

Introduction to the Special Issue on Veterans' Writing

Eileen E. Schell,
Syracuse University
& Ivy Kleinbart,
Syracuse University

The authors offer an introduction to the special issue on veterans' writing, highlighting the four major areas of work that emerge in the issue: 1) veterans' writing in extracurricular settings, whether in community projects and writing groups or specific programs based on veterans' wellness, healing, and recovery; 2) veterans' writing in the composition classroom on university campuses or at military bases; 3) faculty development initiatives that help prepare university faculty, instructors, and TAs for their work with veterans in the classroom. A fourth area centers around veterans' creative works--poetry, in particular—and reviews of the literature of veterans studies and veterans' writing.

In March of 2010, we started a community writing group for military veterans at Syracuse University, open not only to students but also to all veterans and military family members in the Syracuse area. With different individual motivations and reasons for starting the group, we decided to focus on how creative nonfiction could be useful in helping our members to explore their experiences in and out of the military. We had no idea what to

expect at our first meeting on a cold Saturday morning in March, just as our university's spring break began. We did not know if anyone would show up or how long the group would last. Nevertheless, we were gratified to have four veterans, none of whom we had ever met before, show up to write and work with us. We brainstormed a list of essay topics and then opened a discussion on people's writing goals and reasons for attending that first session. Two representatives from the VA stopped by briefly, as well, to make sure veterans who attended were enrolled for VA benefits. The Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group was born.

Now over six years later as our writing group has grown, and our field's interest in veterans' and military-affiliated writing has expanded as well, we take the opportunity in this special issue of *Reflections* to further consider what the act of writing might afford veterans, both within and beyond the bounds of the university. In part, this issue focuses on student veterans, by which we mean veterans in our courses who have separated from the military, reservists who may still be in the military, and active duty service members who are still serving but who may be taking classes on military bases or through online education. We also acknowledge military family members who are in our classes taking courses on the GI bill. In addition, we hope this special issue will raise awareness regarding the uses and outcomes of writing by, for, and with veterans in our wider communities. This special issue, thus, provides readers the opportunity to reflect on the range of meanings that veterans and military-affiliated writers make of the act of writing—whether it is writing in the academic classroom, on university campuses or military bases, or writing in what Anne Gere has referred to as the “extracurriculum,” such as veteran or civilian-led community writing groups, warrior-transition units on military bases, or other specific programs for veterans. It also addresses the capacity of veterans' writing to affect civilian perspectives and understandings of the military.

In compiling this special issue, we find ourselves in good company with other rhetoric and composition scholars interested in contemporary veterans' writing. Scholars in our field have been exploring veterans' writing at conferences, in public readings and performances, and

in publications in the field. Alexis Hart and Roger Thompson's special issue on veterans' writing in the journal *Composition Forum* in Fall 2013 provides us with a larger sense of the urgency we face in higher education and our larger society when they remind us that the effects of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan "will linger for a generation" and more (n.p.). They urge us to remember that as the U.S. military "decreases the number of active duty members, the number of veterans seeking to earn college credentials is likely to increase over the next few years," and that wars are not over when they are officially declared over; their effects linger in profound ways for decades, and, for some, for a lifetime: "Military family members will continue to use GI Bill benefits for the foreseeable future, and those with families displaced by war will also find their way to US colleges and universities, populating our classrooms with students whose experiences of war will be inexpressibly different than those of our military families" (n.p.)

Following on the heels of this special issue in *Composition Forum*, the collection *Generation Vet*, co-edited by Sue Doe and Lisa Langstraat and also reviewed in this special issue, documents the entrance of large numbers of student veterans into higher education and especially in our writing classrooms. According to the Veterans Benefits Administration's *Annual Benefits Report*, nearly 800,000 veterans and military family members received educational benefits from the post-9/11 GI Bill during the 2015 fiscal year (10). Doe and Langstraat predict that in the years to come, "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" (2). Contributors to *Generation Vet* share strategies about the pedagogies and needed faculty development strategies to make writing classrooms spaces where student veterans can succeed and feel welcome, as well as sites for critical education (18). In addition, contributors to *Generation Vet* offer insight into the extracurricular writing opportunities available to veterans and military-affiliated writers such as writing groups and community writing projects.

In recent years at the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), panels, workshops, and a special interest

group on veterans and military-affiliated writers have appeared on the program and have been well attended. The CCCC Task Force on Veterans issued a Statement entitled “Student Veterans in the Composition Classroom: Realizing their Strengths and Assessing their Needs,” in March 2015, offering insights into ways that faculty could see student veterans in the classroom as assets. At this past year’s CCCC (2016), a half-day workshop took place entitled “Working with Military-Affiliated Writers: Research and Practice for Composition Teachers, Scholars, and WPAs,” organized by Mariana Grohowski, the founding editor of the journal of *Veterans’ Studies*. This workshop offered micro-presentation sessions on writing-related research underway on veterans’ writing—from interviews and surveys with student veterans about their writing experiences to community-based literacy and service learning projects to the reading of literary work being produced with and by veterans. Some of the researchers presenting their work were senior faculty members; others were graduate students working on dissertations. Some of these faculty and graduate students were veterans; others were military family members or civilians. It was clear at this session that there was much to learn, much to understand about this topic, and obvious enthusiasm for continued work in this area, especially with respect to how veterans are finding writing useful not only for their academic training, preparation, professional development, and re-integration into civilian society and the work world outside the military but for helping them reflect on and make meaning of their military experiences and potentially share their experiences with wider audiences beyond the university.

To contribute to these ongoing spaces for scholarly inquiry and creative expression in this special issue, we invited writing teachers and community literacy scholars, student veterans, and veterans from outside the university, to submit academic articles, creative writing, interviews with leading organizations/figures engaged in veterans’ writing and visual art that grows out of and addresses the need for research into veterans’ writing projects. We wanted to showcase a range of voices and perspectives that reached across branches of the military, across generations of service, and across various identity markers. The CFP included the following areas of inquiry:

- the range of experiences and approaches explored through veterans' writing groups and community literacy projects
- questions of how, when, and why veterans decide to share writing with each other and to "go public" with their writing
- analyses of why writing is useful for veterans and the challenges that writing may pose
- issues of sponsorship, institutional support, outreach, and the logistical/organizational challenges of establishing and maintaining veterans' writing groups or projects
- models for establishing an inclusive culture within veterans' writing groups and community literacy projects
- pedagogies and curricula aimed at addressing the needs of student veterans and making the university a more inclusive space for veterans
- service learning projects for veterans in the community, as well as projects that involve student veterans' academic integration through service work
- the benefits, affordances, and constraints of online writing communities and digital technologies for veterans
- attempts at redefining reductive and stereotypical rhetoric about the military and veterans while, at the same time, paying attention to the needed critiques and analyses of established military institutions and the culture of militarism and U.S foreign policy
- analyses of special events, conferences, readings, art exhibits, performances, and publications that engage both veterans and civilian publics in conversations around such issues as

disability, veteran suicide rates, military sexual trauma, PTSD, moral injury, and reintegration.

We received submissions that covered some of these areas and that also broke new ground. As we worked with the authors in this issue, it became apparent that the articles we received located veterans' writing in three major domains: 1) veterans' writing in extracurricular settings outside the typical writing sequences found on university campuses, whether in community projects and writing groups or specific programs based on veterans' wellness, healing, and recovery; 2) veterans' writing in the composition classroom on university campuses or at military bases; 3) faculty development initiatives that help prepare university faculty, instructors, and TAs for their work with veterans in the classroom. A fourth area in which we received fewer submissions centered around veterans' creative works—poetry, in particular—and reviews of the literature of veterans' studies and veterans' writing.

VETERANS' WRITING IN EXTRACURRICULAR SETTINGS

Half of the essays we selected for this special issue deal with veterans' writing in extracurricular settings. Karen Springsteen and Melissa Whitworth both engage with questions of what writing can do for veterans in the context of veteran-led community writing groups, what it means to bear witness to war through writing and active listening, and the impact veterans' writing can have in reshaping civilian attitudes towards veterans and war. Springsteen's "Veterans' Writing and a Rhetoric of Witnessing" draws on four examples of veterans' compositions, spanning the genres of documentary film, personal narrative, poetry, and editorial writing, to demonstrate the transformative potential of civilian encounters with veterans' writing. Springsteen suggests that civilians seek out such encounters through literature, film, and other artistic media, as a way of gaining a deeper understanding of veterans' experiences. She also discusses the value of veterans' writing groups, such as Warrior Writers, the group that initially connected Springsteen (a civilian) to a community of veteran writers and artists and started her on a journey that has become both integral to her scholarship and deeply personal. For civilians, Springsteen says, bearing witness to war demands a willingness to enter more deeply into conversations about war and to exercise one's

full imagination in wrestling with the heightened “moral complexities of postwar reconciliation.” She cites Marilyn Valentino’s 2012 CCCCs address in claiming that compositionists have an “ethical obligation” to engage in this work and argues that civilian acts of witness are vital to bridging the military/civilian divide.

Whitworth’s essay, “Writing to Bear Witness: A Grass Roots Healing Movement,” grows out of her work on a 10-part series on veterans’ issues published by the *Ithaca Voice*—a project she refers to as “one of the most significant—transformative, even—projects of my 17-year career as a journalist.” Whitworth borrows from the testimonials and perspectives of veterans in the Central New York area, as well as psychological research on the therapeutic efficacy of writing for veterans, to make a case for the value of community writing groups and artists’ collectives in providing a “grass roots” healing experience for veterans. Writing, Whitworth claims, helps to restore a sense of purpose and connectedness for veterans struggling to integrate back into civilian society, particularly for those suffering from post-traumatic stress and moral injury. Whitworth is the only writer in this special issue to discuss the impact moral injury can have in the lives of veterans. As described by author and psychiatrist, Jonathan Shay, moral injury results from the violation or betrayal of a soldier’s core sense of “what’s right” (5). Whitworth cites both Shay and Edward Tick on the subject of moral injury, as well as the notion that bearing witness to war and its impact on the lives of veterans must be understood as a national/collective project in which civilians play an integral part. Shay argues that “healing from trauma depends upon the communalization of the trauma—being able safely to tell the story to someone who is listening and who can be trusted to retell it truthfully to others in the community” (4). In keeping with this principle, Whitworth interrogates her own role as a civilian/journalist-witness and offers insights into how the experience of listening to and reporting on veterans’ issues informed her journalistic ethics.

As we have observed ourselves, many veterans who become involved in community writing groups and artists’ collectives of the sort Springsteen and Whitworth write about, eventually come to define their purposes as writers in audience-focused terms. However, even

in more limited contexts in which veterans are prompted to write solely for themselves, writing can still play an important role in constructing identities and fostering personal goals. For example, in their essay, "Re-Authoring Narratives: Reflective Writing with Veterans with Spinal Cord Injury," Aimee C. Mapes and Michael T. Hartley document their research on the role reflective writing played for a small group of veterans with spinal cord injury and disease (SCI/D). During a 5-day outreach project held at the University of Arizona in October, 2013, which was designed to encourage veterans with SCI/D to pursue a college degree program, Mapes and Hartley facilitated a series of writing workshops intended to foster participants' process of "reauthoring" their own narratives in ways that were grounded in personal experience and helped to clarify and solidify their senses of "who they are and who they want to be." The article explores the ways in which writing facilitated participants' meaning-making and adjustment processes, enabled them to form stronger bonds and connections to one another that resulted in inner-group motivation and encouragement (from a cohort who could *really* understand) and offered a space for participants to forge educational and other life goals. Mapes and Hartley argue that "Reflective writing afforded [veterans] a powerful context to imagine possibilities informed by previous experiences with war, injury, and transitions to civilian life." Like other authors in this special issue, Mapes and Hartley also discuss the importance of recognizing the function of military discourse in shaping the culture of their writing group at AU. Not only did military discourse form a foundation of mutual trust upon which participants could build deeper relationships but also "The shared sense of military culture among the participants offered a powerful way to translate a past sense of competence into present and future interactions."

The last of four articles we're categorizing under the heading of the "extracurricular" is a co-authored piece written by Paige Paquette, an assistant professor at TROY University, in conjunction with six veterans (MAJ Adam Anderson, SGT La Toya Burnette, SGT JeQuetta Canady, Specialist E4 Brandon Carr, SGT First Class Nathaniel Coakley, Ret., and Staff Sergeant Yolanda Teamer) who participated in a reading and writing group called "Story Swap" under Paquette's leadership at the Warrior Transition Battalion (WTB) at Fort Benning. The WTB, as Paquette explains, is a medical

treatment facility for soldiers dealing with illnesses or injuries, “many [of which] were sustained during combat or training.” It is a place of great uncertainty for recovering service members, as they wait for the military to decide whether they’ll be transferred “back to a unit or out of the Army.” Paquette describes her process and motivations for obtaining a grant from the Maine Humanities Council to start a reading group in the WTB with the help of Nate Coakley, her co-facilitator. She notes that she expected Story Swap to “encourage reading and discussion of various forms of literature” but was surprised to find that the group “create[d] an outlet for storytelling and writing through the reading group structure.” Her co-authors each provide a brief narrative of their experiences participating in the group, and through these narratives, we get a sense of the range of experiences, identities, motivations, and literary affinities present within the group. As Paquette points out, one refrain common among these narratives is that Story Swap provided a support network that felt like “family” during a difficult time in these veterans’ lives. It’s clear that the participants were profoundly affected by the experience of reading and discussing literature in a small group setting and sharing their honest responses. Several of them describe how Story Swap fostered new literacies for them as readers and writers. Paquette concludes that “Story Swap brought a group of men and women, who spent most of their days waiting on the Army, appointments, and others’ decisions, to a new dynamic in which they were intellectuals who were reading, questioning, debating, and speaking out on their understandings of literature.”

In different ways, all four of these articles acknowledge the uniquely powerful experiences that writing groups and workshops can provide for veterans. In addition to offering a supportive and collaborative atmosphere for veterans, writing and reading groups also foster opportunities for veterans to explore and make meaning of their military experiences among an audience of other veterans before sharing their work with a broader public. Taken as a group, these articles suggest new possibilities for the capacity of writing to help veterans cope with post-traumatic stress and moral injury, as well as disabilities, physical injuries and illnesses. Writing in these contexts also seems to foster goal-setting, identity construction, and intimate forms of group bonding premised in part on a shared military discourse combined with a shared desire to engage in decidedly

non-military forms of open expression and (in some cases) literary or artistic collaboration. The extcurriculum of veterans' writing, though, is only one part of the story; another part of that story is centrally located in writing programs on college and university campuses.

VETERANS' WRITING IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

As noted earlier, scholarship on how to design veteran friendly writing courses has begun to appear with increasing frequency in journals, edited collections, and on conference panels. What, however, should such a veteran friendly pedagogy look like when student veterans do not self-identify as such, when they are "stealth" veterans in the classroom? In "Stealth Veterans and Citizenship Pedagogy in the First Year Writing Classroom," Derek Handley argues that a citizen pedagogy, grounded in principles of rhetorical education and focused on issues important to local communities, is a productive way to address the needs and presence of "stealth veterans" in writing classrooms. Stealth veterans are those who do not self-identify as student veterans on paper and in classrooms but who are, nevertheless, older and who may not feel that they fit in with the traditional 18-22 year old college student profile. Handley, himself a Navy veteran and a stealth graduate student veteran, shares his own struggles with returning to the college classroom as an African American male veteran and an MFA student after a long stint in the Navy; he shares his own frustration and confusion about confronting academic protocols and modes of speech and writing that seemed inscrutable at first. Partly out of this experience of being a transitioning student veteran in graduate school and partly out of a desire to better reach all of his community college students, Handley crafted a citizenship pedagogy centered around a theme of local concern in Pennsylvania, hydrofracking, which encouraged his students to engage as writers and as citizens interested in issues affecting their local community. A citizenship pedagogy, Handley contends, challenges student veterans to consider how they might "serve" in other ways.

Handley addresses a veteran-friendly pedagogy in a community college setting, but what does a writing classroom look like when those teaching are not veterans and when the environment is a voluntary education center (VEC) on a military base? VECs are

spaces on military bases where veterans can take undergraduate and graduate college courses and continue their education while serving. Given that setting, how do the dynamics of classroom interaction and authority shift? Bree McGregor and Lourdes Fernandez engage these questions in “Writing Faculty on the Marine Corps Base: Building Strong Classroom Communities Through Engagement and Advocacy,” exploring what they call the flip side of transition, when instructors adjust to teaching in a military setting. They offer a study of five adjunct instructors, representing a community college in the area and a university in Missouri, who are teaching at the Quantico VEC, which is mainly utilized by active duty Marines, although civilian contractors and military family members can take classes as well. They chronicle how four of the five adjunct instructors at the Quantico VEC, unfamiliar with the military and teaching in a military setting, undergo a major transition as they learn more about how to best serve the needs of their military and military-affiliated students. McGregor and Fernandez insightfully document the learning curve these teachers’ experience, but they also explore the effects that contingent faculty status has on these instructors’ ability to access professional and peer communities. Without office space or professional development support directly at the VEC, these instructors created their own structures of community, support, and advocacy directly in the classroom with their veteran students. Thus, as instructors, they underwent a significant transition phase as they adjusted to the environment, created new teaching strategies to best serve their students, made use of the knowledge students brought with them to the classroom, and struggled to understand what their students might need. Studies such as McGregor and Fernandez’s give readers the opportunity to consider how education for service members begins long before they reach the traditional college campus. Their essay also demonstrates how studying the transition process for instructors working with veterans may ultimately help others on college campuses prepare to better serve their veteran students, a topic explored in two essays on faculty development and teacher preparation.

FACULTY DEVELOPMENT FOR VETERAN FRIENDLY CAMPUSES

The essays in this area offer insights about the process of faculty, instructor, and TA preparation for working with student veterans.

The topic of transition, as raised by McGregor and Fernandez, both for student veterans and the faculty who teach them, permeates Sue Doe and Lisa Langstraat's essay "Faculty Development Workshops with Student-Vet Participants: Seizing the Induction Possibilities." Doe and Langstraat document the curriculum, process, and outcomes of their faculty development workshops "Working with Post-9/11 Student-Veterans: A Faculty Primer," which they developed with Colorado State University's Institute for Learning and Teaching (TILT), and the Adult Learner and Veteran Services Office (ALVS). Experienced writing teachers who are also military family members, Doe and Langstraat offer strategies and insights about how to prepare faculty for working successfully with veterans, emphasizing a focus on "strength-based pedagogy," one that emphasizes the strengths veterans bring to higher education and the classroom as opposed to deficit-model approaches. They also describe how student veterans, as part of the workshop, led discussion on case studies that help faculty puzzle through responses to different pedagogical challenges they and their student veterans may be faced with in the classroom. They argue that such faculty workshops not only provide preparation for faculty to enter into working with veteran students in successful ways but that they also help faculty figure out how they are part of "the important project of college as a reintroduction into civilian society, a bridge between military service and civilian workplaces and communities" (22). Moreover, Doe and Langstraat's model of faculty development positions student veterans as leaders and resources rather than as object of study—an important "flip of the script" about student veterans.

Coming at faculty development from a departmental and writing program administrator (WPA) oriented perspective, Thomas Sura shifts the discussion of faculty development to a special interest group model of teacher preparation, one that writing program administrators and teacher educators may want to consider for their programs. First, though, he asks the important question: What makes an institution "veteran friendly," a label and ranking often adopted by campuses or awarded for complying with specific criteria. How can universities adopt an approach to teacher preparation centered around a learning paradigm, one focused on "uncoverage" and on helping teachers own the idea of creating a veteran friendly campus? To address how such an approach might work, Sura offers a microstudy

of how instructors at West Virginia University responded to a micro-curriculum meant to inquire into the processes, background, and pedagogy needed to work successfully with student veterans. Through the varied components of the curriculum, instructors and TAs not only learn strategies for pedagogical preparation, but they familiarize themselves with the scholarship on veterans in the composition classroom. They also engage in reflective writing about what they are learning and how they want to apply that learning to their classrooms, identifying gaps and fissures in their knowledge and in the infrastructure of the campus. Taken together, Doe and Langstraat and Sura's essays and curricula for faculty development demonstrate the value of homegrown leadership, learning, and training on these issues, with ties to the larger body of literature on veterans, transition, pedagogy, and higher education.

CREATIVE WORKS AND REVIEWS

This final section opens up possibilities for how creative works by veterans and scholars can shape public dialogue about war and military service. Jenny Pacanowski, an Army veteran of the Iraq War, poet, public speaker, writing group facilitator, and actor, offers up a poem that boldly testifies to the radicalizing impact war can have on both soldiers and civilians as they become increasingly consumed and carried away by the violence that they are immersed in on a daily basis. "Heart of the enemy" tells the story of a U.S. medic who first encounters an Iraqi child when her convoy arrives to provide medical care for the child's village. She holds a stethoscope to the child's heart and listens, in an intimate gesture that speaks nostalgically to the mission of "winning hearts and minds," but as the poem progresses, both the medic and the child begin to transform. The tension crescendos until the child ultimately commits an act of terrorism that pushes the medic to a point of unbridled rage. Through the child's act of destruction and the medic's raw and uncensored language, Pacanowski conveys a visceral sense of the damage done to both of these characters. Her poem provides a painfully vivid illustration of the kind of "indignant wrath" Shay refers to in *Achilles in Vietnam* as a telltale sign of moral injury and "the first and possibly primary trauma" affecting Vietnam veterans (21). He describes this intense form of rage as "arising from social betrayal that impairs a person's dignity" and being capable of "ruptur[ing] social attachments" (Shay

21). Indeed, it is a rage that Pacanowski's speaker acknowledges she doesn't know how to "come home / From."

Two reviews and a review essay round out perspectives on recent scholarship in veterans' studies, rhetoric and writing studies, and creative work by veterans. Jeanne Bohannon reviews Doe and Langstraat's edited collection *Generation Vet: Composition, Student Veterans, and the Post-9/11 University*, praising the volume for its "consistently networked connections between students and instructors in compelling examples that include prose, poetry, and personal narratives that point to both challenges and successes in composition classrooms that serve veteran communities and veteran-students." This volume, often cited in this special issue and in a variety of publications in our field, has become a significant resource for the field. Catherine St. Pierre, in her review essay examines two significant books: *See me for who I am: Student Veterans' Stories of War and Coming Home* edited by Chrisinger, and *When Johnny and Jane Come Marching Home* by Caplan, as works that "both challenge readers to disrupt the limiting narratives available to veterans to hear fuller stories." St. Pierre notes that both Caplan and Chrisinger encourage listening and storytelling: "Caplan encourages people to listen to veterans' stories," and Chrisinger gives civilians a "way to start" that listening process by reading the work of twenty student veterans.

Creative scholarship by and for veterans and larger publics has become an increasing resource for scholars in our field, not only modeling how veterans use writing to make sense of their experiences and develop a public voice but also offering mixed media examples of publication. Aleashia Walton Valentin's insightful review of *Warrior Writers: A Collection of Writing & Artwork By Veterans* edited by Aaron Hughes and Rachel McNeill, Artists; Lovella Calica and Kevin Basl offers us the opportunity to see how writing and the arts are helping "warrior writers conquer the divide between the public sphere and veteran experience, (from Vietnam to Afghanistan), one line at a time."

CONCLUSION

We hope the pieces in this special issue will not only contribute to ongoing conversations about working with veterans in our

writing classrooms but also that this issue will further expand that conversation to include other sites where writing can contribute to the process of healing, reintegration, public action, and education for veterans, military families, and the civilian communities that engage them. From this work of writing, storytelling, and listening can come the capacity and the means to better consider what going to war and coming home actually means. Veterans' writing can change the narrative about military service and war by dispelling stereotypes of veterans, empowering and aiding veterans' reintegration and healing processes, engaging civilian publics more actively in conversations about the military experience, and correcting and filling gaps in the historical record. If we wish to challenge the actions and policies of a society and a citizenry that sent its military personnel to war in the first place, we must work to deepen and extend these types of conversations.

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Eileen E. Schell, Ph.D., is Laura J. and L. Douglas Meredith Professor for Teaching Excellence and Director of the Composition and Cultural Rhetoric Doctoral Program at Syracuse University. She teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in writing, rhetoric, and creative nonfiction in the Department of Writing Studies, Rhetoric, and Composition and the Honors Program. She is the author of five academic books/edited collections. She has worked with veterans off and on since 1986, when as a college student, she helped a WWII bomber pilot edit his memoirs. For the past decade, Eileen has run a nonfiction writing group at the Nottingham Senior Living Community in Jamesville, NY where she has worked with a number of veterans from WWII and the Korean Conflict. She co-founded the Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group in March 2010 with colleague Ivy Kleinbart. She is co-editor for the forthcoming anthology from the Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group entitled *The Weight of my Armor* (New City/Parlor Press).

Ivy Kleinbart teaches academic writing and creative nonfiction in the Department of Writing Studies, Rhetoric, and Composition at Syracuse University. She also works as a visitor and coordinator for creative nonfiction courses taught through Project Advance, a program that offers college courses in high schools. She received an MA in English in 2009 and an MFA in creative writing from Syracuse University in 2007. Her work has appeared in *Bateau* and *NoTell Motel*. Ivy co-founded the Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group in March 2010 with colleague Eileen E. Schell. She is the lead editor for the forthcoming anthology from the Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group entitled *The Weight of my Armor* (New City/Parlor Press).