In "Reading Disaster," students explore the idea and practice of witness as it relates to disasters past and present. In particular, the course focuses on the motives, techniques, politics, and controversies of the memorial act, by way of such topics as individual and collective memory, the ethics of representation, and the aestheticization and abstraction of atrocity.

Julianne Corbin engages with a number of these concerns in her final course essay, an analysis of Maya Lin's seminal Vietnam Veterans Memorial (VVM) in Washington, D.C. The assignment for the course's second essay provided Julianne with a testing ground and a template for thinking about what memorial means in the United States. In that essay, about the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), also in Washington, D.C., Julianne explained the historical situation that gave rise to the memorial, analyzed the museum's architecture and exhibits relative to some of the concepts we'd explored in class, and summarized and analyzed the critical and popular reception of the memorial. Her thinking about both the USHMM and the VVM was informed by another class assignment—to visit and write a blog post about Boston's own New England Holocaust Memorial (NEHM), which relates to the USHMM in content and to the VVM in form and intention.

Over the semester, Julianne worked diligently to clarify her terms; problems with syntax and diction in evidence in the second paper are not there by the final paper. But what I especially appreciate about "Memory & Form: An Analysis of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial" is Julianne's willingness to embrace complexity, not only in terms of the VVM's form, but also—and perhaps more importantly— in terms of how that form impacts viewer experience and continued engagement with a controversial historical event and memorial. The Vietnam War may be over, but—Julianne argues—Maya Lin's design remains relevant into the next century.

— Jessica Bozek

My initial interest in the topic of memory and form stemmed from my second paper for this class entitled "Memorial and Memory: The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum." The paper primarily focused on the role of living memorials in preserving memory while considering the individual nature of memory. I wanted to expand upon this idea by examining different forms of memory and their relation to two different groups of people: those who had direct memories of an event and those who did not.

This study became the basis for my paper and the overall structure of my argument. While I knew the general idea of how I wanted to approach the study, my research on the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial provided much of the structure and detail within my arguments. The varied research and commentaries available on the memorial led in a number of different directions, many of which were in direct conflict. It was by analyzing and incorporating both argument and counter-argument for each form in my paper that I was able to paint a complete picture of the effectiveness of form on different degrees of memory. Additionally, concerns I worked to address with this paper were developing a strong thesis, which many readers took issue with during the drafting process, and achieving sound grammar and sentence structure throughout the paper.

— Julianne Corbin

Julianne Corbin

Memory and Form: An Analysis of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial

On November 11, 1982, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (VVM) was completed, ten years after the end of the bitter and divisive Vietnam War that tore the United States apart. After ten years of shame, anger, and painful fights over US participation in the Vietnam War, the sacrifice and courage of the soldiers who fought was finally to be recognized and remembered. Speaking at the wall for a Veterans Day ceremony, President Reagan declared, "The night is over. We see these men and know them once again and know how much we owe them, how much they've given us, and how much we can never fully repay" (Reagan 2). However, in light of the conflict surrounding the Vietnam War, the impact of the form of the memorial on the memorialization process and the overall memory of the Vietnam War remains in question.

Psychologists define memory as "the processes that are used to acquire, store, retain and later retrieve information" (Cherry 1). This is traditionally broken into three phases: encoding, storage, and retrieval. While the encoding and storage phases both refer to the creation of memory, retrieval is focused on the process of recalling memory. As memory stands at the heart of all memorialization, this paper focuses primarily on the ways in which form impacts memorialization, vis-a-vis, the process of creating and evoking individual and collective memory. Particular emphasis will be placed on the differences between abstract (i.e. non-representational) and representational forms of memorial and their impact on the process of memorializing. This analysis will be accomplished through study of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. and by deconstructing the memorial into three main parts: the black wall cutting into

the earth, the names inscribed upon the wall, and the statue of the soldiers *as they were*. The study will focus primarily upon the impact of form upon retrieval of memory, the impact of form upon the creation of memory, and the effectiveness of these two processes over the life cycle of memory.

Over the course of this paper, there will be references to a number of similar terms with strikingly different connotations. While this essay places the primary focus upon memory as it is defined above, memorial and memorialization will also be of key concern. While memorial refers to an object which serves as a focal point for the act of remembering, memorialization refers more pointedly to the act of remembering itself. Ahenk Yilmaz, Professor of Architecture at Dokuz Eylül University, asserts that "memorialization as the reification of past experiences crystallizes the bi-directional relation between memory and architecture in its pure form" (Yilmaz 1). Memorials are generally artistic works and thus can have many forms and aesthetics. This paper will focus on two main forms of memorial: abstract and representational. Representational memorials tend to resemble the objects they aim to represent, while abstract memorials do not resemble any specific physical object. In contrast, abstract memorials are more likely to reference non-visual items, like an emotion or an experience. These terms will be used frequently throughout this paper.

Analysis of the impact of memorial form upon memorialization rests upon close study of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (VVM). The purpose of the VVM is to honor members of the United States Armed Forces who fought and died during the Vietnam War. The memorial consists of a roughly 250-foot long series of polished black gabbros walls sunk into the surrounding countryside (see Figure 1). Upon the walls are inscribed 58,000 names of servicemen who were declared Killed in Action (KIA) or Missing in Action (MIA) during the Vietnam War. The names are listed in chronological order beginning at the apex of the wall and visitors who come to view the names are able to see their own reflection in the black walls. The end points of the wall point to the Washington Monument and Lincoln Memorial. A few feet away from the entrance to the wall stands a bronze statue of three U.S. servicemen, outfitted exactly as they would have been during the Vietnam War. They are called "The Three Soldiers" and act as a traditional supplement to the VVM's more abstract nature. It is important to note that "The Three Soldiers" was not part of Maya Lin's

original design for the VVM and was, in fact, added two years later in response to an outpouring of veteran support for a memorial of this form.
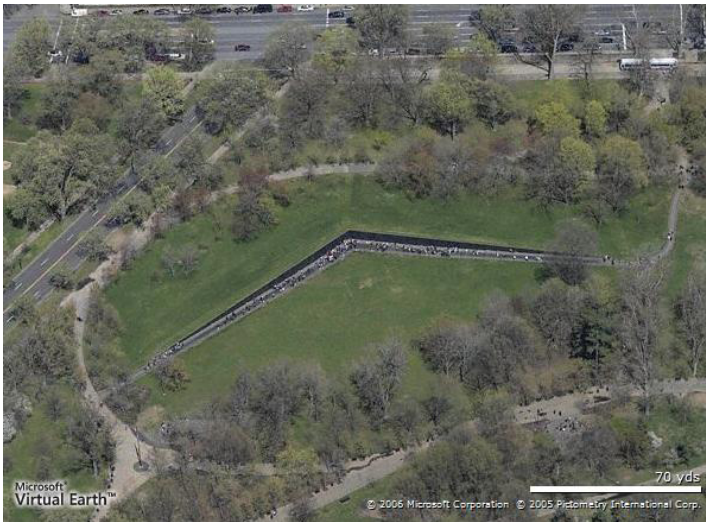

Figure 1. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Photo by Brian McMorrow.

There are a number of subtle aspects of the form of the VVM that impact the process of remembering. Of the parts that will be discussed in this paper, the black, reflective wall is the most controversial and abstract. Described as "'the black gash of shame', a 'degrading ditch,' a 'black spot in American history,' a 'tomb-stone,' a 'slap in the face,' and a 'wailing wall for draft dodgers and New Lefters of the future,'" the black wall was received negatively by some veterans, who interpreted it as "a political statement about the shame of an unvictorious war" (Sturken 68). However, the wall's ambiguous nature lends itself to multiple interpretations. In her commentary on her design, Maya Lin states, "I wanted to create a memorial that everyone would be able to respond to, regardless of whether one thought our country should or should not have participated in the war" (Lin 2). While for many the wall continued to be a symbol of shame, for others the wall evoked a plethora of different interpretations and reflections. Sturken notes,

> To the veterans, the wall is an atonement for their treatment since the war; to the families and friends of those who died, it is an official recognition of their sor-

row and an opportunity to express a grief that was not previously sanctioned; to others, it is either a profound antiwar statement or an opportunity to rewrite the history of the war to make it fit more neatly into the master narrative of American imperialism. (Sturken 80)

The wall's capacity to evoke diverse individual reflections on the Vietnam War can be chiefly attributed to its design. While the wall sits among some of the most famous monuments to American history on the Washington Mall, its striking difference from traditional forms of memorial reflect the controversy surrounding the Vietnam War. While the wall points toward both the Washington Monument and Lincoln Memorial, gently acknowledging past forms of memorial, the VVM is designed not with looming pillars of white granite, but instead "is not visible until one is almost upon it, and if approached from behind seems to disappear into the landscape" (Sturken 66). The memorial is not designed to represent any particular image or item and instead reflects the stigma inflicted upon veterans returning home from the war. Veterans were expected to act as if they had not sacrificed for their country and to separate themselves from a war where they were often seen as complicit in an abuse of American power. The wall reflects this sentiment and evokes the veterans' implicit feeling of abandonment while simultaneously providing a safe haven for memorialization and remembrance. It does not dictate the narrative of memory and instead promotes personal reflection because of its abstract form, leaving individuals to analyze and interpret their memories as they will.

In contrast to the abstract form of the black wall of the VVM, the names inscribed upon the wall (see Figure 2) are of a decidedly more representational form. While many may not think of a name as a representational memorial, a name directly represents an individual. It is a word that stands for a being. The names as representations of individuals tend to evoke very specific memories about that individual. In "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial: Commemorating a Difficult Past," Professors Robin Wagner-Pacifici and Barry Schwartz assert that "to list the names of every fallen soldier, with no symbolic reference to the cause or country for which they died, immediately highlights the individual" (42). By visiting the names and locating those they knew and lost, visitors are able to evoke and

reflect upon very personal, specific memories. Maya Lin also discusses the representational nature of the names in her reflections on her design, writing, "the use of names was a way to bring back everything someone could remember about a person . . . the ability of a name to bring back every single memory you have of that person is far more realistic and specific and much more comprehensive than a still photograph" (Lin 3).

Figure 2. The names upon the wall. Photo from Mapseeing.com.

However, the arrangement of the names along the wall is also important in the process of memorializing the individuals who died as part of the Vietnam War. The names are arranged along the length of the wall in chronological order of death throughout the course of the war. As Lin describes, "a progression in time is memorialized. The design is not just a list of the dead. To find one name, chances are you will see the others close by, and you will see yourself reflected through them" (Lin 5). Thus, the names also exhibit a degree of abstraction in their ability to mirror the individual viewer. The chronological grouping of deaths would tend to group those who died around the same time (*i.e.*: companies of soldiers) together, causing those who reflected upon the names of their comrades in arms to see their own sacrifice and beliefs mirrored in the reflective surface of the wall. In a sense, this "created a psychological space for them that directly focused on human response and feeling" (Lin 11), where the

names could portray in an abstract sense the viewer's own sacrifice, while at the same time memorializing a given person.

Figure 3. The Three Soldiers. From United Press International, Inc.

In direct contrast to the wall, "The Three Soldiers" (see Figure 3) stands as an example of traditional aesthetics of memorialization that utilize representative form to evoke memory. The statue was meant to portray the soldiers exactly as they existed during the war, right down to the diversity of ethnicities. It was designed to serve as the humanizing face of the war, as veterans feared that "the sunken black wall would be a 'memorial to the dead,' not to living veterans, and that it would be a 'grisly reminder of something ugly and shameful in America's past'" (Hagopian 106). The more traditional representational form of memorial exemplified by "The Three Soldiers" focuses memorialization on a specific aspect of the war, namely the soldiers. It evokes very explicit emotions of pride and acceptance for the soldiers' efforts and sacrifice. The use of a specific image to memorialize an event, however, often limits the form and extent of the memory evoked in the memorialization process. Yilmaz asserts that "a direct denotation between the event and its representation minimizes

the variations in the collective remembering process" (8). Lin agrees with Yilmaz's argument in her criticism of the incorporation of the statue into the design, arguing that "a specific object or image would be limiting. A realistic sculpture would be only one interpretation of that time. I wanted something that all people could relate to on a personal level" (Lin). Thus, while the representative statue presents a more patriotic and sympathetic view towards the war, it is limited by its ability to evoke a diverse spread of memories and de-personalizes the memorialization process.

It is relatively easy to discuss memorialization for those directly affected by the Vietnam War, who can draw upon their own memories of the event to remember; however, it is more complicated to analyze the memorialization process for individuals unfamiliar with the event and who have no inherent memories to draw upon. It requires that we ask how an event can be remembered, and therefore memorialized, when those who memorialize have no memories to draw upon. In essence, the experience of visiting the wall becomes a personal memory in itself for the viewer that mimics actual remembrance of the Vietnam War. The form of the VVM is structured so as to evoke the feelings and emotions of the war, regardless of whether the viewer experienced the war or not.

The aim of the VVM was not to be to a political or social commentary regarding the Vietnam War, but a dialogue regarding those who died. The *New York Times* noted at the initial opening of the memorial that the wall "seems to capture all the feelings of ambiguity and anguish that the Vietnam War evoked [and] conveys the only point about the war on which people may agree: that those who died should be remembered" (qtd. In Schwartz 36). For those unfamiliar with the Vietnam War, the wall and inscribed names serve simply as a "journey to an awareness of immeasurable loss" (Lin) surrounding the war and the identities of those who sacrificed. The experience of war can be felt in the structure of the memorial as "an initial violence that heals in time but leaves a memory, like a scar" (Lin). The walls of the memorial cut into the earth with a sudden violence that eventually heals and sinks back into the land around it; however, the violence remains as polished black walls that reflect the viewer's own image among the names of the dead, allowing viewers to "participate in the memorial" (Sturken 66). Thus, viewers experience the sharp violence of the Vietnam War as they enter the memorial and confront the enormity of

the loss as they descend further along the wall. Overall, the experience of visiting the wall becomes a personal memory that mimics actual memory of the Vietnam War.

This same creation of memory can be seen in visitors' interactions with the names inscribed upon the wall of the VVM. In "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial: An Invitation to Argument," Professor Ehrenhaus asserts that there are three types of visitors who come to view the names listed on the memorial wall: mourners, searchers, and volunteers (which were once mourners or searchers and choose to help new visitors). Mourners are typically those with personal connections to the names listed on the wall and often treat their journeys as a "secular pilgrimage" to leave "artifacts of commemoration" in honor of their loved ones (Haines 6). Searchers, on the other hand, have no material connection with the names on the wall and "search for ways of participating as broadly as possible in discovering the Memorial's meanings" (qtd. in Haines 6). "For searchers," Ehrenhaus asserts, "meaning arises in part from memory, but mainly from the chance and momentary encounters with mourners and artifacts of the Memorial's social world" (qtd. in Haines 7). In effect, the searchers come to the wall not to reflect on memories of those lost like the mourners, but as an experience that creates their own emotional connection to the event. However, this distinction highlights a key difference in the memorialization process between abstract and representational memorialization. Abstract memorials allow for those without direct memory and emotional connection to the event to develop their own memories of the event; the names themselves inspire no direct connection or memory beyond the fact that death occurred. Those without an emotional connection to the names driven by memory will not necessarily have the same memorialization experience as those who do. This will impair the purpose of the memorial, which is to remember; viewers cannot remember what they do not know.

This same drawback is present in the "The Three Soldiers." While the form is effective in promoting the memorialization process in those who have a memory of the event, it becomes less relevant to those without an emotional connection. It provides little for those without a frame of reference outside of the history books and seems to exist simply for the memorialization process of the veterans (and even only a narrow subset of that group as it depicts only infantrymen). However, while viewing the

statue upon its own it may do little for the memory creation process for new viewers to the VVM, when combined with the experience of visiting the black wall and names inscribed upon it, "The Three Soldiers" may play a crucial role. The designer of the statue, Frederick Hart, had a very concise view of the statue's relation to the rest of the VVM as he wrote in his initial thoughts on the statue. He writes, "I see the wall as a kind of ocean, a sea of sacrifice that is overwhelming and nearly incomprehensible in the sweep of names. I place these figures upon the shore of that sea, gazing upon it, standing vigil before it, reflecting the human face of it, the human heart" (quoted in Holland 39). As the statue is at eye level to onlookers, the statue serves much the same purpose as Ehrenhaus's description of the interaction between searchers and mourners. The soldiers in the statue look out onto the wall and provide a human face of mourning and loss. The searchers' initial interaction with the statue sets the expectation that this is a memorial to human loss and creates a sense of personal connection with those who sacrificed before entering the memorial. Thus, the statue strengthens the memorialization process by creating a relationship between the new viewer and those who sacrificed by playing upon the viewer's inherent empathy for the human form.

Susan Sontag writes in her analysis of photography, "All memory is individual, unreproducible—it dies with each person. What is called collective memory is not remembering but a stipulating: that this is important and this is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the story in our mind" (1). It is true that memory fades. Forgetting sets in and it is the responsibility of memorials to remind us that an event actually occurred and had an impact on life. This demands that we ask how effective the VVM will be as a memorial over the life-cycle of memory. How will the memorial impact our collective and societal image of the Vietnam War? In the beginning, all of the aspects of the VVM work in harmony. "The Three Soldiers" statue and the names inscribed upon the wall evoke a specific memory and remembrance while the black wall and order of the names evoke a more generalized feeling of loss and time. Each is relatively more effective in evoking or creating memory. As a whole, they can create a complete process. Over time, as the details of the war fade and the process of forgetting sets in, the memories evoked by "The Three Soldiers" and the names inscribed upon the wall will fade. Their representational form

will transition from a role of evoking memory to that of creating memory and informing history; however, their juxtaposition with the black abstract wall injects the emotions and lessons of the war into the representational elements' historical and informative backdrop. Thus, even as the memorial's capacity to reach genuine memory of the event and provoke remembrance fades, its elements will work together to re-create the memorialization process for new viewers, keeping the collective memory of the event alive.

In practice, the form of memorial dramatically impacts the process of memorialization. In the case of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, which incorporates both representational and abstract forms of memorial, the form works effectively by balancing the drawbacks of one form against the benefits of the other to achieve lasting collective memory. While the representational elements of the design are successful in evoking memory in those with a direct relation to the event, the narrow focus of the memorial and requirement of prior memory limits the scope of memorialization possible at the site. This effect is balanced out by the memorial's abstract designs, which convey the emotional feeling of the event regardless of whether the viewer has prior memory, and is augmented by the representational elements which provide historical reference points for the viewer. Overall, the elements of the design work together to maintain the relevance of that which is memorialized and to cement the event into collective memory.

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JULIANNE CORBIN is a recent graduate of the Boston University Dual Degree Program majoring in Economics & Business Administration with a concentration in Management Information Systems. Originally from historic Valley Forge, PA, Julianne spent her time at BU tutoring first graders in the Boston Public School System as part of the Boston University Initiative for Literary Development. She enjoys cooking, traveling and relaxing with a good cup of coffee in her spare time. Post-graduation, Julianne will be working for Ernst & Young as an IT Risk & Assurance Consultant. This essay was written for Jessica Bozek's course, WR 150: Reading Disaster.