

Anti-War Voices: Art as Resistance

Soldiers returning from Iraq & Afghanistan have tough truths to tell...

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"Throughout history, culture and art have always been the celebration of freedom under oppression." – Author unknown

Soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan have tough truths to tell, and it has been well demonstrated that the establishment media does not want to broadcast these. Given the lack of an outlet for anti-war voices in the corporate media, many contemporary veterans and active-duty soldiers have embraced the arts as a tool for resistance, communication and healing. They have made use of a wide range of visual and performing arts – through theater, poetry, painting, writing, and other creative expression – to affirm their own opposition to the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq.

The first [Warrior Writers Project](#) was led by veteran Lovella Calica. To help other veterans deal with their experiences in Iraq, she encouraged them to write. Those who were willing to do so were asked to share their writings with the group. An anthology of these compositions was produced as the book *Warrior Writers: Move, Shoot and Communicate*. Calica has since gone on to lead three writing workshops with veterans, and has published a second book, *Warrior Writers: Re-making Sense*.

The goal of the Warrior Writers Project is to provide "tools and space for community building, healing and redefinition ... Through writing/artistic workshops that are based on experiences in the military and in Iraq, the veterans unbury their secrets and connect with each other on a personal and artistic level. The writing from the workshops is compiled into books, performances and exhibits that provide a lens into the hearts of people who have a deep and intimate relationship with the Iraq war."

Warrior Writers has also created exhibits that showcase artwork by members, and photographs taken by them in Iraq. It is a largely self-supporting endeavor wherein the funds generated from the sale of books and artwork help sponsor veterans to travel around the country, reading from and displaying their work, as well as funding other workshops. It has now grown into the [Combat Paper Project](#).

Iraq veteran Drew Cameron and artist Drew Matott co-founded People's Republic of Paper (PRP), a paper-making studio in Burlington, Vermont. PRP offers artist residencies and also houses the Combat Paper Project. Cameron's commitment to the unique venture is premised primarily upon the need he experienced "for catharsis and reconciliation," and on his conviction that people must hear the soldiers' side of the story. As he wrote in one poem,

If I say nothing, I have failed.

If I do nothing, I am guilty.

If I live by these ideals of democracy I can see that war is failure.

A war of opportunity rather than necessity is unjust.

War is the antithesis of peace, prosperity, democracy and freedom.

Let us hear the stories of these young men and women.

Let us see through the eyes of the Iraqis and the minds of the soldiers what has occurred under the auspices of freedom and democracy.

Let us then ask ourselves if conflict has brought peace.

Let us be challenged by the horrific atrocities that no one should have to bear, and then ask ourselves if they were worth it.

The idea of integrating the Warrior Writers and PRP into Combat Paper evolved from a workshop at Green Door Studio, which combined photography, artwork and readings from the first Warrior Writers book. During an evening reading session, the participants realized there was a lot of potential to extend the intense experience to far more people than any workshop could include. On the second day of that workshop, Cameron assembled a group of veterans and began making paper of the uniform he wore during the occupation by shredding, beating, and pulping it to form sheets of paper, and his friends loved it. That was the genesis of the Combat Paper Project.

In Cameron's words, "The residual anger from being used as tools for an immoral and illegal occupation finds release when shredded pieces of the uniforms are cooked and macerated in a Hollander beater to produce paper pulp." Cameron told Truthout, "The fiber of the uniform, replete with the blood, sweat, and tears from months of hardship and brutal violence in Iraq, tells its tale through these sheets, which are then turned into books, broadsides, personal journals, or works of art composed by the veterans. The entire process is aimed at enabling veterans to reclaim and transform their uniform as a piece of art. It is a step toward reconciling veterans with their traumatizing participation in the occupation. This symbolic act gives them the hope to carve a path through which to reenter civilian life, not by distancing themselves from their experience and the accompanying guilt, but by taking responsibility for their actions. In 2007 we put together the second anthology, 'Re-making Sense.' The title comes from the goal of remaking sense of our relationship with the war, of our lives, of what we do now, as veterans."

He says that combat uniforms that just sit in closets or boxes in the attic can remain associated with subordination, warfare and service. The Combat Paper Project redefines them as something collective and beautiful. The slogan for the project is "From uniform to pulp, Battlefield to workshop, Warrior to artist."

Cameron, who hails from a military background, was raised by his father to value the ideals that the military professes: loyalty, integrity, and honor. His trip to Iraq altered everything, and "it wasn't until after I came back that the truth hit me. I would keep to myself, and try to block out my experiences in Iraq. In the course of processing my memories I realized we had destroyed ... [Iraq's] infrastructure and were not there to help. I realized it was not about freedom and democracy, and recollecting the way we had conducted ourselves, and the way we had brutalized the people turned me against the occupation. We were trained to fight and win battles. I was in the artillery, trained to blow shit up. We were not there to rebuild anything or help the Iraqi people."

Cameron was frustrated and aghast at the whitewashing of the situation in Iraq that the corporate media was engaged in. At the massive US air base Camp Anaconda, just north of

Baghdad, he had access to satellite television and he realized that the images and stories coming out were different from what he was seeing on the ground.

"I remember intelligence reports that briefed us on attacks against us and how we were going to be hit were almost never in the news. I remember being hit for seven consecutive days by mortars, but that did not make news. As the violence escalated, we went from being able to go outside the gate to get sodas to not allowing Iraqis within two miles of the base because of fear of mortars and bombs. The American mainstream media coverage was always this spectacular type of reporting, full of the visual splendor of tanks and such, and not much content."

That discontent with the media influenced Cameron strongly, spurring his desire to bring out the truth about what the US government has done in Iraq. "The fundamentals of civil society and infrastructure have been so changed and altered in Iraq that it is absolutely devastated. To get your mind around that is challenging."

The art projects have been instrumental in assisting Cameron to come to terms with his experience in Iraq and in helping him heal.

"I can see it in my own writing, how the anger, gore, and frustration flows out graphically before transitioning into a deeper reflection and contemplation about how to approach the cultural relationship between militarism and our society. I have been able to purge all that stuff that made me so anxious, and now I'm more deliberate and patient in trying to understand what is happening in this country. It has helped me understand war-making and how this country works. My dad was in the military. It is so deeply rooted in us, it's in our subconscious, and we have to root that out and be able to transcend it."

He believes that the power of the written word and of artwork can achieve what few other channels of communication can. "You can tell people through a didactic political conversation or panel how brutal the whole thing is, but it is not the same. What we are now doing through our art and our writing gives people the full picture."

The Combat Paper Project is the culmination of collaboration between combat veterans, artists, art collectors, and academic institutions. It is mostly displayed in public places, even on the street, which often attracts other veterans. Cameron is hopeful that with continued touring of exhibits and ongoing outreach, more veterans will join in. "We are trying to reach out beyond that ... Last weekend, we had art-hop [where businesses allow artists to showcase their work], and I met four vets. One was a Vietnam vet who remained AWOL for over twenty years before returning home. They all want to be part of the project."

Cameron intends to continue work with both the Warrior Writers and Combat Paper projects, and hopes that "eventually one of these is started with the veterans on the West Coast. The commonality of experience that connects vets is really eye-opening. We've worked with vets from Vietnam, Gulf War, Bosnia ... and the paper-making ritual has been transformative for everyone who has participated in it. For some it is an end and a rebirth."

The co-facilitator of the project, Drew Matott, is not a veteran, but an artist who has been involved in paper-making since 1998. Matott is interested in creating a dialog with the public about the occupation of Iraq. One method he uses is to juxtapose art pieces that veterans created before a workshop against post-workshop pieces by the same veterans to underscore the transformation that has occurred in them.

“Usually the first pieces are very, very dark, when they first came in. Their latter projects reveal the healing that has taken place,” says Matott, who hopes the project will soon go international. In late 2008, he was in dialogue with the Ottawa School of Art, which was interested in bringing the group up to do a Combat Paper Project with AWOL soldiers in Canada. “Then we’re looking at taking some guys to the United Kingdom, to work with vets from Iraq and Afghanistan there, simultaneously opening the project up to wars other than the ones fought by the United States, involving soldiers from the United Kingdom who have been involved in other conflicts, also bring it near bases for active-duty folks to attend as well ... I think it is making a difference.”

The project has had exhibitions around the country, in cities such as Minneapolis, Chicago and San Francisco, with many more to come.

Writing is also a primary means of both catharsis and resistance for soldiers returning from both occupations. Brian Casler spoke with Truthout about the immense relief from PTSD that participating in the Warrior Writers had brought him.

“For the marine, that was the first ‘ah ha!’ moment. We were sitting there, a small group of people at Fort Drum when Calica, who was leading the workshop, read out a letter written by a soldier to his family. She asked the group to guess where the letter was from. Everyone guessed Iraq or Afghanistan, and were stunned to hear that it was in fact from a French soldier in the trenches during World War I. He was an anti-war soldier and he was writing home about all the problems they were facing. It was verbatim the same crap we have going on. And then I read up on the Vietnam letters home, and that was also verbatim the same crap we have going on. Then, I listened to my fellow veterans at the workshop and said to myself, ‘That’s me. That’s me. Those words feel like they’re coming out of me. Your poetry speaks a piece of my heart.’ And every time I push Warrior Writers, I say this is the anti-war veteran’s heart right here on paper. Get it. I got a piece of me in there, but you know what, every piece feels like it’s a piece of me in there.”

Jon Michael Turner, a former US Marine Corps machine-gunner, became an icon of the anti-war movement when at the [Winter Soldier hearings](#) in Silver Spring, Maryland, in March 2008, he leaned into his microphone and said in an emotion-choked voice, “There’s a term ‘Once a marine, always a marine.’” Ripping his medals off and flinging them to the ground as the room exploded in applause he added, “But, there’s also the expression ‘Eat the apple, fuck the corps, I don’t work for you no more.’”

Turner was the first veteran after Cameron to become part of the Combat Paper Project. He was still in the military when he moved to Burlington and heard about the effort. “My first night in Burlington I started to make paper out of the stack of uniforms in my trunk.”

It was an accumulation of his experiences over time rather than any single event in Iraq that had turned Turner against the occupation. He remembers:

“Halfway through my second tour, things started to click with me. One of my close friends was killed, and another close friend, I don’t know how the fuck he survived it, but he got destroyed by a mortar. It was also about how much we were pushing people out of their houses. We would kick them out of their houses and they had nowhere to go. Seeing this, and interacting with the people and seeing how our actions affect them did it. Plus, I was scared for my life each time I went anywhere, wondering if that was going to be the day. Finally it hit me. It sucks that it took three years, but I realized things happening there were

not right.”

Turner has found a genuine conduit to release the havoc that his time and actions in Iraq have wrought upon him, and to heal himself:

“All the experiences I’ve gone through, and all my built-up frustration and thoughts and anger ... instead of taking it out on another person, I can put it into my art, and this allows me to reclaim those experiences. I can take part of my military uniform and cut it up, and turn it into a piece of paper. On that blank piece of paper I put one of my poems for other people to experience it, and for that moment when they read it, they can see it all through my eyes.”

He is not fully relieved of his trauma.

“I still struggle. The problem is [that] there is so much I need to reclaim. The Warrior Writers Project has taught people that they can express themselves through writing, and as traumatic as the experience may be, it’s coming out in a beautiful way.”

He is hopeful that the healing will continue as the project grows, and not for him alone.

In January 2003, Aaron Hughes was studying industrial design at the University of Illinois when he was called up by his National Guard Unit. After being trained in Wisconsin, he was shipped to Kuwait, where he spent fifteen months with a transportation company hauling flatbed tractor-trailers full of supplies to contractors, marines and other units. He regularly took supplies from camps and ports in Kuwait to bases in Iraq, such as Camp Anaconda, Baghdad and Talil Air Base.

After his tour, Hughes returned to college and decided to major in painting. He created more than fifty works of art from the nearly two hundred photos that he’d shot while in Iraq. Rather than attempting to provide a narrative of his experience in the occupation, he wanted his art to depict a deeper reality. Discussing his art with journalist Tatyana Safronova, he expressed the view that “narrative creates absolutes and I don’t have one.” Instead, Hughes sought forms of expression more similar to memory, with the “abstractions and complexities that exist in images or in poetry too.”

Safronova describes one of Hughes’s oil paintings, in which Hughes portrays a kneeling soldier in black and white, in uniform and holding a gun, unaware of two silhouettes of Iraqi boys standing behind his shoulder. The children are ghost-like, faceless, their images blurred into the desert. “It was very huge disconnect between us and them,” Hughes said.

A charcoal and watercolor piece titled “Do Not Stop ... ” represents the consequences of the orders given to drivers in convoys not to stop when children were on the road. The painting shows a soldier’s boot next to the body of a dead child. “Safwan is the city that you cross the border into, in Iraq, and I’d say there’s a convoy going through about every ten minutes, or less actually ...” Hughes explains to Safronova, “and these convoys have between 20 and 100 trucks in them. So that’s like between a quarter mile to two miles long convoys, and these trucks are huge trucks. And there’s a lot of kids on the road and ... it was really hard to control those kids. So there were some things that happened there with kids getting hit by trucks.” In a poem that accompanies the piece, Hughes writes: “Keep the truck moving and don’t stop. Forget the kids! Now, now I can’t forget the kids. Damn kid. I’m not even there. Hundred thousand miles away and it’s still in my fucking head.”

Hughes uses his art in other ways, as well. During fall 2006, he went to a busy street intersection in Champaign, Illinois, and began "Drawing for Peace." In the performance, he set a sign in the street that read:

I am an Iraq War Veteran.

I am guilty.

I am alone.

I am drawing for peace.

Expanding on his action, on his website, Hughes wrote: "It is an attempt to claim a strategic space in order to challenge the everyday and its constant motion for a moment of thought, meditation, and PEACE." The video recording of the same action shows how Hughes had effectively shut down a street by drawing on it. Several buses stop for ten minutes. Many people exit the bus and stand on the street to watch him work before strolling away. Cars drive by him, seemingly unaware, but he works on, kneeling to draw, ignoring them, engrossed in his work. A motorcycle policeman appears and demands that Hughes leave the road and then pulls him off by his arm. Hughes returns and continues working on the dove he is drawing, until the cop again pulls him off the road, yelling at him. Hughes, dressed in his desert camouflage jacket, listens to the policeman patiently, then takes his sign and walks away. The camera pans back to show traffic resume, and cars and buses driving over the dove Hughes has left on the street.

The veteran, who has participated in marches, rallies, and the Operation First Casualty program, is seeking to publish his book "Dust Memories," a visual documentary of his journey through Iraq. His work has been exhibited in the National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum in Urbana, Illinois, as well as in galleries in Chicago, Champaign and New York.

Truthout asked Hughes why he chose art as his means of protest.

"I see creative expression as one of the closest ways we can touch our humanity. By finding outlets for this, we can break through the structures that have been set up to encourage us to dehumanize each other." Hughes believes that art can be used to create a culture of a politically educated democracy because "As long as we have a culture that is depoliticized, we can't deal with the occupation of Iraq effectively."

When he was deployed to Iraq, Hughes carried with him the culturally constructed ideas of America as the great helper.

"But when I got there, I saw we were oppressing and dehumanizing the Iraqis. Seeing that first-hand, and recognizing the structures that allow this to happen, I had my perspective flipped around on me, and I saw how rooted in hate, greed, and racism this war actually was. People are making billions of dollars while other people are dying, and I don't know how to respond to that but through revolt and by finding a language to fight against it. And that is where art comes in. I can use this to speak out against what is happening in Iraq. Through my art I have even found ways to work with the population I used to oppress in Iraq. I now work with a group that gets prosthetics to Iraqi kids who need them, and kids who have lost their eyesight because of us. These children are still willing to embrace me as a human being. That degree of forgiveness is something that is difficult to reconcile without being pushed into finding ways to break through the hatred and sustain hope in humanity through love."

Theatre has been a tool for resistance and social transformation across cultures and ages. American soldiers have used it too, with the objective of exposing the reality of the occupation to the general population, and to exorcise themselves of the dark experience.

Truthout interviewed Jeff Key while he was driving from his home in Salt Lake City to Denver to perform "[The Eyes of Babylon](#)," the one-man play that he has developed from his Iraq war journals. Writing down his experiences in a notebook he carried in the cargo pocket of his uniform kept him sane, says Key. For entertainment, he would read his entries aloud to fellow marines. After returning home, Key was inspired to turn his entries into a play when friends who heard him read encouraged him to do something with his writings. He wrote the play, and a workshop version of it opened at the Tamarind Theatre in Hollywood, California. It ran there for eight months and closed to full houses. Since then, Key has toured "The Eyes of Babylon" nationally and internationally.

Key mentioned that he had two more plays in the works. "We're going to continue touring this one for a year, and I've just been busy with the charity foundation, but the play is my principle form of activism." The charity is the [Mehadi Foundation](#), a non-profit organization founded by Key that serves "as a support network providing assistance to United States Armed Forces veterans" enlisted during the invasion and occupation of Iraq "who seek help dealing with issues of PTSD, drug and alcohol concerns and other issues." The organization also provides "aid and assistance to Iraqi civilians as they attempt to rebuild in the wake of the conflict, with specific emphasis on the alleviation of hunger and rebuilding homes and schools destroyed by the War."

The lack of coverage of the occupation of Iraq worsened in December 2008, when major US television networks ceased sending full-time correspondents to Baghdad. In Afghanistan, as the situation has spiraled out of control, independent media coverage there has become more sparse as well. The door is now left open wider for veterans to use alternative methods to get their message out. With countless stories to tell, in increasing numbers, veterans stirred by their conscience are using creative outlets and artistic expression to articulate their opposition to the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Art and literature sublimate the human experience. They have the power to transform those who create, as well as those who experience the creation. It is not short of any miracle that despite having been through some of the most life-threatening and morally appalling experiences, so many soldiers and veterans have retained their sanity and emotional intelligence. It is even more commendable that they have found within themselves the energy and resolve to deploy those precious assets to accomplish the two-pronged objective of healing themselves and reclaiming the ideals of democracy by making public their resistance.

*As one of the first and few unembedded Western journalists to report the truth about how the United States has destroyed, not liberated, Iraqi society in his book *Beyond the Green Zone*, Dahr Jamail now investigates the under-reported but growing antiwar resistance of American GIs. Gathering the stories of these courageous men and women, Jamail shows us that far from "supporting our troops," politicians have betrayed them at every turn. Finally, Jamail shows us that the true heroes of the criminal tragedy of the Iraq War are those brave enough to say no.*

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