

OPERATION WRITE: A QUALITATIVE ASSESSMENT OF BEST PRACTICES FOR
CREATING, MAINTAINING AND EXPANDING COMMUNITY LITERACY
PROGRAMS IN POSTTRAUMA CONTEXTS

by

Matthew Leavitt Brown

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Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Julie Myatt Barger, Chair

Dr. Allison D. Smith, 2nd Reader

Dr. Patrick Richey, 3rd Reader

To the members and supporters of Writer Corps.

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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I collect and present data on a variety of literary organizations dedicated to providing writing and publishing opportunities to military veterans and their families. I use this data to explain and justify the policies and procedures I have developed for the community literacy program I founded and run, Writer Corps. In chapter 1, I establish the legitimacy of my position as a facilitator of creative efforts for veterans while not having served, myself, in the military by examining the familial origins of my altruism. In chapter 2, I investigate trends within the field of composition studies by discussing Charles M Anderson and Marian M. MacCurdy's *Writing and Healing: Toward an Informed Practice*. I also include theories about expressive writing therapy that emerge from the work of James W. Pennebaker's publications such as *Writing as Healing*. In chapter 3, I define Posttraumatic Stress Disorder as both a psychological and a neurological condition and pay special attention to the specific nature of PTSD as it relates to veterans of combat by alluding to Charles W. Hoge's *Once a Warrior Always a Warrior*. In chapter 4, I present a survey of veteran-oriented writing programs and publishers from around the United States. In chapter 5, I detail a qualitative ethnography of the founding and growth of the Writer Corps program. In chapter 6, I conclude with a list of best practices for working with survivors of trauma, which is based on the research presented in chapters 2 and 3, as well as on my own empirical experiences.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION: A HISTORY OF TOOLS

The history of my family is a history of tools. The story of my growth as an advocate for community literacy programs for survivors of trauma is, in its own right, a story of tools. Through the generations preceding that of my parents, I come from a long line of farmers and manual laborers, so the tools I am referencing in my background mainly include the most standard implements of scratching livings from the unforgiving circumstances. But as is the case with most of the salt-of-the-earth persons I know, the tools people carry come to define not only how they are valued by their neighbors and the wider world, these tools also come to serve as totem to how they define themselves.

When I was a child, my mother's father played a game with me in which he would check to see if I was carrying my tools. He died when I was six years old, but some of my earliest memories have to do with his secret check-ups in which he would see if I was carrying a small pair of pliers and a bone-handled pocket knife he had given me. I can still hear him saying to me that these are the two most useful things a person can have. *You never know when you might need to help someone*, he would say. Not being available to serve others when I was able was a personal fault that, above all others, was unforgivable. My grandfather, a man who was six feet, six inches tall and towered over everyone who ever stood next to him had fought for all of his life to provide a modicum of dignity for his family though farming, trapping, serving in the military, delivering mail part time and praying. It was from this soil that my sense of individual purpose sprung and in which my understanding of communal obligation was germinated.

I often think of the way that my wife's father, who recently passed from lung cancer, used to quote the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, who once likened his love of a woman to being an "infinite ache." I worked for my father-in-law, who was a carpenter, for years. Despite the fact that Neruda's metaphor might be more overtly romantic than I mean to allege here, his notion of love's composition being derived by its lamented and impossible distance rather than its proximity might be appropriate for the sensations that accompany the witnessing of someone else's truest suffering. In the end, we are undeniably alone. Alone, but linked through a complex algorithm of empathic bonds. We are drawn together insofar as we suffer in isolation, but it is the shared separation that allows us connection. It is this bridge, or the hope that a bridge might be fashioned, that originally led me to engage in my pursuit of community service. And it is the need to construct viable avenues of sustainable social change, collaboration, and empathy that led me to rely upon field of writing pedagogy as a method of providing such care and change.

A great degree of attention has been paid, in the past decade and a half, to the intersections between writing instruction, writing practices, and therapy. More specifically, a growing amount of scholarly attention has been focused on the capacities of writing to provide therapy for Posttraumatic Stress¹ and its myriad symptoms and repercussions. I investigate, in chapters two and three, the emergence of current trends in the therapeutic writing movement, and in chapter six I establish a list of best practices for individuals and groups to use when creating or joining programs that use expressive writing as a method of

¹ There are a variety of ways that the words "post" and "traumatic" are spelled, written and linked. Because an overwhelming body of research combines the words to form "posttraumatic" and capitalizes it when combined with "stress," I adhere to this practice throughout this dissertation.

healing. To do this, I examine an interdisciplinary set of current scholarship about writing therapy and PTSD as a psychological and neurobiological phenomenon. In chapter four I examine different approaches used by nationally recognized organizations to work with veterans who write. In chapter five, I also draw upon more than ten years of ethnographic experience I have with using writing and writing workshops with survivors of severe trauma. During this decade of advocacy, I have worked with survivors of rape, domestic violence, sex trafficking, suicide attempts, loss of close friends and family members, genocide, natural disaster, extreme poverty, war, elder abuse and routine isolation from mainstream communities. What has proven to be my most long term and sophisticated undertaking, however, is the work I do with military personnel, veterans, and their families in the writing workshop I founded when I first arrived at Middle Tennessee State University in the fall of 2009. To more clearly establish the best practices I compile here, I use Writer Corps as a representation of the work and attention that are demanded when working with posttrauma writing communities. To be clear, I do not completely exhaust the research associated with this movement. Doing so would prove virtually impossible considering the growing body of scholarship dedicated to interdisciplinary efforts to heal internal wounds in the wake of international turmoil and violence.

Instead, I offer a thorough introduction to the concept of using writing with survivors of trauma, which is designed specifically for the kinds of people who are likely to take up the mantle of such responsibility: namely, those who teach writing in regional universities in areas with high densities of target groups. I spend most of my time here focusing on working with veterans and veteran families. Still, something of value should be available to anyone

hoping to bridge those wide divides of isolation, fear, and anger, a constant presence most of us can at least recognize and assume. For survivors of trauma and individuals living with PTSD, sharing stories and words may not heal their internal scars completely, but it might just be the best tool we have to shed light in the midst of all this darkness.

CHAPTER 2: A SURVEY OF SUPPORTING LITERATURE FOR POSTTRAUMA COMMUNITY LITERACY PROGRAMS IN COMPOSITION STUDIES

To more fully substantiate the value of community literacy programs for survivors of trauma, I reflect upon the trends in a variety of fields and scholarship and measure overlapping goals and gaps in research. Because the best practices I investigate and defend in relation to a variety of posttraumatic contexts have grown out of my work with Writer Corps, these best practices are not centered within a single academic paradigm. As a result, I present research in a number of fields that inform the practice of working with veterans in the context of collaborative writing workshops. When best serving members, dual goals are necessary: providing healing for participants and facilitating opportunities for community engagement between participants and their supporters.

Intentionally involving veterans in writing groups to help them cope with the stresses of remembered combat is a fairly recent concept. The “Global War on Terror”² has produced high volumes of what has come to be called PTSD in not only the ranks of military service personnel but also among military spouses, dependents, and related groups such as political refugees, clergy, social workers, and anyone else who comes into close contact with veterans. Although Posttraumatic Stress Injuries³ occurred well before the attacks of September 11th, the formal attention paid by branches of the US military and the public at large was not as widespread or uniform as it has become in the past fifteen years. In chapter two, I compile

¹ By “Global War on Terror” I mean to reference the phrase commonly used to describe American hysteria following 9/11 that was accompanied by military forays into the Middle East.

² A growing number of individuals, organizations and government agencies are advocating a name change from the term “Posttraumatic Stress Disorder” to the less inflammatory “Posttraumatic Stress Injury.”

research gathered from the fields of composition, rhetoric, and creative writing to foster an interdisciplinary approach to helping veterans heal through writing. In chapter three I investigate the fields of psychology, sociology, and neurocognitive sciences to further define the kinds of psychiatric and physiological impairments that such writing programs hope to absolve. These programs also help veterans use writing to assist in the healing of communal wounds inflicted on families, friends and communities by the ongoing conflict that has become America's longest military engagement and which has no end in sight. In addition to the data revealed through this research, I find processes associated with posttrauma community literacy programs designed for veterans might be successfully adapted by individuals who intend to work with survivors of trauma not associated with the legacy of military service.

1. Expressivism and Writing for Social Growth

- a. The Origins of Expressivism

I investigate practices and justifications for working with survivors of trauma through writing programs by examining the beginnings of expressivist pedagogies within the field of composition studies. Not only can many of the practices I outline throughout the body of this work be traced to those adopted by early expressivist pedagogues, the interdisciplinary nature of expressivism's development in the field of composition is a good fit for community literacy programs that necessarily blend a variety of academic and personal platforms. In my experience, the greatest support for new Writer Corps programs has come from educators who spend much of their time working with general education students in college and university English classrooms. This makes good sense, especially considering the influence

expressivists' views on the rights of individual voices have had on service-oriented educators over the past five decades.

In an article published in 1972 titled "Teach Writing as a Process not a Product," Donald Murray acknowledges that most instructors of writing are trained by "studying a product: writing" (3). He claims that the proper way to teach writing is to focus on honing the skills of process and that "the process can be put to work to produce a product which may be worth your reading." The process of which he speaks is further defined as

the process of discovery through language. It is the method of exploration of what we know and what we feel about what we know through language. It is the process of using language to learn about our world, to evaluate what we learn about our world, to communicate what we learn about our world (3-4).

Such claims fit nicely within the larger framework of expressivist thought, which as outlined by James L Kinneavy in the chapter of *Expressive Discourse* that establishes terminology is the "stake of the speaker in the discourse" (372). For Kinneavy, expressivity is important because "[w]ithout a doubt, the concern common to all of the groups interested in expression [is] the reassertion of the importance of the individual, of subjectivity, of personal value in an academic, cultural, and social environment which tend[s] to ignore the personal and the subjective" (374). As may be clearly deduced from both Murray's and Kinneavy's definitions of the expressivist mindset, early proponents of process-based pedagogy and expressivism were reacting to institutions of current traditional pedagogies that typified the post war era and were also aligning themselves with the psychological theories of developmental consciousness that were often cast as "ego-psychology" in the late 1950's

(Johnson 96). To be certain, one of the greatest differences between the theoretical underpinning of the expressivist movement as juxtaposed to that of the social constructivists is its reliance on a Piagetian rather than a Vygotskian conception of developmental psychology, which is defined by David Russell as seeing “the structure of the *individual* human mind as the source of our perception and rationality” (282).

In the end, it is certainly the expressivists’ foundational reliance on psychology that make so many of their approaches appropriate for community literacy programs designed to promote healing and growth for those affected by trauma. No scholar’s work has had as much influence as Peter Elbow’s. Like other early practitioners of expressivism, Elbow drew on the Jungian concept of “deep psychology” when advocating for the utilization of journaling workshops. These workshops were seen as a way to motivate intellectual and personal growth from the realm of private to shared meaning. By helping students develop an internal and personalized voice first, expressivist pedagogues established a method capable of growing to satisfy public demands on written discourse (Burnham 25). For Elbow especially, the practices of psychology became integral to his student-centered workshop pedagogy. In his first book *Writing Without Teachers*, he advocates for the normalization, in first year writing classrooms, of two of the most essential elements needed for a successful posttrauma community literacy program. The first of these components is what he calls “growing,” and the second is the workshop process with which he first became familiar through the methodologies of therapy.

Another way to think about Elbow’s concept of growth is to consider it by its more popularized and contemporary name, writing to learn. In the second chapter of *Writing*

Without Teachers, titled “The Process of Writing – Growing” he articulates what many of us who have spent time in composition classrooms know all too well. The “commonsense, conventional understanding of writing is as follows. Writing is a two-step process. First you figure out your meaning, then you put it into language” (14). He alleges that “virtually all of us carry this model of the writing process around in our heads and that it sabotages our efforts to write.” In turn, Elbow outlines what he means by writing to grow, a process that works:

by holding off writing and taking time to sit, think, make little jottings, try to figure out what I want to say and make an outline. In the second step I certainly won’t be able to find appropriate diction right at my command but I should try for the best diction I can get: by noticing as often as I can when the diction isn’t appropriate, crossing it out, correcting and trying to write it better. (14-15)

The expressivist interest in uninhibited freewriting and journaling, both of which are embodied within the organic nature of Elbow’s process, springs directly from rudimentary beliefs of psychotherapy. Expressivism is designed not only to help the centrally-perceived, core identity, but also the often undiscovered self, emerging into both public and private view.

In the context of posttrauma writing groups, which encourage a different genre of writing than what is found in first-year writing classrooms, such advice is exceptionally relevant. The primary experience with writing many veterans have comes mainly from writing that precedes their engagement with the group. This writing is often highly formulaic professional and academic prose that is generally strictly assessed. The concept of writing for

purposes other than sharing basic information in the most concise manner possible seems not only impractical but entirely alien. Like many of the students entering first year writing programs, writing as a form of searching, discovery and invention seems interesting but also difficult to approach. The perceived separation is great between those who can write in such an unencumbered fashion and those who are grounded in the rigidity of academic prose. The latter is an attitude that is especially pronounced among military personnel and veterans. Such attitudes benefit well from what Elbow calls “writing backwards” which replaces a “two-step transaction of meaning into language” by inviting participants to:

think of writing as an organic, developmental process in which you start writing at the very beginning—before you know your meaning at all—and encourage your words gradually to change and evolve. Only at the end will you know what you want to say or the words you want to say it with. You should expect yourself to end up somewhere different from where you started. Meaning is not what you start off with but what you end up with... Think of writing then not as a way to transmit a message but as a way to grow and cook a message. Writing is a way to end up thinking something you couldn't have started out thinking. Writing is, in fact, a transaction with words whereby you *free* yourself from what you presently think, feel, and perceive (15).

In my experience with working with survivors of trauma, simply writing backwards does not automatically procure good or even satisfying writing. Not, that is, until the other of Elbow's relevant practices, the workshop method, is incorporated.

In the chapter titled “The Teacherless Writing Class,” Elbow outlines the benefits of processing texts through networks of other writers to facilitate a writing style which moves beyond what he calls “a transaction entirely with yourself” (76). Such processing is greatly useful because “[w]riting is not just getting things down on paper, it is getting things inside someone else’s head.” Accomplishing such a task is aided by establishing groups in which “[e]veryone reads everyone else’s writing. Everyone tries to give each writer a sense of how his words were experienced.” Accordingly, Elbow believes that to improve writing, “you don’t need advice about what changes to make; you don’t need theories of what is good and bad writing. You need movies of people’s minds while they read your words” (77). What is most beneficial to consider is that good movies feature good sensory experiences. Good writing, without the aid of visual elements and effects, is even more reliant than films upon the expressive qualities of language. Facilitating workshops for individuals who have never before considered themselves to be writers is greatly beneficial because it reinforces two basic truths of expressive writing: first, good writing lives in details, second, great writing almost never happens on purpose.

Despite correlations between expressivist pedagogies and best practices for posttrauma community literacy programs, a number of concerns are voiced by alternative pedagogical styles. Most notable of these comes from early social constructivist critics such as James Berlin who argue that expressivism is short sighted because of its reliance on a pristine and unadulterated self (766). Problems arise when growth is assumed to have taken place within the individual domain when what has more likely taken place is the absorption of mainstream values(769). Such potential criticisms hold legitimacy in relation to a purist

adoption of expressivist techniques, but the demographics served by posttrauma community literacy programs have very different needs as well as very different goals than those of social constructivists and many critical pedagogues. Community activist oriented educational theorists are mainly concerned with combating complacency and consumerism through democratic reforms and renewed calls for social justice. Survivors of trauma are all too aware of the ways the external world can disrupt the innermost psyche and spirit. Social communication after the point of initial trauma is always mediated through a bifurcated set of private and public consciousness (Anderson 59). Priority, then, for writing groups is necessarily placed on allowing the inner or private voice to strengthen in relation to the external or public pressures placed on survivors to bear their wounds silently. Such space coincides well with the expressivist predilection for devaluing assessment. Not only does assessment cause interpersonal problems between facilitators and members, it also stifles the development of individual voices trying to move towards growth.

The discussion presented here thus far has centered on how expressivist theories, from within the realm of composition studies, relates indirectly to community literacy programs interacting with trauma survivors who are composing what is commonly considered to be creative work (Vanderslice and Ritter 53). Much of the assumed correlation between writing styles makes sense if one assumes that the foundational principle of contemporary composition praxis holds that writing within a variety of genres satisfies an intrinsic psychological, physical and spiritual need for modern humans, or as Christopher Burnham puts it expressivism is “based on a theory of relations between language, meaning making, and self-development” (24-25). Still, a primary element of composition studies is

centered directly on providing for the development of students enrolled in first year writing programs. In the decade and a half following the turn of the millennium, new movements in composition studies have worked to reintegrate therapy directly into the writing-specific general education classrooms. Some of the techniques and lessons learned from these forays are valuable for posttrauma community literacy programs, but many others are not only inadvisable in the context of such programs, they seem problematic within the context for which they were originally designed.

b. Expressivism and Expressive Writing Therapy

In a review of Marian M. MacCurdy's book *The Mind's Eye: Image and Memory in Writing about Trauma* published in the Spring 2008 edition of *Biography*, Carra Leah Hood articulates an attitude that has not only given rise to the subfield of composition studies that MacCurdy's book defines, she also voices something that most of us who have been tuned into cultural trends over the past fifteen years are well aware of when she plainly states that "trauma is thought to be our shared condition" (269). She points out that such theorists "have also written books and articles on trauma, and formed professional organizations that host conferences and produce documents outlining the best practices. Some of this work retains medical or psychiatric grounding; however, some does not." She concludes her opening criticisms by claiming that:

pedagogical scholarship on writing and trauma, loosely connected to expressivist composition pedagogy from the 1960's, veers so far away from clinical understanding of trauma that pivotal studies correlating writing and healing from trauma actively exclude participants diagnosed with post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD), or limit

discussion of results to data derived from participants without a PTSD diagnosis. Consequently, these studies make claims about the power of writing to heal trauma that employ an overly general, pedestrian notion of trauma as a wide variety of difficult emotional experiences, a large number of which everyone goes through without developing trauma symptoms, derived from work with a clinically non-traumatized population of participants” (269).

With this, Hood launches into one of the two major criticisms of the “writing to heal” movement: the trivializing of the posttrauma qualifier which, to MacCurdy, includes those who have never suffered from major traumas.⁴

Despite Hood’s criticism of MacCurdy’s book, and much of MacCurdy’s theory warrants such frustration, some of MacCurdy’s work has value for groups like Writer Corps, as well as for the first-year writing classroom. Many of these positive contributions are more closely associated, not with the book Hood is reviewing but with an early work that MacCurdy edited with Charles M. Anderson titled *Writing & Healing: Toward an Informed Practice*.

A large number of recent reviewers of MacCurdy’s previous scholarship and reviews of her more recent publications bypass more immediate subjects entirely to discuss what has become a primary text in the canon of the contemporary writing to heal movement. In *Writing & Healing*’s introduction, Anderson and MacCurdy make a number of important

³ The second is also addressed briefly by Hood when she says that “MacCurdy claims pedagogical authority to mediate students’ healing, and to testify publically for them by writing about their writing about trauma” [270] or in other words, she benefits professionally by “curing” her student’s psychotrauma whether they possess any or not.

observations that anyone hoping to work with survivors of trauma needs to understand. They begin by grounding the relative newness of their subject matter in the lack of serious attention paid by the academic community to the effects of trauma on individual. They do this when they write that the PTSD diagnosis

was a response to the Vietnam War veterans who had recently returned from the most unpopular war in our history, emotionally and physically battered by battle, only to discover that their communities, unlike those of previous wars and military actions, did not welcome them home as heroes (3).

They associate this attention with the official designation by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* third edition, which first listed PTSD as a recognized psychological disorder in 1980 (*DSM III*).

Despite the fact that the definition had been significantly revised by the *DSM* six years before the publication of *Writing & Healing*, and has been revised once more since the 1994 revision, the complication many of the descriptors, treatments, and theories, which grew into PTSD's description and treatment suggestions already existed within the therapy networks available for survivors of rape at the time Anderserson and MacCurdy were editing their book (*DSM IV*; *DSM V*; Foa and Rothbaum). This attribution of war trauma rather than domestic, individualized trauma as the justification for developing a name and theoretical apparatus for PTSD is problematic in both its historical accuracy and its exclusivity. Nevertheless, Anderson and MacCurdy reserve some very important caveats for those who should be included within the community of posttrauma survivors' public rhetoric, and more importantly designated funding, normally forgotten. For anyone already familiar

with the needs posed by groups of trauma survivors, especially by veterans and their families, Anderson and MacCurdy's insistence that "no one can experience traumatic moments without serious effects, that PTSD is more likely to occur when survivors are isolated by cultural or individual denial, and most important, that one's recovery from PTSD is directly related to the response of the community to the sufferer" comes as obvious but welcome clarification. In addition to such a clear, yet too often unacknowledged observation, they work to expand the circle of the affected by denoting that "[w]e now know that every instance of trauma has the potential for grave psychic harm and that even witnesses to disasters can be susceptible to the effects of PTSD" (4).

Those of us who spend long hours working with survivors greatly respect the inclusion of non-normalized groups within the domain of trauma survivors. Problems arise, however, when Anderson and MacCurdy posit an assertion made commonly by the writing to heal movement which is to assume that because modern global citizens are networked in the context of global upheaval, displacement, violence and ecological disaster, we are all equally susceptible to the symptoms of PTSD. Or as they claim "because we are all witnesses to, perhaps participants in, this apparently endless succession of virtual and actual encounters with great traumatic potential, PTSD has become a central, material fact of our time" (5). They conclude this widening of the symbolic net by claiming that "[w]e are all survivors."

This inclusion of those not normally associated with trauma may be rooted in the routine beneficence often reserved for composition and rhetoric theorists and practitioners within the academy. Most of us who have spent much time in classrooms are all too familiar with the frequency with which students blur lines between professional demeanor and

personal expressive needs. Needless to say, we endure just about everything individuals experience in the shadows of mainstream consumer culture through the voices of our students. There is a large scholarly apparatus constructed to support the seriousness of just how difficult it can be to address such issues in student writing. If interpreted liberally, such literature also analyzes interactions in view of how detrimental it is to deny the impulses students have to engage sensitive and hidden parts of their personalities with the symbolic gatekeepers for what is their most serious encounter with the world of authority (MacCurdy188; Moran 93; Payne 117).

We are all survivors. Indeed. Still, there is a difference between the kinds of support necessitated by students who have survived the strife of contemporary American life and those who have faced catastrophic turmoil. In his book *The Stress of Life*, Hans Selye claims that in its medical sense “*stress is essentially the rate of wear and tear in the body,*” (1) and that “[t]he feelings of just being tired, jittery, or ill are subjective sensations of stress. But stress does not necessarily imply a morbid change; normal life, especially intense pleasure and the ecstasy of fulfilment, also cause some wear and tear in the machinery of the body.” Selye describes how life is comprised of a general degradation of physical and psychological systems from the biochemical processes of inflammation to the psychospiritual changes associated with familial loss. Proper health, for Selye, requires a certain degree of comfortability within “one’s own skin” (1).

I can only imagine how familiar each person who might read portions of this project might be with the small ways we succeed, fail and ultimately fade each day. Still here, I am

interested in the variety of trauma proscribed by the most recent iteration of the *DSM*, which officially outlines a PTSD diagnosis as including:

a history of exposure to a traumatic event that meets specific stipulations and symptoms from each of four symptom clusters: intrusion, avoidance, negative alterations in cognitions and mood, and alterations in arousal and reactivity. The sixth criterion concerns duration of symptoms; the seventh assesses functioning; and, the eighth criterion clarifies symptoms as not attributable to a substance or co-occurring medical condition” (USDVA).

In chapter three, I investigate the effects of PTSD and the cultural phenomenon it has grown to represent. What is important to note, however, is that what is a primary prerogative for a serious volume of the Writing as Healing movement within the field of composition studies does not apply to the specific demographics I work to outline here.

I do not wish to imply that anyone to whom *DSM* conventions apply are good candidates for inclusion within such writing groups, nor do I hope to imply that inclusion should be limited strictly to those who have experienced violent trauma directly. Keeping in mind that my programmatic style does not directly include first year writing pedagogy, a number of overlaps occur in the scholarship that indicate not only a shared interest in individual growth but also an understanding that many of those in our midst carry serious psychological baggage. In her article titled “Toward a Writing and Healing Approach in the Basic Writing Classroom: One Professor’s Personal Odyssey” Molly Hurley Moran discusses her own teaching style for applying therapeutic techniques to her teaching of beginning writing students. Some of these observations are spot on, as when she claims the intuitive

goal of all writing teachers is to imagine students while assuming that “if I could frame the experience, I could thereby control it” (94). Moran then applies a set of therapeutic goals to her classes which include:

1) the habituation response, whereby confronting a fear or a painful memory habituates one to it and thus robs it of its power; 2) the fact that naming an emotion or a trauma legitimizes it – that is, if there is a word for it, it is something society has recognized and hence the sufferer is not alone; 3) the fact that the act of writing objectifies the trauma and makes one regard it from different perspectives, in effect helping one to resolve it; and 4) the fact that constructing a narrative about an event is a way of finding coherence and meaning in it (97).

It is easy to see in such an outlining of goals that composition theorists have fully absorbed the psychological discourse of trauma. Beside the problems associated with inviting students who may not have experienced varieties of trauma similar to those for whom such goals were originally designed, applying these practices universally endorses the elevation of seriousness of early curfews to incest or the failure to make varsity with real-time combat experience. In accordance to this, there remains another problem. In his article “Writing as Healing and The Rhetorical Tradition,” T. R. Johnson asserts that by “distinguishing the goal of recovery from the goal of representation, we connect the healing dimension of composing to what, in schools, is called creative writing” (86). He suggests that such a descriptor “carries a risk: Whether about memories of combat, rape, or child abuse, writing that heals is often writing in which the writer names, describes, and takes control of experiences in which

the writer's powers of naming and controlling have been explicitly annihilated," and then "[t]o call this writing 'creative' in the traditional sense of the word is to risk undermining or trivializing its extraordinary 'real-life,' nonfiction relevance, the truth it seeks to generate."

Next, Johnson engages with the connection between such "creative" ventures and the expressivist doctrine that opened the door for its inclusion in public. He outlines and critiques the assumed notion that

truth exists 'in here' in the mind of the writer allegedly forms the core of expressivist rhetoric, a much criticized rhetoric often associated with writing that serves a healing purpose. Critics of such writing and its rhetoric construe the healing process as one in which the writer manages to 'liberate' from deep within the unconscious not just an object of representation, but an ideal self or 'true self,' to *express* a kind of private Platonic essence, an authentic 'soul' that is absolutely unique. Writing as healing becomes an activity of 'rugged individualism.' Such a view misunderstands both the classical practice of logotherapy and the contemporary expressivist ideas derived from it (86-87).

Where as his comments are distanced from concerns of posttrauma community literacy programs, Johnson's points make sense in both the context of educators hoping to engage with psychological, physical, and emotional traumas in the classroom but also for those working with survivors and their families. In the latter and more relevant of these platforms, the goal is not so much to produce independent and self-articulating citizens as much as it is to generate opportunities for new engagement between survivors and social

networks. In the end, the links that bind expressivist theories and practices in the field of composition studies and the expressive writing therapy of cognitive scientists and psychologists are clear. The growth in popularity among military healthcare practitioners of expressive writing treatments in the era of endless war, not to mention the explosion of funding for such practices, must inevitably blend into the domain of a scholarly program associated with cognitive science and psychology. Great strides have been made in developing a protocol for using writing to help both survivors of direct trauma and members of the civilian and college student populations at large. What remains problematic is the degree to which research shows the benefits of using writing as therapy while neglecting to develop parameters and vocabularies specific to target demographics. However, it is pertinent to first examine the scholarship surrounding the interplay between community literacy pedagogy, expressive writing therapy, and specific needs of trauma survivors, especially in the arena of veterans and their families.

c. Writing Therapy for Veterans and Their Families

Among the figures most associated with the writing as healing movement, one of the most prominent is Jeffrey Berman whose work integrating therapeutic strategies into the composition classroom has been both maligned and praised by critics, often for the same passages (Hood; Bauer). In his book *Risky Writing: Self-Transformation and Self-Disclosure in the classroom*, Berman justifies appealing to first year writing students to investigate the various traumas they have experienced or witnessed during their lives. Throughout the book, he establishes his unorthodox pedagogy by showcasing examples of how students feel

compelled to write about trauma whether asked to specifically or not, a fact that anyone who has spent time teaching first year composition should be able to acknowledge. Eventually he comes to a primary tenet in his approach when he writes that while not ignoring the “crucial differences that make each person unique, I emphasize the commonalities of human experience” (147).

In a review of Berman’s book, Dale M. Bauer holds Berman and other theorists like him in high enough regard to consider their ideas to be “some of the most thoughtful, incisive meditations on teaching that I have read.” He does, however, raise one of the most important and complicating issues related to the writing to heal movement when he discusses what Berman calls the “empathic classroom,” which is his ideal dynamic groups of students writing about trauma fosters. Bauer’s concerns emerge from the suspicion that “[l]ike calls for the dialogic or feminist classroom, this desideratum is rather too enigmatic, perhaps too dependent on the professor’s personality” (215). What is threatened, according to Bauer, by the establishment of a discipline dedicated to focusing on therapy through writing in the classroom is the very real possibility that the ability to feel deep empathy in a professional setting is not an acquirable skill. Instead, success in such settings might amount to nothing more than charisma.

Even though Bauer’s concerns about the feasibility of therapeutic writing pedagogies for first year writing classrooms warrant consideration, it is also obvious that the ability of facilitators of posttrauma community literacy programs to connect to potential participants depends greatly on how familiar said facilitators are with the specific needs and histories of

their target demographics. In most cases, such familiarity must be cultivated and applied from a plurality of sources. Although a sophisticated theoretical apparatus exists detailing the cognitive, psychological, physical, and emotional benefits that can be achieved through expressive writing practice, very little scholarship has been published detailing strategies for working with veterans and their families (Lawhorne-Scott; Everly). In many ways, such shortcomings might go without notice. A number of high profile media outlets such as *The New York Times*, *National Public Radio*, and *The Guardian* have profiled the beneficial effects writing has had for veterans returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (Simon; Freeman and Freeman). Most of these publications, however, do little more than laud the successes of programs such as *The Veterans Writing Project* or of successful veteran authors such as Kevin Powers (*Yellow Birds*) and Brian Turner (*Here Bullet*).

Other publications that prescribe the adoption of writing therapies for veterans do little more than confirm the argument that creative expression holds value for those who have experienced trauma in the name of military service. Such models are often comprised of overly simplified lists of potential benefits and goals participants might gain from involvement. Researchers Cheryl Lawhorne-Scott and Don Philpott, in publications such as *Military Mental Health Care: A Guide for Service Members, Veterans, Families, and Community* list expressive writing therapy, or cognitive processing therapy, as one of a variety of treatments for PTSD symptoms, but do not differentiate between therapies designed for survivors of rape, domestic violence, natural disaster or warfare (Lawhorne-Scott 43). In *War Trauma and Its Wake: Expanding the Circle of Healing*, Raymond M. Scurfield and Katherine Theresa Platoni comment on the need for collaborative creative

pursuits to be part of the healing process, but leave suggested protocols as vague and insultingly simplistic as outlining a list of best practices that includes:

- Immersion of participants in homogenous, small groups for one to five consecutive days in a *workshop* format;
- Creation and maintenance of a *safe space* by at least to co-leader trainers who have completed the multi-phase, ArtReach Train-The-Trainer program;
- *Work in metaphor* using the creative arts to access participants' creativity and imagination, while protecting their deeply personal material and avoiding potential re-traumatization or vicarious trauma; and
- *integrated use of creative expressive arts*, including art, drama, movement/dance, music, and creative writing, with incorporation of deep breathing, meditation and visualization in seamless transition from one modality to another (285).

Clearly, those working with survivors of trauma need an established set of practices which do not obfuscate the needs and benefits with technical and discipline-specific jargon and that do not infantilize participants through overly simplified concepts and rhetoric. Such modes of interaction are what retired Army Colonel Charles W. Hodge calls “laundry lists of ‘coping strategies’ without adequate explanation of their limitations” (xii). It is my goal, after further investigating relevant scholarship, to outline such a list of best practices for

posttrauma community literacy programs similar to the Writer Corps program I founded and have worked with since 2009.

2. Community Literacy Programs: Definitions and Strategies

So far, I have used the phrase “community literacy programs” to describe the kinds of posttrauma writing groups rather than the more commonly utilized, and perhaps more obvious “creative writing workshop.” My earlier inclusion of T. R. Johnson’s criticism of describing survivors’ remembrance of experienced trauma as “creative” may suffice to showcase why the most commonly utilized moniker is not adequate. Reasons exist to use the phrase “community literacy programs” positively affirms the primary purposes of such groups. Although the titles “creative writing workshop group,” and sometimes just “writing workshop group,” work well to communicate the chief pursuit of organizations such as Writer Corps, they fail to reflect the importance of community interaction that has proven to be such a powerful component in the successes I have witnessed while working with survivors of trauma. Because of the dual interest of Writer Corps. I advocate utilizing a descriptor that focuses on a less restrictive “community” over “workshop” and the multifaceted “literacy” over “writing.” For the kinds of posttrauma programs I am describing, the road towards healing does not conclude with writing but when writing is made public. A basic tenet of collaborative learning pedagogies, as well as community literacy program theory is that true growth comes through developing bridges of understanding and empathy (Bruffee; Kahane).

In many ways, community literacy programs are rooted in the kinds of core concerns about the relationship between language, learning, democracy and social justice that motivate practitioners of liberatory pedagogy. Fostering bonds between general publics and group participants develops a kind of liberatory pedagogical sense of praxis that is most commonly associated with Brazilian educator and activist Paulo Freire. Freire defines praxis in his book *pedagogy of the oppressed* as “reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed” (126). For Freire, all true intellectual and personal growth must be cultivated in collaborative settings because “only through communication can human life hold meaning” (77). When properly executed, such collaboration encourages critical thinking that

discerns an indivisible solidarity between the world and the people and admits of no dichotomy between them—thinking which perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity—thinking which does not separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved (92).

Critical thinking of this variety is what allows scholar and teacher David Kahane to claim in his article “Learning About Obligation, Compassion, And Global Justice: The Place Of Contemplative Pedagogy” that “when we learn about the particularity of others’ lives, we are able to see that they share a variety of distinctively human capacities with us, and so deserve our regard. This is not merely an abstract realization, but a cultivation of both reason and passion that expands our circle of concern” (52). In the case of posttrauma community literacy programs, this realization can work beneficially in both directions: both for the

participants to recognize something more universally human in the public domain and for the public to become more fully aware of the presence of what are often invisible and wholly alien wounds. Perhaps even more important than either of these realizations is the one alluded to in Rachel N. Spear's "Let Me Tell You a Story': On Teaching Trauma Narratives, Writing, and Healing." Spear speaks directly to the kind of growth that is possible for survivors when not only writing autobiographically but when also sharing work with wider publics when she reflects that

[r]elationships create a sense of community, empower, and play roles in restoring agency and in reinventing the self. They confirm that individuals (or rather, the authors of the trauma narratives) have lived past the trauma. Thus a group can, indeed, aid in restoring and transforming individuals by recognizing and accepting them as well as their stories"(67).

Despite the fact that making public the stories, thoughts and beliefs that one holds in private is something that is clearly at the core of community literacy theory, it is also obvious that such attitudes typify creative writing workshop groups. Even more, writing workshop groups are undeniably a sub-categorization of community literacy programs. What then, necessitates the clarification of rhetorical nomenclature? The answer comes from the practice of expanding audiences beyond the immediate workshop group to wider publics. The same sense of restoration and transformation Spear describes, Clare Woodward and Stephen Joseph substantiate in their article "Positive Change Processes and Post-traumatic Growth in People Who Have Experienced Childhood Abuse: Understanding Vehicles of Change." In an

interview with an adult survivor of childhood trauma, in which the man recounts confessing to his wife and children that he had been subjected to severe abuse as a child, Woodward and Joseph record his description of his wife's patience as being "'the keystone that had been missing in my life.' This keystone is the one crucial stone" (276). They follow this revelation by reflecting that "the experience of being listened to and being seen by another person can be a powerful validation for those who have felt unheard and unseen. It is about being seen and heard for who you are and what you have experienced."

Writing heals. This much is evident to anyone interested in reading this text, but so does sharing, as is being shared with. Any pedagogy established around concepts of integrating democratic ideals into society and expanding the scope of social justice to more individuals is necessarily concerned with better providing catalysts of change for survivors of trauma. Most of the scholarship supporting community literacy programs' potential is directed towards their implementation within the pedagogies of instructional composition. Such concerns call on community literacy scholars, such as Nancy Cantor, to reflect upon the "critical role" a university takes on "when it opens its gates far enough to listen to the issues of greatest concern to society and to learn about them firsthand. The university must face outward toward work that changes the culture of the day" (18). She claims that higher education should "educate socially responsible citizens who will not be complacent in the face of entrenched societal norms, but will take the initiative in shaping our diverse democracy and its global interconnections." Even as such lofty and laudable goals might be primarily composed for academic audiences, a certain degree of overlap exists between the domains of posttrauma community literacy programs that are not by design predicated upon

inclusion within an established academic setting and theories created to support university based research.

In his essay “Collaborative Learning and the ‘Conversation of Mankind’” Kenneth Bruffee supports his faith in the beneficial effects collaboration has on individual learning by his investigation of the rudimentary processes by which human consciousness comes to develop knowledge through social interaction predicated upon language acquisition and use. Early, he claims that since “what we experience as reflective thought is related causally to social conversation (we learn one from the other), the two are also related functionally. That is, because thought is internalized conversation, thought and conversation tend to work largely in the same way” (639). If “thought is internalized public and social talk, then writing of all kinds is internalized social talk made public and social again. If thought is internalized conversation, then writing is internalized conversation re-externalized.” This concept of re-externalization matters in the context of working with survivors. When I reflect upon what is the of writing about healing, the objectifying process of extrapolation through language is key.

Scholars like Bruffee focus on academic theories that best align composition pedagogy with natural human psychological rhythms, but some of the more social-justice minded theorists focus on how community literacy programs can empower group participants as well as wider publics surrounding programs’ activities. In their scholarship there is much to inform best practices for programs devised to serve survivors of trauma. In her essay “Sponsors of Literacy” Debora Brandt examines the evolutions that have taken place in both

publishing and social conceptions of literacy since industrialization. After working to establish a vision of contemporary literacy studies as being colonized by corporate and capitalist ideals, Brandt declares that an analysis of sponsorship “forces us to consider not merely how one social group’s literacy practices may differ from another’s, but how everybody’s literacy practices are operating in differential economies, which supply different access routes, different degrees of sponsoring power, and different scales of monetary worth to the practices in use” (21). This public reflection upon differences and the sociopolitical power structures that they represent is important in a meaningful liberatory composition pedagogy. When working with survivors, however, exhibiting differences between those who have and those who have not experienced a particular set of events is only part of what is important. In the case of working with veterans, examining or witnessing such literacy practices has more to do with establishing acceptance, healing and unity. Despite the exclusive nature of military service, veterans’ stories are essentially endemic of all of our stories. After all, veterans come from an almost impossibly large infrastructure that is multiracial, disproportionately made up of working class individuals, and is nominally, but not practically, meritocratic. Veterans’ communities are full of individuals hoping for positive change and who are willing to fight for it.

In the end, what is perhaps most correlative between Brandt’s notion about “sponsors” and posttrauma community literacy programs is the way that she establishes an objective argument for the need to allow the subjective process of growth to develop naturally. If educators wish to develop responsible citizens in a democratic sense they must start with individual needs and build outward. No demographic has more need of this growth

than survivors of trauma, who often look to the public sphere with fear, disdain, mistrust or apathy. This need to be sensitive to the personal needs, histories and developments of each group member places a great degree of responsibility on facilitators. When working with survivors, especially with veterans whose post-September 11th social visibility has greatly increased, the balances of power between groups and their “sponsors” must be developed carefully. For academics especially, the notion that such time and emotionally consuming work might double as professional development is ever present. This is why it is so important to keep in mind what Eli Goldblatt reminds us of in his article “Alinsky’s Reveille: A Community Organizing Model for Neighborhood Based Literacy Projects,” when he comments on the importance of university partnerships for community literacy programs because social workers “usually face high demand for services, few resources, limited training of support staff, and no time to develop projects with partners in an entirely different work culture like a university” (315). Goldblatt remonstrates that in such situations “the question of who is serving whom needs to be asked again and again” (331).

What might be the most straightforward collusion between the needs of classroom teachers and program facilitators comes in the form of definitions and objectives for community literacy activists and practitioners. In their essay “Community Literacy: A Rhetorical Model for Personal and Public Inquiry,” Lorraine Higgins, Elenore Long and Linda Flower encompass much of the developmental history with the discipline. They describe the basic goal of community literacy programs as being “a way for people to acknowledge each other’s multiple forms of expertise through talk and text and to draw on their differences as a resource for addressing shared problems” (167). Soon after this

statement, they outline what they see as the primary features of a successful program as being one that

- uses writing to support collaborative inquiry into community problems
- calls up local publics around the aims of democratic deliberation; and
- transforms personal and public knowledge by restructuring deliberative dialogues among individuals and groups across lines of difference (167).

They follow this list by arguing that a “rhetorically grounded community literacy opens up a unique space where intercultural partners can inquire into and deliberate about problems, working toward both personal and public change” (168). Still, what is perhaps the most relevant of their points for posttrauma community literacy programs deals with their concept of designing their appeal to be directed at a “local public,” which they define as being

[s]omething more than the public meetings or think tanks we have supported in community centers, church basements, health clinics and college auditoriums. And [they] mean something less broad than the imaginary national “public” of the media or the demographic units targeted by marketers... a public is a rhetorical creation; it is called into being by being addressed as a body (i.e., as a public) of interested participants; it exists only if they are willing to lend their attention, to participate in the discourse; and it functions as a public by the circulation of ideas: through reference, response and rearticulation (175).

What makes considering the specific needs of appealing to a local public important is the way that it so greatly magnifies the practical healing capabilities of posttrauma writing programs. This therapeutic expansion works in two distinctive ways. First, it helps survivors share their stories and writing with a wider audience that includes friends, family and interested community members. Sharing work with a wider network not only helps with the writers' healing processes, but also helps build bridges of progressive communication where none may have existed before.

The second and lesser known reason that the appeal to local publics increases the healing potential for such programs has to do with social and psychological theories about treating the symptoms of PTSD. In chapter three, I discuss theories about what makes writing capable of not only serving as a palliative salve for the symptoms of PTSD but also makes it capable of helping survivors to move from PTSD to Posttraumatic Growth (PTG). Theories exist about the healing power of service, especially in the domain of veterans, who often privilege the role of public service provider. An array of empirical studies suggest that veterans suffering from PTSD after deployments benefit greatly from engaging in opportunities to give back. Publications such as *The New York Times*, *Time* and *Pacific Standard* have covered organizations dedicated to facilitating service opportunities for veterans whose track record of success is substantiated by real world evidence (Bach; Klein). Much of the work of the nonprofit *Operation Reinvent* is even dedicated to expanding the practice of providing community service outlets for veterans through its "The Mission Continues" program which helps "returning troops regain their sense of purpose" (operationreinvent.org). Even substantial elements of the call for service dogs and companion

animals for individuals suffering from PTSD is centered around the concept that providing care for fellow sentient creatures is greatly therapeutic (warriorcanineconnection.org; operationwearehere.com). For a posttrauma community literacy program to be truly effective, it must take advantage of additional healing that can develop from a rhetorical apparatus that posits the notion that the greatest beneficiaries of survivors' stories may not be the individual survivors themselves but rather fellow group members and supportive local publics. Such rhetorics help maintain that posttrauma community literacy programs' primary objective is not to serve as sites of group therapy. Instead, they are spaces where individuals work towards healing, where they can help others heal, where survivors share their personal stories with wider publics and where they can honor the lived experiences and sacrifices of brother and sister survivors whose voices have been silenced. If there is no other reason to justify using the name and policies of community literacy theories, this last list should be it. Survivors of trauma have a plurality of personalities, histories, needs and concerns. Expanding the scope of what is possible within and through inclusion in writing workshop groups can only help to expand what will be accomplished because of them.

3. Ethnographic Research in Composition Studies

Before proceeding to a psychophysical discussion of the clinically diagnosed conditions used to diagnose and treat PTSD, I outline the core practices and justifications for ethnographic research in the field of composition studies. In an article titled "Narrative Roots of Case Study" Thomas Newkirk contends that the practice of such a study is not "one primarily of methodology and objectivity, but of authoring and the cultural values embedded

in various narrative plots” (133). These narrative plots are not necessarily designed to focus upon large scale revelations but are instead generated to provide subjective and intimate details associated with writing practices. Such work is done by ethnographers whose goal, according to Beverly J. Moss, is “to study, explore, and describe a group’s culture” so that they may ultimately “describe a particular community so that an outsider sees it as a native would and so that the community studied can be compared to other communities” (155). For Moss, such a methodology “not only allows for but emphasizes the context that contributes to acts of writing and written products. That is ethnographers who study writing, literacy, and so on, study writing as it occurs in its specific cultural setting” (156). What is most notable about Moss’s conclusions dealing with ethnographic research comes in relation to a quotation she takes from Linda Brodkey: “the single most important lesson to be learned from ethnographic fieldwork is that experience is not – indeed, cannot be – reproduced in speech or writing, and must instead be narrated” (qtd. in Moss 161). In the case of the work I have done with Writer Corps, much of the accomplished growth has come as a result of group discussions *about* writing rather than from revelations held *within* written pieces.

In their book *Composition Research: Empirical Designs*, Janice M. Lauer and J. William Asher assert that there are “at least two kinds of roles that the researcher can play” (41). These roles are defined as being objectively involved *with* groups through observation to procure quantitative findings and being subjectively involved *in* groups as an active participant. The latter of these roles can provide qualitative information about both the collective’s features and their self-definitions. They also state that “[n]o ethnographer can be ‘objective’ nor is that the goal. The researcher’s perspective becomes an important part of the

environment studied” (42), which is compounded by the notion that a researcher “does not have the freedom to observe without restrictions and to report results as ultimate truth” (43). In this respect, most ethnographic research is qualitative, which means that it “attempts to give a rich account of the complexity of writing behavior, a complexity that controlled experiments generally cannot capture” (45). An ethnographic researcher’s relationship to writing is truly subjective, which emerges from the belief that humans are essentially subjective creatures. To apply artificial approaches to them can only result in a relative degree of “truth.”

As a result of the attention paid to the subjective nature of human social interaction, Lauer and Asher solidify their theories by appealing to neurocognitive findings which correlate their theories’ successes and challenges. At one point they observe that since “the human brain is unmatched in its ability to derive information from noisy environments, empirical studies have shown that it can also derive recurring patterns of fallible and incorrect inferences from data.” From this they note that “it is well known that people have severe limitations on the amount of data they can receive, remember, and process, especially when inferences are to be made” (46). These kinds of findings prove to support phenomenological philosophies that we see what we want to see and then no more. For facilitators of posttrauma writing programs, qualitative research derived from the position of active participation is both greatly useful and problematic at the same time; and usually for the same reasons. These findings are drawn from recollected first-hand interviews and introspection. For quantitative models of research, such data are typically viewed as problematic in their replicability. Strong empirical grounds exist for such disallowances, or

as Lauer and Asher put it, we are predisposed to “overweigh the importance of more extreme or novel data. On the other hand, redundancy of information tends to reduce its perceived importance” (47).

In their book *InterViews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing* Steinar Kvale and Svend Brinkmann reflect how introspection in the context of academic research “contrasts with a methodological positivism conception of knowledge as given facts to be quantified” (18). Instead, they insist that knowledge gained from introspection and interviews corresponds with intellectual theories associated with “phenomenology, hermeneutics, pragmatism, and postmodern thought.” They reflect the ways using interviews in academic research democratizes the manufacture of intelligence when they claim that “the process of knowing through conversations is intersubjective and social, involving interviewer and interviewee as co-constructors of knowledge.” This collaboration is important given the context. Studies designed to observe the psychophysical wellbeing of survivors of trauma are possible and greatly informative, but they are only as successful at revealing the true burden of trauma as such studies can glean from what individual survivors are willing to showcase publically.

More recent observations about the role of the “participant observer” demands that facilitators not only maintain a scholarly objectivity in relation to participants’ psychological states and growth patterns, but that they forgo such objectivity in lieu of developing personal relationships with participants to ensure communal trust and solidarity (Brueggemann 17; Flower 100). Nancy Welch addresses this concern in her book *Living Room: Teaching Public*

Writing in a Privatized World when she reflects how difficult it is “to teach writing in a way that supports access, voice, and impact while also acknowledging the formidable constraints that convince most people there’s very little they can do, very little that people have ever done, to affect the course of national and world events” (4). She emphasizes how important it is for facilitators of community literacy programs to acknowledge that “a precondition of writing is the belief that one’s experiences, perceptions and spheres of participation are meaningful and thus discussable” (45).

Despite the faith that facilitators of such programs may have in their participants, other critics have raised concerns about the dangers of service projects emanating from an institutional setting. In her book *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition*, Paula Mathieu asserts that “[s]ervice implies ‘good works,’ and often calls up visions of unequal power, with an individual in a superior position of strength helping another who is presumed weaker *or* deficient” (xiii). Mathieu posits that such service models proceed from “a problem approach, in which the community is defined as the source of the problem, which the university defines on whose behalf the students work” (99). Among the most appropriate responses to this kind of criticism of the participant observer is Elenor Long, who, in her book *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Local Publics*, advocates for the need for “non-interventionist agitators,” which she defines as being a position that “lets you draw upon your unique assets as a WPA without assuming you have all the answers” (110). Long outlines the job of non-interventionist agitators as having a need to:

- Connect leaders in the community, but recognize those you bring to the table may have connections of their own to offer,
- Be candid about your own interest in the partnership,
- Let those familiar with the neighborhood guide your assessment of its needs,
- Invest time and energy in the group's process without having to be in charge,
- Leverage resources responsibly, and
- Shepherd documents through the groups composing process (111).

Responsibly cultivating space for the voices of participants is necessary for any facilitator of a community literacy group that is designed to benefit not only members but constituents of the larger supporting population. Such an obligation is more pressing for those who hope to assist individuals in a posttrauma context. Most of the wounds left for survivors, in the wake of catastrophe, are both invisible and silent. In the end, the deeply personalized nature of trauma and trauma recovery necessitates involvement in a very open and honest way if researchers hope to procure helpful data that showcase the useful applications of writing as a medium for growth. It is my hope that the ethnographic research included in chapter 5 can be useful in outlining the potential successes and challenges of posttrauma community literacy programs.

CHAPTER 3: A SURVEY OF SUPPORTING LITERATURE FOR POSTTRAUMA COMMUNITY LITERACY PROGRAMS IN RELATION TO PTSD, EXPRESSIVE WRITING THERAPY, AND VETERAN OUTREACH

1. Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Definitions and Differences

The concept of trauma being “our shared condition” typifies the conceptualization of PTSD diagnosis within composition studies. This belief is supported by the writing to heal movement because discussions of trauma abound in the post-September 11th American media (Hood 269). And yet, participants who stand to benefit most from posttrauma community literacy programs represent much smaller demographics than typical notions of any citizen who has ever been sad or who has ever watched something terrible transpire on television. In *The Reconstruction of Trauma: Its Significance in Clinical Work*, Arnold Rothstein asserts that developmental studies “confirmed that trauma is ubiquitous,” but that this realization manifested “the necessity for distinguishing between significant and insignificant trauma” (31). Throughout the course of this section, I briefly define Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in the three realms in which they apply to writing and community literacy programs: psychological definitions of PTSD, neurocognitive definitions of PTSD and Posttraumatic Growth (PTG).

Before launching into nuanced descriptions of subcategories of PTSD, I should begin by noting that its diagnosis is problematic. Aside from the fact that symptoms associated with PTSD overlap with other forms of what is considered mental illness, such commonalities tend to result from vague terminology used to describe symptoms. (Fredman et al; Hoge;

Zayfert and Becker). The opaqueness of such rhetoric becomes increasingly problematic when interjected into the context of non-typically experienced individuals⁵ such as veterans (Hoge). In their book *Military Mental Health Care: A Guide for Service Members, Veterans, Families, and Community*, Cheryl Lawhorne-Scott and Don Philpott quantify the symptoms typically associated with PTSD (See table 3.1)

Undoubtedly, most of these symptoms are experienced randomly, if not frequently, by significant sections of the population at large. Still there must be something that sets apart those who experience trauma of any degree and develop PTSD against those who do not. In *Personality-Guided Therapy for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder* George S. Everly, Jr. and Jeffrey M. Lating draw upon studies that showcase that 89% of urban dwelling adults (18-45) experience traumatic events capable of producing PTSD, while only about 9% of those affected manifest diagnosable symptoms. Conversely, diagnosable PTSD symptoms emerged in 34% of survivors of natural disasters, 49% of survivors of rape and 53% of survivors of captivity, kidnapping, or torture. In the case of Vietnam War veterans, for whom the original *DSM* categorization was created, about 30% are suspected to suffer from lifetime prevalence of PTSD (27-8). Researchers discuss the two-factor model that has become commonly associated with PTSD: “1. A psychological hypersensitivity; and 2. A neurological hypersensitivity” (29).⁶

¹ The word typical here denotes a common usage by psychological communities to indicate what is usually seen as “normal.”

² The primary difference between “psychological” and “neurological” conditions I will allude to throughout this chapter deals with the separation between thought, or thinking about ideas themselves, and physical processes of the brain or mind.

Table 3.1- Symptoms of PTSD

Startling easily
Feeling as though a certain event is happening again
Having nightmares of terrifying events and night sweats
Feeling distant from those you previously felt close to
A feeling of numbness
Feeling more aggressive or even violent
Chronic intrusive recalling of events
Feelings of guilt, “Why did I live and someone else died?”
Feelings of despair
Suffering addiction
Contemplating suicide
Difficulty trusting
Feeling anxious
Experiencing sleep problems
Reliving the traumatic event(s) with flashbacks; these may include triggers like sounds, smells, feelings, and loud noises
Avoiding the anniversary of the event
Avoiding social events or places that spark memories

The officially recognized psychological manifestations of PTSD are similar to those showcased in the above listed series of symptoms, most of which are reminiscent of popularized images of traumatized individuals; however, my cataloging of the neurocognitive biological elements of PTSD are necessary for a number of reasons. To begin, associating PTSD with a physical disruption in the typical processing of the physiological biosystem is an important step for disassociating the emergence of symptoms (Everly and Lating; Marsella et al; Hoge). This association is between mind and body and has been a part of cultural and psychological understandings of PTSD since antiquity (Johnson 85). Even though social phenomena that could be associated with PTSD have existed since the earliest written texts, the serious consideration of what would eventually be called Posttraumatic Stress Disorder came about during the early industrial era when psychological impairments were beginning to be associated with physical trauma. Among the first names for what would grow into a chain of monikers that became increasingly associated with warfare was “railway spine,” which correlated with the frequency of injured laborers whose physical ailments were often overshadowed by disassociation, irritability or more aggressive forms of psychosis; similarly the Civil War produced “soldier’s heart,” World War I “shell shock” and World War II “battle fatigue.” While psychological founding fathers such as Pierre Marie Janet wrote about “dissociative reactions as a splitting of unconscious and conscious processes in response to an event the mind simply could not integrate,” it was not until five years after the official close of the Vietnam War that the term PTSD became uniform (Everly and Lating 18-9).

Many popular associations with mental health impairments center around ideological confusion and psycho-emotional degeneration, but PTSD diagnoses represent much more straightforward clinical and practical guidelines than many other psychological conditions (Neumeister et al 151). In their article “Trauma, Memory, and Clinical Practice” Lucy Berliner and John Briere explain that “[e]xtreme stress appears to exert effects on brain regions that are implicated in memory (e.g., the hippocampus) and may lead to sensitization, fear conditioning, and failure of extinction.” They advocate that the “persistence of intrusive memories and physiological responses to reminders of the trauma that are associated with PTSD are hypothesized to arise, in part, from stress-activated changes in the brain (e.g. involving the beta-adrenergic system) that cause the salience of trauma memories to be especially enhanced” (9). Such physiological manifestations of trauma and the resulting personality changes are corroborated by Everly and Lating when they observe that

Neurologic hypersensitivity is thought to consist of a lowered functional depolarization threshold within the amygdaloid posterior hypothalamic efferent pathways, as well as other limbic-related structures such as the anterior pituitary. This functional hypersensitivity is thought to give rise to a potential overreactive cascade of neurological, neuroendocrine, and systemic hormonal phenomena, as well as behavioral impulsivity, irritability, and a propensity for violence or isolating avoidance. The limbic hypersensitivity itself appears to result from a potential myriad of physiological mechanisms that may have the potential to reach convulsive proportions and to become virtually self-perpetuating, perhaps over the course of a lifetime. These mechanisms may even accrue a toxic nature (30).

To make matters more difficult for those suffering from PTSD, especially those who have been trained in survival strategies such as veterans, Everly and Lating argue that there is suspicion that many of the characteristics of PTSD are consistent with amygdaloid formations which “represent a unique encoding mechanism for survival-related memories. Memories encoded via this mechanism appear to be immune to extinction and destined to reiterative course over the life of the individual” (56-7). In other words, many of the changes associated with survivors of trauma who develop PTSD are rooted deep in the most primitive regions of the brain associated with involuntary survival instincts, regions with the most inflexible of human actions and activities, regions not given to neuroplasticity capable of growth and healing (Gerrity 87; Vaserling et al) Treatments designed to alleviate the symptoms of PTSD are designed to disassociate traumatic memories from the automated reactions associated with limbic processing. No matter how apparent its need might be, given the nature of the condition, psychological reprocessing might not always provide the basis of treatment.

In the article “The Treatment of PTSD and Related Stress Disorders: Current Research and Clinical Knowledge” written by Ellen T. Gerrity and Susan D. Solomon, they describe the most common treatments offered to trauma victims as “pharmacotherapy; individual psychotherapy, typically involving either behavioral techniques, cognitive approaches, crisis intervention or psychodynamically oriented approaches; and group therapy including mutual self-help groups and family therapy” (87). This list evidences that many of the strategies designed for treating the psychological byproducts of trauma are palliative. A

theoretical apparatus exists, however, which suggests that PTSD might not only be treated but that it might be overcome.

Posttraumatic Growth (PTG) is a relatively new disciplinary phenomenon that was popularized in the first years of the 21st century. Early explorations of what has been informally called PTG can be traced to practitioners of psychotherapy with Holocaust Survivors (Freyberg 85). Like much of the professional scholarship surrounding PTSD theory, it was not until after the militant insurgency of 2005 took hold in Iraq, which led to an increase in the violent nature of the conflict that the concept of PTG was fully articulated (Carll; Hefferon et al; Hoge). At the center of PTG theory is the belief that development of PTSD does not have to result in the continuing occurrence of related symptoms. According to a major international review of PTG literature published by the British Psychological Society under the title “Post-traumatic growth and life threatening physical illness: A systematic review of the qualitative literature,” authors Kate Hefferon, Madeleine Greal, and Nanette Mutrie underscore research that supports claims that “some people who undergo significant trauma and suffering cannot only recover from their episode but surpass the level of functioning they had before the traumatic event occurred” (343). The researchers claim that quantitative and qualitative research in PTG have shown five primary areas of growth (See figure 3.1).

Hefferon, Greal, and Mutrie also acknowledge that a great degree of variance exists between the different causes of PTSD. Still, evidence suggests that therapies designed to intercede specific socio-communicative elements of traumatic memories can be successful

when applied responsibly. Most of these strategies intercept correlations between past traumas and biocognitive associations. A plurality of justifications exist for the inclusion of expressive writing therapy into the catalogue of successful strategies of transitioning individuals from states of stress to growth.

Table 3.2- Primary areas of posttraumatic growth

perceived changes in self
closer family relationships
changed philosophies on life
a better perspective on life
a strengthened belief system

(344)

2. Expressive Writing Therapy

In chapter 2 I showed that expressive writing has an established history of being used not only to offer psychological therapy to those who have typical life experiences, but more specifically for those who have survived traumatic experiences. My goal, then, is not to reiterate that expressive writing therapy exists but to explore the theories about expressive writing that prove to be therapeutically effective. I do this by focusing on the two theoretical trajectories that are increasingly blending: psychology and neurocognitive sciences.

In their book *Military Mental Health Care: A Guide for Service Members, Veterans, Families, and Community*, Cheryl Lawhorne-Scott and Don Philpott feature the kind of graphic that populates a large volume of PTSD clinical literature (See table 3.3)

Table 3.3- Treatment categories for PTSD

Type of CBT	Overview/Components	Goal
Prolonged Exposure Therapy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Imaginal exposure: Repeated and prolonged recounting of the traumatic experience • In vivo exposure: Systematic confrontation of trauma-related situations that are feared and avoided, despite being safe. 	<p>Increase emotional processing of the traumatic event so that memories or situations no longer result in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxious arousal to trauma • Escape and avoidance behaviors
Cognitive Therapy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modify the relationships between thoughts and feelings • Identify and challenge inaccurate or extreme negative thoughts • Develop alternative, more logical or helpful thoughts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help the individual recognize and adjust trauma-related thoughts • Help the individual modify his or her appraisal of self and the world
Cognitive Processing Therapy	<p>Includes elements of Cognitive Therapy and Prolonged Exposure Therapy, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying and challenging problematic thoughts and beliefs (as noted above) • Particular attention is paid to “stuckpoints”: feelings, beliefs, and thoughts that stem from the traumatic events or are hard to accept • Writing and reading aloud a detailed account of the traumatic event 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help the individual modify beliefs about safety, trust, power/control, esteem, and intimacy • Help the individual identify and modify “stuck points”

Stress Inoculation Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a variety of coping skills that are useful in managing anxiety, including muscle relaxation, breathing retraining, and role playing, as a cognitive techniques, such as guided self-talk • May also include graduated in vivo exposure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decreased avoidance and anxious responding related to the trauma-related memories, thoughts and feelings
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(Lawhorne-Scott et al)

For anyone who possesses a strong background in expressive writing, expressive therapy is sure to apply to any of these categories. And despite the fact that writing has been a component of psychological practice and therapy since at least the earliest days of psychological theorizing, it was not until the early 1990's that it became an officially established practice. Widely considered to be the founding father of expressive writing therapy, James Pennebaker first started publishing research dealing with the study of writing's effects on emotional stability and biosystems in the late 80's (Moran). Since then, hundreds of studies have been conducted and published corroborating his early findings. Much of what set Pennebaker's theories apart from earlier applications of writing in clinical settings deals with his early focus on physiological changes associated with writing. These results mainly include overall stress reduction, improved immune functions, and a long-term decrease in a variety of symptoms associated with chronic illness (apa.org). The physical components that have been associated with Pennebaker's theories since the early 1990's, however, are most closely associated with the kinds of emotional and psychological growth normally associated with cognitive behavioral therapy or CBT (Moran).

In their book *Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy for PTSD: A Case Formulation Approach*, Claudia Zayfert and Caroline Black Becker define CBT (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy) as being “a structured form of psychotherapy resulting from a marriage between behavior modification strategies, which are rooted in behavioral science, and cognitive therapy, which is linked to cognitive models of psychopathology” (2). They claim that the primary conceptual support for CBT is the notion that “emotional problems or disorders such as PTSD result from learned responses and can be altered by new learning.” Much of what they work to establish is based on the notion that “PTSD results from a failure to organize traumatic experiences successfully” and that CBT is designed to assist individuals to “make sense of traumatic events as a part of adaptive coping” (15). They support these claims with evidence that indicates “[a]pproximately 80% of patients who completed either form of CBT no longer met criteria for PTSD, and most showed marked improvement in depression” (4). CBT treatments often focus on prolonged exposure, although they can be paired with cognitive restructuring or stress inoculation programs (Foa and Rothbaum 91). In their book *Cognitive Processing Therapy for Rape Victims: A Treatment Manual* Patricia A. Resick and Monica K. Schnicke indicate that one therapeutic approach deals directly with ways memories are created, stored, and recalled when subjects develop alternative schemata, defined by them as “a generic stored body of knowledge that interacts with the incoming information such that it influences how the information is encoded, comprehended and retrieved” (10). They assert that in the case of traumatic events, schemata are fully created, which keeps survivors from being able to fully assimilate or accommodate their experiences (much like how a skip in a record causes a song to become involuntarily lodged in a

listener's mind in an unpleasant fashion). Information processing therapy, then, is about completing the schemata in a manner that allows memories to fully play out so details can be assessed and maneuvered.

The interplay between cognitive behavioral and cognitive processing therapies for PTSD have clear correlations with the practice of expressive writing. Still, another experimental therapy has shown astounding results that are increasingly linked to justification for writing therapy as not only a palliative treatment of the symptoms of PTSD but as a gateway to PTG (Shapiro et al). Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing therapy (EMDR) is a treatment for trauma survivors designed by psychologist Francine Shapiro in the 1980's. EMDR consists of a sequence of eye movements that take place in coordination with clinician directed associative memories. Its processes are primarily grounded in many of the same theories underpinning cognitive processing therapy. The consensus of psychophysical disciplines, then, is that PTSD is a byproduct of impartial memories of traumatic events. The difference between psychological and cognitive approaches emerge from their opposing interpretations of what causes this interruption. CPT practitioners believe that PTSD results from the mind's inability to process traumatic events in real-time. These traumas manifest themselves physiologically. EMDR practitioners believe that PTSD results from physio-neurological inabilities to fully process memories due to a lack of catalogued sensory perception. In other words, survivors retain the primary memory of traumatic occurrences, even if they are repressed, but their cognitive malfunctions stem from their inability to recall details about secondary details surrounding the trauma. Veterans who are affected by memories of an IED (Improvised Explosive Device) may not

be able to remember details about the color of the bicycle a child was riding on the sidewalk or the position of the sun in the sky when the primary event took place. The strategy for EMDR therapy is to reprocess memories by connecting absent details through neurocognitive association rather than by reconstructing narratives. Or, as Shapiro states in her book *Eye Movement Desensitization and Preprocessing: Basic Principles, Protocols and Procedures*, most pathologies are “derived from earlier life experiences that set in motion a continued pattern of affect, behavior, cognitions, and consequent identity structures. The pathological structure is inherent within the static, insufficiently processed information stored at the time of the disturbing event” and that “pathology is viewed as configured by the impact of earlier experiences that are held in the nervous system in the state-specific form” (14). All of this is impacted by the notion that “the traumatic memory is held in nondeclarative memory” (15). For Shapiro, as is the case for most neurocognitive researchers, consciousness is a physical affair (Vermetten et al). Among her bullet points substantiating the physiological nature of PTSD is the concept that “[i]dentity constructs change as the embedded information shifts,” which she describes by stating that

As the disturbing information is transformed, there is a concomitant shift in cognitive structure, behavior; affect sensation, and so forth. Clinical experience has shown that once specific memories are reprocessed, the client’s sense of self-worth and self-efficacy automatically shift. This leads spontaneously to new, more self-enhancing, behaviors. The accelerated Information Processing model [EMDR] holds that underlying dysfunctional memories are primarily responsible for the pathological personality characteristics and that they can be structurally altered. The theory

accurately predicted and is consistent with findings of EMDR clinicians that even severe personality disorders may be amenable to comparatively rapid change through the targeting and reprocessing of key memories (with the obvious exception of chemically or organically based conditions) (16).

In this neurocognitive understanding of trauma's manifestation within individual inter and intrapersonal identities, the relationship with expressive writing has to do with the developmental necessities of peripheral details associated with successful storytelling. If the keys to unlocking the traumatic nature of partial memories and reprocessing them depend on recalling or recreating peripheral details, then the advice given by every good teacher of writing holds true: show don't tell.

Early in her book on the plausible effects of EMDR, Shapiro outlines a list of the conditions that such reprocessing theory have helped to absolve (see Table 3.4). The strides made by psychologists and therapists to treat survivors of trauma are impressive and give rise to significant optimism, but time is a necessary component to healing. In their book *Expressive Writing Words that Heal: Using Expressive Writing to Overcome Traumas and Emotional Upheavals, Resolve Issues, Improve Health, and Build Resilience*, James Pennebaker and John F. Evans caution that “[h]ow recently a trauma occurred probably is important,” which they follow by stating that although there has

been no systematic research on this, there is good reason to believe that writing is probably not beneficial if the trauma has occurred in the last few days. Depending on the severity of the trauma, people are often disoriented in the first one to three weeks

after its occurrence. If you feel as though you are still reeling from a traumatic experience, then it is probably too early to start serious writing (15).

With this, and very few other possible exceptions, expressive writing therapy clearly becomes a viable candidate with which practitioners help individuals transform from “victims into survivors” (DeSalvo 168).

Table 3.4- Applicable ailments for eye movement desensitization and reprocessing therapy.

1. Combat veterans... who were formerly treatment resistant and who no longer experience flashbacks, nightmares and other PTSD sequelae.
2. Persons with phobias who revealed a rapid reduction of fear and symptomatology.
3. Sufferers of panic disorder who are recovering at a rate more rapid than that achieved by other treatments.
4. Crime victims and police officers who are no longer disturbed by the aftereffects of violent assaults.
5. People relieved of excessive grief due to the loss of a loved one or to line of duty deaths, such as engineers no longer devastated with guilt because their train unavoidably killed pedestrians.
6. Children healed of the symptoms caused by the trauma of assault or natural disaster.
7. Sexual assault victims who are now able to lead normal lives and have intimate relationships.
8. Accident and burn victims who were once emotionally or physically debilitated and who are now able to resume productive lives.
9. Victims of sexual dysfunction who are now able to maintain healthy sexual relationships.

Table 3.4- Applicable ailments for eye movement desensitization and reprocessing therapy (cont.)
10. Clients at all stages of chemical dependency who now show stable recovery and a decreased tendency to relapse.
11. People with dissociative disorders who progress at a rate more rapid than that achieved by traditional treatment.
12. Clients with a wide variety of PTSD and other diagnoses who experience substantial benefit from EMDR.

(10-11)

3. The Stigma of PTSD Diagnosis Among Military and Veteran Communities

Significant research and scholarship indicate a troubling disassociation by civilian publics from military veteran families, especially combat veterans, and a parallel disassociation of veteran families from mainstream civilian populations (Cain 341). A significant body of evidence indicating serious aversion by military members, veterans and their families to PTSD diagnoses (Hoge; Ochberg). Much of this stigma is derivative of the concluding word in the phenomenon's moniker: disorder. In an article published in the spring edition of *Military Review*, Dr. Frank Ochberg traces the fight to alter the designation Posttraumatic Stress Disorder to the less inflammatory Posttraumatic Stress Injury. Ochberg gives much of the credit for the rhetorical campaign to General Peter Chiarelli, who is the retired vice chief of staff of the U.S. Army. Chiarelli did two tours of deployment to Iraqi, and after becoming alarmed by the explosive growth of military suicides (still 22 a day according to recent figures) began to question attitudes surrounding military mental health policy (Ochberg 96). Many groups that advocate for survivors of rape, incest and battering

are also leading the charge for a name change in order to provide a “recognition of their dignity” (Ochberg 97).

A significant number of professional organizations and notable individuals have spoken up, via petition to the editors of the *DSM*, requesting an official name change. The web domain of a prominent organization that acknowledges the positive changes the PTSD diagnosis provided for survivors three and half decades ago alleges that it has helped millions of people because

- It gave a name to something that was confusing, frightening and disabling.
- It allowed research into causes and remedies.
- It enabled insurance coverage and disability payment.
- It fostered self-help for those with the condition and collaboration among those who study and treat the condition.
- The name, PTSD, has helped all of us who care about trauma and its consequences (posttraumaticstressinjury.org).

This list is followed, however, by a statement that the term “disorder” has grown to stigmatize many of the individuals who the original diagnosis was designed to protect.

Reasons exist to consider the labeling of “disorder” upon anyone who has undergone substantial trauma to be problematic, the relationship military personnel and veterans have with the term is especially problematic for two primary reasons: the consistency and seeming

universality of trauma among combat veterans and the connotation many military personnel and institutions have developed surrounding individuals who have been diagnosed with PTSD. In his book *Once A Warrior Always A Warrior: Navigating the Transition from Combat to Home Including Combat Stress, PTSD and mTBI*, Charles W. Hoge indicates that much of the terminology and many of the symptoms associated with PTSD were adopted by military psychologists from the mainstream psychiatric community without alteration. In its original designation, PTSD is a diagnosis proscribed to recipients of what is often deemed to be unexpected trauma that is isolated to specific parameters and environments. Survivors of natural disasters and victims of violent rape are normally associated with its original designation. Special provisions are made for survivors of incest or serial rape. According to Hoge, many of the attitudes associated with PTSD are typical behaviors associated with those who have undergone intensive survival training and who have served in situations where such training was called into action. These “warriors” may not suffer from a prescribable affliction but may have simply developed and honed personality not compatible with civilian life (Scurfield and Platoni 23).

In a survey of soldiers and marines who took part in the initial invasion of Iraq, individuals reported having undergone a surprising degree of trauma: (See table 3.5)

Table 3.5- Percent of U.S. Army and Marine service members from brigade and regimental combat teams who reported combat experiences during initial ground invasion of Iraq

Combat/ Deployment Experiences	Army	Marines
Being attacked or ambushed	89	95
Receiving incoming artillery, rocket, or mortar fire	86	92
Being shot at or receiving small-arms fire	93	97
Shooting or directing fire at the enemy	77	87
Being responsible for the death of an enemy combatant	48	65
Being responsible for the death of a noncombatant	14	28
Seeing dead bodies or human remains	95	94
Handling or uncovering human remains	50	57
Seeing dead or seriously injured Americans	65	75
Knowing someone seriously injured or killed	86	87
Participating in demining operations	38	34
Seeing ill/ injured women or children who you were unable to help	69	83
Being wounded or injured	14	9
Had a close call, was shot or hit but protective gear saved you	8	10
Had a buddy shot or hit who was near you	22	26
Clearing/ searching homes or buildings	80	86
Engaged in hand-to-hand combat	22	9
Saved the life of a soldier or civilian	21	19

(Hoge)

Based on the outcomes indicated in Table 3.5, traumatic warfare becomes normal for military personnel in the theater of operations. For Hoge, much of the reason PTSD in combat veteran populations is not universal has to do with the effectiveness of military survival training and the plasticity of the human mind to become desensitized to trauma through normalization. For other military veteran voices, such as James D. Johnson for example, other factors can play a role. In his book *Combat Trauma: A Personal Look at Long-Term Consequences*, Johnson asserts that a certain element of the veteran ethos accommodates a routine of denial. For Johnson, much of the denial stems from the intimacy of contemporary warfare, which places personnel in what are considered to be “peace keeping missions” to win “hearts and minds” of civilian populations but which often place service members directly within the context of civilian suffering that they are unable to positively rectify (109). The other major aversion to which Johnson points is the popularization of veterans claiming PTSD symptoms in hopes of qualifying for a growing list of federal benefits granted to service members in the post-9/11 military. There is an idea among combat veterans that many of those who claim to be worst affected by war experiences never served in direct combat roles (143). No matter how erroneous such prejudices may be in light of what psychologists and neurocognitive scientists have proven PTSD to be, that they exist and are pervasive is enough to warrant their consideration.

Among the chief concerns with acknowledging the stigma of PTSD among veteran and other posttrauma communities, especially in the context of working with survivors in group writing settings, is the very real expectation that any facilitator endeavoring to administer such programs will not encounter a homogenous body of individuals. Instead,

each group is inevitably going to be comprised of members who are fully conscious of their confirmed PTSD diagnosis, those who have not yet come to grips with the reality of their posttrauma affliction, those who display obvious symptoms of PTSD but who resent being labeled with a PTSD descriptor, and those who have survived serious trauma but who do not suffer from PTSD in any obvious or meaningful capacity. Much of the art of facilitating such programming lies in one's ability to acknowledge the reality that all of these posttraumatic psychoemotional states will be present. Success means finding a way to respect and provide equal support for the individuals who embody each state.

CHAPTER 4: A LIMITED SURVEY OF VETERAN-ORIENTED WRITING PROGRAMS, PUBLISHERS, AND WORKSHOPS

The number of veteran-oriented writing programs and community access points designed to highlight the struggles of military personnel and their families are large in number and scope. No official database exists that lists all of the organizations that use writing as an expressive outlet for veterans and their families, but the popularity of workshops for both creative and therapeutic purposes is easily detectable by scrolling through the results of an internet search. When I started the Writer Corps program in the fall of 2009, I was looking for opportunities to use the greatest tool I knew how to use, expressive writing, to help veterans. The first step I took was to see what other groups were aspiring to accomplish and what their practices were. Far fewer programs with a national presence were available then, but the few I found helped me get started. As a result, the primary purpose of this survey is to highlight the programs that would undoubtedly be encountered by those conducting a preliminary searches in hopes of discovering the origins and concerns associated with such organizations.

In spring and summer of 2015, I orchestrated the list by googling phrases such as “writing programs for veterans,” “veteran’s writing programs,” “creative writing workshops for veterans,” and “community literacy programs for veterans.” I conducted these searches repeatedly to amass a list of programs that showed up most commonly within the first five pages of Google search results. After accumulating the list, I contacted the named liaisons for each group so I could acquire basic information and materials. Out of the ten programs I

contacted, only three responded to simple questions about their organizations.⁷ Most of the materials gathered here reflect the basic information presented on the websites of featured groups. The following list is compiled of the most commonly referenced organizations.

Shortcomings associated with a wide variety of outreach agendas become evident when examining their specific traits. These successes and failures are evident as I highlight which organizations facilitate some or most of the subcategories outlined in this chapter. This list is not exhaustive, but my analysis does offer insights into the basic logic associated with serving service members through community literacy programs. In most cases, I have included geographic locations where organizations work with military personnel and their families. Many of the groups listed here operate from major coastal, metropolitan areas such as New York and San Francisco. A significant part of what makes Writer Corps so valuable is its long term and regular presence in states and locales, such as the American South and Midwest, where military and veteran populations live.

A short description of the categories I use to compare and assess my compilation of programs is as follows, and a short descriptor of the categories and programs can be found in Figure 4.1:

- Workshop –Creative writing programs are organized around processes in which individual participants share drafts of pieces that are either prepared prior to the workshop date or during breakout freewriting sessions. Drafts are then discussed by

¹ Of the organizations listed here, the only ones who offered responses to basic inquiries about their operations and values were Proud to Serve and their partner The Missouri Humanities Council, The Veteran Writing Project, and an editor from the Iowa Review, although he simply gave me a list of people who might be better representatives of veteran writing programs.

fellow participants and facilitators with an eye turned toward ways to more effectively convey the degree of emotion called for by the relevant narratives (Vanderslice and Ritter 53).

- Publish – A growth of attention has been paid to literature written by veterans in the past few years. Much of this attention stems from the release of a number of high profile novels, such as *Yellow Birds* and *The Hurt Locker*, and films written about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. I include university presses that publish special journal issues dedicated to veteran writing and publications produced by writing groups of their members' writing.
- Facilitate Public Readings and Advocacy –Organizations must offer literary readings that are open to the general public to be listed. In lieu of public readings, organizations that coordinate service opportunities for their members are included as well. Such service opportunities are recognized as complementary forms of communal healing (operationreinvent.org).
- Self-Prescribed as Therapy – Because of the growth in popularity of expressive writing therapy as a means to combat the symptoms of PTSD, many organizations describe programs as providing a healing component. Workshops in this category often replace discussions about how to improve the literary merit of presented pieces with discussions of memories and associated emotions (militaryexperience.org).
- Avoidance of Therapy – Programs that actively avoid the therapy descriptor do not necessarily avoid or deny the therapeutic nature of expressive writing. Instead, they place more stated emphasis on the telling of stories and the improvement of writing.

Such avoidance may be related to a desire to avoid liability for what should be clinical treatment of psychological and physiological ailments, or it may be an attempt to engage with individuals who either do not suffer from PTSD, who do not know they suffer from PTSD or who are not yet ready to admit to the severity of their trauma. Workshops in these groups run like traditional creative writing workshop groups (veteranswriting.org).

Table 4.1- A list of primary features for veteran-oriented writing programs.

	Workshop	Publish	Facilitate Public Readings and Advocacy	Self-Prescribed as Therapy	Actively Avoids Therapy Descriptor	Website	Primary Location	Email Contact
The Iowa Review Jeff Sharlet Memorial Award for Veterans	No	Yes	No	No	No	www.iowareview.org/veteranswritingcontest	The Iowa Review 308 EPB The University of Iowa Iowa City, IA 52242	iowa-review@uiowa.edu
Military Experience & The Arts	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	www.militaryexperience.org	Military Experience and the Arts, Inc PO Box 821 Morgantown, WV 26507	Contact form on Website
New York University Veterans Writing Workshop	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	http://cwp.fas.nyu.edu/object/cwp.veterans.2.2010	58 W. 10th Street, New York, NY 10011	Zachary Sussman- zachary.sussman@nyu.edu
Proud to Be: Writing by American Warriors	No	Yes	No	No	No	www.semopress.com/events/proud-to-be-writing-by-american-warriors	Southeast Missouri State University Press One University Plaza, MS 2650 Cape Girardeau, MO 63701	Dr. Susan Swartwout- upress@semo.edu

Veterans Voices: Hospitalized Veterans Writing Project	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	www.veteransvoices.com	Veterans' Voices & Veterans Voices Writing Project 406 West 34th St., Suite 103, Kansas City, MO 64111	Contact through website
Veterans of War Veterans of Peace	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	www.vowvop.org	Koa Books, P.O. Box 822, Kihei, HI 96753 USA	info@koabooks.com
Voices from War	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	www.voicesfromwar.org	N/A	Kara Krauze- info@VoicesfromWar.org
Veteran Writing Project	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	www.veteranswriting.org	Veterans Writing Project 6508 Barnaby St NW Washington DC 20015.	Ron Capps- ron@veteranswriting.org
War Writers Campaign	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	www.warwriterscampaign.org	The War Writers' Campaign, Inc. P.O. Box 3811 Parker, CO 80134	ryan@warwriterscampaign.org
Warrior Writers						www.warriorwriters.org	N/A	Lovella Calica- lovella@warriorwriters.org

1. *The Iowa Review* Jeff Sharlet Memorial Award for Veterans

An annual literary contest hosted by The Iowa Review, the literary journal of the University of Iowa, that is open only to veterans. The contest does not offer veterans much in the way of therapy, camaraderie, or guided skill development; however, it does establish a precedent that suggests veteran writing has literary merit. This is

especially notable given the prestige of the publisher since the University of Iowa is the oldest and most respected creative writing program in the United States. A list of their submission guidelines for the 2015 submission period, reproduced directly from their website, are as follows:

- a. Manuscripts must include a cover page listing your name, address, e-mail address and/or telephone number, and the title of each work, but your name should not appear on the manuscript itself.
- b. [Entry fee TBD]. Enclose an additional \$10 if you would like a yearlong subscription to the magazine.
- c. Label your envelope as a contest entry and note its genre. For example: “Veterans’ Contest: Fiction.” One entry per envelope. (Note: multiple poems or prose pieces can comprise a single entry if the total number of pages does not exceed 20. For instance, you may submit two short stories of ten pages each in a single envelope, with a single entry fee.)
- d. Enclose a SASE (self-addressed, stamped envelope) for final word on your work. Manuscripts will not be returned.
- e. Postmark submissions by June 1, 2016, and mail to the address below
(iowareview.org/veteranswritingcontest)

2. Military Experience & The Arts (MEA)

A nonprofit organization based in Morgantown, West Virginia, that publishes writing and artwork by veterans and their families, but that also facilitates workshops geared toward helping individuals hone their craft and prepare their texts for publication. Such workshops

are usually offered via email exchange or online. Occasional in-person workshops do occur, but they are sometimes accompanied with small fees. MEA's primary objective is to "educate schools and other organizations about veterans' issues using the prose, poetry, and artwork" authored by veterans and their families. Their self-description and mission statement from their website includes:

MEA is a 501(c)(3) non-profit, volunteer-run organization whose primary mission is to work with veterans and their families to publish creative prose, poetry, and artwork.

Our volunteers are based all over, including college professors, professional authors, veterans' advocates, and clinicians. As such, most of our services are provided through email and in online writing workshops.

All editing, consultations, and workshops are free of charge to those accepted for publication. Veterans and their families pay nothing for our services, and they never will.

In addition to its primary publishing mission, MEA hosts online and in-person writing workshops and orchestrated national symposia in 2012 and 2015. MEA's in-person events are free or low-cost opportunities for veterans and their spouses to build skills in the creative and therapeutic arts.

Meeting our fundraising goals helps us to pay modest stipends to workshop leaders, host events, and educate schools and other organizations about veterans' issues using the prose, poetry, and artwork created by our contributors (militaryexperience.org).

3. New York University Veterans Writing Workshop

Perhaps the most well known veteran-oriented writing program to civilian populations, possibly stemming from its having been featured in the New York Times and on National Public Radio. The workshops are held each Saturday on the campus of New York University and are open to any veteran free of charge. Workshops are led by creative writing graduate students in exchange for tuition reimbursement. The program was started by Ambassador Jean Kennedy Smith and is operated in conjunction with The Kennedy Center and the Disabled American Veterans Charitable Service Trust. Not much information about the program is available online due to the exclusivity expressed on their website by its brief and uncommunicative data (<http://cwp.as.nyu.edu/object/cwp.veterans.2.2010>).

4. Proud to Be: Writing by American Warriors

An annual writing contest open to military personnel, veterans and their families that was started by the Missouri Humanities Council, the Warrior Arts Alliance and Southeast Missouri State University Press. The series publishes an anthology that its publishers believe “preserves and shares military service perspectives of our soldiers and veterans of all conflicts and of their families.” Included writing is not understood to be completely therapeutic but is, instead, imagined to be “not only an outlet for artistic expression but also a document of the unique aspects of wartime in our nation’s history.” Most notably, *Proud to Be* is produced and edited through a university press in a region with a significant number of active service military veterans. (semopress.com)

5. Veterans Voices: Hospitalized Veterans Writing Project (HVWP)

An organization that uses mentor/ mentee relationships between clinicians and veterans to facilitate expressive writing therapy that can rehabilitate veterans. The group

encourages one-on-one workshopping programs and also publishes writing by veterans from around the country. Such work is listed on their website, so the group meets their mission of enabling “military veterans to experience solace and satisfaction through [their] writing program. This mission emerges from their stated vision of “a world where people appreciate that writing can both heal and entertain.”

The project encourages veterans to express their thoughts and feelings in writing and to send their stories, essays and poems to the HVWP headquarters for potential publication in *Veterans’ Voices* magazine, which is made possible through ongoing contributions to HVWP. Their vision statement proposes that they foster a global cultural climate that

[i]s a world where people appreciate that writing can both heal and entertain.

The project encourages veterans to express their thoughts and feelings in writing and to send their stories, essays and poems to the VVWP headquarters for potential publication in *Veterans’ Voices* magazine. The magazine is made possible by ongoing contributions to VVWP. We are thankful for circulation support to VAMCs by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.(veteransvoices.com).

6. Veterans of War Veterans of Peace (VoWVoP)

A San Francisco based program that was started by National Book Award winner Maxine Hong Kingston. The group focuses on using expressive writing strategies as well as Buddhist mindfulness techniques to heal the psyches and spirits of those who have suffered from the trauma of war. The group’s publication, *Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace*, has received significant national attention as has the group’s leader, Kingston, who was awarded the National Humanities Medal in 1997 for her advocacy. Like many other veteran-oriented

writing groups, VoWVoP invites veterans to explore their military related traumatic experiences to promote personal and public catharsis. Unlike many other programs in this chapter, this organization maintains an overt position of veterans as being both traumatized and purveyors of trauma. Its practices and policies are decidedly political, which narrows both the range of its potential success as well as its ability to recruit many veterans and veteran family members who possess conflicting notions as to the moral rectitude of their time spent in combat or support operations. Much of the group's website is dedicated to honoring Kingston's accommodations and vision as opposed to focusing on the actual activities of the group (VoWVoP.org)

7. Voices from War

An organization based in New York City that is open to veterans free of charge. The group meets for set multi-week sessions at the 14th St. YMCA. Voices from War utilizes rhetoric that neither denies nor directly acknowledges the prevalence of PTSD among veteran populations, while also avoiding direct acknowledgement of writing's unique ability to provide therapy for psychophysical scars. Instead, its facilitators describe the benefit of their program as stemming from the belief that it

- a. Offers opportunities for expressing experiences of war through writing workshops for veterans with attention to individual stories, existing literature, and craft...
- b. Builds community among veterans...
- c. Builds bridges of experience and expression between veterans and civilians by creating and nurturing wider opportunities for diverse dialogue and events...

(voicesfromwar.org)

8. Veteran Writing Project

A large scale and Washington, D.C.-based program that publishes its own veterans-only literary journal, 0-Dark-Thirty, and also facilitates two types of workshops. The first workshop variety is a mentorship program in which veterans who are nearing completion of a full-length manuscript can be paired with an publishing industry insider who provides holistic editorial procedures. In the second workshop variety, consolidated writing conferences are held over a few days at a variety of venues throughout the United States, primarily, however, in large coastal cities such as New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles. These traveling conferences are facilitated by published authors who hold advanced degrees in their genres but who are also veterans.

According to their website, The Veterans Writing Project facilitators approach the work with three primary goals

- a. The first is literary. We believe there is a new wave of great literature coming and that much of that will be written by veterans and their families.
- b. The next is social. We have in the United States right now the smallest ever proportion of our population in service during a time of war. Less than 1% of Americans have taken part in these most recent wars. Our WWII veterans are dying off at a rate of nearly 900 per day. We want to put as many of these stories in front of as many readers as we can.
- c. Finally, writing is therapeutic. Returning warriors have known for centuries the healing power of narrative. We give veterans the skills they need to capture their stories and do so in an environment of mutual trust and respect.

Despite the last item on this list, Veterans Writing Project facilitators separate their group from associating too closely with the therapy moniker when they state that “[f]irst things first: we’re not therapists, we’re writers. If you need medical treatment, please get whatever help you need from a professional. We’ll be here when you get back. If you’re coming to us as one part of healing and coming home, welcome.” They clarify further by acknowledging that “we’ve learned a whole bunch about therapy, some first hand and some by working side-by-side with some of the best scientists, doctors, and therapists in the country” (veteranswriting.org).

9. War Writers Campaign

A veteran-oriented publishing house based in New York City that is dedicated to providing psychological and spiritual healing for military personnel and veterans by facilitating opportunities for them to publish and share their stories with a wide network of audiences. This is done in the editors’ hopes of being able to “promote social change surrounding veterans’ issues through written awareness,” which is designed to “maintain a long-term and historic platform that facilitates the consolidated efforts of service members and veterans to promote mental therapy through the literary word. Its continued purpose of affecting advocacy and assistance will shape and direct the programs of [best-in-class] veterans organizations for years to come.” On their website, the editors list “4 Key Areas for Impact,” which are to

- a. **Assist** veterans in telling their own story
- b. **Engage** them where they are in the power of therapy through communication

- c. **Empower** veterans through written publications that generate royalties, create awareness for change, and provide a platform for reciprocal altruistic giving in the veteran space
- d. **Cultivate** tangible impact for advocacy where 100% of proceeds from published works go directly back to best in class veteran programs

Their mission and vision are⁸

- a. To promote social change surrounding veterans issues through written awareness.
- b. To maintain a long-term and historic platform that facilitates the consolidated efforts of servicemembers and veterans to promote mental therapy through the literary word. Its continued purpose of affecting advocacy and assistance will shape and direct the programs of best in class veterans organizations for years to come.(warwriterscampaign.org)

10. Warrior Writers

An expressive writing and arts workshop group that is based in Philadelphia with a presence also in New York City, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, Texas, Oklahoma and Colorado. Through regular workshops held in their primary locales, and retreats which are scheduled around the country, the organization's primary focus is to foster relationships among creatively minded veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as among their spouses and dependents. Warrior Writers stated list of goals are

- a. Provide opportunities for veterans to be in creative community

² I would like to acknowledge the style confusion and language errors present in this mission and vision list and throughout samples taken from groups' websites. All citations are presented as they exist in their original context.

- b. Provide opportunities for veterans to engage in artistic expression
- c. Support the creation and sustainability of ongoing creative communities
- d. Create visibility for veteran artists and their work
- e. Support the incorporation of creativity in organizing efforts
- f. Support veterans in the discovery of the arts as a transformative tool
- g. Tell the truths about veterans experiences (warriorwriters.org)

11. Conclusions:

All of the organizations I have compiled and described here have something of value to offer veterans and veteran families who utilize their services. I have attempted to organize this list to highlight both the successes and failures of each most clearly. Many of the most important attributes associated with successful programs emerge from the benefits they presume to offer participants. Those that align their missions most closely with providing opportunities to veterans and military families to develop long-term communities of expression and discovery are most likely to benefit members with the kinds of growth and healing that expressive writing therapy is designed to provide. Throughout the process of researching these practices and policies, I could not help but notice the ways that many of those listed as most effective are already centered at the core of the Writer Corps program. One important factor that separates Writer Corps from all of these groups is our long-term presence in the kinds of places where many veterans live. Some of these groups visit areas with high densities of veterans and veterans' families to host workshops, but none of them manage to maintain a regular presence where members can practice, grow and share. This sets Writer Corps apart, and it is one of the features of which I am proudest.

CHAPTER 5: ETHNOGRAPHY OF WRITER CORPS

1. Background:

In early August of 2001, I sat, eighteen years old and newly graduated from high school, in a military recruitment center. The stucco-walled building was situated in a strip mall between a Dollar General and a local retailer that sold everything for a dollar or less and was located in the next town over from where I grew up. It was the only town in my home county, in southern Illinois, that had a stop light. I had recently graduated from Chester High School and had college ambitions. And while I came from one of the few families that considered themselves to be middle class by the region's standards, I had been deeply instilled with the work ethic that typifies rural and small town working class families throughout the Midwest and American South. In other words, I wanted to do it all on my own. So I went to the National Guard, then the Navy, and settled on the Marines. I sat, contract half completed, ready to serve a few years and shuffle along in much the same way that people I knew had done since the end of the American engagement in Vietnam. Neither of my parents knew about my plans and in a last moment of compassion for my mother's feelings, I asked to use the phone of my childhood friend who was enlisting next to me. When I called home, I was informed I had received a letter from a regional land grant university stating that I had been awarded a President's scholarship paying for a significant portion of my tuition. I walked back inside with a conflicted conscience, filled out the rest of the contract with a made up name and identity and left. My friend, on the other hand, had no such call to make. He enlisted. His story did not turn out to be a happy one. Our lives

diverged soon after this incidence: mine to academia and his to war, mine to college and profound anxiety and his to physical and existential brokenness then healing.

In the fall of 2001, I went to college. But I took notice of what was going on around me. I became radical. I began to hang reports and estimates from publications such as *The New York Times* and *Human Rights Watch* around campus that detailed civilian death tolls from NATO bombings. I was threatened with expulsion from on-campus housing several times for promoting peace, or what was more callously called radical and anti-American views, in the wake of those emotional and confusing times. In the late months of 2002 and early months of 2003, I engaged in anti-invasion rallies that sometimes had violence inflicted against them. I sat with hundreds of others as President Bush and his administration scaffolded a justification for preemptive war. We blocked admittance to buildings on the campus of Southern Illinois University and handed out anti-invasion fliers around the community. We were frequently attacked. We had rocks thrown at us. Members of the campus ROTC unit once raided a sit-in and beat participants with a broken dowel rod that had held an American flag next to our speaker's podium before the flag had been stripped, dropped and forgotten. All the while, more of my friends and family were being called up. My roommate at the time was a National Guard member who had grown up in intensive, rural poverty and was the first member of his family to attend college. He was informed two months before the initial invasion of Iraq that he would be activated. This would spell the end of his college career and only the very beginning of what became a decade of physical, emotional, and spiritual struggle for him.

Over the next few months and years, as the American military sieged and occupied Baghdad and then watched its occupying force wither, the young people I had grown up with, mainly young men but a few women, disappeared into a dark cloud of cyclical deployments. These stretches of time away and back became home front interludes of depression, substance abuse, fits of violence and despair. Such was the legacy of those who had hoped to serve as a mode of escape from almost certain poverty. That is, for those who did, in fact, return. Many of my memories of youth are now clouded by the presence of individuals who were killed in action, severely wounded to the point of losing multiple limbs or traumatized to the degree that life after war seemed too unbearable to warrant consideration. The friend whose phone I used to call home on that fateful summer evening in 2001 was later institutionalized on three separate occasions for suicide attempts following his eighteen month deployment to Iraq. Statistics show that a minority of Americans, only one percent, are directly affected by military operations in terms of having close family members enlisted and involved in direct combat. What statistics fail to measure, though, are the ways individuals affected by modern warfare are not usually connected to service members through a single relationship. They are, instead, tethered to an extensive web of individual military service members and their sacrifices.

As time went by, I advanced in my education. Through my involvement in antiwar activities, along with my increased interest in my liberal arts classes, I changed my fields of study to English, philosophy, and French. I became deeply influenced by the transcendentalists, such as Emerson and Thoreau, and later by Existentialist philosophers such as Sartre and Camus, and then by early Buddhist thinkers, such as Nagaaguna. These

writers hold in common an expressed interest in nonviolent approaches to chaotic and seemingly absurd social and political landscapes. When I graduated, I took a job teaching in France. Shortly after my arrival, race riots erupted in the Parisian suburban community where I was teaching, which was populated by poverty stricken immigrant communities from west and north African countries. Two teenagers who were running from police had been burned to death. I began teaching lessons drawn from texts such as “Civil Disobedience” and “Letter from Birmingham Jail” like any good English major would in light of serious social upheaval and revolution. When violence reached a critical enough mass to close schools in my designated community and justify martial law, I was compelled to return to the US, confused and disillusioned.

I spent the next few years working for a publishing company and meandering around the continental US. I worked odd jobs to keep myself afloat while developing my portfolio as a serious poet who focuses on providing witness to social issues of injustice and upheaval. When I was admitted into a graduate program for creative writing, I began working on a manuscript of poems that dealt with the human costs inflicted by generations of conflict, both domestically and in the Middle East. The students I instructed as a GTA, however, were not the same kinds of students with whom I was accustomed as a young man. They came, predominantly, from suburban Seattle communities and had no ties to the socioeconomic pressures that typified the demographics with which I most identified. I had never intended to teach for a living, but for the first time in my life, I recognized that among the primary purposes of my voice was its lack. I had a deep need for the presence of my own silence. For the first time, I realized that the voice I most needed to sound was not my own.

The years I spent in the Pacific Northwest, 2007 through 2009, were tumultuous for America. The Bush administration surged in Iraq and took credit for Iraqi led movements regarding governance and security commonly known as the Sunni Uprising. As a result, the nature of the war changed. Shortly afterwards, the US economy collapsed, which helped lead the way for frustrated and disenfranchised voters to elect President Obama, who offered a message of changing US relations with the Middle East. When we finished our graduate degrees in the spring of 2009, my wife was awarded a job with the Tennessee Arts Commission. We welcomed the opportunity to move back to the geographical area where we grew up. I held hope of finding work with a regional university with the sole desire of starting a writing program for veterans. Years had passed. Many of my friends had been wounded, killed or maimed during the near decade of warfare. Nearly all of them had enlisted so that they could obtain a college education, but none of them had been able to complete their studies. I held a significant amount of remorse that kept me awake at night.

There but for the Grace of God go I.

It was survivor's guilt. I had managed to survive what seemed like apocalyptic years of loss and trauma for the community where I grew up and remained completely unscathed. I held a weight of shame that sank like a lead ball, hollowing me and channeling my core.

2. Academic Year 2009-2010

Within a few days of moving to Tennessee, I was awarded a job teaching at Middle Tennessee State University as an adjunct. I took the low paying position because it offered me an audience with veterans who were trying to accomplish the tasks which led them to enroll in the first place. For me, this was my opportunity to give back, but it was not that

simple. After the volatility I experienced in France, along with the relationships with students I cultivated as a teaching assistant, I was developing a passion for liberatory pedagogy. I became deeply influenced by Freirean theory along with critics such as bell hooks and Mary Louise Pratt.⁹ Due to my experience as a publishing poet, I was also fascinated by the incremental approach to personal efficacy practiced by the expressivists such as Peter Elbow and Donald Murray.

In the end, the reasons for starting Writers Corps seemed clear. Veterans who have experienced great degrees of trauma may have trouble adapting to college environments that are typified by adolescent forays into adulthood. Within my first semester at MTSU, I fashioned the groundwork for a program that would serve to not only provide veterans with a space of normalcy on campus, which seemed to be a key ingredient for their retention, but which would also help them craft the stories of their service in a more effective way. I had become a publishing writer. Writing was my skill, and I could make it a gift.

I knew that not being a veteran myself might be a barrier to working with veteran populations. However, I grew up with veterans. The farms on which my parents were reared, and on which I spent the majority of my childhood, have each been in my families for over two hundred years. During that time, men and women from my family have been continuously engaged in the American military. I have had ancestors or relatives who have fought and or died in every major conflict or war the United States has undertaken. Yet, I am not a veteran. To make matters worse, I am a pacifist. When I first advertised meetings for

¹ I specifically mean Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, hooks' *Teaching to Transgress*, and Pratt's *The Arts of The Contact Zone*.

Writers Corps with a simple flier, I held on to a great degree of anxiety (see figure 5.1). My primary motivations came from survivor's guilt. I had become educated and relatively successful while the people with whom I had been closest in my adolescence were either struggling, deployed, dead, or dying.

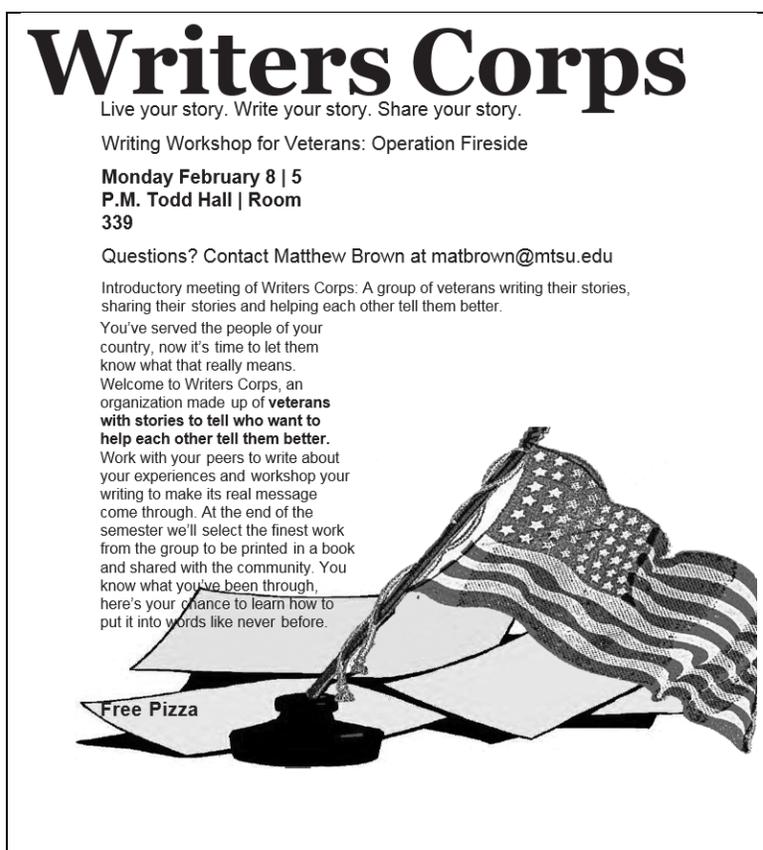


Figure 5.1- Writer Corps' first flier

I met with the dean for the college of liberal arts, who agreed to provide food for one meeting a semester and support the printing of one saddle-stapled journal each year. I began to spread the word about the program by distributing fliers and asking colleagues to make announcements in their classes. The first meeting I held on campus had two participants. One was the representative for the dean's office who came of her own volition. Her brother had served in Iraq which had awakened in her a deep sense of civic duty. She has since been

named the director of the military center on the campus of MTSU and has remained the most steadfast supporter of the Writer Corps¹⁰ program to date. The other individual was an Army veteran who had served in Iraq and was struggling to stay engaged in higher education. He attended, or so he said, because I had advertised “Free Pizza,” which had more to do with the shortcomings he reported with GI Bill financing than with his desire for a free lunch. That first meeting was more or less an awkward discussion of what I had planned, which was followed by a relaxed conversation about the eccentric quirks of the university’s student populations. Over the next year, most of the bimonthly meetings were held between this individual and myself. At times, two or three others would attend, but meetings would often conclude outside of the campus art building with my first member and I sitting while he chain smoked cigarettes and talked about the things that bothered him about civilian life after war. Sometimes, I would sit with him until after midnight, quietly commiserating.

During these early days of facilitating the program, I often asked new members who were struggling to commit words to the page while writing to a prompt that called on them to reflect on a specific moment... the memory of their enlistment. This practice was inspired by Elbow’s theories about “writing backwards” (Elbow 19) First, participants would write their narratives, then they would supplant the stories themselves with concrete details. The responses were almost universally the same: short, terse, chronologically fact-laden and devoid of specific detail. New members who were engaging with an already established

² “Writers Corps” is the name I used for the first six years of facilitating the group. In the spring of 2015, we changed the name to “Writer Corps” hoping to avoid copyright issues as we became more widely known on the national and international stage. In this ethnography, I use the name “Writer Corps” when referencing continuing features or supporters of the group.

group were, and usually still are, nervous about showcasing their work publicly. Many of them ask me to look at it first. After an initial reading, I usually invite them to revise by including more details. When they would bring their enlistment stories to the group for workshopping, discussions would focus on where concrete details would be most effective. Writing and sharing enlistment stories became a kind of initiation practice. I have since quit asking new members to write about enlistments, however, because so many of our members are spouses and family members of veterans who have never enlisted themselves.

At the end of the second semester of working with my first long term and serious member, he was set to graduate. A number of other veterans had visited and disappeared from our meetings, but none of them had stayed for long. On the last night that he attended, he confessed to me what the program had meant. He told me that when he had first attended he had been an alcoholic and a drug addict. These behaviors had been recreational before he had gone to Iraq, but they had been exaggerated after he had convinced his former girlfriend to send him a care package with disguised paraphernalia to his base on the outskirts of Baghdad. On a night when he and his partner were on guard, they had consumed the smuggled substances. The friend had wandered too far out of the perimeter and had been grievously wounded by a mortar shell sent from the dark ring that surrounded their bunker. His writing about the incident, and the regret that followed, helped separate the guilt he needed to feel personally from that which he could assign to larger institutions. He told me that working with the program had helped him to finally give up his substance abuse and that he never would have graduated without having become involved. At the end of the night, we shook hands, and I never spoke to him again.

3. Academic Years 2010-2012

Over a year went by before I had another substantial engagement with a veteran through the Writer Corps program. During this time, the United States withdrew all active service troops from Iraq and made gestures it was prepared to send more troops to Afghanistan. I was busy. I posted a few fliers and met occasionally with anyone halfway interested. It was not until after I received knowledge of the suicide of one of my closest childhood friends that I made further moves to expand the program. My friend had served two tours in Iraq. During his second tour, his wife, and mother of his two children, had moved in with another man who was more capable than a deployed soldier of supporting a growing family with sustainable income. He had withdrawn, then made efforts to reach out for help to his local Veterans Administration hospital before giving in to grief.

Before attempting to expand the reach of the program, I began to research organizations that did similar work around the country. I also began to read literature that supported the belief that writing about traumatic events held the potential to heal wounds inflicted by traumatic occurrences in both psychological and neurocognitive studies. I read about PTSD and started to recognize the evidence supporting a neurobiological, rather than a psychological, explanation of the ailment. More importantly, I moved from having an expressed political agenda for teaching that aligned with liberatory pedagogy to becoming increasingly interested in community literacy and service learning pedagogies. I started

asking students in my general education classes to read articles by critics such as Debora Brandt, Linda Flower, and Ellen Cushman¹¹.

After finding significant evidence backing up writing's healing properties, I decided to abstain from advertising Writers Corps as a therapeutic outlet. My decision came mostly from the fact that many of the other programs I discovered seemed to be motivated by one of two impulses. First, many organizations I heard about at academic conferences such as the National Organization for college English Teacher's annual Conference on College Composition and Communication had a tendency to revolve around the academic identities and needs of their facilitators. Many of these individuals sent messages that because they had studied writing, and writing is reputed to hold healing properties, they wielded the keys to absolving the sins of misguided American policy makers. It was as if they were saying "I went to college so I can fix what is wrong and broken about you." Secondly, many of the programs I heard about or found online suggested some overt political motivations. I began to see advertisements from conservative groups denoting "real American hero stories" as opposed to artificial ones that challenged the use of military force. On the other hand, I found an abundance of more liberally leaning programs promoting their programs as representing "vets for peace." My ambition was to maintain a community space that was free from complicated agendas and which would avoid co-opting the voices of participants.

³ I specifically used Brandt's "Sponsors of Literacy," Linda Flower's "Intercultural Inquiry and the Transformation of Service," and Ellen Cushman's "The Rhetorician as an agent of social change.

4. Academic Year 2012-2013:

At the start of the fall semester in 2012, I began to more aggressively advertise Writers Corps. I did not alter the original message or promotional material but worked more deliberately to engage a wider community of individuals on the campus of MTSU. I contacted the provost's office and asked an assistant to send messages to faculty and staff list-serves encouraging instructors to share information about the program with their classes. The first open meeting of that fall saw six new members attend. In addition to these new members, two faculty personnel—a non-veteran creative-nonfiction writer named Kevin and a veteran teaching in the college of liberal arts named Patrick—began to take part in the workshops. As the semester progressed, the new members continued to attend meetings that took place every two weeks. We were eventually joined by two more. Through this growth, the program began to receive more attention. I was contacted by newspapers and radio and television news programs about conducting interviews. For me, the purpose of the program had always been a somewhat self-indulgent method of paying back the debt I felt I had incurred to my former friends and family. Almost involuntarily, I began to condition all agreements with the qualifier that I would not be asked to speak on behalf of veterans. If I was to attend an event or speak to a reporter, I had to be accompanied by veterans who would be able to speak on their own behalf. Nearly all interview requests were withdrawn. To this day, I am left with only imagined and pessimistic rationales for such disinterest on the parts of regional media outlets.

That spring, most of our members remained. We also added a few new ones, mainly drawn from veterans enrolled in my general education English, which placed our ranks at

fifteen. As the end of the semester approached, I contacted our liaison at the dean's office to make arrangements for printing a journal. Our plan was to hold an end of the year reading and then make copies available around campus for students, faculty, and staff. I was advised to get a bid from the campus print shop, which would be the only outlet we could use without red tape. I received an estimate for a generic page count, material and style. The estimate was one dollar and twenty cents a copy. The dean agreed to pay for a print run of two hundred and fifty copies if the costs did not increase when the file was created. To accommodate the need to minimize costs, I taught myself, through trial and mostly error, how to use a pirated copy of a sample software editing program named *indesign*. The journal came out to be twenty three pages with a single color of ink used on a cardstock cover with an army green sheet of cardstock inserted between the cover and the main contents. I asked the group to vote on the color of the insert, and they decided to alternate between Army green and Navy blue each year. I also asked the group to nominate and vote on journal names. I gave a sample name of *DMZ*, or demilitarized zone. A few suggestions were made, but in the end most members wanted to use the sample name I had given (see figure 5.2).

In April of 2013 we held our first public reading. I made arrangements to hold the reading in an art gallery off campus at the Murfreesboro Center for the Arts to avoid the expense of campus catering and to get around alcohol restrictions. A supporter sent an email to faculty with a history of veteran support which read

Hey guys, the veterans creative writing group will be holding a reading of their works at the Center for the Arts on April 17th. The doors open at 6.30 and the reading begins at 7. If you have an opportunity, please join us. Additionally, Dean Byrnes has

funded the printing of their pieces. If you are interested in a copy of this booklet, please let me know. It should be very nice. And last, please pass this along to others you feel would be interested.

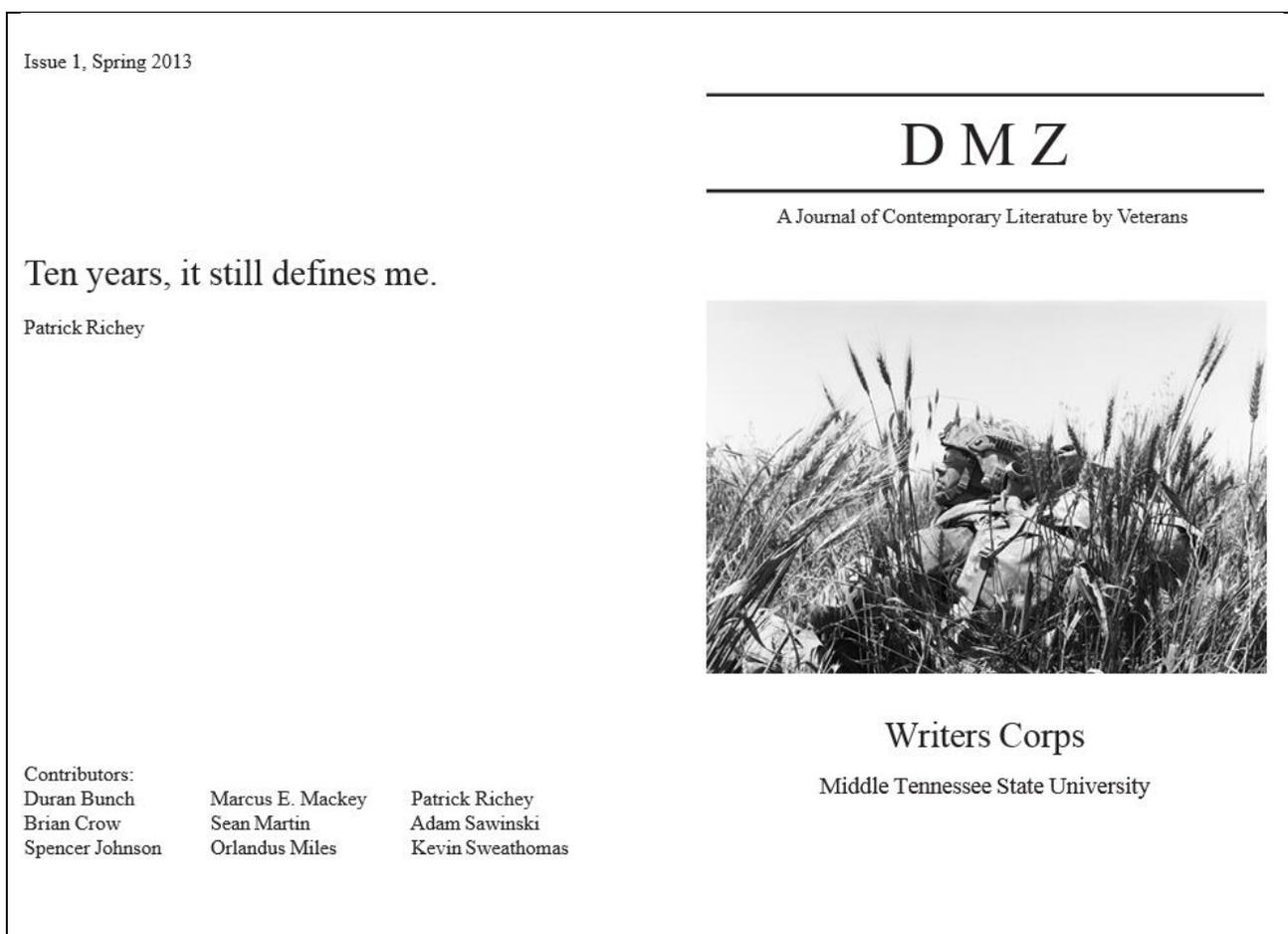


Figure 5.2- Cover for DMZ issue 1

I purchased a box of wine, a case of bottled water and a few trays of vegetables. Members brought other snacks and more wine. The director of the center informed me of a five hundred dollar facility-usage fee. After I explained the program and our not-for-profit

mission of sharing veterans' stories with communities, the director offered to donate the use of the gallery each spring.

All of our contributing members attended but two, which led us to begin the practice of Kevin and I reading for those in absentia. Around forty non-affiliated audience members were in attendance. Most of the attendees were family and friends of participating veterans, along with a few faculty members who were active in serving on committees for veteran accessibility programs. For nearly all of those in attendance, including the veterans taking part, this was the first live literary event they had ever attended (see figure 5.3).



Figure 5.3- First journal release party

The enthusiasm was evidenced by the fact that all of the members who attended the event returned in earnest the following year. Nearly all of them attend still or keep in regular contact if they have moved away after graduating. What was especially exciting was the quality of writing that filled the premiere publication. Members of the group assisted in making the order of the pieces as holistic as possible. They selected a piece by a member of

the Tennessee National Guard who had served a tour in Baghdad as a military police officer early in the war to begin the publication because it seemed to look forward. (See Figure 5.4)

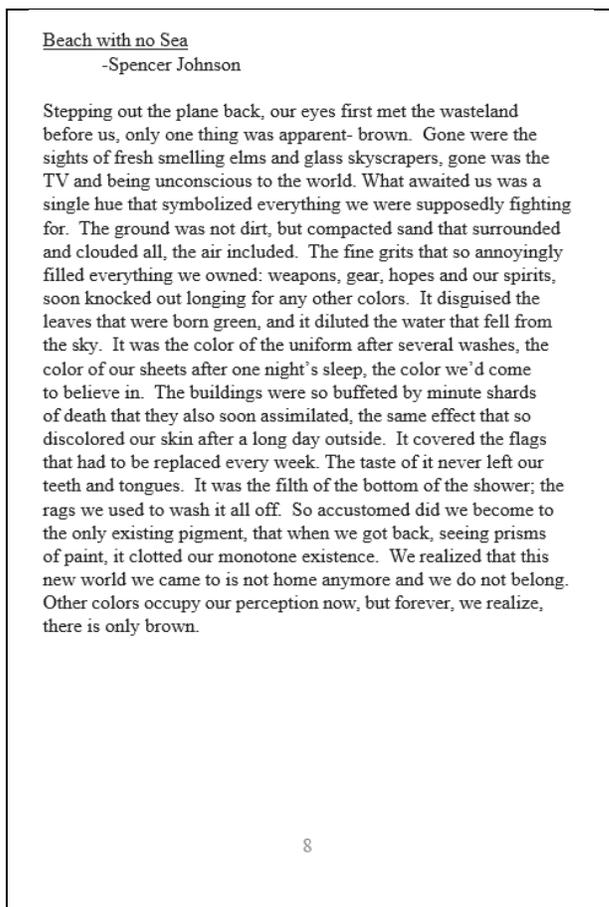


Figure 5.4- "Beach with no Sea"

They chose to conclude the collection with a piece written by a Navy veteran who had left the service on the same day the USS Cole was attacked in Aden. Many mark this event as the true beginning of what became the US led "War on Terror." (See Figure 5.5)

Beach with no Sea

-Spencer Johnson

Stepping out the plane back, our eyes first met the wasteland before us, only one thing was apparent- brown. Gone were the sights of fresh smelling elms and glass skyscrapers, gone was the TV and being unconscious to the world. What awaited us was a single hue that symbolized everything we were supposedly fighting for. The ground was not dirt, but compacted sand that surrounded and clouded all, the air included. The fine grits that so annoyingly filled everything we owned: weapons, gear, hopes and our spirits, soon knocked out longing for any other colors. It disguised the leaves that were born green, and it diluted the water that fell from the sky. It was the color of the uniform after several washes, the color of our sheets after one night's sleep, the color we'd come to believe in. The buildings were so buffeted by minute shards of death that they also soon assimilated, the same effect that so discolored our skin after a long day outside. It covered the flags that had to be replaced every week. The taste of it never left our teeth and tongues. It was the filth of the bottom of the shower; the rags we used to wash it all off. So accustomed did we become to the only existing pigment, that when we got back, seeing prisms of paint, it clotted our monotone existence. We realized that this new world we came to is not home anymore and we do not belong. Other colors occupy our perception now, but forever, we realize, there is only brown.

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Figure 5.5- "Columbus Day"

5. Academic Year 2013-2014:

Within a week of the journal release reading, I was completely out of copies from our initial press run. I had not begun distributing them to the campus at large but had a steady flow of individuals contacting me to request journals. The dean's office offered to print another run of similar numbers, but these copies were gone before the end of summer.

During the summer of 2013, I received emails and phone calls from many of the members of Writer Corps. It became clear that many of the participants had become reliant on the sense of community, the emotional outlet, the adventure and the ability to serve the group facilitated. After having become dedicated to the cause of community, I recognized the need to return to the compositional roots of expressivism. I began to use more of our meeting time for discussing the benefits of freewriting. During this time, it also became clearer that Writers Corps members were interested in expanding our ranks. Many of our members began to advocate for expanding potential membership to new demographics. They wanted to include spouses and dependents. One father who had lost a child in Afghanistan contacted me to see if he, his wife, and their adult children could attend. I said yes, but they never showed up.

That fall, I advertised in the same manner as I had in the past. I began to receive notice that local and regional media outlets were mentioning our first meeting to their audiences. I was once again asked to be interviewed. When I insisted on being accompanied by actual veterans, the requests were not withdrawn this time. A variety of the former year's members accompanied me to each interview. Television crews from Nashville news stations asked to attend our first meeting for special reports. I declined these last requests and have received little attention from Nashville television news since.

Our first meeting of the semester drew over twenty people, which exceeded the capacity of the room I had reserved for the meeting. As a result, I have since started securing a secondary meeting space, although I maintain a primary space in the English department faculty lounge that is less formal than an actual classroom and features more intimate aesthetics. In addition to our new and returning members, I also received messages from

individuals who wished to participate digitally as a result of their having to care for young children or work second shift jobs during our normal meeting times. When these individuals sent me pieces, I took them in to be workshopped by the main group. I would record feedback and email MP3s to their authors. I would also send them copies of each piece that came in from the group so that they could compose feedback for our writers from a proxy. All told, anywhere between ten and twenty people attended each of our meetings throughout that year, and our listserv included ten other individuals who were actively engaged in reading and sending feedback. That fall, we were invited to take part in two events which later grew into a string of other opportunities to read publically or provide services to populations in need. The first was a featured spot at the Southern Festival of Books that is held in Nashville every year. The second was an event held in a coffee shop in Murfreesboro, TN, by an organizational communications class.

On an unnaturally hot day in early October, a standing-room-only audience stretched out far beyond the protective cover of a tent to watch five of our members read at an outdoor stage at the Southern Festival of Books. Afterward, we all answered audience questions. Our reading featured the largest attendance of the festival for an outdoor stage. Among those in attendance were officials from Disabled Veterans of America. They were members of the local chapter of a national organization that was preparing to host the annual conference in middle Tennessee. We were asked to attend the conference and speak to a conference-wide group session. I attended with my one-year-old son in tow. When I was unexpectedly asked to speak with Writer Corps to the group, I did so with baby in my arms. After the conference, I began getting requests from disabled veterans asking for assistance navigating a variety of

textually based endeavors. Some wanted help appealing decades old decisions about medal awards, some wanted help working through bureaucratic medical filings so they could receive needed treatment from the VA, some wanted help editing goodbye letters they would leave to their families which would divulge the details of their experiences. While Kevin and I took on the majority of the editing, several of our members volunteered to help and performed highly professional work.

Another person in attendance at the book festival was a composition instructor at a few local community colleges. Within a few days of the festival, she contacted me wanting to know more about setting up other chapters of Writers Corps. We exchanged emails for a few weeks before I offered to bring a few members to one of her campuses to facilitate a mock workshop. When I asked for volunteers at the next bimonthly Writers Corps meeting, everyone in attendance volunteered immediately without condition. The next week, sixteen of us met on the campus of Motlow Community College in Smyrna, Tennessee. Two faculty members and two veterans who attended the college showed up. We performed a mock workshop, fielded questions and had amiable conversation. When the meeting was finished, most of us went to a bar and restaurant with the two veterans who had attended from the community college. The next semester, both had transferred to MTSU with majors in the college of liberal arts.

The second important event that we were invited to take part in that fall was put on by an upper-division organizational communications class at a local veteran-owned-and-operated coffee shop. The event was set to be a senior project for majors within the field and would be a fundraiser for a local veterans' service organization. In addition to our reading,

there was also set to be a husband and wife team who had developed the wife's father's World War II diaries into a performance. Also, a Nashville based songwriter who had worked with veterans at Fort Campbell, in Kentucky, would be performing. The agenda was established to feature rotating performances between the three entities in the program. Complications arose quickly, however, as it became evident that most of the organizational communication majors were highly involved in Greek life on campus. This meant that despite the fact that there were only a few, mainly female, students involved, their entire sororities attended as did many fraternities. The small room filled past capacity with individuals who were more interested in flirting than paying respects to service members.

Something I had learned long before beginning work with Writer Corps was that veterans who have experienced combat are often very uncomfortable in the presence of large crowds. In classrooms, they typically sit in the back rows. When standing in line at checkout counters, they pivot their bodies uncomfortably, clearly never feeling fully at ease with the concept of someone standing behind them, out of sight. When sitting down at a table to eat a meal, they often find a way to face the primary doorway. I knew this, so I watched as an overcrowded room of entitled twenty-year-olds circled, unaware, between nervous veterans who lined the walls with their hands in their pockets and their teeth grit tightly. Only after the event ended, and the youthful attendees departed, did many of the veterans move and begin to approach members of Writer Corps. Many claimed that they had heard of our organization and that they had come to check us out. They were very impressed by what we were doing, but the message was clear. The crowd of disinterested individuals had produced a lingering

effect. None of the interested parties who attended the event came to our meetings, nor did they come to our later events or readings.

Despite the fact that the event had taught me some valuable lessons about what I needed to be on guard against, which the rapid growth of Writer Corps had prevented me from considering, it also helped me to establish some valuable contacts. The owner and proprietor of the coffee shop wanted to feature the group for more frequent public performances. The instructor who had organized the event was soon after named the executive director of an important regional chapter of a major international arts and advocacy program. When the owner of the coffee shop asked if we would be interested in holding an end of semester event, I agreed. I worked out a theme and set a schedule for a few workshops which would take place outside our normal meetings. My goal was to have some kind of cohesive program that did not navigate attention away from the undirected writing of our contributing members. I drafted a prompt and emailed it out to our member list (see figure 5.6). Six of our most dedicated members attended the workshops.

Scars of Survival

There are many ways with which we measure the passage of time, one of the most important for many of us is with the scars we have collected and left behind over the years. Some scars are funny, some continue to hurt. Some we are proud of, others make us ashamed. Sometimes they are seen, sometimes hidden. Sometimes they are physical, others internal. Some scars we will talk about, others we keep for ourselves. In this piece, we will count some of our scars and reflect on how they are carried. To begin with, we will make lists of several of the different kinds of scars we carry. You don't need to mention something for all of them, just make sure you have something to build off of as you start your piece (four or five could work just fine).

1. Physical scars you have given yourself.
2. Internal scars you have given yourself.
3. Physical scars someone else has given you.
4. Internal scars someone else has given you.
5. Physical scars you have given someone else.
6. Internal scars you have given someone else.
7. Physical scars you have given the world.
8. Internal scars you have given the world.
9. Physical scars the world has given you.
10. Internal scars the world has given you.

There are, of course, other kinds of scars we both leave and receive. For our purposes, however, these should suffice. After you have made a list of all of these different types of scars, you are ready to start your piece. The first words that should appear on the piece are "My first one (is/ came/ you have some flexibility with the verb here)." You should then mention one or more scars from one of your lists and move on down the page, counting as you go. You certainly don't need to count to ten, so feel free to be selective with which of these you include or feature. You may also want to take more creative or artistic liberties as you progress through your list. When the pieces are all complete and placed/ read together, there should be a structured cadence effect that gives the audience the impression that they can all function as one large piece.

Figure 5.6- Prompt for scars of survival event

The event took place that December and had a standing-room-only audience. I advertised the reading under the name "Scars of Survival," a title I assumed would correspond with both the gravity of featured material but would also appeal to those community members who wanted to become more empathically engaged veterans. All six members who had written pieces read at the event along with musical interludes performed by the same troubadour who had attended the class-program event. Four of those readers decided to include their pieces in the publication of the second volume of *DMZ* (See Figure 5.7).

<p><u>Scars</u> -Josh Lovett</p> <p>My first scar came from a white boy's eyes...</p> <p>My nephew and I were at Wal-Mart standing in the checkout line behind a white father and his son.</p> <p>The boy took a glance at my burnt arms and said, "Daddy, why does that man look like that?"</p> <p>He said nothing and pulled him closer to his holey Levis.</p> <p>I looked at my nephew. He looks at me with sadness in those sugar dud eyes.</p> <p>He said, "I know you love me uncle, but please don't save me next time."</p> <p>At that moment, time stopped as if the batteries in life had expired.</p> <p>I wanted to spill these bottled up emotions with no cap on its lip</p> <p>An over cooked soul with a hint of pain and a dash of anger from my childhood abuse.</p> <p>I wanted to cry oceans and punch a wall as if it was my childhood bully on the school bus tormenting me with racial remarks—Move nigger! Move.</p> <p>I then told him, "I saved your life because I love you. It would hurt me if you were burned up in that house fire."</p> <p>A tear slowly slid down his face like a drip of water from a cracked sewer pipe.</p> <p>He knew in his heart that I would never be normal like other blue collar dads with your everyday scrapes and scabs still playing catch in the backyard.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">23</p>	<p>I use to think it was difficult being a black man in American society, because we have always been the problem.</p> <p>But, now being black with these burns... I'm a freak of nature... I can't even be black!</p> <p>Sometimes I consider my scars as a curse, but every day I see my nephew grow I see them more as a gift.</p> <p>I can wrestle him with these burnt arms, run beside him with these charred legs, I can hug him with this scorched skin.</p> <p>His laughter and smile to me is worth more than being normal.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">So why care?</p> <p style="text-align: center;">24</p>
<p><u>Scars</u> -Pat Richey</p> <p>The first real scar escaped me for over a year. My "war" officially ended in March of 2004. I had survived Iraq, demobed, and was a civilian again. I wasted no time with my unit. I was stop-lossed almost two years past my enlistment.</p> <p>The small scars followed me: aches, pains, nightmares, physical/psychological reactions to stop signs and trash on the road. I did not watch the news. I lived Iraq, sort of, and did not need to be reminded daily. I chatted now and then but rarely in-depth unless it was with a fellow vet. Few at school understood, so I just let it be.</p> <p>The fall semester of 2004 was typical except that my friend, Rob, was being activated with the Louisiana National Guard's 256th Infantry Brigade for duty in Baghdad, Iraq. The week before he left, we talked for at least two hours about the suck, the heat and the sand, and how locals acted. I explained that the local food would make him sick at first but it was worth it compared to months of MREs. I told him to stay safe and keep his head low because I knew of people who had lost their heads in Iraq because of piano wire strung across the road.</p> <p>The semester passed and another began. I kept up with the 256th as best as I could during the rare occasions I watched the news and thought of Rob from time to time. But life was busy as it always is when trying to finish a degree and start a family.</p> <p>I was on campus early January 11th preparing for classes for the Spring semester when I received a phone call that Rob had been killed in action in Baghdad. At first, I thought it was another speculation floating from the never ending rumor mill of war. I knew the 256th had taken a lot of casualties recently in its AO. So, I ignored it for an hour, but the calls kept coming until I knew it was true.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">26</p>	<p>Rob's death hit me extremely hard in a split second. The war was not over? The place and time were both behind me but the war was still there. All the pain, joy, fear, excitement, and death poured back into me. The smell and heat were back. The sound of the click from safety to fire was back. The young man Rob was when he left was gone forever, but I knew the young me was too.</p> <p>His funeral was the last time I wore my Class As. Shiny medals and patches decorated the coat for a job well done but they meant very little at that moment. I watched the flag draped coffin, crying family and friends, and listened to Taps playing in the background.</p> <p>He was gone, I was not. His war was over, mine not. Campus changed. Its patriotic fervor had been tempered. Only a lone pair of combat boots hung from a power line to remember Rob.</p> <p>I tried to get back to school but Rob's death has never left me. It was the turning point from a detoxing combat soldier to a true combat veteran. The scars continue to accumulate: the deaths, suicides, and wounded lives cut me anew each time I hear about one. The scar only half heals, there to remind me that it is there forever.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">27</p>

Figure 5.7- Examples of scars of survival pieces

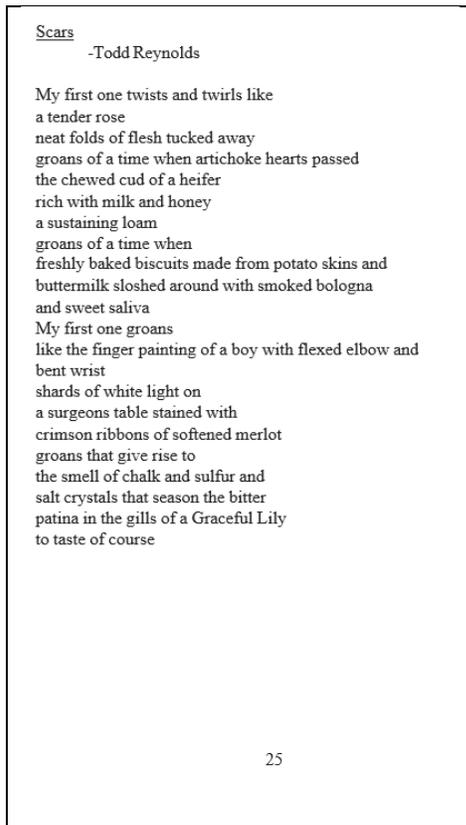


Figure 5.7- Examples of scars of survival pieces (cont.)

The spring semester of 2014 featured a new slew of opportunities and events. Early in the semester, I found that the Frist Center for the Visual Arts museum in Nashville was scheduled to host an exhibition of paintings and murals composed by an artist who had visited Iraq and Afghanistan during the wars. I contacted the community outreach representative for the museum to inquire about opportunities for Writers Corps members to visit the exhibit at a discount. What resulted was an invitation for our group to read in the gallery space in a special event. The chain of correspondence that accompanied the planning and promotion of the event, however, proved to be more difficult than I expected. After first asking the group to perform a formal reading at a major metropolitan art museum, the exhibition coordinators began to shift their desires from having our members serve as

featured speakers to having them sit in a circle of chairs in the main gallery to replicate a group therapy session. The idea was that they would read their pieces while ignoring visitors who would be viewing them, and the entire event, as complementary installations in conjunction with the featured art hanging around the room.

After having experienced the uncomfortable reaction most of our participants had in relation to the disinterested crowd in our fall event, I understood that this change would not work for us. A tense series of phone calls and meetings followed, which eventually resulted in a slightly less than formal literary reading in the gallery space of the museum (See Figure 5.8). Following this event, I began to receive requests for interviews from major national





Figure 5.8- Writer Corps reading at the Frist Center for Visual Arts (cont.)

publications from Boston, to New York to the west coast. None of the publishers maintained contact after I complicated matters by insisting that interviewers first speak with veterans who belonged to the group. This point began to take up more of my mental energies when working with the group. I watched as individuals established meaningful relationships through the sense of community that the group facilitated. I also noticed the ways that our regular members seemed comfortable in their own skin any time they were in a workshop. I began to understand that the program had become bigger than I had anticipated. If my willingness to speak in forums where I had formerly refused could aid in the growth of numbers of people helped by the group's platform, I felt I should at least consider it. At that point, however, I was not yet ready to speak for others.

The spring semester of 2014 concluded with publication of our second journal issue (See Figure 5.9). The dean's office offered to pay for the printing of four hundred copies and I matched that with an additional four hundred copies, paid for out of my own paycheck, as well as by a few small, unsolicited donations. At that point, we had well over thirty individuals who either regularly attended, came occasionally or corresponded with me through email and phone conversations. I contacted the same gallery space and reserved it

free of charge. I purchased snacks and another box of wine and asked the manager of the space to set up fifty chairs and a podium.

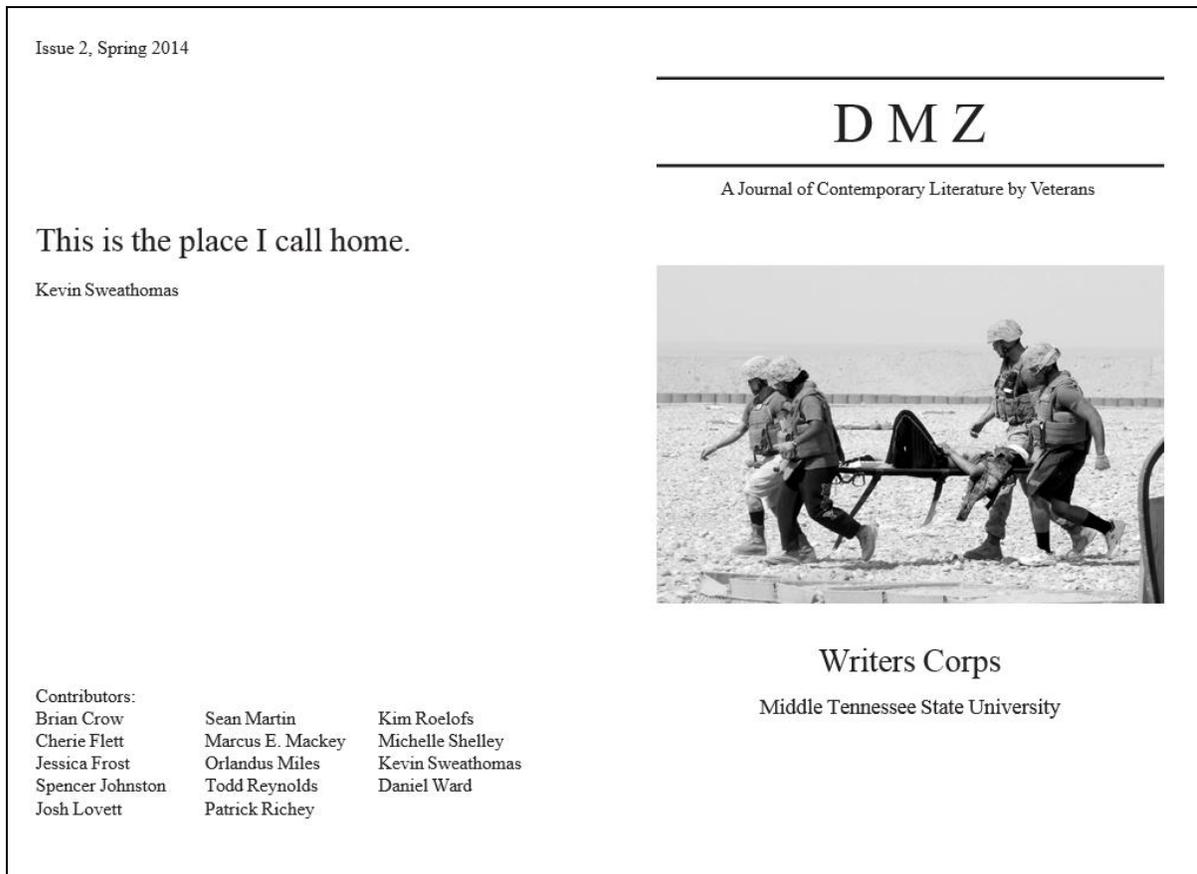


Figure 5.9- Cover for DMZ issue 2

On the night of the reading, every chair was filled and people stood throughout the large room as well as in the hallway. The published members attended and read their pieces with an air of literary professionalism I normally only see in highly successful touring authors. Even more remarkable was the developing quality of writing we were starting to see in some of our returning members. In the first issue of *DMZ*, one of our members had

published a poem that lacked much of the important detail that great literature features. (See Figure 5.10)

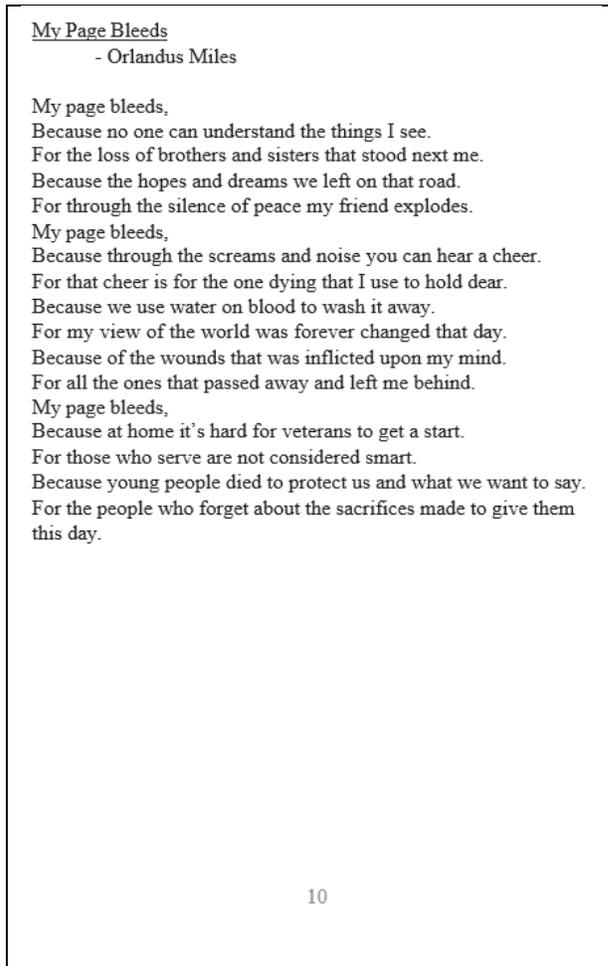


Figure 5.10- “My Page Bleeds”

In the second issue, however, his skills of specificity had increased greatly. His most well received piece reads much better. (See Figure 5.11)

Many of our continuing members had become more prolific and produced work that seemed more refined. What mattered most to me, though, was the way that their families and friends became more impacted by the stories they were sharing. Many of the parents, siblings

<p><u>Chains</u> -Orlandus Miles</p> <p><i>Please lord let us find our way out of here. I am still getting used to this landscape but this roundabout looks all too familiar. The crumbling brick buildings look as if they could collapse at any moment. The blowing sand paints everything a soft shade of tan so that the buildings look as if they sprang up from the desert dust. It is hard to tell where the breadth of sand begins and the town ends. We are drawing too much attention. I see distrust in their eyes. Glancing past the bottom of hard blackened feet, the same expression as a middle finger in the western world, I lock eyes with theirs, mirroring their distrust.</i></p> <p><i>“Crap” the small wheel on the rear of the trailer ahead ceases to move, like an invisible restraint holds it in place. Don’t stop I start to think. The truck rounds a corner and the wheel stops spinning completely. A little trail of smoke comes from the wheel. Don’t stop. The truck picks up speed. I can sense the driver’s panic. Don’t stop. The truck jumps the curb, barely missing old orange and white cars, to stay on the road. This place is too crowded to stop, for any reason. Don’t stop. Flames leap from the tire. The poignant smell of rubber fills the air. Don’t stop. The truck picks up speed on a straight road. The flames grow larger, it threatens to consume the cargo on the back of the trailer, feasting first on my silent pleas; we stop.</i></p> <p><i>Taking a deep breath I open my door and jump down from my truck. “Lock your driver side door and pull security with your back to the trucks. And for God’s sake don’t point your weapon unless you have to use it!” the sergeant yells. My driver comes alongside me. She is visibly nervous as the crowd of Iraqi children run toward us. “Imshi” I say, waving for them to go. Not paying any attention to the command, the children come closer, followed by others from the town. Their expression was of curiosity; they want to touch the American soldiers. They grab hands, clothes,</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">33</p>	<p>anything they can get their hands on. As many as I get to go away it seems three more take their place. Out the corner of my eye I see a rock thrown in our direction.</p> <p><i>“Imshi” I yell. Their eyes meet mine, I start to panic as the ground around me is swallowed by robes and faces; so many faces. One man outside the crowd watches with AK-47 in hand. Where did the children go? Soft angry pleas draws my attention to my left. The soldier next to me was getting swarmed by men. I hear her cry out as they grope parts of her body. As she turns to push a man away that grabs her butt another man behind her repeats the offense, pinning her in place. My panic turns to anger. With all the strength I can muster, I push them away from her.</i></p> <p><i>“Get in the truck” I yell. Just a day ago I followed the orders she gave me, today she got in the truck. In that moment instinct starts to take control of me. The mob grows more hostile with her departure. I hear the shouts of the sergeant and the soldier next to him fighting to keep their ground. The crowd swarms us like ants invading a picnic.</i></p> <p><i>I have two hundred and ten bullets. Looking at the rows upon rows of eyes looking back at me; that would barely make a dent, but I have to do something. As if sensing what is about to happen, the sergeant’s shouts of “DO NOT ENGAGE” immobilizes my fingers. I shove people away from me, holding on to the little ground I have left. I feel like a pitbull trying to protect my territory, my harassers outside the reach of my shackle. The order not to shoot hangs like a chain around my neck, keeping me from what I was trained to do. They keep coming, pulling, grabbing, twisted faces seem to blur together. Their soundless mouths move with spit hanging from their lips. I push back the mob, I feel the chain loosening. The ground that keeps it firmly in place starts to release its hold under my indignation. Baring my teeth at my tormentors, every strike I endure loosens my chain a little more. The earth no longer can hold the pull from my chain. I turned my weapon from safe to semi and turn to fire.</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">34</p>
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Figure 5.11- “Chains”

Wait. The sound a whisper that caught my ear against the deafening noise of the mob. It is not the word but the voice that halts my hand. It has been years since I last heard my grandmother's voice; the last time in a hospital seven years ago right before she passed away. Releasing my finger from the trigger. The sound of "let's go" echo from one of the soldiers; swinging my weapon furiously, I back up to the truck door. I climb inside, the door blocking the mob's madness. Inside she is shaking; shock still has its hold on her. The banging hands on our idling truck do little for her bearing. The truck in front of us is beginning to carve its way through the crowd. I tell her to go. She shakes her head, too frightened to move. I reach over the center console and put the truck in drive and press down on her leg. Feeling the urgency to leave she starts to follow the truck in front of us out of the crowd. I watch as Iraqis run alongside our truck. We turn a corner and keep driving.

Speeding, trying to catch us, a Humvee pulls alongside of us. We pull over and two marines step out of the Humvee. Reluctant, we hop down out of our vehicles. We drove to the outskirts of town. No Iraqis for miles, but the echoes of their voices haunt my ears. The marines explain that they saw us from their position right outside the city and that they were trying to get permission to leave to come help us. One marine remarked, it is good we didn't shoot because there is insurgents in the town and who knows what could have happened if you did. I nod in agreement. *Thank you lord.*

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Figure 5.11- "Chains" (cont.)

and spouses of Writers Corps participants began coming to me and asking about my plans for the future. They had never known what their loved ones had gone through and frequently stated that they did not appreciate their continued struggles until reading and hearing about them through Writers Corps. Many of these individuals expressed concern that I would leave for another university position elsewhere and that their family members would lose such an important avenue for sharing, healing and growth. I did not know what to tell these people. To this point, I had worked with the group in the same way I work with most things, nose to the grindstone – focus on the task at hand and the details will take care of themselves. I felt a new sense of burden when I thought about how to approach the following year. I decided that

it might be a good time to once again focus on the relationships I had established with the group and that I had witnessed between group members. As a result, I took up the offer from a local farmer and artist to host a writers' retreat on the grounds of her family estate. In July of 2014, ten of our members met at the farm and spent the day writing to a prompt that I had designed. The prompt asked participants to highlight deep insights brought on by spending time in nature as well as the importance of understanding the concept of home (See figure 5.12). I also asked Ethan, a colleague who was a practicing, professional novelist, to attend in

<p>1. Homecoming- (better for poetry) One of the few things that tie us all together is that we all come from somewhere. Whether we stay there forever or we leave before we have committed its features to memory. Whether we were born there or we find it somewhere down the line. Whether it is real or imagined, we all have a place we dream of as home. One thing that ties those of us who have been involved with Writers Corps together is that we have all moved away from or lost our homes at one point or another. Taking a note from Kevin's piece from our most recent DMZ, which is constructed of a series of concrete images that evoke a strong sense of place, each one starting with "There is..." <u>concluded</u> by the statements "There is 3255 Dixon Creek Road. This is the place I call home." Try doing this yourself. The images don't need to be connected, just specific. After conveying the most essential sense of the place you can, conclude it with the lines "This is _____. This is the place I call home."</p> <p>2. Natural mirror- (better for prose) As far back as the earliest evidence of human artistic creation, there are signs of the organic drive to reflect the deepest recesses of our spiritual, emotional and psychological states through depictions of the natural world. It is hardwired in what and who we are to see our own faces in the bark of trees, smell past lovers in a summer breeze, <u>find</u> lost brothers and sisters in the washed colors of wildflowers along a country road.</p> <p>I think of this as I reflect back to a time when a good friend of mine who, after returning from his tour during the invasion of Bagdad in 2003, took a backpacking trip with me through the Missouri Ozarks and looked upon the deep green wash of Southeastern American forest and remarked that if people in Mosul, Kirkuk or Southern Iraq could see so much life, the war would be over in a day.</p> <p>I never knew what lead to him to reflect on this, nor did I know what lead him to attempt suicide six times in the next fifteen months. I do know, however, that there is a profound conviction that he held that the land from which he came could heal.</p> <p>Taking a note from these revelations, you can observe nature, be it your immediate surroundings, someplace you have been to or imagined before or a combination of both. Use natural features as metaphor for ideas, feelings or beliefs you have. You might chose to personify some natural feature as someone you have cared about (<u>ie</u> your grandfather is an old oak tree by the south field) or the way that nature reminds you of someone else (<u>ie</u> the puddle that always collects in spring in the dip on Jackson St is the way you failed your last partner). Whatever you choose to do, be sure to be specific and concrete with your imagery.</p>

Figure 5. 12- Prompt for the farm retreat in Wartrace, TN

to help us workshop the pieces. Everyone in attendance wrote significantly impressive pieces, but what really spoke to me was the degree to which the event was fun. The members of the group had begun to genuinely care about their writing, but even more so about each

other and each other's writing. To this day, these bonds represent the success of the program far more than the literary development of any of our members could.

6. Academic Year 2014-2015:

The following fall and spring saw the first major hiccups Writer Corps has seen since its inception. Just before the start of classes, I sent an email out asking if anyone would be interested in traveling overnight to Illinois to help several interested parties set up Writers Corps chapters that would work through and around Southern Illinois University. Many of our members offered to travel with their own finances. In the end, only four of us went due to space and lodging restrictions. We slept on the floor of a church that had been converted into a community arts center and met with a handful of university officials and community organizers. When classes resumed, we began to meet with the whole group again along with a handful of new members. We hosted a reading at the local coffee shop with which we had worked before and featured the pieces that had been written and workshopped during our farm retreat. The event was well attended and the pieces well received. Many of these pieces, however, had taken a rather dark turn since their initial drafting. Most of our more constant members had begun using their writing to explore some of their more guarded pasts. The public reception of the reading was among the most supportive we had yet had, but there began to emerge a seriousness in the content of our writers' works and the public's response.

Once again, we attended the Southern Festival of Books, this time with a high profile indoor space that filled past capacity (See Figure 5.13). We were also asked to be featured at the book signing stands set up in the legislative plaza of the Tennessee State Capital.



Figure 5.13- Reading and book signing at the Southern Festival of Books

These events were wildly successful and resulted in organizers in four different states asking for materials to help them set up chapters in their local communities. The meetings that we were holding back on the campus of MTSU with our home group, however, were filled with emotional turmoil and complications. Some of our writers had begun bringing in pieces that

dealt with guilt over killing enemies at alarmingly close range or that featured first-hand accounts of being raped or having lost family members to substance abuse or depression. Many of our new and continuing members cried frequently in meetings or had to excuse themselves for long periods of time. When my mother was diagnosed that fall with advanced terminal cancer, I spent long stints of time attending her bedside in Missouri and then Illinois. Many meetings were cancelled, or were sparsely attended because of the sporadic nature of our schedule. Throughout it all, though, I received a continuous flow of notes, cards and phone calls from Writers Corps members who wanted to help in any way they could. Some even offered to take turns driving six hours to my parents' home to perform routine maintenance such as lawn care.

In the spring of 2015, my familial situation was still in limbo. I was still traveling out of state for a few days at a time every week or two. The group's meeting schedule was even spottier which led to even fewer attendees when we did manage to get together. To make matters more difficult, the university that held our flagship group was transitioning to different leadership for veteran care on campus. As a result, we lost our funding. I paid to have a couple hundred journals printed from my personal finances, but our future and funding seemed in question (See figure 5.14). We persevered, however, and held our annual journal release reception and reading in the same gallery location where we had been featured for the previous two years. The journal was considerably shorter than it had been the year before, and many of the pieces were more somber. The event, too, was more sparsely attended. Those who did attend, however, were so moved by the emotional resonance of the pieces that many of them came to me and asked if they could make a donation. By the end of

the event, we had raised an amount nearly equal to what I had paid for the printing without having to ask for it.

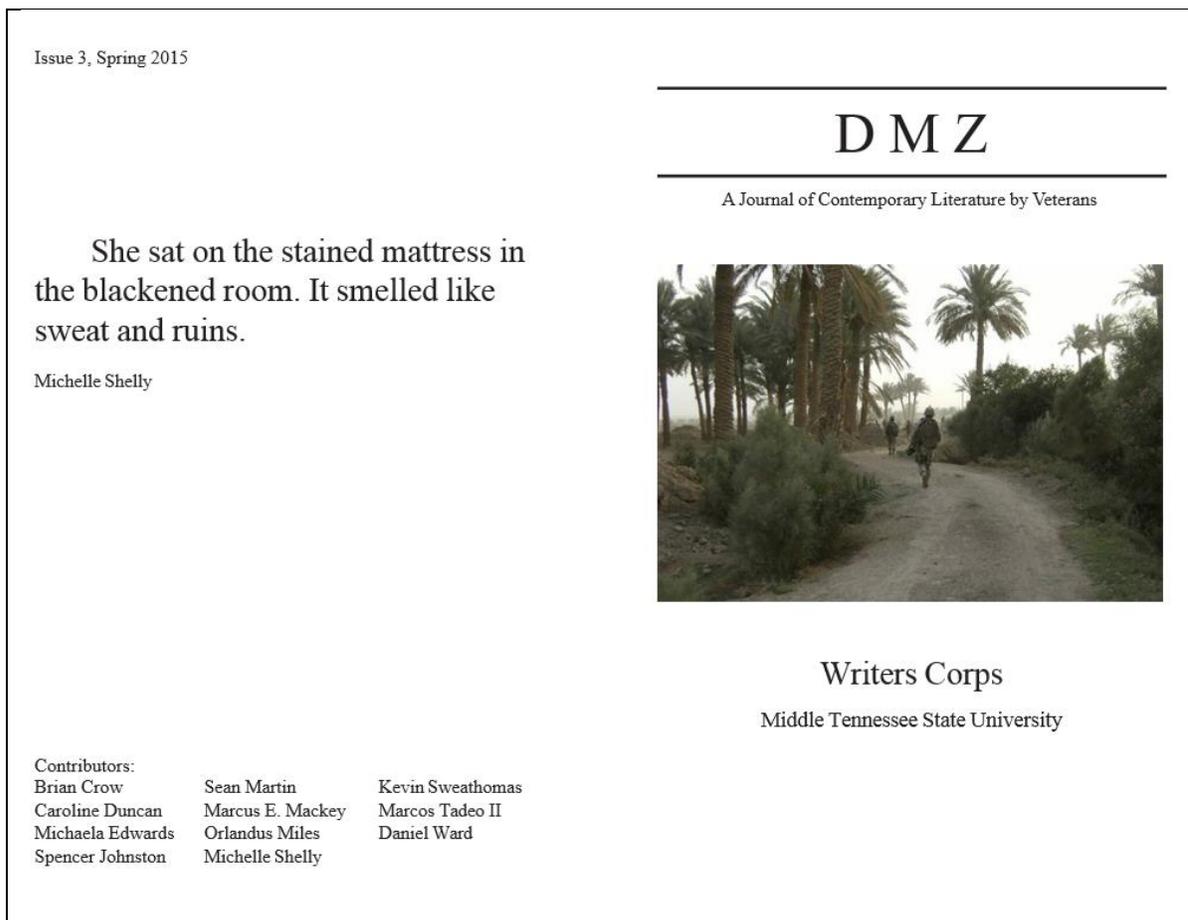


Figure 5.14- Cover for DMZ issue 3

I was contacted, about midway through the term, by the woman who had organized the event two years earlier that had been so complicated for many of our members. She had been appointed as the executive director of VSA Tennessee. She was working with the Kennedy Center and the national headquarters to set up international partnerships for their 40th anniversary celebration. She wanted to know if we would be willing to perform an exchange with military members of the Iraqi or Afghani militaries to be displayed at the state department in Washington, D.C. I agreed, but soon found that she expected the group to

provide contacts with the Iraqi and Afghani militaries, which was not only far too complicated but impossible given my familial obligations. Instead, Patrick and I worked out a plan to contact the local Kurdish refugee population to facilitate an exchange of workshops. We made inroads with the Imam and several representatives of the Kurdish Mosque. We even attended the groups' largest annual memorial celebration with our children in tow, but the reclusive nature of the Kurdish community proved too guarded to follow through with the agreed upon exchange.

Next, I made arrangements to work with the International Institute of St. Louis. Their resettlement program hosts a number of Iraqi asylum seekers they help to integrate into American society. I wrote a prompt that asked participants to consider the various ways that the concept of "home" changes once you have spent time away from it in a field of war and held special workshops with participating Writer Corps members. I asked several Arabic speaking friends of mine to translate the prompt, which proved difficult because Arabic has no word for the concept of home. I circulated the prompt to several more friends to get a consensus as to the viability of the group-sourced prompt's accuracy (See Figure 5.15) In May, after our journal release party that included fewer participants and readers than the year before, I travelled to St. Louis with two former Marines to work with the refugees. We slept on couches in my brother's apartment and arrived an hour early to be prepared.

The workshop went well. Virtually none of the Iraqi participants spoke English, but a few aids helped to translate simple phrases and the two Marines, who had fought in some of the most violent battles for Fallujah, could read some Arabic. All told, four asylum seekers were willing to have their pieces shared. One woman, who, while seated next to her teenage

daughters, began the session by showing us recent cell phone images of her husband's severed head, asked if we would find a way to make sure her story could be shared in English

In most cultures, there are a variety of ways that people define the concept of home. Some describe geographies (for example, "Home is where you count your own stars") others describe relationships (for example " Home is where the heart is" or "Home is where you feel loved"). For most of us, home is not something that we leave our neighborhoods and families for the first prolonged time. In other words, spending time away from our birthplaces and in the cultures and customs of others changes the way we understand ourselves. For this piece, I am asking you to consider the ways that your understanding of home has changed. Below are a list of questions that might help you enter into the discussion.

- Do you understand home through landscapes?
- Do you understand home through family?
- Do you understand home through food?
- Do you understand home through music?
- Do you understand home through faith?
- Do you understand home through photographs?
- Do you understand home by talking about it with friends?
- Do you understand home by talking about it with strangers?
- Do you think about home at all?
- Do you have a place in your life now that you can go to where you feel at home?
- Can you go to this place whenever you want to?

مفهوم الوطن يختلف من ثقافة إلى أخرى باختلاف الناس. البعض يصفه مكاناً جغرافياً، على سبيل المثال "الوطن هو أينما تسكن أرضه وتتأمل نجوم سمانه"، وهناك آخر من يصفه من خلال عواطفه وأحاسيسه كأن يقول "الوطن يكون حيث يكون الحب أو هو ما تتشعر أنك محبوب فيه كثير منّا لا يمتد أن الوطن هو المكان الذي نرحل عنه لمدة طويلة نأخذنا خلفنا أهلنا وأحبائنا، بمعنى آخر: نحننا عن المكان الذي ولدنا وترعرعنا به وانعمنا في حضارات وتقاليد الآخرين بلحب دورا في تعبير تفكيرنا ونظرتنا لأنفسنا.

ومن خلال ما سبق أود منك أن تتأمل في الطرق التي غيرت مفهومك عن الوطن، وفيما يلي مجموعة من الأسئلة التي قد تساعد في التفات:

هل مفهومك للوطن يتمثل في إرتباطك في تراهيه؟
 هل تفسيرك للوطن مرتبط في تواجد عائلتك؟
 هل لإحالات التقليدية إرتباط في فهمك للوطن؟
 هل للموسيقى التقليدية إرتباط في فهمك للوطن؟
 هل إعتقادك الديني مرتبط في فهمك للوطن؟
 هل للصور والذكريات إرتباط في فهمك للوطن؟
 هل تفهم الوطن من خلال حديثك عنه مع الإصدقاء؟
 هل تفهم الوطن من خلال حديثك عنه مع الغرباء؟
 هل تتكرفي وطنك إطلافاً؟
 هل لديك مكان تستطيع أن تذهب إليه وتشعر بأنه الوطن؟
 هل تستطيع زيارة هذا المكان متى شئت؟

Figure 5.15- Prompt for VSA collaboration

so that Americans could know what she had gone through. I spent the next month working with Arabic speaking friends and beginners' textbooks to translate her piece as well as I could. Five members of Writer Corps submitted texts, all of which were featured at www.40days.vsatn.org/writers-corps-tnst-louis and were presented to the US Congress and the US State Department (See Figure 16). To date, the online exhibit has hosted over 33,000 readers.

7. Findings, Feelings and Futures:

A few days ago, Writer Corps held their first meeting of the year. There were eleven people in attendance, about half of them new. Many of our longtime members have graduated and live in surrounding communities that are often over an hour away. Most of them still attend the majority of our meetings. At the start of each semester, I edit the list of email addresses to which I send notifications and announcements. I try to only include individuals who actively participate with the group, meaning they attend meetings frequently or they have requested to read member submissions. After editing the list, I sent an email announcing our first meeting of the semester at our home location to 49 people. There are more, of course, to whom I have to send such information because they ask to be kept in the loop for media and support reasons, but the first list is only for people who would call themselves members of the group. And this is only our home program. At this point, we have chapters operating at a number of locations throughout the state of Tennessee as well as in California and Illinois. I have received requests for information and assistance in setting up chapters in a number of other states including Iowa, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Missouri, South Dakota, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin. We have members who are submitting writing from a distance through to be workshopped; they include those attending graduate school in Washington D.C. to someone who relocated to China for a job. I have also received requests from publishers, both domestically and internationally, for individual submissions from some of the writers in our group. Writer Corps has gone national then international.

I have big plans for the group this year. After losing the small amount of funding we once received from the dean's office and the College of Liberal Arts, we have decided to

separate ourselves from the university system officially and declare 501c3 nonprofit status. I have made contact with an attorney who is willing to process the filing for us pro bono. This move will allow us to remain untethered from oversight from the university or the state legislature who are eager to adopt programs that nominally support veterans' causes. We will also be able to fundraise in a manner that will allow large donations to be tax deductible. If such fundraising is successful, I hold ambitions of offering scholarships to some of our members to attend arts and literature events around the country to perform readings and grow the network people interested in veterans' writing.

I have also made arrangements to increase our digital presence. I asked a former student who I have been working with to establish another posttrauma community literacy group for survivors of sexual violence to be our Manager of Digital and Social Media. We have been working together to build a website and social media presence that will soon feature resources for individuals who want to start similar programs, online editions of our journals and podcasts that feature our members reading their pieces and telling the stories behind them. This development has caused us to reconsider who we are in some very fundamental ways. After performing some basic internet searches, I found that the name "Writers Corps" is copyrighted by a national group of professional writers who volunteer with at-risk youth. The organization needed a name change, but we decided that the network we have established is too significant to give up wholesale with a major title shift. The group is now known, officially, as "Writer Corps."

When I look back over the tremendous amount of growth I have been a part of and have witnessed over the past six-plus years, I am struck by the ways so many people and

communities have been so eager and willing to help. I am struck by the ways that people turn out to our events and request copies of our journals when their contents portray such complicated, difficult, and emotional material. I am struck by the ways new members continue to get involved and old members continue to stay involved. Most of all, I am struck by how deeply I have been accepted and welcomed into what is commonly viewed as a highly exclusive group of individuals. Recently, I asked eight of our most long term members to reflect on how they feel about Writer Corps, what Writer Corps has done for them, and what Writer Corps has helped them to accomplish. The responses were both humbling and inspiring.¹²

One Army veteran who served in Iraq told me that getting involved with the group offered him “the opportunity to come in and relate with other veterans while learning how to properly portray my story.” He went on to say that “It isn’t about trying to gain sympathy from the listener, I just want more people to be able to relate to what service members actually go through. I think that when we came home, people listened but they had a lot of trouble relating.” In a sense, his comments and experiences reflect David Barton and Mary Hamilton’s view that “[l]iteracy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices” (8). He concluded the interview by stating that

Telling people about the heat in Iraq is nearly impossible. They hear me say it's hot over there and then try to tell me how hot it was this past summer here. Writer Corps

⁴ In order to organize and comment upon these interview results, I have adopted the rhetorical approach to literacy practices of David Barton and Mary Hamilton in their article “A Social Theory of Literacy: Practices and Events,” in which they define literary practices as “the general cultural ways of utilizing written language which people draw upon in their lives. In the simplest sense literacy practices are what people do with literacy. However practices are not observable units of behavior since they also involve values, attitudes, feelings and social relationships” (7).

helped me to find a way to make people understand that being over there when it's scorching hot that it's like standing inside of a giant hair dryer while wearing full gear. It works in Writer Corps because it's a chance for veterans to share experiences they've had with other veterans who CAN relate first, then mold the story to better fit for those who haven't had the life experiences to do so. Veterans don't want to seem weak, and the effect of that is we tend to close up when we deal with the lingering issues from our service...Writer Corps offers that middle ground where we can come off as explaining instead of complaining. (Interviewee 1)

In an interview with a young woman from Boston who had been forced to move to Tennessee to live with her grandparents when both of her parents deployed to the Middle East, she told me that being a part of the group “has been a huge blessing in my life.” She went on to reflect that “it has taken me quite a while to really evolve in this writing group, I have learned that by just going to the meetings and listening to the stories of other veterans, that my own sadness has somewhat been lessened and my understanding of PTSD has been sharpened” (8) Her points prove to highlight the idea that “[l]iteracy is best understood as a set of social practices; these can be inferred from events which are mediated by written texts” (8). She concluded her statements by saying that

These veterans are real people, who came from families just like mine, who are torn and ripped apart and their innocence robbed in many ways. This group is filled with strong men and women, who are willing to share their stories for awareness as well as a way to touch others who have similar experiences... Writer Corp has served two purposes: The first is a better understanding of psychological scarring and its'

devastating effect on both the victim and the secondary victims; the family and friends. And secondly, I have grown spiritually, and try daily to offer compassion and tolerance to all I meet for I know, they too, might be suffering in some big or small way (Interviewee 2).

In another interview with a Marine Corps veteran who served in both Iraq and Afghanistan, I was told that “I think where my most significant area of growth came from the transition from passive participation to actual active participation.” She went on to say “I enjoy writing and have many "ideas" for story-telling, but the group helped push a boundary for me that I struggled with in several aspects of my life, not just in the military (self-confidence/self-esteem, acceptance).” Her comments provide insight into the idea that “[t]here are different literacies associated with different domains of life.” She concluded her statements by revealing what I think is the most significant accomplishment I recognize in the group by stating that

This group has always felt like a safe medium. Material can be of any content, military or not. Which is helpful in exploring "stuck points", at least in my personal opinion. The experiences and stories aren't usually "judged", the material is critiqued for readability and delivery, not on the actual content... But, it is very rewarding to share some really crazy shit, and cultivate it into art. There is also something healing in the thought that sharing these stories may "help" someone, somehow. Or at least motivate or inspire someone to share their story (Interviewee 3).

Another Marine veteran who saw some of the heaviest combat during the Surge in Iraq shared his reflections which were altogether different. He began his response by stating

that “I don't particularly identify with most veterans' groups, or look favorably upon the seemingly ubiquitous ‘victim narrative’ and the so-called PTSD ‘epidemic.’” While startling, I have found this kind of hostility to be common among the participants of Writer Corps. Most family members and supporters are eager to ascribe loved ones’ revelations of suffering and violence to a diagnosable ailment, but the stigma against PTSD is profoundly developed in many of the veterans involved in such groups (Johnson 143). After three years of involvement in Writer Corps, this particular individual has yet to tell any of his family or loved ones that he has been attending meetings and is working on a memoir. His comments show that “[l]iteracy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies are more dominant, visible and influential than others” (8). He reflected that “trauma can come in many forms, be it through combat, tragedy, or sexual trauma, I refuse to believe that the veteran population is as broken as so many agencies, organizations and individuals paternalistically allege.” He finished his statements by saying that

I do think that it's important for veterans—particularly combat veterans—to share their stories, warts and all. War and service are the sum of many things, and none are uncomplicated. As you suggested, participating in Writer Corps is a way for me to continue my service. The truth is never partisan, be it momentous or mundane, and I feel like I've got an obligation to tell it. I think my stories (and those of others) are inherently human, and so it's important to color them in the unsettling hues of moral grey, because, well, that's life (Interviewee 4).

Among the most touching but also harrowing responses, I received while interviewing this small pool of participants came from a Marine Corps veteran who had also

served in some of the heaviest combat of the war in Iraq. He has become involved in veterans advocacy groups and has been appointed to the Governor's Task Force for Veteran Success. Early in the interview, he stated plainly that "my trauma is now my pathway in life. I do not deny my own disabilities and thoughts any longer to ensure that anyone I meet is aware that I have been 'papered crazy' by Veterans Affairs." For him, working with the group and others like it have provided many opportunities to heal through giving, which he describes by saying "I use this as a learning tool for other persons who are dealing with their own unique struggles to see a light during their bleak moments. I am broken but refuse the label much like the label of hero. To me, the hero is one who casts his belief to the side and presses forward with a pursuit." He concluded the interview with what can only be described as the single most significant testimony I have yet received about the power of the group, writing, and community. His comments show us that "[l]iteracy practices change and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making" (8). I finish this ethnography in much the same manner that I have used to conduct the group since its inception: by letting the voice of a veterans' organization belong to a veteran. I started the program for people like him out of guilt—coincidentally he is from the same small town in Illinois that I am from (he went to school with my little brother)—and I continue to work to grow it for others like him out of pride. He finished our interview by stating that

[t]hat is why I can say I feel reassurance when working through a program like Writers Corps. There is zero attention given to my disabilities or status as a Veteran in relation to trying to help me overcome any issues I may be having. Instead, the organization works to deliver the best methods of telling a story, be it trauma related

or otherwise. There is no aspirations of finding an answer to my thoughts and feelings buried inside. Rather, what I have found is a group of fellow writers who use the medium of ink and paper to hammer out our minds eye conceptions of thought. Having professional, classically trained writers to assist in the adventure heightens my awareness of what I mean to convey. Through this, I have found means of overcoming my personal doubts rather than being told what I should be feeling or doing with them.

Though it is true that the organization is premised under the concept of Military connections (service member, Veteran, spouse, child, etc.), the real program itself is so highly malleable that it does not require members to adhere to simple, tracked demographics. I see it as a tool to gain a better understanding of how generate language in a form that not only benefits me as a writer with a novice skill set, but also as a means of peer to peer interaction and collaboration. Bringing persons of differing background to the same table to discuss, dissect, and detail our feelings of pieces written is such a phenomenal experience that it highlights the positive approach of writing ability while in detailing something possibly horrific witnessed by the writer. There have been tears and mixed opinion amidst meetings which proves to me that there is something moving within individuals who participate. To me, there is nothing more furthering than that connection made within each and every participant... the program has personally given me a method of allowing myself to open up in a positive manner about my history. Furthermore it has allowed the rekindling of my re-socializing through the act of peer review and peer

interaction. It has also given me back the ability to feel committed to myself and my direction in life once more through the assistance it has given me in writing out my thoughts and feelings. These items are invaluable to me as one being wracked with anxiety and guilt of my past. At least through this program I no longer carry the stigma of being broken and a victim and for that I am ever thankful (Interviewee 5).

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS AND BEST PRACTICES

For over a decade, I have worked with individuals and groups who are surviving the events that have given pain, definition, and meaning to their lives. I intentionally use the verb *give* to indicate those who have experienced severe hardship and survived it to its fullest extent. These traumas often manifest a sense of compassion and civic engagement that synthesize purpose and meaning. This type of posttraumatic growth rarely arises in persons whose entire lives are predicated by the modern obsessions with the ephemeral qualities of consumer culture. Even so, it is difficult to call such suffering a gift, but the hard-wrought stoicism expressed by those whose experiences I have witnessed have allowed me to envision possibilities in which none would have easily appeared before. The results of programs with which I have worked or whose work I have witnessed have shown me that true growth can occur. Such growth can deliver us from difficult places from which many hold no hope of being saved. A variety of ways exist to pursue this deliverance – my tool is writing. I hope the evidence I have exhibited throughout this text justifies my conclusions about the healing power of writing in the face of trauma. I use this dissertation to analyze something close to my heart and believe I have shown both scholarship and real-world evidence to warrant its viability as an approach.

What follows is a list of best practices for community literacy programs that endeavor to work with survivors of trauma. The majority of these best practices are dedicated to serving members of the military, veterans and veterans' families. Those working with groups who have experienced trauma outside of these demographics can also take something from these practices. In my experience, working with veterans means working with all American

identity. The United States' military is a multicultural, multiethnic and multigendered institution, and I have worked with a wide swath of survivors from around the world. None of these survivors are, on their own, representative of the entirety of human variety as those connected to the American military.

2. Best Practices for Designing and Facilitating Posttrauma Community Literacy Programs:

Note that I have included relevant scholarship aligned with each best practice as helpful reference.

- a. When describing the purpose of the community literacy programs to publics and potential members, use the word “survivors” rather than victims. Use the words “veterans” or “veteran family members” as opposed to the now popular word “warriors.”
 - i. Recent studies have shown no correlation between some of the most severe reactions to stress exhibited by veterans and a history of combat. Suicide rates are equal among military personnel who have been deployed to warzones and those who have not. Other research has indicated that PTSI is a condition that can be transferred from individuals who have experienced trauma to loved ones who support them over generations. Using more inclusive names for participatory demographics not only helps more individuals feel welcome, but those who do participate are more likely to feel comfortable workshopping their own writing.

1. Hoge, Charles W. *Once A Warrior Always A Warrior: Navigating the Transition from Combat to Home Including Combat Stress, PTSD and mTBI*. New York: Globe Pequot, 2010. Print.
 2. Hodge, Thomas. *Trans-Generational Trauma: Passing It On*. Charleston, SC: Createspace, 2014. Print.
 3. Kime, Patricia. "Study: No link between combat deployment and suicides." *Military Times*. 1 April 2015. Web. 12 September 2015.
- b. With members, use the terms Posttraumatic Stress (PTS) or Posttraumatic Stress Injury (PTSI) rather than Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).
- i. A wide coalition of psychologists and service providers have advocated for a rhetorical shift away from viewing survivors of trauma as having disabilities to viewing them as having injuries that are often times more clearly explained physiologically than psychologically. Such a change in description shows a sensitivity to those who have been affected by past experiences but who have been routinely kept from finding access routes to healing due to the cultural branding that connotatively comes with being labeled as dis- (or un) abled. This shift to a more physiologically motivated understanding of what happens after exposure to trauma is especially warranted among combat veterans due to the close relationship associated between PTSI and MTBI (Mild Traumatic Brain Injury).
 1. "Healing war trauma; a handbook of creative approaches." *Reference & Research Book News 2013: Academic OneFile*. Web. 18 May 2015.

2. Jaffe, Greg. "New name for PTSD could mean less stigma" *The Washington Post*. 5 May 2012. Web. 16 May 2015.
 3. Lawhorne-Scott, Cheryl and Don Philpott. *Military Mental Health Care: A Guide for Service Members, Veterans, Families, and Community*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013. Print.
 4. Piper, Robert. "Everyone Should Be Talking About Removing the Stigma of PTSD That Veterans Face." *The Huffington Post*. 24 April 2013. Web. 24 May 2015.
- c. Sympathize mostly, and only empathize when you can.
- i. Among the byproducts of having an all-volunteer military is the reality that the American public has little to no connection with what it means to undergo long periods of separation from loved ones and comfort in the name of politically motivated foreign policy. Whether a facilitator is someone who has experience with serving in the military, has familiarity with supporting family members who have served, or who simply wish to support military families, the facilitator should remember he does not share the lived experiences that his members have. Be honest about your background. If you are not a veteran, do not assume that persona. If you are a pacifist, do not shortchange your convictions. Authenticity is a universal language.
1. Brandt, Deborah. "Sponsors of Literacy." *College Composition and Communication* 1998: 165. *JSTOR Journals*. Web. 12 May 2015.

2. Pennebaker, James W. *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions*. New York, NY: Guilford, 1990. Print.
 3. Pennebaker, James W., and Martha E Francis. "Cognitive, Emotional and Language Processes in Disclosure" *Cognition & Emotion* 10.6 (1996): 601-626. Web. 18 May 2015.
 4. Wilson, John P., and Rhiannon B. Thomas. *Empathy In The Treatment Of Trauma And PTSD*. New York: Routledge, 2004. *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*. Web. 18 May 2015.
- d. Be the last one to leave.
- i. The primary focus of meetings should always be to workshop writing. Writing sharing, and discussing deeply personal memories is a taxing experience for anyone. Emotional connections and complexities are elevated, within a community aesthetic that emerges when individuals who have become separated from mainstream society because of similarly traumatic experiences get together. If a facilitator is going to ask members to pour out their hearts, she should be prepared to stay for as long as it takes to pick the broken pieces back up, which can sometimes take all night.
 1. Farwell, Nancy, and Jamie B. Cole. "Community as a Context of Healing." *International Journal of Mental Health* 30.4 (2001): 19. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 13 May 2015.

2. "Healing War Trauma; a Handbook of Creative Approaches." *Reference & Research Book News 2013: Academic OneFile*. Web. 18 May 2015.
 3. Scurfield, Raymond M., and Katherine Theresa Platoni. *War Trauma And Its Wake: Expanding The Circle Of Healing*. n.p.: New York, NY: Routledge, 2013. *MTSU Libraries' Catalog*. Web. 20 May 2015.
- e. Think of your members as writers, not survivors. Think of your group as a service to its members but also as a service to the community.
- i. One problem with talking about writing workshop groups as being “creative” is that it reduces the value of survivors communicating their experiences in a well-crafted manner. Writing is healing on its own merits, but contemporary scholarship holds that service is too. Linking community service to writing offers additional modes of healing without the mandate that members be self-reflexive about their own healing processes in overt forms.
 1. Johnson, T.R. “Writing as Healing and the Rhetorical Tradition: Sorting Out Plato, Postmodernism, Writing Pedagogy, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.” *Writing & Healing: Toward an Informed Practice*. Eds. Charles M. Anderson and Marian M. MacCurdy. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2000. Print. 85-114.
 2. MacCurdy, Marian M. “From Trauma to Writing: A Theoretical Model for Practical Use.” *Writing & Healing: Toward an Informed*

Practice. Eds. Charles M. Anderson and Marian M. MacCurdy.
Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2000. Print. 158-200.

- f. Focus facilitator commentary on editorial feedback rather than on participants' writing skills to cultivate community.
- i. Any writing group features different levels of accomplishment and dedication. Variations in proficiency will inevitably be immediately recognized by most or all members. As opposed to professors running workshops in MFA programs, facilitators in posttrauma community literacy programs have the primary job of motivating members to keep writing and keep sharing. Do not focus on writing proficiency. Committed writers will continue writing. Focusing on the expertise of feedback and taste of individual commentary may, however, support members who feel intimidated to bring in writing of their own to have more courage.
1. Martin, Jane Roland. *Educational Metamorphoses: Philosophical Reflections on Identity and Culture*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007. Print.
 2. "Meditation as the Answer to Healing Post-War Trauma." *Arutz Sheva/Israel National News (Beit El, Israel)* 2013:InfoTrac Newsstand. Web. 16 May 2015.
 3. Spigelman, Candace. "Reconstructing Authority: Negotiating Power in Democratic Learning Sites." *Composition Studies* 29.1 (Spring 2001): 27-50.

- g. Facilitate group-oriented public engagements that represent the strengths of overcoming trauma rather than the trauma itself.
 - i. Facilitators who dedicate enormous amounts of time, personal finances and emotional capital to the groups with which they work have a vested interest in making the public as aware as possible of the accomplishments group members have made. If among the group's stated missions is providing opportunities to share with the general population, public engagements allow members to take pride in and recognize growth in skill and healing rather than being reminded of what they have gone through. There can and should be a certain kind of pride in having survived.
 - 1. Interlandi, Jeneen. "A Revolutionary Approach to Healing PTSD." *The New York Times Magazine*. 22 May 2014. Web. 18 June 2015.
 - 2. operationreinvent.org. Operation Reinvent. Web. 28 May 2015.
- h. Make all public events optional and insist on their optionality through the entirety of the process.
 - i. For many survivors of trauma, especially veterans of combat, exposure to large crowds and unadulterated attention can manifest severe symptoms of PTSI. Although members may have every intention to support the group and attend events, they may be unable to do so. I have personally held events with what I found to be low turnout only to find members not in attendance paralyzed in their cars in parking lots, unable to get out or drive away. Ask for permission for any pieces to be read by other members if the authors cannot

attend. Such a provision reinforces the voluntary nature of participation within a group that may often feature very intense interpersonal relationships among members.

1. Friedman, Matthew J., Terence Martin Keane, and Patricia A. Resick. *Handbook Of PTSD : Science And Practice*. New York, NY: Guilford, 2007. Print.
 2. Troyanskaya, Maya, et al. "Combat Exposure, PTSD Symptoms, And Cognition Following Blast-Related Traumatic Brain Injury In OEF/OIF/OND Service Member And Veterans." *Military Medicine* 180.3 (2015): 285-289. *CINAHL Complete*. Web. 12 May 2015.
 3. Wheeler, Kathleen. "Psychotherapeutic Strategies for Healing Trauma." *Perspectives in Psychiatric Care* 43.3 (2007): 132-141. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 20 May 2015.
- i. Ask members to write about anything they want.
- i. This is, perhaps, the most controversial of the best practices listed. Most theories about writing's healing properties rely on the understanding that for it to be effective, individuals must write about traumatic experiences. Little evidence exists that suggests composing pieces about ideas or events that are unrelated to trauma has similarly healing properties. And while helping members to find healing is the clearest draw for facilitators of this sort of community literacy program, individuals must be writing for writing to heal.

Having survivors follow their own processes of growth is necessary if facilitators hope to make writing a long term part of survivors' lives. I must note, though, that organizations composed of members who share similar experiences will inevitably influence members to write about the primary ties that bind them together without facilitators having to ask.

1. Baker, Barbara Ann. "Art Speaks In Healing Survivors Of War: The Use Of Art Therapy In Treating Trauma Survivors." *Journal Of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 12.1/2 (2006): 183-198. *Criminal Justice Abstracts*. Web. 20 May 2015.
 2. Fuertes, Al B. "In Their Own Words: Contextualizing The Discourse Of (War) Trauma And Healing." *Conflict Resolution Quarterly* 21.4 (2004): 491-501. *Business Source Complete*. Web. 15 May 2015.
 3. "Healing War Trauma; a Handbook of Creative Approaches." *Reference & Research Book News 2013: Academic OneFile*. Web. 18 May 2015.
 4. Kienzler, Hanna. "Debating War-Trauma And Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) In An Interdisciplinary Arena." *Social Science & Medicine* 67.(2008): 218-227. *ScienceDirect*. Web. 16 May 2015.
- j. Be as transparent as possible in all planning, motivations and public persona.
- i. Experiencing trauma creates a stigma that separates survivors from mainstream communities. No one understands this stigma more than survivors, especially in veterans' communities who have almost universally

been forced to prove, through brief surveys, that they are not broken before they are allowed to leave military service. No matter how promotional information is composed, many members will inevitably suspect organizational motives that have grown out of facilitator desires to “save” them. If this is indeed the primary rationale for a facilitator to be involved, he should be transparent about it. Such a step is most important, however, when presenting information about the group to the general public, since acknowledging that there are both healing and community service oriented elements to the program is not a problem when articulated clearly. When descriptions change in the faces of different audiences, facilitators risk alienating members and supporters.

1. Cain, Jimmie. “The Combat Veteran as the Monstrous Other.” *Zeiten der Zombie-Apokalypse*. New York, NY: Springer, 2015. Print 341-376.
2. Nesaule, Agate. "A Woman In Amber: Healing The Trauma Of War And Exile." *Woman in Amber: Healing the Trauma of War & Exile (HIA Book Collection)*. 1. n.p.: 1995. *Historical Abstracts*. Web. 15 May 2015.
3. Romero, Daniel H, Shelley A. Riggs and Camilo Ruggero “Coping, Family Social Support, and Psychological Symptoms Among Student Veterans” *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 62.2 (2015): 242-252. Web. 20 May 2015.

4. veteranswriting.org. Veteran Writing Project. Web. 12 June 2015

3. Conclusions:

The conclusions highlighted in this list of best practices are, of course, partial. Facilitators must consider many more approaches before they can successfully work with posttrauma community literacy programs. What is listed, however, is capable of establishing a solid foundation from which healing and growth can germinate. The provided research touches the surface of the theoretical camps and resources available regarding trauma, writing, and community literacy. My research is enough, though, to ask some important questions and suggest some important answers for those who are committed to using writing and literacy to help individuals who have experienced unimaginably difficult circumstances. Having worked with and founded a number of such groups in the past decade, I believe the information collected here is enough to provide an opening for volunteers and facilitators.

Any minute now, my wife is set to give birth to our second child, a girl. My son turned three last week. Already, I have begun to sow the seeds of altruism and service into his worldview. It is now my turn to teach the lessons and importance of using tools to not only help others but aid my children in constructing identities built on faith, service, and empathy. I hope that the practices laid out here can assist those who are already doing good work to expand the scope of their reach.

I hope for this, because I believe that together, we can save the world. I have to.

I live here.

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