

# American War Culture

**An Advanced Elective on the Contemporary War Genre and Why "We're Still in the Desert"**



## **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

"We're still in the desert," concludes Anthony Swafford, whose Gulf War memoir, *Jarhead*, was adapted to the big screen in 2005. In the decades since Swafford's deployment, the United States has continued to wage war in the Middle East, making the veteran's words a prescient warning to Americans today. In this course, we will explore contemporary war culture to help answer why, in 2024, we are still in the desert. We will question what counts as "war" with Claudia Rankine and the characters of *The Wire*, trace the archetype of the American soldier in embedded documentaries and Hollywood dramas, and compare how two institutions—the US Army Museum and the Iraqi collective Beit Tarkeeb—have translated the "War on Terror" into visual texts for different publics. We will also analyze criticism and scholarship on war, culture, and state-sanctioned violence by Stuart Hall, Nikhil Pal Singh, Judith Butler, James Mattis, Maggie Nelson, and others, and ask, how do these critiques apply to our personal experiences? And how do our perspectives enrich these interventions?

Throughout the semester, you will grow as a scholar of film and literature and as a written, oral, and visual communicator. The assignments, discussions, and readings will require you to develop original arguments, share your ideas in a variety of mediums and forms, work with different types of texts and media, collaborate with your classmates and wider community, and practice methods associated with literary and cultural studies.

**Professor Caitlin Cawley**  
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**860.227.0416**

**Office Hours:**

**TF 10-11:15 in Dealy 525**

**M 5:30-6:30 on Zoom**

**ENGL 3616**

**Spring 2024**

**TF 1-2:15 PM**

**Keating Hall 214**

**Require Books** (available at the bookstore)

- Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969)
- Claudia Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* (2004)
- Maggie Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty* (2011)
- Phil Klay, *Redeployment* (2014)
- Hassan Blasim, *The Corpse Exhibition* (2014)

**Required Films and Episodes** (available on Amazon and other streaming platforms)

- Stanley Kubrick, *Full Metal Jacket* (1989)
- Clark Johnson & David Simon, "The Target," *The Wire* (2002)
- Clint Eastwood, *American Sniper* (2014)
- Garret Scott & Ian Olds, *Occupation: Dreamland* (2005)
  - Mandatory screening (OD not available via streaming platforms)
- Kathryn Bigelow, *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012)
- Spike Lee, *Da 5 Bloods* (2020)

**\*All other readings are available as pdfs under the "Content" tab on Blackboard\***

**Required Digital Platforms**

- Google Docs
- Fordham Blackboard
- Zoom Pro (free access on Blackboard)
- [Microsoft Office](#) (free access on your Fordham portal)
  - All papers must be submitted in Word format (.doc or .docx) . **No pages, pdf, etc.**

**Assignments and Grading Policy**

Assignment	Percent of Final Grade	Notes
Attendance and Participation	20%	See below
Group Presentation	20%	See GP via GoogleDoc
Midterm Close Reading Essay	20%	Due 3/5
Outreach Blog Post	10%	Due 4/5
Final Research Essay or Creative Project	30%	Due 5/17

**Attendance and Participation**

Your attendance and participation are important. Great classes are built on a collective commitment to working together to formulate questions, share ideas (laughs, frustrations, challenges, etc.), develop special interests, expand our respective perspectives, debate different interpretations, and learn the subject matter. So come to class ready to participate! To participate, you will need to

1. read/watch the assigned text,
2. organize your thoughts about the work prior to our meeting,
3. bring the assigned text to class, and
4. listen to your classmates.

Participating in class and on Blackboard will take different shapes for different people, but to receive full credit for attendance and participation, you must attend class, share your ideas with the group, contribute to in-class activities, and engage with your classmates. To this last point, let's do our best to create an environment where everyone feels respected, valued, and included. As the thinker Judith Butler argues, "If I am to live a good life, it will be a life lived with others. I will not lose this I that I am; whoever I am will be transformed by my connections with others, since my dependency on another, and my dependability, are necessary in order to live and live well."

You will not be penalized for your first three absences or latenesses; thereafter, your final course grade will drop one grade for each day missed. Six or more absences may result in failure of the course per [Fordham's policy](#).

### **Extensions, Late Work, Emails, and Etiquette**

Everyone is entitled to **one** extension over the course of the semester. If you need or want to use the extension, simply request it 24 hours before the deadline via email, and we can establish a new due date—typically two days after the original deadline. Unexcused late work will be marked down or not accepted.

If you have a question or an issue arises, sign up for office hours (or let me know after class -- I hang back at the end of the period for just this reason). You may also email me, but please note that the best way to reach me is via office hours and our in-person meetings. When emailing me (or any professor), keep in mind that there is no time like the present to begin honing your email etiquette. Consider all messages professional correspondences and include subject headings, appropriate salutations, and minimal grammatical errors. This skill will be valuable throughout your career at Fordham and beyond.

Last but not least, I know we are still navigating the aftermath of a devastating global pandemic and that our lives have changed dramatically over the last four years. While learning about literature, film, and history is important, your health and well-being are my top priority. I am happy to make adjustments, so please ask for what you need. Communication is key (always but especially now), so please do not wait or be afraid to reach out to me after class or via office hours if an issue arises. Fordham's [Counseling and Psychological Services](#) is also an excellent resource. They offer free one-on-one appointments and group workshops to support your mental, psychological, and emotional health.

### **COVID-19**

If you have to miss class because you **test positive for COVID** and are symptomatic, please

1. email/text/call your assigned class partner(s) to get notes from class;
2. sign up to meet with me during Zoom office hours on Monday;
3. post a 250-word reflection on the Blackboard Discussion Board *if* you have to miss **more than one class** because you are symptomatic; and
4. rest up and feel better!

### **Plagiarism and Academic Integrity**

Participating in an academic conversation means learning from others and giving them credit for what you have learned. This skill is one of the great responsibilities and joys of writing. Moreover, plagiarism undermines the integrity of your work, our classroom, and our school. Therefore, plagiarism will not be tolerated. Evidence of plagiarism will result in an automatic zero for the assignment as well as a notification to the Dean's office and possibly failure of the course. For more information on Fordham University's policy on academic integrity, please consult your student handbook. Also, while we'll practice citing, synthesizing, and incorporating the work of others in class, please don't hesitate to reach out to me with questions about using outside sources!

### **Paper Submission and Formatting**

Please submit an *electronic copy* of each assignment on Blackboard under the Content tab and bring a *hard copy* to class. Essays should be formatted according to MLA standards: double spaced; Times New Roman, 12-point font; header and title; citations and works cited page, etc. See *The Bedford Handbook for Writers* or [Purdue Owl Online Writing Lab](#) if you need a refresher. Fordham's [Writing Center](#) is also an excellent resource.

### **Mandatory Reporting**

As a faculty member, I am a mandatory reporter. This means that if I observe, learn, or suspect that a student has experienced sexual or any other type of misconduct, I am obligated to report this information to Fordham's [Gender Equity & Title IX Office](#). This obligation extends to the work that you produce in this class. The system is part of Fordham's commitment to supporting you and ensuring that misconduct stops and does not happen again.

### **Commitment to Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion**

One of my goals is to make this course inclusive, equitable, and explicitly antiracist by supporting the vital truth of Black Lives Matter and its charge to all of us to recognize biases, confront privilege, and labor toward justice for all Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). During this semester, we will strive to be courageous and empathetic when we navigate difficult topics and discuss complex issues related to racial and other intersectional forms of social justice.

As part of this effort, we will answer [Toni Morrison's](#) challenge to ensure that oppressive language is "rejected, altered and exposed." This means disavowing speech that attempts to silence, threaten, and degrade others and communicating in ways that are inclusive of individuals and groups regardless of race, sex, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation,

national origin, political affiliation, disability, religion, appearance, and more. For example, we will use gender-inclusive and non-sexist language, which avoids misgendering people, and recognizes the distinction between biological sex and gender expression, as well as one another's chosen name and preferred pronouns. Similarly, we will not repeat racial slurs even when we watch a film or read a text that includes them. This choice shows respect to all the people who have been subjected to hate speech and acknowledges the history and violence of this language. Last, like everyone, I am still in the process of learning about diverse perspectives and identities. If something is said in class by me or a classmate that makes you feel uncomfortable, please talk to me about it or provide anonymous feedback via Blackboard.

### **Disability Services**

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973, all students, with or without disabilities, are entitled to equal access to the programs and activities at our university. If you believe that you have a disabling condition that may interfere with your ability to participate in the activities, coursework, or assessment of the object of this course, you may be entitled to accommodations. Please schedule an appointment to speak with someone at the [Office of Disability Services](#).

### **Please Note**

This course includes disturbing, discriminatory, and violent content. My goal is to cultivate sensitive discussions and an empathetic classroom environment, and we will work together to identify and critique racism, homophobia, misogyny, ableism, and other forms of discrimination and cruelty. That said, please email me if you want further information on how these topics will be covered or for assistance in switching into a class that suits you better at this time.

### **Course Schedule**

Please note: The syllabus is subject to change. See Blackboard for updates.

Weeks 1-3

#### **"American Cultures of War" in Context, 1914-1989**

- Jan 16: Course Introduction
  - We will discuss Sam Mendes' *Jarhead* (2005), Sylvia Plath's "Daddy" (1965), and Chief Keef's "War" (2014) to establish some key concepts, questions, and historical background for the course.
  - Please sign up for the group presentation via the link on Blackboard before class on 1/19
- Jan 19: Hemingway, "Big Two-Hearted River"; McKay, selection from *Home to Harlem*, pp. 1-11 [bb]
- Jan 23: Hall, "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies"; Hsu, "[Stuart Hall and the Rise of Cultural Studies](#)"
- Jan 26: Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*, Chapters 1-5
  - Group 1 Presentation
- Jan 30: Herr, selection from *Dispatches* [bb]
- Feb 2: *Full Metal Jacket*

- o Group 2 Presentation

Optional Additional Reading/Viewing: Simone White and Vincent Staples, "Vincent Staples," *BOMB Magazine* (Summer 2016); Allan Dwa, *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949); Frederic Jameson, "On 'Cultural Studies'" (1993); James Dawes, *The Language of War* (2002); Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (2017); Joseph Darda, *How White Men Won the Culture Wars* (2021)

Weeks 4-5

**War (What Is It?) After the Cold War, 1989-2003**

- Feb 6: Baudrillard, "The Gulf War Did Not Take Place" [bb]
- Feb 9: "[The Target](#)" (Ep. 1, Season 1) *The Wire*; Pal Singh, selection from *Race and America's Long War* [bb]
- Feb 13: Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric*, pp. 1-70
  - o Group 3 Presentation
- Feb 16: *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric*, pp. 71-156

Optional Additional Reading/Viewing: Sam Mendes, *Jarhead* (2005); Neda Atanatoski, *Humanitarian Violence* (2013); Spike Lee, *Chi-Raq* (2015); Erica Edwards, *The Other Side of Terror* (2021)

Weeks 5-6

**The "War on Terror" in American Cinema, 2003-2014**

- Feb 20: No Class / Monday Schedule
  - o **Screening *Occupation Dreamland* @ 5:30 PM in the Walsh Library auditorium**
- Feb 23: *Occupation Dreamland*; Gaines, "The Production of Outrage: The Iraq War and the Radical Documentary Tradition" [bb]
  - o Group 4 Presentation
- Feb 27: *American Sniper*
  - o Synchronous Virtual Class / Please see Blackboard for Zoom link
- March 1: *Zero Dark Thirty*
  - o Group 5 Presentation

Optional Additional Reading/Viewing: [The West Wing](#) Season 3, Episode 1 (2002); Judith Butler, *Frames of War* (2009); Tim Hetherington and Sebastian Junger, *Restrepo* (2010)

Week 7-10

**Remembering (and Forgetting) Iraq, 2014-2018**

- March 5: Blasim, *The Corpse Exhibition*, pp. 3-23 & 69-77
  - o Midterm Essay Due
- March 8: *The Corpse Exhibition*, pp. 81-101 & 157-170
  - o Group 6 Presentation
- March 12: *The Corpse Exhibition*, pp. 187-196 & Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty*, pp. 31-52
- March 15: Klay, *Redeployment*, pgs. 1-16; 77-128
- March 19: *Redeployment*, pp. 129-236
  - o Group 7 Presentation
- March 21-April 1: No Class / Spring Break

- April 2: US Army Heritage Museum, "On Patrol" Exhibit (2016-present), Carsilse, PA
- April 5: Beit Tarkeeb Contemporary Art Institute, "Remains of Remains" (2018), Baghdad, Iraq
  - Outreach Blog Post Due

Optional Additional Reading/Viewing: Sinan Antoon, *The Corpse Washer* (2013); Roy Scranton, *War Porn* (2016); Maysoun Pachachi, *Our River...Our Sky* (2021)

Weeks 11-15

### Activism and War Culture Now, 2018-present

- April 9: [Michael Rakowitz](#), "The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist"; Justin Lewis, "Public Arts Funding: Who Benefits?" [bb]
- April 12: *Da 5 Bloods* (2020)
  - Final Project Workshop
- April 16: *Da 5 Bloods*; Defense Department Fiscal Year 2022 Budget Request (23 June 2021), [CSPAN Video](#) (02:27:15-02:40:46)
  - Group 8 Presentation
- April 19: TBA
- April 23: Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty*, pp. 131-61 & 175-204
  - Group 9 Presentation
- April 26: *The Art of Cruelty*, pp. 236-69
- April 30: Last Day of Class / No Reading

Weeks 16-17 / Finals

- **Friday, May 17:** Final Research Essay or Creative Project due via Blackboard by the end of the day (11:59 PM).