

**Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet**

**From Iwo Jima to Iraq: Approaching Combat Death through Genre in the American War Narrative**

**ABSTRACT**

One of the conventions of war narrative – whether in prose or film – is to claim to be free of convention, i.e. to be a faithful portrait of truth. As a result, war narrative is often discussed mainly in terms of degrees of realism – or how accurately it depicts a certain event, its technical details, or the subjective experience of combat. Nevertheless, war narrative is a highly conventionalized form of representation, characterized by a recognizable set of tropes and situations, and organized according to two or three main cultural modes. Two of these modes – melodrama and adventure – will be the focus of my presentation. No aspect of war writing calls forth more charged ideological and rhetorical operations than that of death in the context of military service and we can notice how certain conventions will cluster densely around these moments of a narrative. Looking at key texts of American war writing and film since WWII – including *Sands of Iwo Jima*, *The Green Berets*, *Full Metal Jacket* and the recent *American Sniper* – we will see how these modes structure our understanding of war, killing and self-sacrifice and inform the enduring emotional purchase of war stories (and perhaps, as a consequence, war itself) upon American culture. Since my talk is situated within a critical cultural studies framework, questions of race, class and gender will also be examined in relation to combat death.

**BIO**

I teach American literature and culture in the English Department at the University of Lausanne. Born in Warsaw, Poland, I grew up in Los Angeles, California, and moved to Switzerland in 1994. After teaching at the University of Geneva for 12 years, I came to the University of Lausanne in 2006. My areas of specialization are cultural studies, critical theory, gender and queer theory, the affective and cultural work of genre (including melodrama, horror, American Gothic and adventure), representations of war, and African American literature, history and culture. I have a strong background in Film Studies and work with cinema studies as well as visual culture and literature.

In recent years I have taught and researched the role of genre in the affective and ideological work of narratives about combat and warfare — especially representations of military death — and have just finished a book on this topic. This project has taken me deep into the world of American nationalism, the cult of the flag, the highly ambivalent and emotionally charged role of the military, and the place of gender in American self-definition and political rhetoric. The result, *Combat Death*

*in Contemporary American Culture: Popular Conceptions of War Since WWII*, will be published by Lexington Books at the end of 2020.

A recurring question that motivates my research is how art, literature and language can be used to promote social justice and a more sustainable future — and I have as a result been increasingly concerned with environmental issues, and have come to realize that our dependency on oil, accelerating environmental degradation and what some scholars call ‘ecocide’ go hand in hand with American militarism, imperialism and war culture. My next research project will focus on these issues and especially the role of narrative and language in shaping our responses to this planetary crisis. (See the short video on a collaboration with Lancaster University around climate change below and the poster for the transdisciplinary and interfaculty course on Global Warming and Societal Change).