

EXPRESSIVE WRITING AS A CREATIVE MEANS FOR TRANSFORMING MILITARY CULTURES: INSIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

NANCY TABER



All rights reserved. No part of this paper may be reproduced without the prior written permission from the TMC Network.

Transforming Military Cultures (TMC) Network
Mount Saint Vincent University
Centre for Social Innovation and
Community Engagement in Military Affairs
166 Bedford Highway, Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3M 2J6, Canada
www.msvu.ca/tmc
tmc@msvu.ca

Suggested citation:

Taber, N. (2024). *Expressive writing as a creative means for transforming military cultures: Insights and recommendations [Working paper]*. Transforming Military Cultures (TMC) Network.

Funding Acknowledgement:

This paper was published by the Transforming Military Cultures (TMC) Network which receives funding from the Mobilizing Insights in National Defence and Security (MINDS) program designed to facilitate collaboration and mobilize knowledge between the Department of National Defence, the Canadian Armed Forces, and academia and other experts on defence and security issues. Through its Targeted Engagement Grants, collaborative networks, scholarships, and expert briefings, MINDS works and collaborates with key partners to strengthen the foundation of evidence-based defence policy making. These partnerships drive innovation by encouraging new analyses of emerging global events, opportunities, and crises, while supporting a stronger defence and security dialogue with Canadians.

This paper is based on the analysis of the author and does not necessarily reflect the perspective of the funder.



Introduction

Research about the Canadian military demonstrates that its culture at a structural level is steeped in ableism, colonialism, homophobia, racism, and sexism (Eichler et al., 2023). The military's total institution values a warrior ideal that privileges white, able-bodied, male, straight, and cisgender members while marginalizing personnel who are viewed as "other" (Taber, 2020). Equity-seeking personnel too often experience structural barriers as well as discrimination, sexual harassment, and sexual assault (George, 2020; Eichler, 2016). It is this military culture and its related barriers that I aim to challenge and change through my research and my work as a co-director of the Transforming Military Cultures (TMC) network. TMC is a network of Canadian and international academic researchers, defence scientists, military members, veterans, and people with relevant lived experience that aims to challenge, reimagine, and transform the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) culture into one that embraces inclusivity and difference. The network co-directors—Dr. Maya Eichler, Dr. Tammy George, and myself—conduct research, facilitate webinars, host symposia, advise DND/CAF, and disseminate outcomes related to transforming military cultures. One of our goals is to give space for a variety of forms of learning and participation, including traditional academic presentations and panels, informal discussion opportunities, and creative forms of expression.

In the summer of 2022, soon after TMC was established, Writers Collective of Canada (WCC), a charitable organization that engages in arts-health exploratory expressive writing in community, began to develop a workshop series for woman-identifying Canadians who had served in the military, which was then called *Healing Unseen Wounds: Her Story*, subsequently renamed *A Force for Women: Her Story*. WCC co-director Shelley Lepp¹ approached Maya Eichler, explaining that the aim of the series' funders was to use the creative arts to support women veterans in their transition to post-service life.

¹ Now Chief Executive Officer.

After speaking with Shelley Lepp about her own research, Maya Eichler suggested Shelley meet with me. At our meeting, Shelley asked for advice on the series due to my experience and background as a retired military officer; feminist academic with expertise in the intersection of gender, militarism, and learning; and fiction author who conducts writing workshops. In our meeting, I discussed how the culture of the military itself intersects with women's identities during and after their service and subsequently agreed to train as a WCC facilitator in order to co-facilitate the series in the Fall of 2022 (see Lepp & Taber, 2023 for more context on this decision). Partially as a result of these conversations, TMC decided to provide opportunities for network members to participate in expressive writing workshops.

In this paper, I discuss how expressive writing has informed TMC's work on transforming military cultures. I explain why TMC considers expressive writing an important tool for culture change; detail two TMC expressive writing workshops and their outcomes of a resource on trauma-informed writing and a collaborative story; and discuss my learning experiences as a co-facilitator in the *WCC Her Story* workshops, with my findings presented thematically and as a found poem. I conclude with implications for those working creatively toward transforming military cultures.

Transforming military cultures through expressive writing

Expressive writing is personal writing which can assist with working through emotions, reframing experiences, giving coherence to memories, and creating a strong narrative identity (DeSalvo, 1999; Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016). Similar to what many label free writing, expressive writing can release suppressed emotions and assist writers in working through, claiming, and reclaiming their experiences. Fitting experiences such as a life disruption or traumatic event(s) into a storyline that one can accept as one's own can enable a writer's cohesion with past, current, and imagined future selves, which has positive implications for both physical and mental well-being and health (Adler, 2012; McAdams & McLean, 2013; Pennebaker & Smythe, 2016).

When engaging in expressive writing, as a co-facilitator and writer, I am continually awed by how telling one's own story, from one's own everyday experiences, so often challenges ableist, gendered, classed, colonial, patriarchal, and racialized ruling relations.² It is this aspect of expressive writing that most interests me when I am working with writers from military communities, as it holds much potential for transforming military cultures. If they so choose, writers can engage with the complex ways their military service both benefitted and harmed them. Indeed, this is what often occurs, even with writing prompts that, on the surface, may seem to have nothing to do with the military. Writers choose to explore what they feel is most compelling to them in the moment, and those who join a group of woman-identifying Canadians who have served in the military often write about and share their military and veteran experiences.

DeSalvo (1999) argues that writing gives order to thought. The act of crafting a story helps to organize, summarize, and make sense of experiences, which can allow for trauma to be more easily negotiated (Pennebaker & Smythe, 2016). Writing one's way through life's challenges can celebrate courage and survival through claiming narrative identity, which is "the internalized, evolving story of the self that each person crafts to provide his or her life with a sense of purpose and unity" (Adler, 2012, p. 367). The "story of the self" as it relates to women's military service is inextricably connected to the culture of the military as well as to the ways in which individual experiences intersect with institutional expectations, norms, policies, and practices.

As an adult education scholar, I examine expressive writing using a feminist transformative learning lens (English & Irving, 2012), meaning that I am most interested in the ways in which writers can engage in a societal critique of power, connect self to society, claim their own stories, and build community with one another.³

² See Smith (1987, 2005) for a discussion of how grassroots experiences can illuminate societal relations of power.

³ See hooks (1994) for her foundational discussion of feminist pedagogy that explores the intersection of class, gender, and race.

Although positioning oneself within and critiquing power relations is not a stated aim or element of expressive writing, it is linked to WCC's assertion that "social change happens one empowered voice at a time" (n.d., last para).

In many ways, expressive writing starkly contradicts military values, which is why it is so useful for transforming military cultures; this deep creative exploration helps writers think differently about the military and their connections to it. Expressive writing can promote an emotional celebration of each writer's authentic voice and unique identity in an egalitarian space (WCC, n.d., 2023). In contrast, military values demand conformity, uniformity, obedience, discipline, stoicism, and deference to the collective (Enloe, 2016; Soeters et al., 2006; Taber, 2020). Feminist antimilitarism (Enloe, 2016, 2023), a theory and praxis I use in my academic work and one that I have come to integrate into my work with expressive writing, problematizes how these military values tend to promote ableism, colonialism, homophobia, racism, and sexism due to the ways in which they encourage binary thinking in relation to man/woman, masculine/feminine, protector/protected, and friend/foe, with the former of each pair privileged over the latter. Feminist antimilitarism is thus not inherently anti-military; rather, it analyzes how military norms, structures, and values benefit certain groups of people over others, at individual, organizational, national, and societal levels.

Women are the most underrepresented designated group in the CAF. Although they represent approximately 50% of Canadian society, only approximately 15% of them serve in the military, so the ratio of women serving is approximately 30%, whereas Indigenous people and visible minorities serve at a ratio closer to 50%; these percentage differences demonstrate that there is something particularly problematic about how women, in all their intersectionality, are viewed and treated as military members (Taber, 2021). Additionally, women experience discrimination, harassment, and assault in the Canadian military at greater percentage rates than men (Cotter, 2016, 2019; Cotter & Burczykca, 2023), as do those in the Regular Force "who are younger, who are Indigenous, who have a disability, or whose

sexual orientation is not heterosexual” (Cotter & Burczycka, 2023, p. 4). Learning more about women’s experiences can assist with understanding, challenging, and transforming military cultures to benefit all equity-denied members. Below, I describe two of TMC’s writing workshops and my work with WCC’s *Her Story* workshops, which demonstrate how expressive writing can inform understandings of transforming military cultures.

TMC’s expressive writing workshops

TMC’s first annual symposium, at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in February 2023, included keynote presentations, panel presentations, and discussions. Additionally, the co-directors planned for creative writing opportunities: trauma-informed writing workshops and a WCC workshop, both focused on how expressive writing can inform work on transforming military cultures.

Tell your own truth: Trauma-informed writing

TMC invited Dr. Kelly S. Thompson as both a keynote presenter and workshop facilitator, due to her experiences and expertise as a military veteran, memoir writer, editor, and creative writing instructor. Her debut memoir, *Girls need not apply: Field notes from the forces* (2019) delves into the gendered nature of her (often traumatic) experiences as a military officer in the CAF. Her teaching centres on expressive and trauma-informed writing, including an exploration of how these practices underlay her approach to writing her memoir. Thompson and I trained together as WCC facilitators, and she co-facilitated one of the Fall 2022 Her Story workshop series.

In the two 1.5 hour workshops Thompson facilitated for TMC symposium participants (with 20-25 participants per workshop), as well as in the TMC resource she created, Thompson explained how “trauma-informed writing practice accepts, acknowledges, and incorporates the reality of collective trauma and how writing about and sharing traumatic experiences can impact both reader and

writer” (Thompson, 2023, p. 2).

Her tips for writing about trauma include: “set a space to write that feels safe”; “write non-stop for fifteen minutes without overthinking, erasing, or rephrasing”; “write for yourself only...there is no need to share...unless you choose to”; and “talk to mental health professionals” as needed (p. 2). Thompson gave writing prompts (see p. 4 for a list) to participants, who then wrote to the prompts and shared their responses with the group.

Here, I provide an example of my writing in response to the prompt, “Describe your childhood home in vivid detail,” which I shared in the workshop. This is first-draft writing which I edited only for typos. I refrained from any further editing so readers can see how writing, while raw and unpolished, can support reflection on experiences.

Which home?

The one I was born in but don’t remember?

The one we moved to where the only thing I remember is the time an older girl—the one I adored, who walked me home every day, just her and I, but only because it was her job to walk me home—once forgot me because she had a dentist appointment and I refused to leave the school alone because there was no way she would ever forget me? Which she did, but not on purpose. By all accounts, she felt quite badly about it.

Or the one with the stucco exterior and my attic room, posters of MacGyver on the wall?

The one where we moved into the house that the family across the street had built? Her father built one house, lived in it for 6 months to avoid capital gains, then moved the family out.

I got her room. She hated me. Used to wait at the corner with her friends to taunt me, try to beat me up. I had a shortcut to avoid them. Then they built houses there. No more shortcut.

The two of us on the corner, me in a headlock, her arms tight around my neck. Me punching her half-heartedly in the stomach, trying to make a joke of it.

Of course I knew why she hated me, but not until writing that, did I realize how much we had in common. Moving, moving moving. Her father a contractor, me a Navy brat.

At least she moved in the same city. I moved coast to coast, to Ottawa and back again.

Always the new kid.

Making friends again and again. You'd think I'd get good at it, instead of worse and worse. What was the sense of it?

Four years at Royal Military College. The longest I'd ever stayed in one place. If you didn't count the summers, the move from room to room every year, or was it every term.

Maybe it was a way for the military to keep us from bonding with anyone, with any one roommate.

Something else I just realized.

It's devious, when you think about it, how the institution works, against its members, so often, when members dedicate themselves to it.

But now I know, almost instaneously, who will be a true friend and who will not.

So I'll count that as a win.

For me, the phrase "not until writing that, did I realize" is the most powerful, as it demonstrates how expressive writing can assist with working through and understanding memories.

It shows how what might seem to be disparate experiences are connected through societal ruling relations in general and, in my own case as a member of a military family and then as an Officer Cadet at a military college, in the institution of the military particularly.

Culture shock: Writing together to reflect on transforming military cultures

At the symposium, TMC also planned a WCC workshop, which I facilitated. In the workshop, which had approximately 30 participants, I explained how WCC's use of expressive writing is based on Pat Schneider's (2003) Amherst Writers & Authors method. The structured workshops (WCC, 2023) allow learners to articulate their experiences, receive affirming comments as their stories are heard, and examine their sense of self in a supportive environment. Writers share first-draft writing, practice deep listening, and offer feedback to others about what resonates with them. WCC workshops help writers work through and claim their stories, develop caring relationships with one another, and empathize both with other participants and with themselves. All writing in WCC workshops is treated as fiction, even if writers identify a piece of writing as memoir or write from a first-person perspective. The positioning of writing as fiction keeps the focus on the writing, not the person, and can free the writer from worrying about sharing something personal, in that nothing in their stories will be attributed to themselves.⁴

After giving two tone-setting quotations about thinking differently about power and how humans are connected to story, participants wrote to two prompts: "If I knew then, what I know now, then..." and "What story do you want to leave behind?" Participants who felt comfortable sharing their writing did so, and other participants responded to the writing, speaking about the strength of their words.

⁴ A note on the use of terms and concepts such as fiction and stories: I recognize that the experiences of military women who are survivors of military sexual violence have too often been problematically dismissed as "stories," in that they are perceived as fictional and not true. In WCC workshops, all writing (whether positioned as narratives, stories, experiences, memories, or memoirs) is taken seriously and respected. The aim is not to evaluate for truth, but to engage with each other's writing.

At the end of the workshop, participants were asked to write their favourite line from their own writing on post-its and, if they wished, leave it for TMC to collate into a collaborative story. Ash Grover, TMC Research Assistant, transcribed the lines, wrote a blog about the workshop (Grover, 2023), and used the favourite lines to create the following collaborative story.

The Story Always Belongs to Us

I want to leave behind a story that helps others laugh and gives them the strength and confidence to be imperfect.

I can do hard things!

Willing to take the journey through storm and calm.

I do not know if I can leave behind the anger, abandonment. How others can revel in their liberty, and yet I will try.

Even when I feel frustrated at the speed of progress – I know I'm standing on the shoulders of giants and that I have community – and that gives me strength.

Take the time to pause.

If I knew then, what I know now, then I wouldn't be who I am today!

Would I be better or would I be worse?

I would not give so much power to acts of resistance to my humanity and dignity.

The only approval I need is my own.

Feeling like an imposter, but it was exciting, captivating, an imposter no more.

I was keeping myself stuck.

I would have given pieces of myself I didn't know I could give.

Collective identity, party of one.

I would tell her that she would be ok, that she would love and live again, she would be good, do good and feel whole again.

The pressure we all feel to persevere and keep pushing on even if it means we must conceal the fact that we just need time to heal.

Through the years, I have found healing in people and places that did not hurt me.

Don't rock the boat, until you can.

Je veux laisser derrière les faux-semblants et les prétextes, les enjeux contraignants et l'absence de mouvement pour aller de l'avant avec ceux qui sont trop souvent laissés derrière.

I want to leave behind hope.

For their dark times...it will shine.

Or it would give voice to the ones who feel like they have nothing to say, like it's not their place to speak, like they have no story to contribute.

The story always belongs to us.

The ending of the collaborative story, "The story always belongs to us," speaks to the core drive of expressive writing: shaping and claiming one's own story.

In the military, the organization controls how identity is expressed (conformity and uniformity), whose stories are told (hierarchy and obedience in regulations on who can speak to whom about what), and what ways of being are valued (discipline, stoicism, hegemonic masculinity). Claiming one's own story, in the military context, is a defiant act. Expressive writing can provide a space to contest military norms as writers celebrate their own identities, voice a range of emotions, explore their experiences from a creative perspective, and (re)consider their relationship to the military. This can facilitate a rethinking of military assumptions and expectations, freeing writers to imagine alternatives to military culture.

WCC: Her Story

My TMC symposium WCC workshop connects to my co-facilitation of the WCC expressive writing workshops for woman-identifying Canadians who have served in the military. From October 2023 to March 2024, I conducted an analytical-evocative autoethnography (Anderson, 2006; Reed-Danahay, 2009; Williams & Jauhari bin Zaini, 2016) of my experiences co-facilitating the 6-week workshop series in Fall of 2023 and the 5-week workshop series in Winter of 2023, each with one 1.5-hour workshop per week. My co-facilitators were two different WCC facilitators who identified as women and did not serve in the military. The numbers of participants in each workshop varied, ranging from one to ten. In developing workshop materials, we chose quotations and prompts that would problematize and reframe the ways in which issues of power, force, purpose, empathy, experience, identity, honour, leadership, and heroism played out in military and veteran contexts. I also tended to choose quotations from novels, as a way to further demonstrate how WCC positions all writing as fiction. Here are two quotation examples and their related prompts:

- “Power dictates acceptability.” — R.F. Kuang, *Yellowface*
 - Write about the accountability of power or write about the different ways you have experienced power.

- “Traces of the past hang in the air around us. Millions of them, still suspended. Like time is a glass and we kind of smear it a bit as we pass through it.” — C.J. Cooke, *A Haunting in the Arctic*
 - Write about traces of your past self, as connects to your present.

My autoethnography explored the connections between the self and the social in relation to expressive writing, military service, and my academic scholarship about the intersection of gender, militarism, and learning (see Taber, in progress, for methodological details). In my analysis, two themes emerged: reclaiming military identity, memories, and story through imagination; and building community through story-telling inspired by shared gendered military experiences. A description of each of these themes follows, with sub-headings taken from lines from my workshop writing.

In the military, the organization controls how identity is expressed (conformity and uniformity), whose stories are told (hierarchy and obedience in regulations on who can speak to whom about what), and what ways of being are valued (discipline, stoicism, hegemonic masculinity). Claiming one's own story, in the military context, is a defiant act.

Reclaiming military identity, memories, and story through imagination: “You have no power over me”

In my writing, I often wrote about pushing away and hiding experiences and memories, in boxes, in corners of my mind, behind doors, and once in a hole in the ground. Until I analyzed my field notes, I hadn't realized how common this was in my writing, as was a lack of trust. In each of these stories, there was a point where I (re)considered and confronted my memories, accepting them into who I was, and reframing them. Although the memories often came unbidden, surprising me with what emerged in my writing, in each case, the writing (rather unconsciously) allowed me to control how I engaged with them, framed them, and resolved them.

Several times, as in Thompson's trauma-informed writing workshop, I wrote a phrase somewhat similar to "I just realized this now, as I'm writing these words" and "My mind is taking me where it needs to go" as I took control of my own experiences and memories. No matter what had happened to me in the past, as a writer, I was in charge of what happened now, which was a powerful feeling, as I resolved collisions and contradictions between my past military and present civilian (veteran) self.

As my writing was treated as fiction, and all my stories therefore nicely positioned within plausible deniability, I neither felt the need to censor myself nor edit my words. I wrote about mundane everyday things such as baking bread, putting together a jigsaw puzzle, and watching a sunset; exceptional military experiences like attending military college, flying in a helicopter, and deploying at sea; and fantastical images of yellow brick roads, wicked witches, and dragons. Sometimes, all three of these elements ended up in one story. The stories, while written as fiction, all connected to who I am, what I value, why I am writing about particular experiences, where I am now in my life, and how I think. As Banks and Banks (1998b) explain, "the opposite of fact isn't fiction but something like error" (p. 13). Fiction can hold truths, just as non-fiction writing can.

Taking an imaginative approach to my military service, which was steeped in a desire to conform and belong to the collective (Soeters et al., 2006), was freeing. Even though I understand the theory behind expressive writing at an intellectual level, in that it assists in working through experiences, emotions, identity, and memories (DeSalvo, 1999; Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016), I was still astounded at its positive effects on me personally. After one workshop, I wrote, "It always surprises me, how amazing the workshop makes me feel, claiming my own stories and listening to others." I felt as if, even for a brief moment, the military, and my military experiences, had "no power over me."

Building community through story-telling inspired by shared gendered military experiences: “I feel seen”

The strength and healing potential of stories was woven throughout my field notes, in relation to not only my own writing, but to sharing my stories with other writers in the workshops and listening to their stories, as well as giving and receiving feedback. I wrote about how, “when I free myself to write, anything is possible”; “when I create, I am free”; and “that fiction makes me feel alive, reading it, writing it,” because “it’s the potential I love...with stories that celebrate women and their lives, their loves, their strengths and flaws, truths and lies.” Because the group of writers in the workshop was comprised of women with shared experiences, I felt a deep understanding between us and connections between our stories. All we knew of each other was our first names, what location we were writing from, and that each writer identified as a woman with military experience. In others’ stories, I saw myself, and I felt as if they saw themselves in mine, which was an important form of validation for me. In the workshops, I wrote about a “vat of empathy,” “listening ear,” and an “understanding look” in creating “a patch of belonging.”

In their program evaluation of WCC workshops with homeless veterans at Veteran’s House and with the first *Healing Unseen Wounds: Her Story* workshops in 2022 (the latter of which Thompson and I co-facilitated in two separate series), Lepp, McShane, and Vasser (2023) found participants had similar responses with respect to building community and finding validation. For military women who, despite having the potential to find success in the military, often feel excluded, isolated, and tokenized, and are often discriminated against, harassed, and even assaulted (Eichler, 2016; Perron, 2017; West & Antrobus, 2023), experiencing such community and validation in a non-judgemental space is empowering. For me, it was also freeing. By giving my words to the group, I felt seen. Writing together allowed me to connect, without having to claim any particular military experience.

Her Story found poem

In creating this found poem, I selected sentences and phrases I had marked during my autoethnographical research (written in a variety of first-, second-, and third-person points-of-view as well as past and present tenses) from the twenty stories I wrote during the workshops. As a reminder to readers that these lines were written as fiction, as well as for consistency and coherency, I changed the point of view throughout to third person. I corrected tenses to work within the poem and changed minor words for clarity. I ordered the lines into a narrative arc, then re-ordered and revised as needed, to demonstrate my overall autoethnographic findings.

A place safer than castles surrounded by moats

Anyone who looks at her, knows where she belongs. But not if she belongs.

Green for Army, blue for Air Force, Black for navy. Bruises in a camouflage pattern.

Conform. Fit in. Don't stick your neck out. Do not get noticed.

Don't trust.

It's just a joke, they say, as they put themselves in the good guy category.

But a joke is never just a joke, when it's aimed at her.

So she created a smoke and mirrors illusion by acting tough, talking rough, jostling with elbows out and shoulders squared.

Contradictions that were somehow true.

A collective.

Protectors.

For operational effectiveness.

She forgot that it's fucked up.
Or maybe decided not to see it.
Easier to cope.

How good she was at shoving away anger, fear, and sadness.
Distrust.

She learned.

Put the emotions in a box, in a corner of her brain.
Click, click, click, and presto, nasty memories, scary thoughts
disappeared.

Dusted off her hands and walked away.
Experience taught her to leave it all behind.

But memories' superpower is their staying power.

Her experiences followed her. Haunting, stalking, reminding.

Tapped her on the shoulder. I'm here, they whispered.

Memories cascaded out.

Suspended in mid-air, twisting.

Is she screaming into the void?

A hand stretched out, just when she needed it.

Fuck the void.

She wasn't the only one.

She took her memories out of the box, peered at them,
reframed them, in her own words.

Incorporated them it into who she was.

With a form of acceptance
She gave the memories words
Realizing, as she wrote
That those experiences, those memories were, after all, what
made her.

She gave the words to the group.
And those memories had less power over her.

The group, they saw her.

Created a place safer than castles surrounded by moats.

So she took that thin gruel of experience, added a heap of oats.
Cinnamon, just a dash.
Soaked it in a vat of empathy, stirred it up, like a witch with a
cauldron.
Cackling, as others added a listening ear, an understanding look,
a chuckle well-placed, even if the humour was hidden.

In a patch of belonging.

She created space to tell women's stories, to listen to them.
A force of women. Made of words.
Strong, difficult, brave, complex.

Stories about women, by women, for women.

We are here, they called.

Unstoppable.

Stories of fiction, of truth, of how the two intersect.

Words on the page, in the ether, in the world.

Where her own true self lives
She makes her own fairy tales.
She spews fire and brimstone.

She makes her own path.
She lays the stone with every step she takes.
She sets the direction.

She decides.

Which memory to pay attention to, and when, and which to let go.

For the wicked witches of the world are not wicked, but defiant.

The anti-hero walks in the minefield.

She creates a world where her whole self flies.

Immersed in story.

When she creates, she is free.

We are free.

As this found poem demonstrates, finding community in a group of women who wanted to write and share their own stories of military service, and wanted to listen to those of others, was powerful and freeing for me. Although I am hesitant to share the more vulnerable lines with readers outside of the WCC workshop series, I have retained them here, because reading the latter lines of the poem still gives me chills and feeds me positive energy. It is this energy that I keep with me, long after the end of each writing workshop.

Implications

My work with expressive writing as connected to transforming military cultures has several implications. First, service indelibly imprints itself on military personnel. Expressive writing can assist with exploring the interconnections between writers' military and veteran/civilian selves. Military service is not bounded by dates of enrollment and release, but continues on throughout life. As such, veteran voices need to be part of ongoing efforts to transform military cultures. DND/CAF should find ways to more systematically and meaningfully integrate veteran voices into culture change efforts.

Second, individual military experiences are tied to collective ones (Taber, 2007, 2020), in that the ruling relations of the military—what is expected, normalized, valued, and rewarded, along with what is devalued, denigrated, and punished—have profound effects on individual life. In the expressive writing workshops, I shared stories that recognized the wide variety of my military experiences, demonstrating a gamut of emotions from pride, joy, and amusement to anger, frustration, and sadness. The expressive writing workshops allowed me to express these emotions, some of which I had never voiced before, and certainly not in the presence of military members or veterans; military training in conformity and stoicism (Soeters et al., 2006) has a long legacy in my body and mind. But, by giving these stories voice, I felt as if I could claim and control them, so they would not claim and control me.

...service indelibly imprints itself on military personnel. Expressive writing can assist with exploring the interconnections between writers' military and veteran/civilian selves. Military service is not bounded by dates of enrollment and release, but continues on throughout life. As such, veteran voices need to be part of ongoing efforts to transform military cultures.

Third, military service can isolate women, as anything associated with femininity is often perceived as weak or less than (Kovitz, 2000). While I was in the military, I would never have sought out a community of military women, something that also made me hesitant when I was first asked to co-facilitate the WCC *Her Stories* series (Lepp & Taber, 2023). Women are taught not to bond with each other in the military (West & Antrobus, 2023). If we did not share the difficulties of our service with each other—enabling us to see them as “deeply odd,” as described by West and Antrobus—then we were not likely to see similarity in each other, a pattern in our experiences that was not individual but institutional. The WCC workshops further demonstrate the commonality in military women’s service and give women the opportunity to learn from one another’s whole selves (hooks, 1994). DND/CAF should recognize how military culture often causes women to feel as if, in order to belong to the collective, they cannot belong to a community of women. Providing opportunities for women to bond and learn from each other would be beneficial, but insufficient. It is the organization’s responsibility to change its culture, not the responsibility of individual serving women. I am not recommending that DND/CAF provide expressive writing workshops as I am unsure if there is enough (or any) trust that such workshops would be safe for personnel to tell their stories. However, DND/CAF could promote outside expressive writing opportunities and give personnel the time and space within their work days to attend.

Fourth, although the *Her Story* series was specifically created for Canadians who identify as women and have served in the military, TMC’s expressive writing workshops at the February 2023 symposium included men, women, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people from a variety of intersectionalities, who were serving military and Defence Team personnel, veterans, and civilians. By focusing on the topic of transforming military cultures, the writing centred on the experiences of a group working for transformative cultural change. Just as gender is not only about women, expressive writing is not only for women.

Fifth, working through memories and situations with which one may be in conflict is not easy. Facilitators must be properly trained in expressive writing theory and practice; writers must choose to attend with an understanding of the tenets of the workshop, if and when they themselves feel ready. It must be recognized that choosing to be vulnerable, especially for those trained in military culture (Higate & Cameron, 2006), can be both freeing and difficult.

Sixth, understanding a commonality of experiences is central to transforming military cultures, in order for DND/CAF to move away from its current individualized approach to change. Recently, in the media, there has been much discussion of the need to root out sexual assault and racism in the ranks of the CAF, but it continues to be positioned as something that can be achieved by changing individual behaviours only; military culture, it is problematically argued, must stay the same, based as it is on British traditions and the service of straight white men (see Duval-Lantoine, 2023, and Saideman, 2023, who problematize this perspective). Continuing with an individualized approach and leaving culture intact will never stop the harm caused by colonial, patriarchal, and racialized norms, policies, and practices in the CAF (Arbour, 2022; Deschamps, 2015; Eichler & Brown, 2023).

Finally, while the aim of expressive writing workshops is to share stories within the workshop itself, opportunities for publication and presentation serve a valid function in assisting others—from both military and civilian communities, and those that intersect with them—to learn from the experiences of those who have served and are reflecting on that service. For instance, I have published aspects of my stories in blogs (Lepp & Taber, 2023; Taber, 2024), in this working paper, and in the upcoming CASAE (Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education) 2024 conference proceedings (Taber, in progress) because I believe in the importance of sharing what I have learned through expressive writing.

Additionally, WCC is planning a *Write On!* series, where those who participated in the *Her Story* workshops will be invited to revise their workshop writing for publication in a chapbook. Sometimes, writers learn from writing their stories and sharing with no one, others from sharing in a small group, and others from wider dissemination. The goal is, for those writers who decide on the latter, that reading and/or listening to these stories can assist with demonstrating not only the need for transforming military cultures, but give insight into how change can be achieved.

Historically, as well as currently, approaches to changing military culture have been conceptualized and operationalized through traditional and often non-critical theories and methodologies that lead to policies, practices, training, and recommendations that preserve the status quo. Expressive writing offers something different—a creative way to bridge past with present, make meaning of collective experiences, cope with difficulties and trauma, build community, support relational communication, foster belonging, engage in healing, and imagine a transformation of military cultures.

References

- Adler, J.M. (2012). Living into the story: Agency and coherence in a longitudinal study of narrative identity development and mental health over the course of psychotherapy. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 102(2), 367-389.
- Anderson, L. (2006). Analytic autoethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35(4), 373-395.
- Arbour, L. (2022). *Report of the independent external comprehensive review of the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces*. Borden Ladner Gervais.
- Banks, A. & Banks, S.P. (1998b). The struggle over facts and fictions. In A. Banks & S.P. Banks (Eds.), *Fiction & social research: By ice or fire* (pp. 11-29). AltaMira Press.
- Cotter, A. (2016). *Sexual Misconduct in the Canadian Armed Forces, 2016*. Statistics Canada. <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-603-x/85-603-x2016001-eng.pdf>
- Cotter, A. (2019). *Sexual Misconduct in the Canadian Armed Forces, 2018*. Statistics Canada. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/85-603-x/85-603-x2019002-eng.pdf?st=mmG0oxr0>
- Cotter, A. & Burczycka, M. (2023). *Sexual Misconduct in the Canadian Armed Forces, 2022*. Statistics Canada. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/85-603-x/85-603-x2023001-eng.pdf?st=obb2l3-a>
- DeSalvo, L. (1999). *Writing as a way of healing: How telling our stories transforms our lives*. Beacon Press.
- Deschamps, M. (2015.) *External review into sexual misconduct and sexual harassment in the Canadian Armed Forces*. External Review Authority.
- Duval-Lantoin, C. (2023). Addressing backlash and supporting colleagues. *DND/CAF101 substack*. https://dndcafl01.substack.com/p/addressing-backlash?r=1v6dzb&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web

- Eichler, M. & Brown, V. (2023). Getting to the root of the problem: Understanding and changing military culture. *Canadian Military Journal*, 23(3), 6-13.
- Eichler, M., George, T., & Taber, N. (2023). Editorial: Transforming military cultures. *Canadian Military Journal*, 23(3), 3-5.
- Eichler, M. (2016). Learning from the Deschamps Report: Why military and veteran researchers ought to pay attention to gender. *Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health*, 2(1), 5-8.
- English, L.M. & Irving, C.J. (2012). Women and transformative learning. In E.W. Taylor & P. Cranton (Eds.), *The handbook of transformative learning* (pp. 245-259). Jossey-Bass.
- Enloe, C. (2016). *Globalization and militarism: Feminists make the link* (2nd ed.). Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Enloe, C. (2023). *Twelve feminist lessons of war*. University of California Press.
- George, T. (2020). Troubling diversity and inclusion: Racialized women's experiences in the Canadian Armed Forces. *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice*, 41(2), 42-56.
- Grover, A. (2023). Writing to create culture change. *Transforming Military Cultures (TMC) blog*. <https://www.msvu.ca/research-at-the-mount/centres-and-institutes/transforming-military-cultures-network/blogs/>
- Higate, P. & Cameron, A. (2006). Reflexivity and researching the military. *Armed Forces & Society*, 32(2), 219-233.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.
- Kovitz, M. (2000.) The enemy within: Female soldiers in the Canadian Forces. *Canadian Woman Studies*, 19(4), 36-41.

- Lepp, S., McShane, K., & Nasser, L. (2023). *Healing unseen wounds: Writers Collective of Canada's work serving veterans*. Writers Collective of Canada.
- Lepp, S. & Taber, N. (2023). *The door creaked open and invited me in: Supporting healing for woman-identified veterans navigating the transition to post-service life*. Mental Health Commission.
- Pennebaker, J.W. & Smyth, J.M. (2016). *Opening it up by writing it down: How expressive writing improves health and eases emotional pain*. The Guilford Press.
- Perron, S. (2017). *Out standing in the field: A memoir by Canada's first female infantry officer*. Cormorant Books.
- Reed-Danahay, D. (2009). Anthropologists, education, and autoethnography. *Reviews in Anthropology*, 38, 28-47.
- Saideman, S. (2023). Resistance to culture change. *Saideman's Semi-Spew*. <https://saideman.blogspot.com/2024/01/resistance-to-culture-change.html>
- Schneider, P. (2003). *Writing alone and with others*. Oxford University Press.
- Smith, D. (1987). *The everyday world as problematic: A feminist sociology*. Northeastern University Press.
- Smith, D. (2005). *Institutional ethnography: A sociology for people*. AltaMira Press.
- Soeters, J., Winslow, D., & Weibull, A. (2006). Military culture. In Caforio, G. (Ed.), *Handbook of the sociology of the military* (pp. 237-254). Springer.
- Taber, N. (2007). *Ruling relations, warring, and mothering: Writing the social from the everyday life of a military mother* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of South Australia.
- Taber, N. (2020). The Canadian Armed Forces: Battling between Operation Honour and Operation Hop on Her. *Critical Military Studies*, 6(1), 19-40.

- Taber, N. (2021). Eliminating unearned privilege: Problematizing the warrior ideal embedded in recruitment, retention, and promotion policies and practices. *In Schedule O Consultation Group, Gender representation and diversity consultation summary report*. Schedule O.
- Taber, N. (2023). Understanding and addressing opposition to transforming military cultures: Moving from technical and humanist to critical learning. *Canadian Military Journal*, 23(3), 30-36.
- Taber, N. (2024). *A force for women*. Atlas Institute for Veterans and Families.
- Taber, N. (in progress). Learning to share gendered military experiences: An autoethnographic exploration of the intersections between expressive writing, feminist antimilitarism, and adult education. [Manuscript in preparation]. *Proceedings of the 2024 Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education conference proceedings* (abstract accepted). CASAE.
- Thompson, K.S. (2023). *Tell your own truth: Trauma-informed writing*. Transforming Military Cultures (TMC) Network.
- WCC. (2023). *WCC program theory: Measuring the magic*. WCC.
- WCC. (n.d.). *WCC Visions and values*. <https://wcc-cec.org/vision-values/>
- West, H. & Antrobus, S. (2023). "Deeply odd": Women veterans as critical feminist scholars. *Critical Military Studies*, 9(1), 24-39.
- Williams, J.P. & Jauhari bin Zaini, M. (2016). Rude boy subculture, critical pedagogy, and the collaborative construction of an analytic and evocative autoethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 45(1), 34-59.

Author Bio



Nancy Taber

Dr. Nancy Taber is a professor in the Department of Educational Studies at Brock University and a co-director of the Transforming Military Cultures Network. Her research explores the ways in which learning, gender and militarism intersect in daily life, popular culture, museums, militaries and educational institutions, with a particular focus on women's experiences in the Canadian Armed Forces related to organizational culture, official policies, and informal everyday practices. She is a retired military officer who served as a Sea King helicopter air navigator. Dr. Taber is a former President of the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education and the former Editor-in-Chief of the Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education.

The author would like to thank Lea Aluie, Lis Héroux Rhymes, Sophia Godsoe, and Kimberley Smith Evans for their assistance in preparing this paper.