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Frank Usbeck



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Frank Usbeck

1. Introduction

- 1 The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have generated a broad swath of firsthand narratives written by US military personnel. Soldiers employed the latest technological gadgets and cultural practices to stay in contact with home during their deployment and to reflect on their overseas experiences. They used the features of Web 2.0, such as Skype, blogs (the so-called “milblogs”), or social-media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to communicate with families, friends, and online communities. Returning veterans have written memoirs, nonfiction accounts, poetry, blogs, and short fiction based on their experiences, and many have contributed to documentary and feature films. Their texts are available in print and online collections, with many more currently underway (cf. Molin; Peebles). A wide support network has emerged for soliciting, editing, and publishing these firsthand narratives, including financial backing and training in writing and editing techniques through large institutions such as the National Endowment of the Arts and PBS (cf. Carroll; *Operation*), through writing centers and composition courses at college campuses, but also through a host of local and national grassroots organizations.
- 2 First-person war narratives have a long tradition in the US. Historians have collected diaries and letters from wars going back to the revolution (Morgan and Michalson). During the Civil War, soldiers and civilians in the war zone wrote profusely, and their private letters and diaries were often widely circulated and published (Shapiro and Humphreys 4). Henry Steele Commager finds that, in the Civil War, “[e]veryman was... his own historian” because ordinary people recorded events in great detail (qtd. in Jimerson 3–4). Samuel Hynes contextualizes historical life—and war—writing with the emergence of a large middle class, describing this group as the “great self-recording class that keeps

diaries and journals and considers that the preservation of one's daily life is an appropriate and interesting activity for an individual" (31–32). In this respect, US troops since the Civil War have integrated this cultural penchant for self-reflection into their military careers and vividly discussed life in the war zone, as well as their roles as citizens and soldiers in their written representations of war. The current proliferation of war narratives, then, is not a novelty; what is new is the narratives' heterogeneity in terms of genre and medium, as well as the way in which technological telecommunication capabilities accelerate and extend the dissemination of these narratives among worldwide audiences.¹

- 3 Yet, contemporary war writing also seems to be determined by unique circumstances, mostly tied to the sociocultural and historical context of the Vietnam War: the new generation of writers is aware of the domestic controversies that arose during Vietnam; it is aware of US society's struggles to resolve them, and of the resulting anxieties about civil-military relationships in current public debates on war. Today's military authors grew up immersed in cultural representations of Vietnam that reflect these anxieties and that have popularized particular images, such as the broken and traumatized veteran, and the neglectful, or even hostile, civilian home front. This new generation of veterans was the first to enter a war imbued with knowledge about psychological injuries and equipped with the lexicon of military psychology, aware of concepts such as "trauma," "stressors," and "breaking points" (Larkin). It is also the first military generation to become involved in major, long-term military engagements after the establishment of the professional, all-volunteer force in the aftermath of Vietnam. Soldiers experienced firsthand the resulting changes in the traditions of citizen-soldiering, as well as public debates about these changing roles and social relationships (cf. Bacevich; Thompson; Hendricks and Amara).
- 4 Likewise, the civilian public is also aware of these images, issues, and role changes. The outbreak of the post-9/11 wars sparked widespread public support for "the troops" (despite the controversies over the political decision for the Iraq War) and social activism has quickly evolved to tackle the social and psychological problems of veteran reintegration. Many activists in veterans' affairs treat "[p]ost-traumatic stress [as] a medical term for a cultural problem" (Crawford). That is, they argue that war experience should not be understood as the concern of an "isolated individual among other isolated individuals, each devoted to pursuing his or her private interests" (Crawford), but of society as a whole: after all, they argue, it was society that sent the soldiers out to fight these wars.² These activists, thus, seek to engage veterans in sharing and publicly reflecting on their experiences as a means of reintegration that is at once symbolic and tangible; they both nurture public discourse on war and pursue concrete results for individual veterans' well-being. Hoping to bridge the perceived civil-military gap, activists employ war narratives and their public recital and dissemination as central elements to soothe anxieties about public indifference, neglect and refusal. It is no coincidence that Ken Burns' 2017 documentary series on Vietnam rekindled the public debate about contemporary domestic struggles and US civil-military relations and that Vietnam-era veteran writers, such as Tim O'Brien and Karl Marlantes, feature prominently in the series. In combination with contemporary media technology and this sociohistorical context, then, today's veteran generation emerges from a "multimedia confessional society" (Simon), imbued with the means and embedded in a receptive social environment to share and negotiate their war experiences in public.

- 5 This article explores the recent proliferation of veterans' writing projects. They represent the public discourse and sense of social crisis regarding war experience, psychological injury, and civil-military relationships stemming from the Vietnam War, refueled by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Rather than investigating the literary techniques and the generic merits of veterans' writing, it focuses on the projects' approach to writing and asks how their self-reflections portray the process of narrating war experience as a form of social activism to overcome the civil-military divide. The article links activists' postulations of a social crisis in veterans' affairs with their promotion of war writing as social therapy and explores how they seek to nurture public debate and to support civil-military reintegration. It draws on religious anthropologist Roy Rappaport's notion of ritual who describes it as "not simply [being the] symbolic representation of social contract, but tacit social contract itself" (138). I argue that the cultural work of veterans' writing projects lies in their frequently explicit enactment of workshops, events, and publications as civic rituals of reintegration and that they negotiate, as well as showcase, values and norms around civil-military relationships. Adapting recent theories and methods of psychology (such as narrative therapy), they seek to create dialog between veterans and civilians on veterans' social and psychological struggles of homecoming, and they emphasize the role of civilian support therein.³
- 6 In the following, I will briefly sketch out some of the interrelations of trauma theory, psychology, literary theory, and war-related civic activism, to pinpoint the methodological foundation for many writing projects. I will then discuss a few projects housed at university campuses, carving out the activist drive behind their merging of academic and military culture, before detailing the work and self-portrayal of two grassroots projects, the Warrior Writers and the Veterans' Writing Project. Both sections offer close readings of journalistic and academic texts that situate these projects in the realm of military psychology, veterans' affairs, and social activism, as well as self-representations on "about" pages online and in editorials of the projects' anthologies. The readings focus on how activists attribute social-therapeutic qualities to public writing, how veterans' writing is understood as nurturing civil-military relationships, and how the projects discussed here assume role model functions in envisioning these relationships.

2. War Experience, Trauma, and Narrative in Activist Scholarship

- 7 Since the final decades of the twentieth century, a growing body of scholarship correlated recovery from traumatic experiences with narrative-making. In turn, academic and civic activists in veterans' affairs have adopted this focus on narrative for their social-therapeutic approach to veterans' writing projects. Medical researchers and humanities scholars explored how people process extreme experiences, how memory—individual as well as public—is shaped by these negotiations and what role narrative, i.e., the constructed representation of experiences, plays in people's abilities to overcome emotional distress. These academic explorations have pursued interdisciplinary approaches from the start. Literary studies adopted ideas and theories from psychology and psychotherapy, particularly from the emerging field of traumatology. Both literary studies and psychology shaped their respective paradigms on related subject matter: while the medical professions constructed theirs from practical work with traumatized

survivors of the Holocaust and with veterans of World War Two and Vietnam, literary studies engaged the texts that represented authors' recollections and imaginations of these events (e.g., Wilson et al.; LaCapra; Heberle). Eventually, medical scholars and practitioners turned to literary representations of war to test and refine theories and their therapeutic applications (e.g., Hunt, Shay).

- 8 Literary scholars engaged traumatology to explain how traumatic experiences affect people's capabilities to make sense of and reflect on an event. Adopting psychology's understanding that traumatic experience, e.g., forces affected persons to compulsively relive the event and the corresponding emotions through flashbacks but leaves their minds incapable of analyzing and contextualizing them, literary scholars postulate a "crisis of witnessing" (Felman and Laub) and discuss how the "unclaimed experience" (Caruth) of trauma becomes visible through narrative reconstructions of these events. This interdisciplinary focus on trauma and narrative encompasses both individual and collective processes. Narrative therapy, pioneered by James Pennebaker, explores neurological processes set in motion when a person writes about emotional distress, and its proponents argue that writing helps order thoughts and integrates emotions and memories with the experienced event (Pennebaker and Seagal 1243). As these scholars suggest, writing provides a tool to approach the traumatic event in a controlled fashion and to engage in a process of working through, that is, of making sense and constructing meaning.
- 9 Medical scholars have also begun to integrate concepts and methods from literary theory and other fields in the humanities. Noting that "[n]arrative is the performance of the self in the sense of self-identity" (116), psychologist Nigel C. Hunt observes that social processes such as public discourse influence the construction of memory and self-identity (120-125). According to Hunt, psychology and therapeutic practice can learn from the humanities and social sciences, considering the constructedness of memory and identity in their efforts to 'construct' efficient therapies. Among others, Hunt compares selective memory—consciously or subconsciously utilizing and discarding particular aspects of experiences—to the process of narrative development, i.e., of selecting plot elements, setting, and character in writing a story (125-26). Linking narrative construction with the (re)construction of self and identity in trauma therapy in this fashion, psychologists and literary scholars have promoted narrative-making as a viable course to work through and represent extreme experiences.
- 10 While the principle of revisiting a traumatic event by narrating its particular aspects has long been a cornerstone of individual psychotherapeutic practice—e.g., in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)—academics and civic activists increasingly relate it to notions of social health and community relationships that pervade the discussions around veterans' affairs. Traumatologists have noted that a traumatic event shatters the affected person's sense of trust and critically impedes one's ability to (re)build personal relationships (Herman 53). A growing number of medical practitioners and researchers, thus, emphasize the role of community and social relationships in trauma therapy. As Judith Herman states: "Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships, it cannot occur in isolation" (133). Similarly, Jonathan Shay argues that "*recovery happens only in community* [emphasis in original]" (4), adding that, ideally, the relationship between client and therapist is amended by the contribution of a third party, such as family and friends, to help the clients rebuild their selves and their social relationships. Scholars and activists, thus, propose diverse forms of therapy and social integration

centered around making war narratives and sharing them with civilians. These practices often explicitly construct civic rituals of veteran reintegration and civilian pledges to veteran support (cf. Shay 152, 245).

- 11 In the US, public discourse on the sociocultural nature of war trauma is further intensified as it correlates with the controversies on civil-military relationships since Vietnam. The public memory and cultural imagination of Vietnam, manifest in countless movies, novels, and memoirs, portrays an ignorant, neglectful, even outright hostile civil society at home which compounded the returning veterans' reintegration struggles (Leikauf 76–90). Trauma scholarship has developed concepts such as “sanctuarial traumatic stress” (Parson 250) to explain how the experience of civilian neglect impeded veterans' reconstruction of their civilian selves. It is in this context that many medical professionals who had worked with Vietnam veterans since the 1970s, both in their academic writing and their civic engagement in veterans' affairs, demanded that civil society as a whole be held responsible for the reintegration of veterans, regardless of individual traumatic experiences made during the war. Based on this perspective, many activists organize public events where veterans share their stories as opportunities for civil society to bear witness, to symbolically absorb psychological stress in acknowledging responsibility, and to work toward reintegration (cf. Becknell; Junger 123–24). The construction of and public discourse about firsthand war narratives, then, plays a central role in social therapy-oriented interrelations of academic and civic activism.

3. Campus Activism, Composition Courses, and Student Veterans

- 12 US universities have adapted to the new generation of post-9/11 war veterans in recent years, investing much energy and resources to address their specific backgrounds and needs. In the first three years after the new GI Bill passed in 2009, some nine hundred thousand veterans used benefits related to higher education. Similar to the effect of the first GI Bill after World War Two, it is expected that these veterans “will substantially transform postsecondary classroom dynamics, relationships across campus and in the community, and our understanding of the kinds of literacies students bring to our courses” (Doe and Langstraat 1-2).
- 13 To support and guide this transformation, many universities created veteran centers, student services, and specific programs for the student veteran population. In this context, composition courses have become critical elements for student veterans' careers because these classes often serve first-year students and, thus, become focal points for exchanges between military and academic culture in the students' transition to civil life. As students contribute “the values, rhetorical traditions, and communication styles they have learned in the military,” their “perspectives will likely challenge the values and beliefs of not only traditional college students but faculty as well” (Doe and Langstraat 3). While military and academic life share as a central element the dedication to hard work and discipline, entering student veterans tend to be older than most undergraduates and their military experiences set them apart from both civilian students and faculty (Logan). It is this environment of cultural exchange and, frequently, conflict, that social activists in academia utilize to nurture civil-military relationships and to support student veterans' efforts toward reintegration.

- 14 Not surprisingly, the humanities feature very prominently in these efforts. Their representatives contribute disciplinary expertise, be it critical thinking, interpretation and comparative approaches in literature and culture, or the mechanics of writing—both academic and creative—to offer students a form of service learning tailored to their respective diverse cultural and social backgrounds. English literature programs in particular bring in a long tradition of scholarship on war narratives. They can readily provide examples and contextualization for particular issues emerging in student veterans' writing courses. While sometimes leading to political confrontations in the classroom, as Doe and Langstraat caution above, the humanities' large numbers of social activists among faculty and students, who are already well-versed in analyzing and discussing social issues, contribute their experience in social organization and outreach to these projects. Lastly, the recent spike in veteran-related programs on university campuses might also serve the mundane purpose of giving the humanities better access to external funding. At a time when the humanities face increasing financial pressures, the "hot" topic of veterans' affairs helps these disciplines advertise their own social relevance.⁴
- 15 Many veterans' writing groups on campus are embedded in general efforts to create and improve specialized student services for veterans, and often result from student veterans' own initiatives. Travis L. Martin, veteran of two tours to Iraq, organized a veterans' campus group at Eastern Kentucky University which lobbied for better institutional support for veterans. Working with university administrators, the group helped found a veterans' resource center on campus that provided a meeting space as well as student services. Martin eventually created a Veteran Studies program that "introduced non-veterans to military service, allowed veterans to contextualize their experiences, and brought both groups together in scholarly analysis of veterans' issues" (Martin). The collaboration of student veteran activists and university administration also resulted in a symposium on veteran writing in 2012 and in the emergence of publication venues, such as the *Journal of Military Experience*, and the website *Military Experience and the Arts* ("Military Experience and the Arts"). These venues present poetry, prose, and scholarship, and they serve as support sites for writing instruction, as well as for socializing. Merging campus volunteerism with student services and a veteran-related curriculum, this project seeks to enhance student veterans' abilities to succeed in their programs, to evaluate their military-related experiences, and to create dialog with civilians. Firsthand writing and reflecting on the psychological and cultural roles of war narratives are central elements in these activities.
- 16 Similarly, a number of projects in the University of California system combines student services with civic activism. UC Santa Barbara's Interdisciplinary Humanities Center organized a series of lectures and roundtables named "Fallout: In the Aftermath of War," culminating in the titular symposium on "Narrative-Making" in Spring 2013, which I attended to present my research on milblogs ("Fallout"). The symposium brought together scholars who worked with war narratives in diverse contexts (e.g., literature workshops to improve awareness for patients' special needs among military hospital personnel, and courses on war novels in English Literature departments), established veteran writers, and instructors and participants from writing and composition classes. All emphasized and commented on the role of firsthand war narratives in civil-military relationships and, invoking social-therapeutic approaches, discussed the therapeutic attributes of writing.

- 17 The symposium also informed participants about a writing workshop for student veterans at Santa Barbara, which has since been extended to include a summer writing workshop for students from the entire University of California system. These workshops pursue integrated goals. Adapting traditions of trauma theory in literature, they are supposed to help participants make sense of their experiences because it is expected that the writing process helps them “become more connected to themselves,” to “heal invisible wounds,” and to “discover new meanings in their life” (“UC Student Veterans Writing Workshop”). One participant describes the workshop as “‘liberating’ because it allowed him to write in a way that was more philosophical than what he would express verbally” (Logan). Another student states that it “allowed me to actually express and let out some of the emotions that I was feeling that have been trapped for a long time” (qtd. in Logan). Yet the workshops also serve as convergence spaces. Student veterans, who often feel isolated on campus because of their unique background, use them to share experiences and exchange ideas about their common struggles on campus, as Susan Derwin, the workshops’ organizer, explains. In addition, the workshops also help veterans to learn how to engage and share their war-related experiences with civilians. In pointing out how student veterans learn to “educate the community” (qtd. in Logan), Derwin emphasizes the social-activist thrust behind the workshop. In the same spirit, the workshop’s website refers to the civil-military experiential gap, explaining that the workshops seek to “build bridges of communication to the civilian world” (“UC Student Veterans Writing Workshop”). In addition to their concrete services for individual students, then, the workshops advertise their task to mend civil-military relationships and, thus, contribute to integration.
- 18 Like the group around *Military Experience and the Arts* and the *Journal of Military Experience*, the California workshop organizers have founded a journal, *Instant Separation*, an online venue to document the workshops’ results and to give students an opportunity to publish their work. Its title symbolizes veterans’ struggles in the two-fold transition between civilian life, the military, and back. One of the authors, Victor Orta, explains that the journal’s title refers to this transition. He invokes the image of cutting an umbilical cord that had connected the transitioning persons to their previous lives, throwing them into completely new and confusing environments (Orta, qtd. in “Instant Separation—About”). Here, too, the effort to bridge the gap between civilian and military experiences and to help civilians understand the returning veterans’ struggles of integration bespeaks the overall notion of social therapy through writing.
- 19 Many projects, such as the Syracuse Veterans Writing Group, founded at Syracuse University in 2010, emerge from civilian faculty’s desires to support veterans beyond curricular programs. Cofounders Eileen Schell and Ivy Kleinbart state that they wanted to help veterans “see themselves as societal witnesses to warfare” and to “make sense of their experiences” through writing (121). In this, such projects are embedded in an increasing network of writing groups and campus activities who are self-aware about the social impact of their work. As Schell and Kleinbart have it, “we see ourselves as part of a national movement to create spaces for veterans to speak out and represent their experiences rather than being silenced or used as tools of patriotism or pawns of war” (137). The organizers here assume a leading role as representatives of civilian society, not only by helping veterans speak out about their experiences, but also in initiating and nurturing veterans’ contact with civil society. Their self-representation in the quotation above highlights these intertwined purposes when it stresses that the veteran

participants are neither “tools” nor “pawns”: it emphasizes strategies of veteran empowerment through self-expression (they are no longer “silenced”) and, in doing so, the civilian organizers clarify their own position. They seek to support the veterans’ empowerment without steering their writing through a political agenda, particularly without seeking to align veterans’ recollections with an ‘official’ master narrative about what the wars are supposed to mean to US society.

- 20 The course instructors provide academic and didactic expertise in writing techniques, as well as infrastructure through their university programs. Although the course is centered on campus, it is not restricted to enrolled students. It focuses on writing about veteran experience, rather than on completing a program or, generally, on success in college, and is comprised of an intergenerational cohort. The cofounders explicitly contextualize their service for the wider veteran community when they describe their work as an “acknowledgment of civilian complicity” (Schell and Kleinbart 122) in war, that is, by emphasizing—and setting examples—that civilians should acknowledge and take responsibility for veterans’ war experiences as part of the communal reintegration process. In their reference to tools and pawns above, the activists portray their work as detached from governmental, that is, ‘official’ state activities and, rather, as a bottom-up effort in civic responsibility.
- 21 This notion was popularized by activist psychologists such as Jonathan Shay and Edward Tick who developed their social-therapy approaches working with Vietnam-era veterans. Their theories and therapeutic projects are frequently referenced as the Syracuse group and many others reflect on the community-building attributes of public writing and on civilian-veteran dialog. Helping veterans express and make sense of their experiences, then, criticizes “the culture of denial and forgetting in which citizens blame leaders for initiating wars and veterans for fighting them and then completely disavow the consequences, or glorify those whom they believe to be heroes” (Schell and Kleinbart 122).
- 22 Initially anxious about their outsider role as the only non-veterans in the group, the instructors quickly learned that they not only provided the writing expertise, but also began to serve as sounding boards, as points of first intense civilian contact for the veterans who were equally anxious about sharing some of their war-related experiences with civilians. The instructors’ interaction with their participants, thus, constructs a microcosm for dialog between civilians and veterans (128) in a protected and controlled atmosphere that can, eventually, be extended by including a wider civilian audience.
- 23 Veteran writing projects on campus, as the above examples suggest, promote veteran reintegration on several levels. Organizers offer services to the veteran community and provide spaces for direct contact between veterans and civilians, arguing that this direct interaction nurtures dialog and social integration. In addition, the projects’ self-representation and self-reflective texts signify idealized civil-military relationships. Their activities at once call for such improved relationships, they enact them, and they showcase themselves as role models for society as a whole.

4. Empowerment and the Civil-Military Social Contract

- 24 In addition to campus-based activism, some grassroots projects merit discussion here because of their nationwide scale and because their activities and self-representation

particularly illustrate the intertwined thrust of civic engagement for veterans' personal and general social concerns. This section explores two groups, the Veterans' Writing Project (VWP) and Warrior Writers (WW), to carve out how they use the process of writing and publishing to help veterans interpret and express their memories, to raise awareness about veterans' issues among civil society, and to bring veterans and civilians into dialog. Both projects utilize and advertise notions of empowerment and of the civil-military social contract. Like the projects discussed above, their negotiation of values and norms regarding the roles of veterans in civil society constructs these activities as civic rituals of reintegration where narrating, sharing, and acknowledging war experiences become the central conduits for civil-military relationships.

- 25 The work of the Veterans' Writing Project is closely tied to Ron Capps who served in the Army and the Foreign Service for several years, reporting and preparing advice for the US government on international conflicts and on their implications for US foreign policies (Simon). Having developed PTSD over some of the extreme personal experiences he endured during these missions, he began a personal process of working through by way of writing. Eventually, he founded VWP in collaboration with George Washington University to help other veterans come to terms with their memories (Simon; Capps, "Back from the Brink"). Operating nationwide, the group organizes workshops in creative writing (e.g., fiction, nonfiction, playwriting), mainly based on Capps's writing manual (*Writing War*), and they produce the journal *0-Dark-Thirty* to publish and promote their own and their course participants' texts.
- 26 The project is adamant in emphasizing the integrated and mutually reinforcing functions of its three goals, that is, literary, social, and therapeutic work (*Veterans Writing Project*). Organizers want to cater to the generation of writers among veterans and their families, and to support their careers as authors. At the same time, they join other observers (cf. Thompson) in their warnings about a deepening social segregation of the military from civil society. The current wars are fought by the smallest proportion of the overall population in US history, that is, fewer people have firsthand experience about war than before. Finally, VWP organizers adhere to the notion that war writing is a universal tradition to express and overcome painful memories (*Veterans Writing Project*). In these interdependent and reinforcing goals, veteran empowerment and the social contract are prominently implied. The project diagnoses a need to enable and to support veteran voices in public discourse. Following the premise that public sharing of war experiences will have therapeutic effects on individual veterans, the group further argues that the social segregation between civilians and veterans requires social processes to nurture veterans' reintegration, and that writing and publishing can serve as the major techniques for these processes.
- 27 Similarly, the Philadelphia-based group Warrior Writers anchors its activities around empowerment and social integration. The group was founded by Lovella Calica who worked with Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW) and introduced writing workshops to this NGO's portfolio in 2007. Calica states that she "wanted to inspire and empower veterans to express themselves" (Editor and Facilitator's Notes i) but also to use writing workshops as safe spaces where veterans could support each other in exploring and challenging their war memories as well as their civilian selves. She further explains that she "recognized the need for veterans' stories (in their own voices) to be present in a culture that often misunderstands them" (Editor and Facilitator's Notes i). Here, too, literary, therapeutic, and social goals are explicitly intertwined. Writing serves as a

device for both individual psychological self-help in a group setting and for addressing the social problems around civil-military segregation and veteran reintegration.

- 28 Both projects emphasize the technicalities of publishing, in addition to writing, as part of veteran empowerment. Other projects can rely on the infrastructure and financial support of large organizations to bring veterans in contact with instructors who are themselves established writers, and to publish their works. However, the protagonists within these large projects must constantly re-examine the ethics of their own role as supporters; their work is something done for the veteran participants, and—even when the activists take precautions not to steer or channel veterans’ voices during the editing process—control over editing and publishing ultimately remains with the activists and their backing institutions (cf. Carroll; Gioia). In contrast, VWP and WW (as well as the campus groups discussed above) stand exemplary for grassroots projects who not merely work to “give voice” to the veterans, but help them raise and disseminate their voices themselves, by supporting their efforts at self-publishing. In doing so, they follow longer traditions, e.g., of Vietnam veterans, who were among the first to use the Internet as a device to take control of their message (Leikauf 104-05). Karen Springsteen describes this “materiality” of writing as the “question of who has the right, privilege, position, or ability to record and circulate veterans’ words” (143). In this sense, the projects’ do-it-yourself approach to publishing not only teaches skill sets but it allows veterans to develop and retain control of their message. Civilian supporters in these NGOs bring in their expertise, compassion and commitment, but their power position in this process is restricted.
- 29 The notion of empowerment through group efforts in writing is intertwined with the social aspect of writing. As VWP highlight in a disclaimer on their website, they do not propose their activities as ‘therapy’ in the clinical sense and they refute the notion of therapist-client relationships in what they do: “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” (*Veterans Writing Project*). In contrast to clinical “narrative therapy” as, e.g., James Pennebaker conducts it, they emphasize that course instructors are not medical professionals and that writing is not a tool within a specific form of therapy but that it should be perceived as “a process that has therapeutic value” because the course activities allow participants “to help themselves work through emotional issues... through their writing” (Capps, “Writing by Service Members” 117). This process also illustrates the NGO’s social-therapeutic and civic perspective: working as a group of like-minded people who share specific experiences and support each other in their tasks (e.g., working to become published authors) removes them from a self-perception as ‘patients’ while, at the same time, offering the safe space of intra-group activity for controlled integration and interaction with the civilian world.
- 30 In addition, the high level of metatextual self-reflection in the groups’ editorials and “about” pages bespeaks their thrust toward integration and social therapy. These texts often explicitly reveal the projects’ ritualistic outline. Since, as Rappaport argues, ritual not only affirms and symbolically represents but enacts and, therefore, “is tacit social contract itself” (138), these projects’ work can be understood as civic rituals when they affirm and enact the idea of veterans’ social integration. In some cases, their texts function as meta-ritualistic markers, that is, they discuss their own role as rituals, and they often use ritualized language to enforce this message. Ronald Grimes observes that human activity in general is subject to varying degrees of ritualization: “An action that is

merely repeated is less ritualized than an act that is both repeated and stylized. If an action is repeated, stylized, prescribed, and sacralized, it becomes more ritualistic” (Grimes 13). The language used in the projects’ self-representations frequently utilizes such elements, such as repetition and cadence, playfully mirroring the style of the veteran contributions but also increasing the degree of ritualization of these introductory texts.

- 31 These meta-ritualistic elements become evident in the editorials to the series of WW publications, in the way they invoke the creativity of writing and the sacredness of sharing experience, how they formally address the reader, and in how they adopt the style conventions of poetry to identify with their veteran authors and to amplify their message. First, the editorials of the collections WW published since 2007 dichotomize war experience and civil life in emphasizing the creativity of the writing process as a counterweight to war’s loss and destruction: “There is a deep necessity to create when so much has been shattered and stolen—a profound sense of hope comes from the ability to rebuild” (Calica, Editor’s Notes, *Re-Making* 3). Similarly, the introduction to the collection *Move, Shoot, and Communicate* states that “we can create beauty and life from our fears and pain” (Calica, Introduction, *Move* v). Turning painful experience into “beauty” through the creative process of writing is explicitly denoted as “sacred” (e.g., Calica, Editor’s Notes, *Re-Making* 3) because the group processes are built around an atmosphere of nonjudgmental criticism of each other’s work and mutual support, building a “spiritual connection” (Calica, Introduction, *Move* v) among the participants. The veterans’ return to civil life by way of writing is, thus, portrayed as a ritual to reinstate the entire community.
- 32 Second, the editorials directly call upon their readers to become involved. They not only explain the veterans’ activities to reintegrate into civil life but remind readers of their responsibility to aid veterans in this process. Calica states that she finds the work with veterans to be “exhausting” but that she continues in her efforts because she knows “that our lives are bound together, that we share these struggles as a society, and that art can provide a path forward” (Editor’s Notes, *Warrior Writers* 16). She thus sets an example that she expects civil society to follow. This expectation is voiced more clearly when she warns the audience that their reading experience will be painful and might “infuriate” them (Editor’s Notes, *After Action* 3). She directly calls upon readers: “[D]o not turn away from these voices of our veterans” because “[i]t is up to all of us to hear our story, to refuse to disregard the voices of veterans and to utilize this creative expression as a bridge to move forward together” (3). In this, Calica diagnoses a social problem (i.e., that veterans are largely ignored by US society) and postulates civil society’s responsibility to remedy the situation by reading about and, thus, acknowledging veterans’ experiences and struggles. In evoking the image of a bridge, activists seek to raise awareness about and diminish the gap between civil society, the military, and veterans. Once more, Calica’s own position as an activist and grassroots organizer here sets an example for how civil society is supposed to approach and aid the veterans.
- 33 Third, WW’s editorials often switch from prose to poetry to make their case. In these passages, ritualization becomes obvious because they utilize stylized language (e.g., cadence, repetition) in similar ways as chants, prayers, and liturgy do in religious ceremonies. In *After Action Review*, *Warrior Writers* is described simultaneously as “a community,” “a movement,” “a voice,” and as “a performance” (anon. x). Most of these descriptors are arranged as individual lines, and thus stand for themselves. The sum of

this listing signifies the intertwined tasks of the group, that is, their effort to serve as a self-help organization for veterans and to represent civilian-veteran support, to raise awareness for veterans' issues among civil society and to perform—that is, to enact and to exemplify—the civil-military social contract. The explicit listing of these attributes in the form of a poem marks the group's activities as civic rituals.

- 34 In addition, Calica personally assumes a role model function—as a course instructor and organizer, she is the point of first civilian contact for the veterans' voices, and she represents the civilian witness to veterans' stories in general, postulating that listening is an active effort:

I do nothing but stand beside...

I do nothing but hear you. (Editor's Notes, *After Action 4*)

- 35 This might be interpreted as a somewhat apologetic acknowledgment that, although civilians did not go to war themselves, they at least make an effort to listen to veterans' stories. Yet, it can also be read as a confirmation that civilians are fully dedicated to listening to veterans now that they have returned. The reciprocity in this sequence of veterans sharing their war experiences and civilians bearing witness becomes even more obvious in the following section:

it is with these words you walk

it is with our willingness to absorb them

that we remain

that we create

that we sustain

that we can rebuild. (Editor's Notes, *After Action 4*)

- 36 Veterans "walk" with words, that is, they learn to cope with their memories through writing and to go on with their lives. "[O]ur willingness to absorb" these words signifies that civil society acknowledges its responsibility for the veterans' well-being. The interaction between both groups suggests the successful reintegration of society, which is represented by the final lines, including a reference to the problem of rampant veteran suicides ("we remain"), to creating stories that can outweigh war loss, and to the notion that reintegration will "sustain" the social contract and "rebuild" both individual selves and society as a whole. In their metatexts, then, NGOs such as Warrior Writers and the Veterans Writing Project use writing as a conduit to help veterans cope with their war memories, and they work to empower veterans in supporting their efforts at self-expression and self-publishing. The NGOs exemplify the civil-military social contract by enacting and affirming veteran integration through writing and through using their publications as calls to action, directed at civil society in general.

5. Conclusion

- 37 The current proliferation of veterans' writing projects stands in the longer tradition of life writing about war in the US. Such writing groups are embedded in the public debate on war experience and on the psychological costs of war since Vietnam that has regained immediacy in the public perception after the outbreak of the post-9/11 wars. Like many civic activists working on war-related issues, protagonists postulate a social crisis derived from the increasing social segregation between civil society and the military, and they relate many current veterans' psychological problems to this perceived gap. Venturing forth from the premise that psychological injury is not simply determined by individual

attributes but that it conveys a wider sociocultural problem, activists argue that writing about and publicly sharing firsthand war experiences offers a remedy.

- 38 Writing and publishing are understood as vehicles for therapy and social integration, based on activist scholarship about trauma and narrative since the late twentieth century. Protagonists in veterans' writing projects have begun to explore heterogeneous avenues to promote veterans' writing. Campus-based groups offer composition courses to support student veterans' academic careers and to serve as contact zones between military and civilian culture. They also utilize networks, infrastructure and the penchant for social organization and activism found at university campuses to further veterans' interests. Writing, thus, is supposed to fulfill therapeutic as well as social functions.
- 39 Similarly, grassroots NGOs such as The Veterans Writing Project and Warrior Writers employ writing for a range of interrelated purposes. They seek to benefit from the therapeutic effect of ordering memories and emotions through writing, and to help rebuild veterans' civilian selves through self-expression, but they also create environments for social reflection and debate, both within veteran circles and in exchange with civil society. They encourage as well as empower veterans to engage civil society. In doing so, these projects are acutely aware of their role-model function. They showcase the forging of civil-military relationships in their activities as well as in their publications. The self-reflective representations of their work take on the form of civic rituals in that they not only envision and affirm values and norms regarding veterans' integration into civil society but, by discussing these values and norms and by instigating veteran-civilian exchange, they self-consciously enact this integration.

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NOTES

1. My forthcoming monograph *Ceremonial Storytelling: Ritual and Narrative in Contemporary US Wars* discusses the respective mediality and textuality as well as the biographical contexts of different formats and media in more detail (e.g., differences in immediacy, limitations due to [self-] censorship and the anticipation of homecoming in deployed soldiers' milblogs, in contrast with reflections on actual homecoming experiences in veterans' writing after their return).

2. As a consequence, representatives of this crisis-centered activism often seem to perceive all war experience as somehow traumatic; some groups and publications struggle to avert the fallacy of perpetuating the popular image of the 'broken' veteran. However, the perspective of war experience as traumatic is grounded in the social-therapy approach that, in fact, seeks to avoid subscribing to this popular image. As John Becknell explains, observations on war experience should differentiate between "suffering" and "pathology." Like many other activists, he argues that the experience of war and homecoming generally causes suffering because it is beyond the range of what is considered "normal." To understand the "normal" expressions of suffering from such "abnormal" experiences as an illness would pathologize this experience and absolve society from responsibility because it would individualize the problem and hand it over to medical professionals. The social-therapy approach to war experience, then, argues that society must acknowledge its responsibility for this suffering in order to absorb it and to help the returning veterans reintegrate—it recognizes the psychological costs of war experience but does not automatically perceive veterans as "sick" or "traumatized" (Becknell 10-16).

3. Here, as in my research for the forthcoming monograph *Ceremonial Storytelling*, the activist projects I analyzed represent a wide range of political affiliations and ideas about the role of US civil society regarding war. Some postulate a civic duty to support veterans regardless of the political circumstances of war, while others embed their work in an explicit, politicized anti-war message. Since my research is not concerned with notions of activist efficiency or in how far the projects actually succeed in bridging the civil-military divide, it will suffice here to state that their cultural work lies in the ritualizing of and self-reflections on the process of writing in order to enact the civil-military social contract.

4. My thanks to Larry Acker of Lindenwood University for his insights into these political considerations within higher education.

ABSTRACTS

The post-9/11 wars have brought forth a new generation of military veterans in the US and rekindled debates about social and psychological problems related to war experience. These veterans produced a plethora of firsthand war narratives in diverse genres and media. This article explores how public discourse about civil-military relationships, war experience, and trauma, simmering since the domestic divisions over Vietnam, turned to such first-person narratives in recent years to discuss the psychological costs of war and homecoming. It interprets the proliferation of veterans' writing projects as part of a civic activist movement that, postulating a social crisis in civil-military relationships, seeks to address veterans' social and emotional struggles through community (re)building and social therapy. The writing projects promote themselves as a means to bridge the experiential gap between civilians and veterans and, in doing so, they enact social reintegration.

INDEX

Keywords: creative writing, veterans, social therapy, narrative therapy, PTSD, civic engagement, civil-military relationships, social segregation.

AUTHOR

FRANK USBECK

Frank Usbeck studied American Studies, History, Journalism, and American Indian Studies at Leipzig University and at the University of Arizona. His dissertation *Fellow Tribesmen. The Image of Native Americans, National Identity, and Nazi Ideology in Germany* (2010) earned the Rolf Kentner Prize of the Heidelberg Center for American Studies and was published in 2015. His latest project, *Ceremonial Storytelling*, explores civic rituals and post-9/11 firsthand narratives written by US soldiers and veterans. Usbeck currently serves as Research Scientist at the State Ethnographic Collections Saxony, Germany.