

## Lying in Writing or the Vicissitudes of Testimony

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In “Requiring Students to Write about Their Personal Lives,” which appeared in the 17 February 1993 issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Susan Swartzlander, Diana Pace, and Virginia Lee Stamler note the contradiction between the “shockingly unprofessional” practice of asking students to write about their personal traumas in writing courses and the common occurrence of such assignments (B1). They argue that this practice remains common because the debates about whether or not “personal writing helps students to develop the necessary academic skills” ignore the ethical concerns of requiring students’ self-disclosures in writing for school (B1). Most importantly, the authors point to ethical concerns with grading, retraumatization, and gender. It is their contention that attention to these concerns will convince a professor inclined to ask students to write about their personal traumas not to do so. For instance, any professor who might argue that “having students write on what they care about most and know best is the only way to get them to write well” would reconsider an assignment that could potentially retraumatize the student writer (B1). A male professor might change his assignment after being apprised of the gender concerns such disclosures present to female students, the authors predict.

In 2001, Jeffrey Berman published *Risky Writing: Self-Disclosure and Self-Transformation in the Classroom*, his contribution to the debate about the value of students’ self-disclosure in their writing courses. In this study, Berman argues that student writing about trauma leads to educational, aesthetic, and therapeutic achievements. His position highlights, first of all, at least one instance of a writing teacher dismissing the ethical concerns raised by Swartzlander, Pace and Stamler. Secondly, Berman’s analysis demonstrates superficial understanding of the relationship between writing, trauma, and recovery, a superficiality that is all too common in the debates about the appropriateness or inappropriateness of requiring students’ self-disclosures in their writing courses.

In an effort to restate the ethical issues embedded in essay assignments that ask students to explore traumas in their life, this essay conceptualizes the place of writing, and language use more generally, in recovery as much more complicated, much less controlled, much more diffuse, and much less significantly associated with particular writing assignments in school than Berman and even Swartzlander, Pace, and Stamler assume.

### Missing the Point

The debate about students’ self-disclosure in their writing courses focuses on the content of students’ essays. If students write essays about rape or incest, for example, teachers assume that they are writing their trauma. If students write essays about poverty or the death penalty, however, teachers might not make the same assumption. Significantly, if students write essays about shopping or financial planning, teachers will assume that their essays are most likely not about trauma. These latter topics are not risky, to use Berman’s term. Nor do they suggest that students are disclosing an emotional truth that they have never revealed before. Shopping and financial planning do not mark a student as potentially in need of counseling; they seem safe topics, not the remnants of traumatic memory.

These assumptions display a misunderstanding of the way that trauma works on language and in writing.

They also display an overly simplified perception of the trauma survivor and the conditions for recovery. Finally, teachers who are guided by these assumptions, as Berman is, reveal themselves as bad readers, and it is in the context of bad reading that the ethical concerns identified by Swartzlander, Pace and Stamler emerge in the writing classroom. Berman's "Introduction" provides an example of bad reading, so I turn to that text at this point not entirely because he represents a male teacher performing a bad reading of a female student's writing but primarily because his reading of a student's essay exemplifies the kind of mistakes that underline, and importantly misdirect, the debate about assigning risky topics in writing courses.

Berman begins *Risky Writing* with two essays written by a single female student, Diane. The first describes her experience baking bread; the second, childhood molestation. Berman says of the first essay: "Far from being a risky paper topic, the wholesomeness of the subject is matched by the student's quiet self-confidence" (3). After reading her second essay, Berman comments that "the two papers could not be more different, the first with its proud vision of home and hearth, the second with its almost unspeakable horror and indignation" (9). He adds that "the first composition evokes love, joy, and serenity, while the second elicits shame, confusion, and anger" (9). However, he also notes, but fails to interpret, that the first essay has "an undercurrent of tension throughout," that it is "sensuous," and that it contains "evocative language; the image of instinctual kneading along with the rising and swelling of the dough, culminates in an act of creativity comparable to the birth of a child" (4). Following his reading of Diane's second essay, Berman observes that "ironically, both essays describe events that occurred when Diane was about ten years old — the age when she was first taught by her grandmother to bake bread and when she was molested by a trusted friend of her family" (9).

Berman's commentary on Diane's essays suggests that the first essay is as revealing of childhood trauma as the second; however, Berman misses the subtlety contained in her essay on baking bread. Berman's reading of the first essay as a "metaphor for family values" (4) leads to his statement that the process of bread making "culminates in an act of creativity comparable to the birth of a child," a comparison that does not appear in Diane's essay. Diane's essay, in fact, refers to bread making as "therapeutic," relief for stress, an unconsciously performed activity, one that "transports" and "empowers" her (2). She ends her essay stating that "baking bread should be prescribed by doctors" and "our world would be a better place if we just had more homemade bread" (3).

Some obvious questions are prompted by these moments in Diane's essay. What therapy does bread making provide, and what is the therapy for? What stress is relieved? Why is bread making unconsciously performed? Why is she transported when she makes bread; where is she transported? Why does she need empowerment? Why does she mention doctors and prescriptions at the end of her essay? Our world would be better than what? I raise these questions not only to emphasize the lapses in Berman's reading and but also to foreground the importance of acknowledging the unspoken trauma frequently present in even the most quotidian practices.

Diane tells the story of her childhood trauma in her first essay; however, her teacher overlooks her references to therapy, dissociation, medication, idealization and displacement. He fails to interpret elision as traumatic statement of fact. He needs her second essay to answer questions that he does not infer from the first. To Berman, Diane's second essay is therapeutic. However, to Diane, therapy occurs through the act described in the first. She actually wrote a trauma narrative on a topic that Berman considers "far from being a risky paper topic" before she disclosed anything specific about being molested by a family friend — an experience, incidentally, from which she returned to her grandmother's kitchen, the site of her memories of the pleasure of bread making and of the stress associated with keeping the secret.

Diane's second essay, not the first, although it too discloses trauma, presents the type of subject matter Swartzlander, Pace, and Stamler point to in "Requiring Students to Write about Their Personal Lives."

Although they do not advocate an end to writing assignments that ask students to investigate their personal lives, Swartzlander, Pace, and Stamler insist that “professors should be careful not to foster the perception that students must ‘deal with’ their emotional problems in their writing” (B1). Berman disagrees, arguing that writing about past traumas transforms students and presents them with the opportunity to reinterpret difficult events. Swartzlander, Pace, and Stamler do not dispute that writing can transform writers; however, their essay focuses only on the ethics of writing practices taking place in university classrooms. They question writing teachers’ misunderstanding of psychological transformation as that which occurs simply, naturally, magically when a student types and the words appear on the screen. Instead, they contend, transformation results from an internal and social struggle, typically irruptive and unpredictable. Writing can contribute to transformation, but writing does not constitute it. Writing can document transformation, but writing does not instantiate it. Finally, the act of writing and the act of transformation are not only disconnected but they are also asynchronous.

Berman contests this position, situating his disagreement within composition studies, specifically debates about expressivism and social-constructivism, rather than therapeutic disciplines. Both approaches to writing instruction are ideological, according to Berman; expressivism, an individualistic approach to writing, advancing the notion that writing the self writes the world, abuts social-constructivism, a critical and resistant approach to writing, positing the view that writing the world writes the self. Expressivism produces the personal essay while social-constructivism results in exposition; expressivism values subjective experience, and social-constructivism, the objective presentation of evidence.

Feminist compositionists, like Min-Zhan Lu who value aspects of both approaches, offer “a third possibility, where the self is used not as an end in and of itself but as the opening of a perspective that allows us to conceive of transforming ourselves with the aid of others” (243). This third approach, which is not the approach Berman adopts in his writing course, proposes that writing the world writes the self writing the world. Berman, however, considers himself an expressivist, and as such, dismisses both the evidence informing Swartzlander, Pace, and Stamler’s caution and that derived from studies of trauma and survival in disciplines other than composition. To justify the worth of his assignments, Berman contends, for instance, that he does not coerce confessions or disclosures from his students —although he did encourage Diane to write a second essay; “they simply wanted their words to be heard and believed” (167). He adds that students “risky self-disclosures [did not] result in revictimization” (167), a statement that can only reflect limited knowledge of students in his course during one semester —importantly, the semester when he was evaluating their work for a grade. Berman, clearly, has insubstantial understanding of retraumatization; Diane actually testifies to re-experiencing her childhood trauma when, after writing her second essay, she reveals:

I feel nervous and anxious as I write this essay. My palms are clammy, my mouth dry, and I feel as if I might be sick to my stomach. Recalling this incident sickens me. I feel as if this has just happened to me all over again (1).

A sensitive and caring man, perhaps, Berman’s flaw, which follows from his proclivity for bad reading, rests in the conviction that he, in the role of the writing teacher, and his course can accomplish students’ transformations in fifteen weeks that trauma therapists cannot claim for their clients over much longer periods of time. Neither expressivists nor social-constructivists should proffer such claims, according to Swartzlander, Pace, and Stamler. Although college courses can affect students, they are not the sole contexts for students to overcome childhood trauma. Students’ testimony and research evidence on the effects of trauma indicate that transformational processes are more enduring than one semester and exceed the temporal and spatial parameters of the classroom; in addition, as Berman’s reading of Diane’s first essay demonstrates, they are also not always accessible to the professor.

Even if they are, a writing teacher who is also a bad reader might miss the signs. Berman missed Diane’s,

not because her first essay was incoherent but because he wanted another story. With her second essay, she gave him precisely what he wanted. But did she write more of the truth, more of the trauma? Or is she just a more astute reader of Berman than he is of her? Is her second essay an example of better writing than the first? What kind of trauma does Diane testify to in her first essay, in her second, in her reflections on the writing of both? What form does her testimony take? Does her second essay represent transformation, and therefore risky writing, or is it, as David Bartholomae argues in "Writing with Teachers: A Conversation with Peter Elbow," an over-determined master narrative, one that we have all read before, a cliché, and therefore safe writing (66-67)? I pose these questions in order to suggest that teachers, their courses and their assignments, can be less significant to students' transformations than are students' uses of the classroom, and the transactions occurring there, as they fit into transformational narratives begun prior to and extending beyond them. Diane's second essay, in other words, might be an instance of acting out instead of working through her trauma.

## Walking in Diane's Shoes

If I was twenty years younger, in my first semester of college, and my composition teacher handed out an assignment anything like the one that Berman did, I am quite sure that I would have responded in two ways. I would have written a paper critiquing the assignment (how dare he ask us to disclose such experiences to him ) and lying (if he wants trauma, I'll give him a more outrageous story than he can imagine). I wrote undergraduate papers from these perspectives whenever I felt that an assignment was inappropriate. This particular assignment to write about a traumatic event would certainly have fit into that category. I might have written about being molested, raped, or incested, in other words, but I would have written about one of these experiences to challenge the teacher. Knowing that my essay was motivated to mock his need to view my trauma, rather than to tell a truthful story, I would have written an essay that confessed too much, that confessed too conventionally, or that confessed the truth of an hypothetical other.

I realized quite by accident, as a result of assignments like Berman's, that I did not always need to write the truth in essays for school. I only recognized the truth hiding away in every untruth, the autobiographical facts disclosed in every choice of topic, the confession folded into every close reading, the trauma weighing down every insight, later on. By that time, however, lying in writing had become a habit, a survival skill. I learned from my various experiences lying in writing for school that there is more than one way to tell an untruth. There are avoiding lies, the kinds that elide the awful reality. There were also generic lies and hyperbolic lies, stories that do not represent my truth but reproduce a truth which appeared in a movie, book, or news story and stories that push a truth beyond credulity. In the process of learning to write for school, I concluded not only that a teacher was a peculiar audience but also that writing for a grade was a peculiar exercise. Assignments required interpretation; a successful essay negotiated what the teacher wanted and what I wanted to write for the teacher to read and to grade. In the context of writing assignments, the truth was nothing more than this performance. A good writer does not need to tell any more of the truth in writing for school, I reasoned, than she is willing for the teacher to grade. The true story safely tucked away, how many times have I have succeeded in telling lies? Have the lies become the truth? What part of a lie is the truth; what part of the truth, a lie?

I tell this story, a sort of literacy narrative, and present this informed perspective on a common assignment topic in first-year composition for two reasons. First, theories of trauma support my style of resistance to the assignment. Survivors resort to lies even in extremely safe environments. The fact of grades makes school a less than safe context for survivors to tell the truth; therefore, lying would not be an unusual response to this assignment. Secondly, theories of trauma also support the notion that for a survivor of trauma an assignment to write about a traumatic event is an impossible task. Deflection, avoidance, elision, hyperbole, cliché are all among survivors' ways of writing an event that resists telling, or even sometimes recognition. A sort of lying, then, is not only a common feature of survivors' stories

but also the truth. In other words, the traumatic experience cannot be represented as the survivor's trauma because the event characteristically appears as a trace, an incoherence or temporal disjuncture, in narrative.

These two concerns compel me to raise another: did Diane write a true story of being molested by a family friend when she was a child, or did she lie? If Berman suspected that she lied, he does not admit to that suspicion. In fact, he considers Diane's second essay topic a sign of his assignment's success and of her transformation. Had I been one of Berman's students, I would have considered the essay a success if I tricked him into believing a lie reproduced the truth of my experience. Although I do not know Diane any more profoundly than I know myself, I can attest to the learned rhetorical sophistication of trauma survivors. Making use of language both to conceal a secret while appearing truthful and to reveal the truth through contradiction, illogic, exaggeration, trite prose, or sentimentality are skills that trauma survivors bring to school. As Juliet Mitchell describes in "Trauma, Recognition, and the Place of Language,"

The trauma sufferer will speak (and sometimes write) nonreflectively, wearing the mantle of someone else. That the story may be fiction and the words a lie is because the arbitrary relationship to their referents cannot be acknowledged. There is then a free circulation of signifiers in which "words tumble associatively after one another." Words are pseudosymbolic, plagiaristic imitations or metaphors in which they present rather than represent (132).

So Diane may have represented the truth of her experience in her second essay; she may also not have. In either case, a teacher who hands out an assignment asking students to write about a traumatic event in their lives needs to understand that writing an essay on this kind of topic does not produce healing, that students who have experienced trauma as may lie in writing, that those who appear to be telling the truth may not be, and that gauging the success of an assignment of this sort may not be as simple as counting the number of essays on risky topics. Finally, teachers need to realize that students' essays, especially those written by students who are trauma survivors, represent their readings of teachers and their readings of course assignments; these readings may seem self-disclosing and honest even when they are not or may seem non-disclosing and safe even as they reveal markers of traumatic history.

Berman misreads the trauma in Diane's first essay precisely because he associates trauma with a topic rather than with an effect signaled by forms of narrative or figurative codes in narrative, a misreading that trivializes trauma (Lee 9), mistaking the literal, diffuse horror of the event with its conventional, clichéd presentation. Robert Samuels, in "Teaching about the Holocaust and the Subject of Objectivity: Psychoanalysis, Trauma, and Counter-Transference in an Advanced Writing Course," misreads students' trauma for precisely the opposite reason. Samuels reports that students produce "diverse forms of resistance to thinking critically" about their own and others' trauma" (134). He considers the clichéd presentation, which Bartholomae rejects and Berman embraces, a form of denial that his course on the Holocaust aims to break down. Samuels admits that he is unsuccessful until he takes "the risk of openly discussing my reaction to the students' negative responses to the class readings and assignments" (134). Unlike Berman, who claims that students want to share their own traumatic stories and to listen to those of their classmates, Samuels is not able to motivate his students to respond to the trauma of the Holocaust in other than trite ways before he reacts to their non-reaction. Samuels does not respond directly to the trauma of the Holocaust, however; he "reacted to students' passivity by unconsciously equating them with the passive bystanders in Nazi Germany" (134).

In other words, Samuels creates a counter-transferential context in which the teacher, in the role of the object of collective transference, castigates students for their clichés about the Holocaust. As a result of equating their clichés about the Holocaust and their denial of subjective experiences of trauma, Samuels claims that he is able to motivate students to generate more honest responses to others' trauma. "There

are many risks to this type of teaching” (134) Samuels admits, as Berman also does in relation to his “pedagogy of risk” (231); however, Samuels believes that “counter-transference can play [a key role] in a writing class” (134). In both types of pedagogy, the teacher is construed as central to and in control of students’ investigations of their own and others’ trauma, and students’ learning is thought to occur through shared traumatic recognition. Importantly, however, students in Berman’s class and students in Samuels’ class are evaluated by teachers who judge the clichéd expression of trauma in contradictory ways: Berman considers trauma an event, and Samuels considers it a subjective experience.

## What is Trauma?

Although the meaning of trauma is not static, therapeutic discourse generally considers trauma a response, not a specific type of event. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, for example, Sigmund Freud describes trauma as the fright that results from unpreparedness, or surprise. Fright follows “severe mechanical concussions, railway disasters and other accidents involving a risk to life” (12). According to Freud, symptoms appear as traumatic dreams “repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident” (13), rather than as neurotic behaviors. Memories of the accident causing trauma do not interfere with waking life because, Freud speculates, “perhaps they [traumatized individuals] are more concerned with *not* thinking of it” (13).

Judith Herman refines this description in *Trauma and Recovery* when she observes that “the conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma” (1). Emphasizing the force of this conflict, Herman adds that “the psychological distress symptoms of traumatized people simultaneously call attention to the existence of an unspeakable secret and deflect attention from it” (1). Both Freud and Herman agree that traumatic events are horrible events, threatening survival. Unlike Freud though, Herman does not assume that traumatic symptoms are expressed only in dreams. Nor does she attribute trauma always to unprepared for events. Herman distances herself from Freud most significantly, however, by recognizing the conflict central to the distress experienced by traumatized individuals.

Cathy Caruth returns to *Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, interpreting Freud’s statements about trauma as theory of history. The drive to return and to depart from the scene of the event, to tell and to withhold the story, Herman’s central dialectic of psychological trauma, misses Freud’s most subtle, and perhaps most important, insight into trauma. According to Caruth, “the trauma consists not only in having confronted death but in *having survived, precisely, without knowing it*” (64). Claiming ownership of the event - that is, managing to acquire control over its effect and a sense of adequate preparation for its recurrence - would not end the experience of fright. Claiming ownership of the event and of surviving the event, however, “brings into prominent view a larger conception of historical experience” [and] of a survival exceeding the grasp of the one who survives, engag[ing] a notion of history exceeding individual bounds” (66). In Caruth’s reading of Freud, a theory of individual trauma requires also a theory of “historical violence” [and] the peculiar incomprehensibility of human survival” (58).

Herman would not necessarily disagree with this position, although her goal with *Trauma and Recovery* is “restoring connections: between the public and private worlds, between the individual and community, between men and women” (2-3), rather than producing a theory of history. To achieve connection of these sorts, though, would be an historic accomplishment for the individual and trauma studies since, Herman argues, the history of trauma studies has been characterized by “episodic amnesia” (7). *Trauma and Recovery* was written and published at a time permitting discussion of trauma. Herman attributes this episode in history to both the women’s movement, making possible public discussion of domestic, familial violence, and the movement for human rights, making possible public discussion of the human cost of global, political tyranny (4).

Unlike Caruth, however, Herman, a psychiatrist, primarily looks to history for insights into the conditions of life that contribute to individual traumatic experiences, to therapeutic intervention, to public discussions, and to local and global public health. Caruth conceives the symptoms of trauma not only in terms of individual suffering but also, even more importantly, as “bear[ing] witness to a survival that exceeds the very claims and consciousness of the one who endures it” (60). Tools for understanding survival are also historic, Caruth explains. Trauma theories today, for instance, represent survival of the Freudian psychoanalytic tradition (72). Psychoanalysis does not promise individuals simple recovery from trauma, but it does offer a mechanism for individuals to account historically for the experiences producing their fright, to see themselves as witnesses to a history, and to comprehend their survival as an historic, if enigmatic, event.

Dori Laub contends that these goals can only be accomplished if “the analyst identifies himself as a listener who can precisely recognize, and meet the victim’s silence; a listener who can recognize, in other words, and meet, ‘the gaping, vertiginous black hole’ of the experience of the trauma” (64). The specific trauma Laub refers to is the Holocaust, an historical trauma, “a watershed event,” he concludes in “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening,” which “entailed an implicit revolution in all values” a ‘transvaluation’ of which we have not yet measured the array of cultural implications for the future” (74).

Survival for Laub is cultural and historic, rather than individual. Not simply a condition to be cured, according to Laub, trauma marks survivors and their history in such a way that recovery occurs in the future, through the cultural productions of another generation. The black hole represents the space of belated and of reflective language, the space in waiting for transvaluative writing, the understanding about the past that must be conceptualized, written, and assimilated in the future. Like Caruth, Laub views trauma work as the work of making history. Psychoanalysis confronts its limits with survivors of trauma since their symptoms, as Caruth notes, bear witness to past events that cannot be fully integrated, literally or directly, into individual consciousness or cultural narrative. Laub suggests that psychoanalysis, itself a symptom of the twentieth century’s cultural trauma, serves survivors best when it functions as the space for documenting testimony, producing those texts from which future generations will write the past.

Each of these discussions of trauma follows from the assumption that horrible, life threatening events result in trauma, creating gaps in memory and, therefore, in knowledge. Although not prominent in any of the preceding discussions, this assumption rests on others: gaps in memory and knowledge are anomalous - and painful, as painful perhaps as the event responsible for producing them; if a cause can be identified, the gap should be curable; memory and knowledge can be total; and if they are, pain and suffering will be alleviated. Finally, failure to create theories structuring how and therapies competent to fill in individual and cultural memory with accurate, truthful knowledge insures continuation of individual, cultural, and global pain and suffering. The first assumption, central to contemporary trauma theory, stands alone as the point of departure for analysis of trauma in clinical settings and academic contexts.

As Linda Belau explains in her introduction to *Topologies of Trauma: Essays on the Limit of Knowledge and Memory*, “Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through: Trauma and the Limit of Knowledge,” remembering, repeating, and working-through, “indispensable for any adequate understanding of trauma” (xvii), name survivors’ struggles to make coherent knowledge. Gaps in memory are “inconsistent” with knowledge, repetition is a symptom of inconsistency expressed in a “form foreign to knowledge,” and working-through fails to assimilate the traumatic event as knowledge, “maintaining it as that which it is impossible to make into a ‘reality’” (xvii). *Topologies of Trauma* aims, as a result, to consider the “intimate relation” of remembering, repeating, and working-through (xvii), not to interrogate the assumption that something is wrong with survivors.

This question is not posed by any of the trauma theories that I have read. Although all of those I have mentioned so far verge on asking it. For instance, Freud observes that the event of survival produces ongoing trauma during waking hours. Survivors return to the scene of the traumatic event in their dreams, according to Freud, “a situation from which he wakes up in another fright” (13). “This astonishes people far too little,” he adds (13). Although Caruth recognizes, in this observation, a turn from the traumatic event revisited in dreams to the trauma of awakening and of survival, she like Freud, does not pursue the curative potential implicit in Freud’s statement that “this astonishes people far too little.” What might happen for survivors, to therapies, and in the field of trauma studies if people were more astonished - that is, accountable for the trauma-producing quality of waking life?

Although *Trauma and Recovery*, is an attempt at public education about the effects of trauma on survivors, Herman, too, veers away from implicating the public in the maintenance of survivors’ trauma. Her final chapter, “Commonality,” for example, ends with the insight that attending an interpersonal psychotherapy group can help survivors learn “that the trauma can be surmounted in active engagement with others” (235); however, the burden of initiating and sustaining relationships rests with the survivor who, as a result of trauma-focused therapy, “understands her limitations” (235). In other words, for commonality to occur, the survivor must occupy the role of self-educator and educator of others. This role requires hypervigilance, recasting a symptom that before therapy entangles the survivor in debilitating repetitions but that afterwards serves a socializing function for others.

According to Laub, even therapists need protection from survivors’ stories and the trauma they communicate. Treatment entails, for Laub, “*re-externalization* of the event” [which] can occur and take effect only when one can articulate and *transmit* the story, literally transfer it to another outside oneself” (69). The psychoanalytic context permits this articulation, transmission, and re-externalization to occur because, in this context, the survivor meets a trained and willing listener. The listener, however, is never safe from survivors’ stories; Laub contends that testimony is “a journey fraught with danger,” presenting “hazards to the listening,” that “leaves, indeed, no hiding place intact,” producing in the listener “a need, an urgency to pull back,” and that asks listeners to “bear witness to [their] own historical disfiguration” (73). “Survivors frighten us,” he adds (74), meaning that listening traumatizes the listener. Telling their stories, a crucial act of self-assertion for survivors, “paradoxically enough, constitutes as yet another threat” to listeners: their survival “embod[ies] cultural shock” (74). The peril confronting trauma therapists, transferred from survivor to therapist through testimony, produces a caution on the part of the therapist that impedes re-externalization of the event and stifles progress toward commonality. Constructed in this fashion, therapy subordinates survivors’ needs to those of the therapist; fearful of the trauma-producing effects of listening, the therapist contributes to the trauma-producing quality of survivors’ waking life.

Why do trauma therapies and trauma theories posit survivors as abnormal, toxic, and in need of help, constructing them as either those who must learn to protect others or those from whom others deserve protection? I raise this question here in an effort to initiate a shift in responsibility and in ethical focus for thinking about trauma. Is there something really wrong with survivors of child sexual abuse, criminal or domestic violence, natural disaster, physical injury, or wartime atrocity that is not even more wrong with families, communities, nations, and worlds that, on the one hand, permit traumatizing violations to occur and, on the other hand, treat survivors as if they are sick when they acts as witnesses and do not return to normal quickly enough? If survivors are sick, their illness begins not solely with the traumatic event but primarily with the conditions of survival - that is, cultural response to the ways in which witnessing takes place, to the frustration acted out around survivors because their trauma defies cure, to fear that their stories traumatize listeners, and to the notion that what survivors know isn’t consistent, familiar, or real. Theories of trauma and therapies to treat trauma fail precisely because they focus on the survivor rather than on the world to which the survivor returns.



## The Roles of Writing

Psychoanalysis has been deemed the “talking cure,” a misnomer in at least two respects. First, psychoanalysis does not promise a cure, but offers a way to read and understand experience. Second, while talking can take place in the analyst’s office, it does not always take place. Even when talking does take place, however, conversation lasts for fifty minutes or less. So how are analyst and client to account for the work performed during sessions conducted in silence; how are they to account for the work performed outside of the analyst’s office, where talking may or may not also occur?

Many therapies compensate for silent sessions, and for forgetfulness or misremembering, by encouraging clients to write regularly; clients might be asked to keep journals describing and interpreting their dreams, chronicling their activities and thoughts each day, examining conditions that produce specific symptoms, or analyzing triggers. These notebooks document clients’ work outside of the office and can be used to prompt discussion during therapy. All therapists write, too; they take notes during and after sessions. Their notes include record of conversations and of clients’ facial expressions, dress, movements, and habits in the office. As well, therapists document their thoughts about diagnosis, the progress of treatment, transference and counter-transference episodes, therapeutic goals for the future, what to remember for the next session, reading to do on related cases, and possibly the names of colleagues to consult. In addition, therapists write books and articles that describe their approaches to clinical work, present their theories for treating clients with particular diagnoses, statistically analyze the prevalence of certain disorders, or narrate case studies.

If the amount of time spent conducting an activity determines its professional value, therapy is more significantly a writing than a talking profession, a writing history, more precisely, one that engages therapist and survivor in the composing project. I make this observation cautiously, aware that much of the writing that I have described serves as necessary antecedent and postscript to the talking that, ideally, occurs during a therapeutic session. I also recognize, however, writing’s role in documenting the work of therapy and in aiding memory of events that both took place in the distant past and occurred between therapeutic sessions as well as of their evolving interpretation.

Although school is not therapy, many writing teachers approach writing as therapists do - as a technology for documenting and remembering the past and, therefore, for facilitating healing. For example, Charles M. Anderson and Marian M. MacCurdy explain in their “Introduction” to *Writing and Healing: Toward an Informed Practice* that “the healing effect of writing is” to recover and to exert a measure of control over “the past” (7). They assume, even more profoundly than therapists, however, that the act of writing constitutes, rather than supplements or informs, healing. They also assume that college students enter classes having survived “overt and covert traumas” and that “the writing they do about what they have experienced” is shaped by these traumas (2). Consequently, Anderson and MacCurdy argue, teachers need to understand the ways in which the traumatic pasts that students bring into writing classes challenge presumptions about not only the goals of higher education but also the “purposes of writing” (2). *Writing and Healing* is Anderson and MacCurdy’s response to these challenges, their “attempt to help writing teachers” recognize the trauma in students’ writing, comment and grade in appropriate ways, become aware of the effects of different traumas on writing, and ease the potential trauma-producing consequences of students’ disclosures (3). Anderson and MacCurdy do not consider students with trauma histories frightening or toxic. Significantly, professors have commonality with student survivors since, they insist, “we are all witnesses” and “we are all survivors” (5).

I do not know whether Anderson and MacCurdy are more naïve or more reflective and self-aware than the writers I have previously discussed, but this admission suggests that they are not among those people who are astonished far too little by the trauma-producing conditions of survival. In their opinion, therapies fail trauma survivors, in part, because many survivors elect not to work with therapists but

more importantly because trauma therapies have evolved out of Freud's rejection of the seduction theory (10). Freud "abandoned this position [widespread trauma among girls was correlated with a high incidence of incest] "for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was his inability to convince both himself and his colleagues that his culture could produce so many victims of sexual abuse" (9). Herman and other feminist critics of Freud share this view. However, they are not as ready as Anderson and MacCurdy to insist that trauma is a public rather than an individual condition and, therefore, requires practices that demonstrate public commitment to education about trauma-producing events, their effects, community responsibility to survivors, and ethical social change (10).

Their sincerity is convincing; their notion that writing is healing, less so. Writing appears to accomplish healing magically for Anderson and MacCurdy; "as we manipulate the words on the page, as we articulate to ourselves and to others the emotional truth of our pasts, we become agents for our own healing" (7). A quote from Richard E. Miller's "The Nervous System" presents writing as a similarly magical, healing act. Writing about his father's recovery, Miller explains, "just medicating the body is insufficient; he must also learn a new language, learn how to tell the stories that he has never told in order to escape the terrible power they have over him" (284-5 qtd. 16). Anderson and MacCurdy appear to believe that writing about trauma, all at once, just like that, "transforms stories that have never been told into texts that bear witness to lived experience "[and] become agents for personal and public healing" (16). Furthermore, they claim that "students seek out the writing classroom" because the very process of writing and rewriting invites them to tell their stories" [and] supports the healing those stories make possible" (7). The writing classroom includes first-year composition, a course that students do not usually seek out, since it is required at most colleges and universities, and that conventionally focuses on teaching exposition, rather than creating "more narratively able" students (7).

I resist the intervention of magic in the equation of writing and healing, however, not because students are placed in some writing classes rather than self-selecting them, but because both writing and healing require extremely hard work, not obviously the same hard work. If writing is healing, or if healing takes place through writing, it is, or does so, because the two processes cohere. To appear other than an assertion derived from desire, Anderson and MacCurdy need to specify how the processes of writing intersects with those of healing to accomplish the transformation of one into the other.

In his essay, "In the Future": On Trauma and Literature," Petar Ramadanovic argues against equating writing and healing because the equation is embedded in a perception of survivors that, as I have already suggested is characteristic of trauma studies, situates them at the center of the recovery effort. As well, Ramadanovic concludes, "trauma studies, based on the assumption of the possibility of the transmission [of the story of the traumatic event]" may function as a strategy of prolonging compulsive repetition and of guaranteeing *jouissance* in disaster, and hence, of obscuring a foreclosure" of trauma symptoms (209). This critical perspective, and pedagogical assumption in *Writing and Healing*, compels the survivor to repeat, to appear symptomatic, thus, satisfying the reader's/teacher's desire to see another's trauma and creating the opportunity for the writing teacher to feel instrumental in effecting student's healing. In other words, Ramadanovic identifies the conditions for canon formation while also rejecting the final writing product as evidence of working through. Writing trauma, especially for assignments in school, rather than healing, rather than symptomatic repetition, constitutes an exercise for students in pleasing the teacher. Real healing does not occur so simply, with this kind of objective in mind, when writing for a grade.

In addition, Ramadanovic explains, reading a text for trauma requires interpreting features other than the narration of the traumatic event. For instance, interpreting a literary text, such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, as on trauma, or on the specific trauma of slavery, amounts to an insufficient engagement with the text. *Beloved* "is neither a secondary copy of a 'primary' traumatic event nor a repetition which allows us to trace another, prior trauma". [because] in representing the event, the novel in effect remembers the

event as past, thus allowing the event to have a historical, and not solely an (unconscious) traumatic significance” (198).

The current state of trauma studies permits both the pedagogical and the critical assumption that narrating trauma, representing the frightening event, means that the effects have passed. According to Ramadanovic, trauma may not be what is narrated; the story may not be the object of repetition. Trauma studies needs to acknowledge these possibilities and “[come] to grips with” how difficult it is” to heal (209) and, perhaps, how illegible. Writing teachers need to acknowledge the same possibilities, or “they are likely to misread their students’ affective lives” (Worsham 234) and their written work. Since “the discourse of emotion is our primary education” observes Lynn Worsham in “Going Postal: Pedagogic Violence and the Schooling of Emotion” (216), students’ with trauma histories bring them into their courses. These histories inform students’ writing regardless of the course or the assignment; it happens not because teachers require students to write about a traumatic event in their lives but because they do so anyway.

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