

“We Can Do Better”: “Listening” to the Voices of Veterans in Interviews, Memoirs, Literary Texts, and Memorials

Alexis Hart, David Noon, Elena Friot, and Kristin Kelly

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“You don’t honor someone by telling them, ‘I can never imagine what you’ve been through.’ Instead, listen to their story and try to imagine being in it, no matter how hard or uncomfortable that feels.”

–Phil Klay, “After War, a Failure of the Imagination”

This series of four teaching modules aimed at undergraduates uses as a touchstone text Phil Klay’s 2014 op-ed for the *New York Times* titled “After War, a Failure of the Imagination,” in which Klay calls attention to the fact that “the notion that war forever separates veterans from the rest of mankind has been long embedded in our collective consciousness,” a perception reinforced by the 2011 Pew Research Center report “War and Sacrifice in the Post-9/11 Era,” which calls attention to “the gaps in understanding between the military and civilians.”

The purpose of these modules is to introduce students to the concept of the military-civilian gap and to suggest that by listening to the stories from and about veterans and trying to imagine what these veterans have been through, the gaps in understanding can be reduced.

Each module is designed for a 75-minute class period, but can be expanded to additional class periods or even an entire course. The modules can be used as a set or separately.

Modules:

Veteran Authorship and The Politics of Standpoint: This module asks students to compare and contrast Grant’s memory of Shiloh with one of several composed by soldiers who survived the maelstrom of battle and authored versions that complement Grant’s while offering perspectives he could not have experienced on his own.

Veterans and the Meaning of War: This module asks students to consider the ways planning for the Memorial gave veterans, civilians, politicians, artists, and architects the space to engage in a rhetorical battle to define the significance of the war and the reason for such grievous loss. This class session encourages students to engage with the documents and words produced by a number of individuals involved in the memorial debates of the 1980s, and think critically about the ways commemorative activities might bridge the civilian military divide.

Female Veterans' Voices: In this module, students read one interview text and one piece of short fiction and then discuss what their preconceptions about women in the military were prior to reading these texts and how the two readings by female servicemembers either confirmed or overturned their preconceptions.

Witness through Literature and Listening: Witnessing war requires imagining homecoming from the perspective of veterans and their family members. Hemingway's "Soldier's Home" invites such witnessing.

Veteran Authorship and The Politics of Standpoint

“This is a simple story of a battle; such a tale as may be told by a soldier who is no writer to a reader who is no soldier...”

Ambrose Bierce, “What I Saw of Shiloh”

Overview

The political history of the United States — along with the histories of business, or education, or any other social endeavor — has been populated with veterans who have made use of their experience in various ways for an array of ends. Iconic presidents like George Washington and Andrew Jackson, as well as more forgettable ones like William Henry Harrison and Franklin Pierce, either fought or led soldiers into battle during the Revolution, the War of 1812, the various Indian campaigns, or the Mexican War. These early presidents, however, did not leave extensive narrative records of their deeds — and they certainly did not address their stories to a wider audience. Following the Civil War, however, the rise of mass-market publishing facilitated the emergence of a genre of writing best described as “political autobiography,” the most famous and most lucrative of which remains Ulysses S. Grant’s *Personal Memoirs*, hastily completed just prior to his death of throat cancer in 1885. Not surprisingly, much of Grant’s narrative is preoccupied with the Civil War, and his accounts of particular battles — including the horrific Battle of Shiloh in 1862 — continue to draw the attention of historians and literary scholars. As a general, and as someone who later served two terms as President, Grant’s discussion of Shiloh focuses predominantly on the choices made by the military commanders on both sides of the line.

Grant’s account, though, represents only one narrative standpoint on the battlefield. His memory might be read in conjunction with the stories told by others (especially ordinary soldiers) who set their experiences to paper in the decades after the war ended. This module asks students to compare and contrast Grant’s memory of Shiloh with one of several composed by soldiers who survived the maelstrom of battle and authored versions that complement Grant’s while offering perspectives he could not have experienced on his own.

Required Readings

Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant* (200-219)

Choose one of the following:

Henry Morton Stanley, “A Confederate Soldier at Shiloh”

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/grant-stanley/>

Cyrus F. Boyd, “A Union Soldier at Shiloh”

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/grant-boyd/>

Ambrose Bierce. “What I Saw of Shiloh”

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/13541/13541-h/13541-h.htm#shiloh>

Additional Related Readings

George Egerton, “Politics and Autobiography: Political Memoir as Polygenre,” *Biography* 15:3 (Summer 1992), 221-242.

Elizabeth D. Samet, "Adding to My Book and to My Coffin": The Unconditional Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant," *PMLA* 115:5 (Oct. 2000), 1117-1124.

Winston Groom. "Why Shiloh Matters."

<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/06/why-shiloh-matters/>

Herman Melville, "Shiloh: A Requiem"

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/45906>

Pre-class Expectations

Write a brief (250-300 word) reflection and/or response to the readings. Choose one of the three soldiers' narratives and consider the similarities and differences between their perspective and Grant's. If they met years later, what might they say to one another? Does Grant seem to understand what ordinary soldiers might have been thinking and feeling during the battle? Does either of the accounts you read seem more or less truthful or authentic than the other? What broader lessons can we take away from thinking about an author's standpoint with respect to historical events?

Bring at least two questions for discussion to class with you.

Instructional Plan

Begin the class by asking students to share their thoughts about the two readings. Ask one student to write key words from these responses on the board.

Next, ask students how the two readings either confirmed or overturned their preconceptions.

Put students in groups of 4 and to discuss the questions they brought to class. Assign members of the group to the following roles:

1. *Leader*: Makes sure everyone participates; focuses work around the assigned task
2. *Notetaker*: Keeps notes about the discussion
3. *Timekeeper*: Keeps track of time and moves discussion along; helps leader ensure everyone's voice gets heard
4. *Presenter*: Shares a summary of the group's discussion with the full class and identifies any still unanswered questions the members of the group have about the readings

Bring class back together for group summaries.

Veterans and the Meaning of War

The bitterness I feel when I remember carrying the lifeless bodies of close friends through the mire of Vietnam will probably never subside. I still wonder if anything can be found to bring any purpose to all the suffering and death.

Jan C. Scruggs
November 11, 1979

Overview

In “After War,” Phil Klay warns of the dangers of “fetishizing trauma as incommunicable.” “In a democracy,” he says, “no one, not even a veteran, should have the last word.” In the absence of words, Americans often turn to the construction of memorials to give meaning to the sacrifice and ordeal of war. Part of the “vocabulary” for communicating the unimaginable, then, are the debates, controversies, and physical structures inherent in the process of commemoration. The collective memory of a society is at once collective and individual, and the process of commemoration thus happens where the experiences, memories, and languages of civilians and veterans collide—not always neatly, and usually without ever achieving true consensus. The debate over the Vietnam Veterans Memorial served as a tonic for a society fractured by a war. Though many wounds were never healed, planning for the Memorial gave veterans, civilians, politicians, artists, and architects the space to engage in a rhetorical battle to define the significance of the war and the reason for such grievous loss. This class session encourages students to engage with the documents and words produced by a number of individuals involved in the memorial debates of the 1980s, and think critically about the ways commemorative activities might bridge the civilian military divide.

Required Readings

“Making a Memory of War: Building the Vietnam Veterans Memorial” in Hass, Kristin Ann. *Carried to the Wall: American Memory and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998. <https://books.google.com/books?id=SHbDacM2o0EC>.

Life. The Faces of the American Dead in Vietnam: One Week's Toll. June 27, 1969. Accessed July 27, 2016. <https://books.google.com/books/about/LIFE.html?id=pE8EAAAAMBAJ>, 20-32.

Hearing before the Subcommittee on Parks, Recreation, and Renewable Resources. The Senate. 96th Cong., 2d sess., 1980. S. Doc. 96-111, 71-83.
<http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/trial/vietnam/files/round1/hearings.pdf>.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Design Competition, “Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund,” “The Purpose and Philosophy of the Memorial,” <http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/trial/vietnam/files/round2/vvmdesigncomp.pdf>, and “Judging Criteria,” <http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/trial/vietnam/files/round2/judgingcriteria.pdf>.

Maya Lin, “The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Design Competition Winning Designer’s Statement.” May 6, 1981. <http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/trial/vietnam/files/round2/winnerannounced.pdf>.

Comments from Tom Carhart, Commission of Fine Arts Meeting Transcript, October 13, 1981.
<http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/trial/vietnam/files/round3/transcript.pdf>.

Milton R. Copulos. "Finally We Come Together." March 1982.
<http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/trial/vietnam/files/round3/miltoncopulos.pdf>.

Suggested Films

Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision, 1994, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0i8zOW31e0A>.

Frontline "Vietnam Memorial," Season 1 Episode 18, 1983.

Review

Phil Clay, "After War, a Failure of the Imagination," *New York Times*, February 8, 2014, accessed July 27, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/09/opinion/sunday/after-war-a-failure-of-the-imagination.html?_r=0.

Pre-Class Expectations

Students will come to class having read Klay's "After War, a Failure of the Imagination," prior to the start of the module. For this particular session, students will have engaged with the required readings and primary source documents. In preparation for their participation in discussion, students will prepare a short, 250- to 300-word reflection on what they have read, and come armed to class with at least two questions developed as a result of their reading.

For the written reflection and questions, students should put the required readings in context with Klay's "After War," and think carefully about the relationship between war, society, and veterans, and the role each plays in complicated meaning-making process by which societies memorialize and commemorate war. In particular, students may wish to respond to the following questions: Who are the stakeholders when it comes to memorializing conflict, and how are their voices heard? Are some voices silenced? Why or in what ways? Who or what do war memorials represent? In what ways is the process of commemoration a political exercise? Can memorials bridge the cultural gap between civilians and the military?

Instructional Plan

1. In small groups, students will share their short reflections and discuss the questions they generated as a result of their readings.
2. Students will briefly reconvene as a large group to share their comments and thoughts.
3. Students will return to small groups and work with a small selection of primary sources and accompanying discussion questions from Lehigh University's digital resource *The Vietnam Wall Controversy*, in particular those related to the proposal and construction of *The Three Servicemen* statue (1984) and the Vietnam Women's Memorial (1993).
4. In a large group, students will share their responses to the sources and the discussion questions and offer concluding comments.

Discussion Questions

1. In "After War," Klay suggests veterans and civilians have the equally burdensome responsibility of coming to terms with the experience of war; veterans "need to explain" and civilians need to "try to understand." Does the commemoration of war help or hinder this communicative endeavor? In what ways, and through what processes?

2. Do veterans voices matter in the commemoration of war? Where are they heard? Where are they silenced? In what ways do their voices affect the shape and meaning of monuments and memorials?
3. Do conversations between veterans, the public, architects and artists, and civic officials reveal a common vocabulary of war or its larger meaning? Can we identify common words, feelings, and themes?
4. The commemoration of war is an inherently political project, as communities and veterans negotiate the meaning of conflict and its long term consequences. How might we trace the political trajectory of the controversy over the Vietnam Veterans Memorial? Can we locate points of agreement and disagreement? What is at stake in the choices made along the way in terms of the form, content, and location of the memorial?
5. The life of a memorial extends far beyond its conception, construction, and dedication. Indeed, some might say the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was not “completed” until 1993 with the erection of the Vietnam Women’s Memorial, while others maintain war memorials are never completed— their meanings are perpetually rewritten and repurposed. Based on the readings, how did the meaning of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial change over time? Whose voices were ultimately heard or silenced?
6. In his Veterans Day commentary, “We Were Young. We Have Died. Remember Us.”, Jan Scruggs quotes Archibald MacLeish’s poem *The Young Dead Soldiers* as an avenue to perhaps “give the sacrifice” of thousands of young men “some meaning.” Reflecting on the readings and this poem, does the Vietnam Veterans Memorial give those deaths meaning? What is/are those meaning/s?
7. This memorial is named the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Is it a veterans memorial? Who does the memorial belong to or who is it for? Who can it or should it be for? Do those answers matter? Were veterans recipients, creators, both, something else, of this memorial? Whose voices were most significant in its construction from beginning to end? What factors should we consider when we attempt to decide who the memorial belongs to? Has “ownership” changed since its conception or dedication?
8. Does this memorial work to bridge the “gaps in understanding” between civilians and veterans? If so, in what ways? If not, why? Where does it succeed? Where does it fail?

Female Veterans' Voices



Image Source: <http://userpages.aug.com/captbarb/>

"[F]or more than a century, American women have been volunteering to serve in the U.S. military in combat areas, have suffered wounds or been killed performing their duties, and yet were left out of U.S. history books and out of the history preserved and passed on by each branch of the U.S. Armed Forces."

--Evelyn Monahan and Rosemary Neidel-Greenlee, *A Few Good Women*

Overview:

Since the establishment of the Army Nurse Corps in 1901 as a "quasi-military" unit whose members were given "no military rank, equal pay, or other benefits normal to military service such as retirement or veterans' benefits" (Holm 9), the public, male members of the military, and even the women who serve themselves have often considered female service members as ancillary to the "real" military. According to a 2011 report published by the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, "Over the past 30 years, women have entered the military in ever-increasing numbers. Ultimately, these women will make the transition from Servicemember to Veteran. In 2009, women comprised 8 percent of the total Veteran population in the United States. By 2035, they are projected to make up 15 percent of all living Veterans" (v). Despite this growing presence of female veterans in society, as Laura Browder points out in her introduction to *When Janey Comes Marching Home*, "Today, American women in the military still have to struggle against stereotypes that they are either masculine or sexually out of control when they join the armed forces" (7).

The interview and short fiction story included in the required reading for this class session offer the opportunity for students to "imagine" how women have and do serve in the United States Armed Forces and asks them to confront their own preconceptions and stereotypes about women in the US military.

Required Readings

Kalinowski, Mariette. "The Train." *Fire and Forget: Short Stories from the Long War*. Ed. Roy Scranton and Matt Gallagher. Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2013. 59-78.

Diane Corcoran interview from the Betty H. Carter Women Veterans' Historical Project:

<http://libcdm1.uncg.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/WVHP/id/9668/rec/1>

Review:

Phil Klay, "After War, a Failure of the Imagination." *NYTimes.com*. 8 Feb 2014. Web.

http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/09/opinion/sunday/after-war-a-failure-of-the-imagination.html?_r=0

Additional Related Readings

Bowden, Lisa, and Cain, Shannon, eds. *Powder: Writing by Women in the Ranks, from Vietnam to Iraq*. Tucson, AZ: Kore Press, Inc., 2008. Print.

Browder, Laura, and Sascha Pflaeging. "Introduction." *When Janey Comes Marching Home: Portraits of Women Combat Veterans*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. 1-10. Print.

Desnoyers-Colas, Elizabeth F. *Marching as to War: Personal Narratives of African American Women's Experiences in the Gulf Wars*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014. Print.

Grohowski, Mariana. *womenveteransrhetorics*. Web. <https://womenveteransrhetorics.wordpress.com/>

Hoffman, Cara. "The Things She Carried." *NYTimes.com*, 31 March 2014. Web.

Holm, Jeanne. *Women in the Military: An Unfinished Revolution*. Revised ed. Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1992. Print.

Howard, Ron and Francis Martin. *Unsung Heroes: The Story of America's Female Patriots*. Maryland Public Television, 2014. Web. <http://video.mpt.tv/video/2365247457/> and <http://video.mpt.tv/video/2365252314/>

Monahan, Evelyn M. and Rosemary Neidel-Greenlee. *A Few Good Women: America's Military Women From World War I to the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010. Print.

National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics. *America's Women Veterans: Military Service History and VA Benefit Utilization Statistics*. Washington, DC: National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011. PDF file.

Ryan, Kathleen M. "'I Didn't Do Anything Important': A Pragmatist Analysis of the Oral History Interview." *The Oral History Review* 36.1 (2009): 25-44. Print.

Williams, Kayla and Michael Staub. *Love My Rifle More than You: Young and Female in the U.S. Army*. New York: WW Norton & Co, 2006. Print.

Pre-class Expectations

Write a brief (250-300 word) reflection and/or response to the readings. As you read these female veterans' stories (both non-fiction and fiction) and "tr[ie]d to imagine being in [them]," what felt "hard" or "uncomfortable" (Klay) to you? What surprised you? How did these narratives differ from your expectations about female veteran experiences prior to reading these narratives?

Write two questions about the readings you'd like to discuss in class.

Instructional Plan

Begin the class by asking students to share what their preconceptions about women in the military were prior to reading these texts. Ask one student to write key words from these responses on the board.

Next, ask students how the two readings by women servicemembers either confirmed or overturned their preconceptions.

Put students in groups of 4 and to discuss the questions they brought to class. Assign members of the group to the following roles:

1. *Leader*: Makes sure everyone participates; focuses work around the assigned task
2. *Notetaker*: Keeps notes about the discussion
3. *Timekeeper*: Keeps track of time and moves discussion along; helps leader ensure everyone's voice gets heard
4. *Presenter*: Shares a summary of the group's discussion with the full class and identifies any still unanswered questions the members of the group have about the readings

Bring class back together for group summaries.

Witnessing War Means Listening to Soldiers



Blake Miller

“The Troubled Homecoming of the Marlboro Marine”

by Jenny Eliscu, April 3, 2008 *Rolling Stone*

Image Michael Macor/SF Chronicle/Getty

“At first Krebs, who had been at Belleau Wood, Soissons, the Champagne, St. Mihiel, and in the Argonne did not want to talk about the war at all. Later he felt the need to talk but no one wanted to hear about it.” Ernest Hemingway, “Soldier’s Home”

from *Soldier’s Heart: Survivors’ Views of Combat Trauma* (1995)

“For My Family—Who Don’t Understand Me”

Dennis R. Tenety

Lance Corporal, USMC (Ret), 1st Marine Division

India Co 1st Plt 3rd Bn 5th Reg, An Hoa, Vietnam, 1969

“I’ve been home over two decades, but there is no need for *me* to keep track. The few times I see you, you remind me: ‘Find a direction. Set your goals in life. You should find God. Cut your hair. Shave that beard. Stop living in the past. Leave the war behind you. It’s over 20 years since you’ve been home from Vietnam.’” (158)

“I have been welcomed home many times, but I have never come all the way back from the places I have been.” Benjamin Busch, *Dust to Dust*

Overview:

All parts of this four-part teaching module echo the importance of possessing the will to communicate about the costs of war. Phil Klay’s op-ed “After War, A Failure of the Imagination” speaks eloquently to

the political costs of military and civilian silence, and students should read and discuss this article in conjunction with this module about imagining and witnessing war.

Furthermore, Judith Lewis Herman's groundbreaking *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (1992) underscores the importance of bearing witness to trauma. The required short fiction reading for this class session offers the opportunity for students to "imagine" how difficult coming home from a war zone may be when no one bothers to listen to stories of survival. "Soldier's Home" by Ernest Hemingway suggests several ways family members and fellow citizens discount the experience of war veterans by not allowing them to speak truthfully or by imposing certain assumptions, narratives, or time frames upon them. Literature such as Hemingway's "Soldier's Home" can highlight inevitable difficulties in communication and ultimately energize friends and family members to reach out to veterans, listen without judgment, and ultimately imagine for themselves the weight of the war experience and how they may work to mitigate the pain of holding the reality of violence in the mind and heart every day.

How does truth flourish in the face of trauma? Consider the following passages. What conflicts do you imagine Krebs might be feeling?

"Krebs acquired the nausea in regard to experience that is the result of untruth or exaggeration, and when he occasionally met another man who had really been a soldier and they talked for a few minutes in the dressing room at a dance he fell into the easy pose of the old soldier among other soldiers: that he had been badly, sickeningly frightened all the time. In this way he lost everything." ("Soldier's Home" 156)

"His mother would have given him breakfast in bed if he had wanted it. She often came in when he was in bed and asked him to tell her about the war, but her attention always wandered. His father was noncommittal." ("Soldier's Home" 156)

"I pray for you all day long, Harold." ("Soldier's Home" 160)

Required Readings

Hemingway, Ernest. "Soldier's Home." *Standing Down: From Warrior to Civilian*. Ed. Donald H. Whitfield. Chicago: Great Books, 2013. 155-162.

Additional Related Readings

Kinder, John M. *Paying with Their Bodies: American War and the Problem of the Disabled Veteran*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 2015.

Mena, Gerardo. "So I Was a Coffin." October 25, 2010. Youtube.
www.youtube.com/watch?v=IdYJuYOZRjU

Morris, David J. *The Evil Hours: A Biography of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015.

Powers, Kevin. *Letter Composed During a Lull in the Fighting*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2014.

Shay, Jonathan. *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming*. New York: Scribner, 2002. Print.

Tick, Edward. *Warrior's Return: Restoring the Soul after War*. Boulder: Sounds True, 2014.

Pre-class Expectations

Write a brief (250-300 word) response to Hemingway's "Soldier's Home" discussing the character with whom you identify the most and why. Be prepared to bring this short response to class to share with the members of your group.

Instructional Plan

Begin the class by highlighting Hemingway's overall contribution to understanding the psychological aftermath of war. Play a short clip (5-7 minutes) from the American Masters documentary film entitled *Ernest Hemingway: Rivers to the Sea* (PBS Video, 2005).

Then, put students in small groups of four members each to read aloud their before-class responses to each other. In step two of this process, all group members will comment upon how the short responses differed from student to student. Assign members of the group to the following roles:

1. *Leader*: Makes sure everyone participates; focuses work around the assigned task
2. *Notetaker*: Keeps notes about the discussion
3. *Timekeeper*: Keeps track of time and moves discussion along; helps leader ensure everyone's voice gets heard
4. *Presenter*: Shares a summary of the group's discussion with the full class and identifies any still unanswered questions the members of the group have about the readings

Lastly, bring the class back together for a large-group discussion of how the pre-class writings varied and how speaking the truth can be impeded (10 minutes or so should be allowed for this step).

Homework for the next class session: Write a short (250-300 words) response from the perspective of another character in Hemingway's short story. Imagine the scenes in the story taken in by a different set of eyes and ears. How might sympathies change over time based on differing perspectives and different family roles?