

# Veterans' Writing and a Rhetoric of Witnessing

**Karen Springsteen,**  
Wayne State University

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*Four examples of Iraq veterans' self-sponsored writing and media compositions are reviewed in order to develop a rhetoric of "witnessing" (Oliver, "Witnessing and Testimony" 80) with which to engage veterans' writing. Particular attention is paid to how this rhetoric can help reframe anxieties that accompany faculty work with veterans in composition classes and in higher education more generally.*

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In her August 2, 2011 column, titled "On War, Guilt, and 'Thank You for Your Service,'" West Point Professor of English Elizabeth Samet argued that the ritual of US citizens thanking troops for their service is a "poor substitute for something more difficult and painful—a conversation about what war does to the people who serve and the people who don't." That conversation can be difficult to initiate in a nation that has seen fifteen years of a post-9/11 global war on terror conducted, for the most part, outside its own borders. US civilians may assume, for example, that all recent veterans have deployed to Iraq or

Afghanistan and—out of ignorance, curiosity, or concern—have the desire to ask: “What was it like over there?” “Did you see any action?” Or the lesser spoken (I hope) “did you ever kill anyone?” To some veterans and their family members, such questions may seem foolish or smack of a certain voyeurism. In the words of former Marine and Assistant Professor of English Galen Leonhardy, “asking a person whether he or she has killed another person does seem to push the limits of propriety” (346). Yet, “action”—killing and combat—is a truth of war. It is as undeniable as it is ineffable: overwhelming, seemingly beyond words. Faced with the moral complexities of postwar reconciliation, in the midst of ongoing US military action and with serious stumbling blocks to the kind of deeper conversation Samet calls for, how many of us—veterans and civilians—turn off, tune out, go numb?

In this essay, I argue that veterans’ self-sponsored writing and media compositions offer a way to reconnect veterans and civilians with one another and with the necessity of communicating about war and its lasting effects. I first review one example of such work: Iraq veteran Zach Skiles’ recent feature length documentary, “Veterans ‘On Killing,’” which takes as its central organizing feature dialectical engagement with an academic text<sup>1</sup>. I then address some implications of this and other forms of veterans’ self-sponsored writing and representation for those working with veterans in higher education, particularly in college writing classrooms. I contend that academics must be able to work deftly with some specific ideological tensions (i.e. differences in values and beliefs) that veterans’ writing can make poignant and pressing, and I suggest that a rhetoric of witnessing may be useful for doing so. I draw this rhetoric from the work of feminist philosopher Kelly Oliver, from Iraq veterans’ creative writing, and from my own experience as a civilian supporter of the national Warrior Writers organization, a nonprofit that offers veterans’ writing workshops and community literacy events in major cities nationwide.

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1 My review of Skiles’ documentary was first published by the online organization Military Experience and the Arts: [militaryexperience.org](http://militaryexperience.org)

## ZACH P. SKILES' "VETERANS 'ON KILLING'"

In a playlist of eight videos available on YouTube, each of which is 9-12 minutes long and has been viewed anywhere from 126-1200 times, Skiles shares the voices and faces of veterans as they read and respond to passages from Lieutenant Colonel David Grossman's book, *On Killing: The Psychological Costs of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, which Skiles read while receiving treatment at an in-patient PTSD clinic in Northern California called the Gateway House. By first reading a passage from the book aloud for the camera and then offering his or her own perspective on that passage, twelve veterans (of Iraq, Afghanistan, Vietnam, and Kosovo) bring Grossman's research to life. When, for example, Grossman writes about how citizens today are mostly insulated from death—our meat is pre-packaged; medicine prolongs life; mortuaries take care of our dead—Iraq veteran Jose Arias reflects on how death is treated in war, discusses how "our honor code prevented us from talking about it" and suggests that "we create the bubbles we want to live in." When Grossman cites the term "operant conditioning" from B.F. Skinner's work, Iraq veteran Mack Butler follows up by talking about what had become "natural" from his military training. Relating an experience from combat, he talks about the "path of least resistance" and the power of automatic, as if instinctual, response.

In another passage, read by Skiles, Grossman uses the term "combat exhaustion" to describe a scenario in which the current physical and logistical ability to sustain combat outstrips humans' psychological capacity to endure it. Grossman notes that never before have troops had to stay in such a continual state of fight-or-flight, and seldom have they experienced such high levels of imminent personal risk without respite. In response to this passage, Skiles tells us that, in his first two weeks in country in 2003, he got eleven total hours of sleep, a point about sleep deprivation echoed by Javier Juarez, a veteran of Kosovo and Iraq: "when I came back and I would tell people I didn't sleep for a year, physically you might've but even then your brain didn't." The vigilance and danger has been so extreme in some cases that, as Iraq veteran Irwing Lazo puts it in the documentary, "in a sense, you have to play like you're dead already"—a practice Lazo sees extending into veterans' postwar lives as well.

At home in the US, sitting on their porch, two veterans (not identified by name) tell us that the effects of such service aren't as noticeable "until you get out and maybe *are* a civilian... I think it's been promoted, like, I think in the military it's better to be wound up and uptight." The need to shift mindsets and come to terms with the ways in which a military may commit what Grossman calls "psychological warfare" upon its own troops, was a need Iraq veteran Tasia Flores put this way before the camera:

It's much like in basic training when you do say "kill, kill, kill." It's just another word ... but reading this book, I see how it can affect people, you know. Learning that "kill" is not a bad word to knowing, like, yes it is, and it has a profound ripple effect not only on my life or the person that was affected by it, but their family and, you know, their community.

For all of us, the personal reflections and real responses to Grossman's work captured in Skiles' documentary speak to the larger psychological and moral context of war and post-traumatic "stress," which now seems too plain a word. Nancy Sherman has written extensively about "moral wounds" ("Soldiers" B6; *Afterwar* 4), and healing from those wounds, she argues, is collective work; it is critically connected with the creation of culture in which veterans "do not view their war as a private burden banned from their families and communities" (*The Untold War* 7). Skiles' documentary helps advance this effort by teaching that veterans' issues leaving the service or coming home from one or multiple deployments are not pinned to individual defect or aberration; in fact, the documentary makes clear in its engagement with Grossman's work that *no vet is alone* in feeling the mind-body effects of a military's systematic, years-in-the-making, training apparatus. In this way, Skiles' work is humane, powerful, and humbling.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER ED

What are the implications of Skiles' work for those of us in higher education? If the men and women we see on screen were to be among the many students who now attend college on the Post 9/11 GI Bill or with the assistance of Vocational Rehabilitation benefits, would we have any good sense of where they are coming from (cf. Chrisinger)?

Many institutions, my own included, have earned “military friendly” designations, an achievement that both enhances recruitment of veterans as students and warrants discussion about how to follow through, continually, on the promises of that label. Aware of the sort of responsiveness to academic work generated in Skiles’ documentary, university faculty and staff members realize that, although veterans on campus may be first-year students, they are not eighteen year-old freshmen and may have very different orientations to schooling, to professors, and to assigned material than many of their “peers” with whom we are more accustomed to working (cf. CCCC “Student Veterans in College Composition Classroom: Realizing Their Strengths and Assessing Their Needs”). Writing specialists, in particular, recognize that because first-year writing courses are almost universally required for graduation, often with small class sizes and one-on-one feedback, we are uniquely positioned to connect with veterans, some of whom may wish to draw directly upon military experiences in the educational context (cf. Hart and Thompson). To the extent that writing faculty are among the first points of real pedagogical contact for veterans, we know that we cannot afford to remain uneducated about veterans’ prior experiences; however, we may not wish to pin veterans down, pressing them for information or placing upon their shoulders an onus of disclosure that they do not want (cf. Morrow and Hart). We have, surely, an abiding interest in the intrinsically compelling aspects of veterans’ writing as a literature or as a mirror unto cultural conditions, yet we also have what past CCCC Chair Marilyn Valentino notably called “an ethical obligation” to react responsibly to veterans in the classroom (170).

For our part, composition researchers have been vigorous in our support of veteran students and thorough in our consideration of veterans’ texts. The more difficult move, in my view, has been to negotiate a level of self-conscious engagement with explicitly ideological dimensions of veterans’ representation. For example, I support Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW). But what do I do with that commitment when I show up at the Veterans Resource Center on campus to facilitate a five-day academic writing orientation for new student veterans from across the map? My past assumption has been that those who occupy institutional advocacy positions may be better served by an amiable neutrality, which would, hypothetically, remove obvious agendas and open the door to deeper interpersonal

relationships with vets. However, that assumption must be monitored and questioned. The same may be said of the assumption that any critique of the US military, especially any critique based in opposition to militarism or anti-war sentiment, would be received as relatively incompatible with a pro-veteran stance. One may wish, for example, to be “against the war but for the troops.” However, as Samet points out, there are inherent contradictions and difficulties in such a position. “Most [people] fail,” she writes, “to consider the social responsibilities such a stance commits them to fulfilling in the coming decades.” Indeed, many in higher education have lingering anxieties about the depth of commitment required when working with veterans and about where to draw lines between activist, supporter, teacher, and friend. Our questions may include the following:

1. How can civilian or noncombat veteran faculty, who haven’t “been there,” possibly understand, imagine, or relate to the experience of deployment, war, and homecoming? Wouldn’t it be better to keep our mouths shut or place certain topics, such as war, and genres, such as personal writing, off limits in the classroom?
2. How might a veteran or a civilian on campus reconcile pride in military identity with some of the dark aspects of military experience, such as veterans’ suicide and military sexual trauma?
3. Don’t faculty members need to be therapists to work with veterans or military family members who want to talk or write about their experiences as such? If it is increasingly clear, as Professor Joyce Goldberg wrote in a 2011 column detailing a military history course she taught in which she felt overwhelmed by the demands of veteran students and their families, “just how unprepared universities are to deal with the needs of these student veterans or their relatives,” then how do we get prepared? Whose job is it to “deal”—a rather unfortunate phrasing?

In what follows, I seek to demonstrate how a rhetoric of witnessing can be useful for addressing these questions. Though this rhetoric

of witnessing offers no easy answers or innocent positions, it can, I believe, encourage readers, writers, listeners, and speakers to hold their anxieties, contradictions, and competing points of view in suspense, staying present in a potentially conflicted conversation about the effects of war on us all. Specifics regarding who can speak with most authority about war, when conversations about military experience are appropriate and welcome, what being a veteran or a civilian signifies in our time, why violence seems so attractive, abhorrent, or inevitable, and where to look for truth and support for the living, can then be accessed through a connection with veterans' writing and self-representation that is more informed, thoughtful, and sustained. Such is the rhetorical power of witnessing, outlined in the remainder of this essay.

## WITNESSING

The idea of witnessing veterans' writing first occurred to me when I started to work with Warrior Writers, and it came in response to my own concerns over my qualifications and right to work with this organization, having little family history and knowledge of the military when I began. Drawing the term "witness" from Warrior Writers' mission statement ("About Us"), I first conceptualized witnessing as *being a witness to*, and thus took on the role of quiet observer. This ostensibly passive stance allowed me to actively focus on the role of the self and carve out time to come to terms with my own position in the world of veterans representing war and peace. At an early workshop, for example, when an Iraq veteran offered the word "chains" to prompt our writing, I thought of my own relatively sheltered experiences and wondered: what I could possibly come up with about chains? I composed the following response, which I have shared in the book *Generation Vet: Veterans, Composition, and the Post-9/11 University* (Doe and Langstraat) but repeat here as an origin story that set in motion my current focus on the ideological dimensions of working with vets. I wrote:

Ever since I moved to the North Country [an area of upstate New York], I have been collecting bits of printed matter related to the war and its aftermath... My collection is like one of those paper chains we made when we were kids—each person's little strip hooking onto the next. A Sesame Street themed booklet

for kids whose parents are deployed, taken from a kiosk at the Watertown mall; an Ottawa newspaper with the front page headline: No Peace for Vets; the card a ROTC officer gave me when I told him I took a year of Arabic; the half-ass note written by an Air Force recruiter as an excuse for Sarah [my student] to go take her ASVAB; the free Fort Drum newspaper I snagged at Valero [a gas station] while the guy in front of me bought a case of Old Mil at seven forty-five in the morning. There are so many more little pieces I could add to this chain, including the pages we are all making right now. When the Veterans Taskforce tries to tie yellow ribbons on the trees next month, I want them to tie these paper chains instead. *Some of us don't care for yellow ribbons unless they end war.* (Springsteen 141-2, italics in original)

When we were done writing, each workshop participant read aloud what we had written. I went last, and when it was time for the next prompt, my co-organizer, Iraq veteran Nathan Lewis, responded to the words I had just read by asking the group to compose something starting with "Dear Veterans Taskforce." As both Lewis and I were members of the Taskforce at the time, his graceful gesture made it clear that, like links in a chain, our variable positionalities are tied together: yoked. And I believe it is the quality of these connections that lies at stake as universities wake up to the increasing presence of veterans on campus.

Research can quantify things like funding for veterans' programs, square footage for resource centers, job openings for support professionals, and trainings for faculty and staff. Harder to quantify and impossible to mandate is the nature of beliefs, attitudes and values about, towards, and among veterans—ideological matters—that take shape within these efforts. "For so many years now," writes Iraq veteran Drew Cameron,

the wars waged by our country have influenced our daily rituals, our morning consciousness. For some the recognition is very close to home. For all of us though, war, as it does, continues to pressure the very fabric of our culture and worldview. Have we not all become veterans of war then? It is this very question of responsibility, of openness and honesty, that reveals the essence



of conflict and how it shapes our collective lives. When someone says: "I cannot know what it was like over there," we want them to. When someone says: "I can't imagine how it must have been," we need them to. When someone says: "I cannot," they must. (qtd. in Lewis, *I Hackey Sacked* vii-viii)

I repeat this quotation every chance I get, as the imperative of Cameron's call, his provocation, and the question of responsibility led me to step beyond my initial idea of witnessing as watching and summoning any direct experience that would implicate me in the scene of veterans' writing. I would have agreed with Edward Tick then, as I do now, that "it is imperative for the health of our veterans that they experience other ordinary Americans ... as walking with them and accepting accountability for our wars" (238). Yet, at the same time, I could have fallen easily into a category of citizens who, while the country was in the middle of a decade long war, placed our focus elsewhere on priorities that now seem shallow. Bridging that gap of alienation, Cameron's call has been an invitation for me, as I hope it will be for others, to move productively into what Oliver describes as a second side of witnessing, one which may be useful for negotiating the ideological tensions outlined above.

In "Witnessing and Testimony" Oliver argues that "witnessing" is a double-sided term (80). On one hand, witnessing retains the sense of being an eyewitness to historical facts and actual events, as in its juridical use (like in a courtroom). On the other hand, witnessing, for Oliver, includes the sense of "*bearing witness* to [some] truth about humanity and suffering that transcends those facts" (81, italics mine). The notion of seeing with one's own eyes ("what went on over there") is paired with the notion of testifying to that which cannot be seen (*bearing witness*). And it is this realm of the unseen—what Oliver calls witnessing "beyond recognition" (*Witnessing* 20)—where we may fully absorb Cameron's non-literal question, "have we not all become veterans of war then?" Applied to veterans' writing, witnessing is about more than getting together and telling stories of what happened in the most literal sense. Witnessing involves telling some truth that touches the lives of everyone.

For civilians, adopting a rhetoric of witnessing may mean tracing our own allegiances to military service, war, and the prospect of peace. We may need to disrupt a sense of dislocation from these matters (i.e. a sense that, because we have not served, it is not our place to “go there”) and enter into dialogue with veterans, if “only,” at first, by engaging with their self-representations and writing. Samet points to this need for engagement by conveying the words of an officer who says: “People thank me for my service, but they don’t really know what I’ve done.” Knowing deeply what veterans have done is, in my view, a lifelong commitment, requiring civilians’ introspection much more than gratitude. As Samet writes, “Thanking soldiers on their way to or from war isn’t the same as imaginatively following them there.” Veterans’ compositions can help that imagination along. For example, in a poem from Warrior Writers’ third anthology, *After Action Review: A Collection of Writing and Artwork by Veterans of the Global War on Terror*, Lewis writes:

If things were the other way around

20 year old Iraqi soldiers would write home to girlfriends about the cold New York winter. About watching snow blow from frozen lakes.

A Captain would stand under a tall pine in Appalachia and call home to Baghdad on a satellite phone. He’d try to be cheerful and tell them about skunks, hummingbirds and the mountains.

Children would scribble the number and type of every enemy vehicle in Crayon...

Iraqi soldiers would take reenlistment orders under the St. Louis arch, in the shadow of the Washington Monument. Two hundred protestors march down Haifa Street demanding an end to the war... (11)

In this poem, Lewis draws on what he has seen as an eyewitness to war to paint a picture that does not exist yet speaks truth about human suffering, the waning innocence of children, the split consciousness of

a nation. With this act of witnessing, Lewis opens up an imaginative space where we can move beyond what Oliver calls “the melancholic choice between either dead historical facts or traumatic repetition of violence” (“Witnessing and Testimony” 81). The writing turns things around, remakes the common sense of war. And in this remaking lies the power of witnessing to bring us beyond a state of stale relations, hollow platitudes, and fear on all sides.

Using a rhetoric of witnessing to engage with veterans' poetry, documentary, reflection, and, in the final example that follows, narrative can challenge reductive representations of veterans (such as stereotypes of veterans as heroes to be put on a pedestal, ticking time bombs, or sad souls in need of help) and turn those representations into something more nuanced and truthful. For example, when Iraq veteran Ivan Lopez opened fire at Fort Hood in April 2014, injuring 16 people and killing four, including himself (Tan), Iraq veteran Jon Turner wrote a letter to several newspapers and media outlets offering his condolences to the family members of those who were part of the tragedy, including Lopez, and setting the record straight about the reality of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which, arguably, had not been fully recognized as a factor in Lopez's actions, given that Lopez served a relatively short deployment (of four months) and had an occupation (driving a truck) that some assumed would place him on the periphery of conditions associated with PTSD. Titling the letter “Many Faces of War,” Turner wrote:

As a two time veteran of the Iraq war in 2005 and 2006, as an infantryman with the marines, as well as being a purple heart recipient for a minor shrapnel wound, and having been diagnosed with severe Post Traumatic Stress and two Traumatic Brain Injuries, I must depict my own unhealthy emotions that have risen from the response [to] this past week's shooting by the officials who have publicly made claims that PTSD is not an issue. In 2007, as an alcoholic who underwent two rehab treatments before the age of 22 because the only way I could deal with my deployments was by staying drunk, I was discharged from Camp Lejeune and into the civilian populous who had an even lesser understanding of war, the effects of war, or the impact of Post Traumatic Stress.... I was fortunate enough to have been introduced to a small veteran

population in Vermont who believed in alternative methods to what was, and continues to be, provided in attempt to reduce the symptoms of PTSD, but the reality is, many of us will not find a healthy outlet. For the past 7 years I have travelled the country working with veterans by utilizing creative writing and artistic expression to make sense of the triggers, dreams, behaviors and methodology that we have adapted since [we] returned home. Having worked with hundreds of veterans, having heard many sides to many stories, having seen the impact war has had on those who served as well as their family members, spanned over several generations and times of conflict, I can and will always say that, regardless as to whether or not we saw death, touched the hearts and minds which we were intended to do, or whether we drove trucks and served for only 4 months overseas, PTSD is real and it has the potential and ability to rub off on those around us and leave anyone who was exposed to war and trauma in a state of confusion.

In this letter, Turner draws on both sides of the act of witnessing. Turner first turns his own face to the light by testifying to trauma he experienced personally before moving into a discussion of war's intergenerational and vicarious effects. In this way, Turner both identifies with a tragic dimension of Lopez's actions *and* meets that tragedy with truth; Turner steps through his own specific embodied history in order to illuminate some vital and shared aspects of the human condition—namely, the need for honesty, humility, and communion in the wake of war.

Such is the double-sided work of witnessing in this letter and in other examples of veterans' self-sponsored composition presented in this essay. These veterans were not writing and creating for a grade or for college credit but out of a desire to communicate, to enhance and clarify the public's understanding, and to speak a collective truth, not just a personal one. Witnessing demands that collectivity. It is a communal activity rooted in individual experience but not stuck there. By adopting a rhetoric of witnessing, then, compositionists need no longer leave it to some other part of the university or society to "deal with" veterans and their relatives. We are those relatives—if not by blood, then by kinship in other forms.

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**Karen Springsteen** is a senior lecturer in the English Department at Wayne State University in Detroit, MI. She currently teaches first-year composition and coordinates Community Writing initiatives for the department's Composition Program.