

## **The body at war: wounds, wounding and the wounded**

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This issue looks back, on the one hand, to some of the founding work undertaken by the research group GWACS1 (Group for War and Culture Studies, the research impetus from which the *Journal of War and Culture Studies* sprang), and looks forward, on the other, to themes and approaches that will be developed in the future in the pages of this journal. The subject of the body at war is indeed a vast one, and one which has received increasing attention over the past few decades. Elaine Scarry's extraordinarily wide-ranging meditation on the vulnerability of the human body (1985) has provided a blueprint for many researchers in the field. Her focus on 'the difficulty of expressing physical pain; [...] the political and perceptual complications that arise as a result of that difficulty; and [...] the nature of both material and verbal expressibility, or more simply, the nature of human creation' (Scarry 1985: 3), provides a compelling portrait of the imbrication of the political with the cultural, of the ways in which the 'making and unmaking of the world' are enacted through the body in pain. Joanna Bourke's hugely influential work on the impact of the First World War on the male body and masculinities, *Dismembering the Male* (1996), refocused attention towards the social constructions of wartime masculinities, thereby eschewing easy assumptions about the links between virility and war. She shows, through thematic studies of mutilation, malingering, bonding, inspection and remembering, that the experience of war 'fundamentally affected not only the shape and texture of the male body, but also the values ascribed to the body and the discipline applied to masculinity' (Bourke 1996: 30). The articles in this issue build upon this work, each demonstrating, in different ways, how 'culture' (in its myriad forms) has reacted to the impact of war on the human body. They discuss a number of themes relating to the body at war: the act of wounding, the repair of wounds, the representation of the wounded, the wounded body as metaphor, legacies of war and wounding. In turn these themes open up further areas of enquiry: the purposes and ethics of military training, war and the subversion of gender roles, the political and social functions of the veteran, national narratives of war, and the transmission of memories and legacies of war. In her article, 'Painful bodies and brutal women', Carden-Coyne demonstrates how the wounded body forces a renegotiation of archetypal gender roles. As Susan Sontag has noted, there is shame as well as shock (1996). *JWCS* 1 (2) pp. 119–121 © Intellect Ltd 2008. GWACS eighth annual conference 'The Body at War: Somatic Cartographies of Western Warfare in the 19th and 20th Centuries' was held in 2004. See [http://www.wmin.ac.uk/ssh/page-1322.JWCS\\_1.2\\_01\\_Int\\_Cooper.qxd](http://www.wmin.ac.uk/ssh/page-1322.JWCS_1.2_01_Int_Cooper.qxd) 2/28/08 4:34 PM Page 119 in looking at the close-up of a real horror (Sontag 2003: 37). Who has the right to look at images of suffering, she asks; only, perhaps, those who can do something to alleviate the suffering. The expectation of sympathy on the part of those charged with the care of the wounded is, however, proved misplaced in Carden-Coyne's article. Whilst we might imagine that the wounded body inspires pity, in the arena of war, the wounded male body elicits atypical responses and disturbs established power relations: the wounded body becomes a battleground of the genders. Moreover, as Hodges's article suggests ('"They don't like it up 'em!": Bayonet fetishization in the British Army during the First World War'), images and descriptions of gruesome wounds were used quite conversely to inspire blood-lust rather than empathy. This piece focuses on soldiers' identities and masculinities, and shows how the infliction of wounds, and the encouragement of the desire to wound and mutilate, was related to battlefield confidence and a soldier's sense of self. Wounding, it is shown, becomes an assertion of masculinity, and the bayonet functions as potent fetish which overwhelms and silences the enemy, thereby asserting the supremacy of the British soldier. In Hurcomb's article ('Raising the dead') the wounded body and the decaying corpse of the dead of the First World War also assert a form of supremacy.

Examining a selection of visual representations, he argues that the grotesque treatment of the war dead and the wounded in film and monuments serves to establish, and to maintain, the moral supremacy of French war veterans as these attempt to gain, and then to consolidate, greater political influence in interwar France. The wounded body as a form of moral currency also underlies Duffy's article, 'The veteran's wounded body before the mirror'. This piece considers the novels of the Russian writer Andreï Makine, in which, Duffy argues, the wounded body serves as a metaphor of national loss and the dismemberment of the Soviet Union, symbolized in the striking image of the samovar, whose shape with its stumpy handles and feet recalls the amputated body of the combatant who has lost all his limbs. Using Lacanian theory, Duffy goes on to argue, however, that the memory of the wounded, dismembered Russian body is subsequently mobilized and reassembled in a process of re-membering in order to assert continued Russian hegemony. The unmaking of the Soviet world, to return to Scarry's terms, through the dismemberment of the Russian body, leads ultimately to a remaking of the Russian world. The memory of the wounded body is further explored in Vassallo's article, 'Embodied memory'. Examining the autobiographical writings of Nina Bouraoui and Leïla Sebbar, two French writers of French-and-Algerian descent, Vassallo discusses the legacies of war and wounding in generations who, whilst they did not participate directly in war, experience its transmitted memories and legacies as psychological trauma. The body of each writer therefore becomes an uncomfortable reminder for the French nation of a war that France would rather forget: the Algerian War of Independence. The body of the descendants of Franco-Algerian relationships of the 1950s and 1960s become an inconvenient presence in con-temporary France, Vassallo argues, literally embodying the memory of a silenced war.<sup>120</sup> Professor Nicola Cooper and Dr Martin Hurcombe JWCS\_1.2\_01\_Int\_Cooper.qxd 3/5/08 4:48 PM Page 120

Forgotten wounds, silenced stories of suffering, but also the spectacle of the wound and the wound as currency in a contest between genders, generations and even nations, these articles depict a variety of opposing uses of the wounded body. For, as Scarry argues, whilst the act of wounding constitutes an attempt to silence the enemy Other, to override the latter's ideological or nationalistic assertions about itself and its enemies, concomitant with the deconstruction of the world through the infliction of wounds is the desire for world-building. The injuring of the Other reflects the desire of each belligerent party to give material form to previously derealized and disembodied beliefs' (Scarry 1985: 128) and ideologies. Material and human destruction therefore becomes a way of giving material form to discourse, and the body in pain is a vital component in the battle to assert meaning and authority. As these articles demonstrate, the wounded body mediated by culture exists as a form of currency mobilized by different social factions at different times in the twentieth century in a range of struggles (gender, ideological, political, generational). The centrality of the wounded body to war itself demands that we continue to make it the focus of scholarly enquiry. We hope therefore, in future issues of the journal, to build upon the work on the body at war commenced here by pursuing themes such as disfigurement and disability, the medicalization of war, war and rape, MIAs, war dead, rehabilitation, military training, amongst others. As Scarry has noted, 'visible or invisible, omitted, included, altered in its inclusion, described or redescribed, injury is war's product and its core, it is the goal toward which all activity is directed and the road to the goal' (Scarry 1985: 81–82).

## References

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