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Great Sand

Grains of Occupation and Representation

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ABSTRACT: Nadine Hattom's text is written as a sequel to the artist's 'Shadows' series (2016), comprised of ten digitally altered photographs made from US Department of Defense public-domain images depicting Operation Iraqi Freedom. As Hattom's piece explores migration and landscape, it untangles narratives rooted in the colours, textures, ecosystems, and geographies of the Middle East, but also in the political implications of the author's position in the landscapes of the West.

KEYWORDS: Germany; Landscape; Operation Iraqi Freedom; Sand; 'Shadows' series (2016); War

Great Sand

Grains of Occupation and Representation

NADINE HATTOM

We can't deny that the landscapes
we produce are embodied
within the identities we assume.

THE SEARCH, PART I: IRAQ

In 2013, I drove through the Syrian Desert in Jordan toward the Iraq border. It would be the closest I could get to Iraq in the twenty-five years since leaving. I stopped some sixty kilometres short of the border; the taxi driver was anxious to turn back. I took a photograph of the sprawling desert with my medium-format camera — a landscape image that would come to represent a long investigation into how landscapes of heritage and imagination shape our identities.

As I was researching the journey to the Jordanian–Iraqi border, I searched online for landscape images of Anbar Province in Iraq. I wanted to see what the area looked

like. I was confronted with an overwhelming number of images of the US military occupation of Iraq.

Military images dominated the online presence and furthermore, were included in cultural heritage documentation as visual material. It was as though the place didn't exist without militarization. The very-high resolution images were predominantly from the US Department of Defense archive documenting Operation Iraqi Freedom and the Iraq War of 2003. The archive contained thousands of images by military personnel detailing activities and missions.

Knowing that this land existed without occupation and feeling that this representation was an injustice, I was compelled to reveal the beauty of the landscape and remove the occupier. So I digitally removed the soldiers from a selection of images from the archive, approximating the space they occupied. It soon became clear, however, that I could never erase or undo what took place in the landscape, and I decided to leave the soldiers' shadows in the earth, as a trace of the long shadow that war has left behind. In the words of James Joyce, 'places remember events.' This remembrance is imprinted in the earth itself, albeit ephemerally.

In removing the soldiers I intervened in the landscape, resisted its militarization, and reframed its representation. I also became aware that by removing the figures in the landscape, the real subject of the image was revealed — that which was projected onto the land itself. An assumption about an entire region.

The work 'Shadows' is a series of ten digitally modified photographs from the Department of Defense Operation



Figure 1: 'U.S. Marines of Company G, 2nd Battalion, 2nd Marines, fall into a tactical column as they maneuver through a palm grove to conduct a security patrol in Fallujah, Iraq, on Oct. 22, 2005. DoD photo by Sgt. Paul S. Mancuso, U.S. Marine Corps. (Released)'

Iraqi Freedom archive.¹ Each photograph is accompanied by a caption that describes what is happening in the image and who took it, providing a look into the language of warfare in the public domain. See for example the caption of Figure 1.

Militarizing a landscape involves defining and being defined by processes that result in the space being read

1 See the page 'Shadows' (13 July 2017) on my website <<http://nadinehattom.com/shadows/>> [accessed 12 November 2022].

as militarized.² ‘Military control over space is as much a strategic task of representation as it is a physical act.’³

At the very least, Operation Iraqi Freedom’s processes consisted of ‘weapons searches’, ‘security patrols’, ‘area scans’, ‘beach insertions along lake shores’, and ‘disruption operations’. Combat artillery and barracks coupled with a presence in uniform, form an act of occupation.

But an archive of images documenting these acts disguises a total occupation of a people’s history and their right to exist on their own terms. As Judith Butler writes, describing Susan Sontag’s famous critique of war photography, ‘the photograph substitutes for the event to such an extent that it structures memory more effectively than either understanding or narrative.’⁴

Beyond occupation with a physical presence, this archive of images serves to occupy the narrative of the war and legitimize violence. But what I saw in these high-resolution images was a palette of sandy beiges, sunburnt greens, and high-noon blues that tell a far different story.

So, where is the archive that writes a history of what really took place in this landscape?

THE SEARCH, PART II: GERMANY

While researching another trip for a different project, this time in Germany, I was looking for sand. Specifically, a sandy, inland landscape, perhaps with dunes. A landscape

2 Matthew Flintam, ‘Parallel Landscapes: A Spatial and Critical Study of Militarised Sites in the United Kingdom’ (PhD diss., Royal College of Art, 2010).

3 Rachel Woodward, ‘How Military Landscapes Work’, in *Military Landscapes*, ed. by Ingrid Book and Carina Heden (Bergen: Bergen Kunsthalle, 2008), pp. 78–101 (p. 81).

4 Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2016), p. 71.

to approximate what I know and relate to — namely, a desert landscape.

Deserts don't exist in Germany, whose geography consists of temperate forests, lakes, rivers, and mountains. However, near Mainz, in Germany's southwest, is a sandy expanse, a relic from the last ice age called the Großer Sand, or Great Sand. The sand there consists of calcareous sediment from the Rhine riverbed that was transported by the wind to the northern slopes of the Rhenish Hesse plateau around twenty thousand years ago.⁵

The Great Sand is a nature reserve on an area of only 1.27 square kilometers and a habitat to a multitude of endangered flora, some on the verge of extinction. Around ten thousand years ago, steppe plants from western Asia and southeastern Europe migrated to the dunes, followed by plants from the Mediterranean. According to the Johannes Gutenberg Universität Mainz website, 'it is the only area in Central Europe that has been able to retain this character thanks to the particular local conditions.'

How is it that this landscape continues to exist and resist the dominant vegetation? Part of the answer is that this landscape has been occupied by militaries since the eighteenth century. First by French troops of the First French Republic (1799–1804) and the First French Empire (1804–14), followed by Prussian troops, Austrian troops, the Wehrmacht, the French again, and finally, the United States Army, which is still present there today.⁶

5 Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, 'The Mainz Sand Dunes Landscape', last modified 5 January 2012 <<https://www.botgarden.uni-mainz.de/outdoor-grounds/the-mainz-sand-dunes-landscape/>> [12 November 2022].

6 Wikipedia, s.v. 'Grosser Sand', (in German), last modified 18 September 2020 <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gro%C3%9Fer_Sand>.

The military presence involved the diligent removal of trees and bushes to provide a clearing for artillery training.

The 24th Military Intelligence Battalion of the 66th Military Intelligence Brigade is one of the United States Army Europe (USAREUR) units currently using the sand dunes local training area. Since its activation on 15 July 2009 in the Mainz Sand Dunes, the unit has supported operations including Operation Iraqi Freedom (Iraq), Operation New Dawn (Iraq 2010–11, Afghanistan), Operation Enduring Freedom (global war on terror), and Operation Unified Protector (Libya).⁷ The 66th Military Intelligence Brigade has also been associated with the atrocities committed at the Abu Ghraib detention facility.⁸

Despite protests against the nature reserve being used as a military training area and skepticism about how closely the area resembles the landscapes that it is supposed to simulate, such as Afghanistan, USAREUR continues to train for combat there.⁹

When I searched online for images of the Great Sand near Mainz, I found that stock photographs featured prominently. The photographs document the US military's training activities. Figure 2 shows a stock image with caption.

The photographs bear a strong resemblance to the Department of Defense (DoD) archive images of Operation Iraqi Freedom although the landscapes are worlds apart

7 66th Military Intelligence Battalion website, last modified 26 July 2018 <<https://www.inscom.army.mil/msc/66mib/24thML.html>>.

8 George R. Fay, 'Investigation of the Abu Ghraib Detention Facility and 205th Military Intelligence Brigade MG', 2004, p. 43 <<https://www.thetorturedatabase.org/document/fay-report-investigation-205th-military-intelligence-brigades-activites-abu-ghraib>>.

9 Ludger Fittkau, 'Kampftraining im Naturschutzgebiet: Kriegsübungen der US-Army im Mainzer Sand lösen Protest aus', Deutschlandradio, 31 May 2012, 14:17:31–14:23:09 (no longer online, but available upon request from Deutschlandradio Archiv).



Figure 2: 'Soldiers assigned to 24th Military Intelligence Battalion, 66th Military Intelligence Brigade, conduct a Land Navigation Course during the Best Warrior Competition in the Sand Dunes Training Area located in Mainz, Germany, 28 March, 2017. The competition put its candidates through a series of physical and mental challenges including marksmanship; physical fitness; day and night land navigation; tactical communications; medical aid; board appearances and written exams; weapons skills; obstacle course negotiation; a 12-mile foot march; and a battery of other Soldier tasks and drills. U.S. Army.'

and do not look alike. However, the composition of the photographs and the relationship between the subject (the soldiers) and their surroundings (a sandy landscape) are strikingly similar. The high sun casts shadows and gives a distinctive hue to the foliage and the golden sand. The soldiers strike active poses that anticipate violence.

The photographs conjure a sense of a staged performance, blurring the lines between the real and the imagined. What is the difference between simulated and real warfare in these images? It can't be found in either image. Presented with both, one risks concluding that these are natural scenarios. However, I insist that both are carefully composed and manufactured with intent. They document neither actual combat nor the simulation in a landscape that contains the elements that mark it as suitable for war.

The problem is, nonetheless, that the photographs serve to legitimize both scenarios by their being indistinguishable and therefore natural. Moreover, photography has long been perceived to assert truth: indeed, it 'is built into the case made for truth ... there can be no truth without photography'.¹⁰

Once this truth is established and accepted, it forms a basis for further acts that take this truth as a starting point. And the result is a war that is manufactured, mass produced, and exported.

My search came to an end. Once again I had sought a landscape that I identify with, and again I found that it was occupied.

SHIFTING SANDS

What builds the case for militarizing a landscape? Which elements provide a space that invites militarization?

The Great Sand has many aspects that speak for the case against assuming it as a military training ground, including its size and its status as a nature reserve with endangered flora. But there seems to have been one very compelling reason for USAREUR to establish a presence there.

¹⁰ Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 70.

After all, it is one of very few areas in Germany that provide a sandy landscape. Perhaps the most obvious place to start is with the name, the Great Sand. Sand is its defining characteristic. Is the presence of sand, however small in proportion — the Great Sand is a mere 1.27 square kilometres — enough to serve as a surface on which to project conflict and thus to militarize? To convince as a place to produce and reproduce war?¹¹ As one scholar observes, it is ‘no longer possible to treat landscape and war as separate realms. Instead, the challenge is to explore how war and landscapes reciprocally reproduce each other across time and space.’¹²

Perhaps the Great Sand acts as a sand table. Like Reisswitz’s prototype of the original *Kriegsspiel* (war game), in which a table topped with damp sand served as an effective surface to project conflict and play out war games, transforming the sand into any landscape.

What would happen if you replaced sand with soil? Sandy paths with mud? Grass with dense forest? Would that change the nature of the conflict? Would it perhaps even shift the conflict to an entirely different region? The elements of the landscape have geopolitical implications. If you could imbue a grain of sand with a different set of associations, if you could stage an intervention that completely transformed the landscape, would the space continue to serve as a legitimate site for the production of combat?

In choosing a military training area, would an open landscape based on soil be too familiar? Does sand serve

11 Zoltan Grossman, ‘War and New US Military Bases’, *CounterPunch*, 2 February 2002 <<https://www.counterpunch.org/2002/02/02/war-and-new-us-military-bases/>> [accessed 12 November 2022].

12 Chris Pearson, ‘Researching Militarized Landscapes: A Literature Review on War and the Militarization of the Environment’, *Landscape Research*, 37.1 (2012), pp. 115–33.

to transport and thus manufacture a fantasy on which to project aggression?

It takes a landscape which has the characteristics of a 'foreign' territory, an 'elsewhere' on which to project conflict. Do sand dunes conjure this imagination?

'Military landscapes are constructed with intent. The assertion of future intentionality to continue to shape such spaces in the military's image confirms that right to be.'¹³ These landscapes have to continue to produce the need for militarization in order to preserve the military's stronghold on the space. What if a 'foreign' landscape exists within our midst but is part of the fabric of our collective identities? This foreignness doesn't immediately call for militarization or a show of aggression or force.

The Great Sand is also not the only inland sand dune in Europe used for this purpose. The inland dune in Jüterbog, Germany, another relic of the last ice age, was used as a military training area for 150 years — and until 1994 by the Soviets. More examples include the Biville Dunes in France, Braunton Burrows in the UK, Drift Sand Nature Reserve in the Netherlands, and Záhorie Sands in Slovakia.

Researcher Rachel Woodward notes that there is a core idea among national military forces that 'certain iconic types of landscape, that inform widely-shared national cultures of identity, are suitable and somehow naturally appropriate for military use.'¹⁴ Perhaps the idea is connected to certain landscapes that need to be 'conquered' or present some particular physical or mental challenge. But because soldiers are shaped by and in turn shape the landscape — 'The soldier is made in military landscapes, and military landscapes impact upon the

13 Woodward, 'How Military Landscapes Work', p. 84.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 81.

soldier'¹⁵ — a narrative of dominance must be inserted into the landscape for this process to work. The space itself is not separate from the act of soldiers becoming and thus carrying out acts that militarize the space.

In other words, 'the projection of military power in a landscape is reliant on the legitimation of spaces — how it is framed and represented — through which this can happen.'¹⁶ Legitimizing the space can't take place irrespective of what elements are present within it. It relies on perhaps just a few key pieces in order for the narrative to be successful. This 'framing and representation' is then exported to an entire region.

The landscapes we choose to project our conflicts onto have an impact on the warfare we readily engage in and the conflicts we devise as a result.¹⁷ Furthermore, they have a lasting effect on the narratives associated with the space and the elements within it.

An example from the Alps in the World War I illustrates how a militarized landscape can have a profound impact on ways of understanding the landscape and in turn the people for whom this landscape forms an integral part of their culture. The war transformed the once peaceful realm of solitude and escape into the military 'bulwark of the nation'.¹⁸ The peaks, once a source for an ideology of freedom and spirituality, could no longer be seen the way they were before they were militarized; their meaning was redefined. They even imparted new meaning to activities

15 Ibid., p. 96.

16 Henrik Strömsten, 'Military and Nature: An Environmental History of Swedish Military Landscapes' (MA thesis, Uppsala University, 2016), p. 10.

17 Grossman, 'War and New US Military Bases'.

18 Tait Keller, 'The Mountains Roar: The Alps during the Great War', *Environmental History*, 14.2 (2009), pp. 253–74 (p. 253).

not formerly associated with conflict, as they ‘diminished the distinction between mountain climbers and combatants.’¹⁹ Which is to say that to exist in the landscape, meant to become militarized.

We can take a closer look at the 66th Military Intelligence Brigade for hints of how the perception of the so-called desert landscape is entwined with the production of conflict. The brigade has been active in Germany since 1968, with its mission to provide intelligence for USAREUR ‘in order to facilitate the gaining and maintaining of information dominance.’²⁰ Their shoulder sleeve insignia includes a sphinx and is described on its website as ‘an oriental blue hexagon bearing a yellow sphinx superimposed by a silver gray dagger hilted black’. The distinctive unit insignia also includes a sphinx and is described as ‘composed of a chequy of nine sections of Gold and Blue (oriental) with the center square charged with a Gold sphinx head’. The detail ‘oriental’ blue is intriguing, as it is the less common name for ultramarine blue: “The name comes from the Latin *ultramarinus*, literally “beyond the sea,” because the pigment was imported into Europe from mines in Afghanistan by Italian traders during the 14th and 15th centuries.’²¹ A deliberate use of an uncommon name for ultramarine blue.

To what extent is the idea of an oriental, desert sand landscape coupled with the imagining of warfare? The oriental blue coupled with the Sphinx of Giza was chosen as a specific image to use as an emblem for exercising force.

19 Ibid., p. 270.

20 66th Military Intelligence Battalion website <<https://www.inscom.army.mil/msc/66mib/24thMI.html>>.

21 Wikipedia, s.v. ‘Ultramarine’, last modified 19 April 2021 <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ultramarine>>.

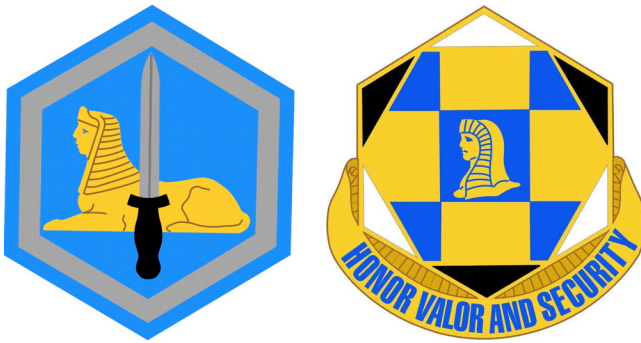


Figure 3. Shoulder sleeve insignia (left) and distinctive unit insignia (right) of the 66th Military Intelligence Brigade.

There is also often a link between conservation and military landscapes. This association forms a part of the narrative of legitimation of the space, and also serves the perception that the military is there to 'defend'. In the case of nature conservation, then, the military wants to 'defend' the landscape from either invasive species or human interference. 'Military land use is legitimated through strategies of naturalization.'²²

In the case of the Great Sand, the US Army reported in 2009 that it served to protect the Great Sand nature reserve, that its presence was therefore beneficial, perhaps crucial to conservation, and that through 'close cooperation with German authorities' it had conducted 'a Threatened and Endangered Species survey in 2007'. The survey indicated that 'encroaching urban development, resulting pollution and the abundance of Black Locust Trees planted in the eastern part of the installation were all leading to a dramatic shift in the soil makeup and ecological diversity'. The army then led an initiative to remove invasive trees and bushes

22 Woodward, 'How Military Landscapes Work', p. 81.

(the Black Locust Tree is native to North America), claiming that 'U.S. Army environmentalists and training support providers are living up to the Defense Department's motto of being good stewards of the earth wherever Soldiers are called upon to serve.'²³

Do we need to militarize a landscape in order to conserve the planet and protect it from 'encroaching urban development, resulting pollution'? Are these the best conditions for wildlife to thrive, the most 'original' state?

The military maintains this unique geography through its activity, but in doing so also ensures that it remains a militarized landscape. It follows that this militarized and thus conserved landscape must not contain humans. If it does, then the only humans permitted there are those who are trained to kill other humans in order to eliminate them from this and similar landscapes.

'For all national military forces, ideas about national identity are implicit within military representations of landscape, and complicit in their construction.'²⁴

How the chosen military training landscape then shapes the national identity perpetuated by the military shapes the national identity of the wider population.

So, why does it matter if a particular landscape or a specific feature of that landscape is militarized?

First, it matters to the people in the regions that conflict is being exported to. Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation New Dawn, Operation Enduring Freedom, and Operation Unified Protector are all conflicts in regions that are associated with this landscape. The identities of the people in these regions are inextricably linked to a sandy

23 Karl Weisel, 'Project Serves Soldiers and the Environment', US Army website, 23 February 2009 <https://www.army.mil/article/17299/project_serves_soldiers_and_the_environment>.

24 Woodward, 'How Military Landscapes Work'.

landscape, built through experiences in their surroundings. Memories and histories are made against the backdrop of particular colours, smells, and textures. The landscape shapes how people relate to their environment and this in turn forms the idea and delineation of what that landscape is.

Second, it matters to the places that contain these numerous militarized areas. They are among nations that may not believe they have much to do with the conflicts going on 'over there'. Training areas make up approximately 6 percent of the earth's land mass.²⁵ A military training area next door doesn't mean that we are separate from what takes place there or that it doesn't affect us. It is part of the fabric of the entire landscape that surrounds us. This means that not only the whole landscape but the whole culture encompasses those activities. A conflict takes place both 'over there' and on our doorstep. The conflict abroad is in fact mirrored in the very landscape that the military claims to protect.

[L]andscape can be understood with reference to the representational qualities of landscapes, an approach which understands landscapes as texts to be read for what they tell us about the exercise of power over space. Third, landscapes are also experiential, engaged with through bodies, senses, movements and emotions, and brought into being through our being.²⁶

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- 25 Rick Zentelis and David Lindenmayer, 'Bombing for Biodiversity — Enhancing Conservation Values of Military Training Areas', *Conservation Letters*, 8.4 (July/August 2015), pp. 299–305 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/conl.12155>>.
- 26 Rachel Woodward, 'Military Landscapes: Agendas and Approaches for Future Research', *Progress in Human Geography*, 38.1 (February 2014), pp. 40–61 (p. 41) <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132513493219>>.

Our reading of landscapes reveals the narratives that we have embedded within them. It reveals that landscapes form an integral part of who we are and that we are not separate from them or from the processes that produce them. People whom we classify as belonging to that place, and those who identify with it are as much a part of that narrative.

As we militarize certain elements, like sand, marking a sandy landscape as a stage for warfare, we also occupy the imagination that takes this landscape as inspiration. For entire regions this is an occupation of the people's agency over their own representation.

To demilitarize and decolonize sand requires a different narrative that will become as ubiquitous as the material itself, one that is no longer associated with violence and war but simply with life there, in all its richness.

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