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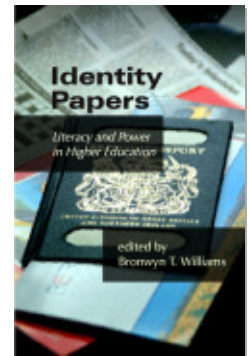
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COMPOSING (IDENTITY) IN A POSTTRAUMATIC AGE

Lynn Worsham

The philosophy one has does not depend solely on the kind of person one is. It depends more essentially on the time in which one lives and, above all, the way in which one belongs to the time.

—Ernst Bloch¹

The events of September 11, 2001 and its aftermath would seem to provide all the corroboration necessary to substantiate the claim that this is a “posttraumatic culture”—the idea, in other words, that the twenty-first century has begun the way the twentieth century ended: as an especially catastrophic age characterized by unprecedented historical trauma that has produced a pervasive and generalized mood corresponding to posttraumatic stress disorder.² To claim that we are living in a posttraumatic age does not mean, of course, that everyone is equally traumatized or suffers in quite the same way. This diagnosis of our social psychology calls attention to a collective sense of profound historical shock, to a sense that we live out our individual lives, more or less consciously, in the overwhelming shadow cast by the unspeakable atrocities of war, genocide, mass murder, and terrorism.³ Identifying what he calls “a new form of historical reality,” Hayden White (1992) points to “a profound sense of the incapacity of our sciences to *explain*, let alone control or contain” the events that constitute our epoch, and “a growing awareness of the incapacity of our traditional modes of representation to *describe* them adequately” (52). White’s examples include “the phenomena of Hitlerism, the Final Solution, total war, nuclear contamination, mass starvation, and ecological suicide.” I would also include the daily agonies caused by imperialism, racism, sexism, poverty, and crime that have been endured by generations of a vast number of the world’s population. This history implicates us all. Indeed, as Cathy Caruth (1996) argues, “History, like trauma, is never simply one’s own”; history is “precisely the way in which we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (24). In a post-9/11 world, in a world that seems more than ever to spin threateningly out of control,

our every effort to wrest meaning from senselessness only serves to bring the specter of social death, if not our own literal death, too frighteningly near (see Farrell 1998, 2, 15).

In this catastrophic age, the concept of trauma offers a diagnosis for both an individual and a social reality. Yet, trauma is also a trope, as Kirby Farrell (1992) argues, similar to the Renaissance figure of the world-as-stage. In his view, trauma serves as an enabling fiction and an explanatory tool for “managing unquiet minds in an overwhelming world” (7). In a catastrophic age, the focus on trauma has become, in other words, a “radical form of terror management.” To be sure, the concept of trauma may have explanatory power precisely because we increasingly feel, or are prepared to feel, traumatized and wounded. Representations of trauma in postmodern art, popular culture, and the news media contribute to creating what Mark Seltzer (1997) calls a “wound culture”—a culture that is preoccupied with (if not addicted to) suffering, woundedness, and trauma, preoccupied with its own suffering and sense of injury (both physical and psychic). In this context, the term *trauma* applies not only to those who *directly* suffer traumatic events but also to those who suffer *with* victims of trauma, or *through* them, or *for* them and thus live their lives as survivors of a traumatic history that *is* and *is not* their own (see Laub 1992, 57–58). In a wound culture, life is lived not as life but as survival. This culture, Seltzer reminds us, is in a very real sense both deeply traumatized *and* profoundly pathological. It is therefore in immediate need of the curative promise of both political critique and psychiatric intervention (3–5).

In this broad sense, trauma arguably forms the most fundamental rhetorical situation in which we operate as scholars and teachers of composition. I employ the term *composition* here in the familiar sense to designate the field of inquiry into writing, literacy, and discourse as well as to the product and process of writing. In this disciplinary sense, one that is more or less consciously aware of the time to which composition belongs, we may be increasingly drawn to an examination of the relationship between writing and healing; we may be increasingly drawn to pedagogies of self-disclosure and personal narrative for the curative power that they claim to bestow. I argue, however, that pedagogies of disclosure (and the concepts of identity, experience, and narrative that inform them) may serve less effectively as tools for gaining access to and integrating the unspeakable truth of traumatized subjects than as strategies of managing our own terror in an overwhelming world—or, if not terror, exactly, then a kind of free-floating anxiety that cannot be easily traced to a particular source or cause, whether personal or public.⁴

As I will suggest, the concept of trauma cannot be easily factored into existing epistemological and pedagogical projects in composition studies, for trauma presents a fundamental challenge—indeed, I would say a *fatal* challenge, as it were—to some of the field’s most cherished concepts, concepts that continue to inform what is taken for granted as the common sense of composition. In fact, I would go so far as to say that the concept of trauma itself *traumatizes* concepts that authorize epistemological and pedagogical work in the field—in particular, concepts of identity, experience, and narrative.⁵ The concept of trauma displaces these concepts and in so doing displaces us from a conceptual terrain that many compositionists might want to call “home.” What’s more, traumatic history represents a fundamental challenge to the very project of epistemology and historiography, for, as many trauma theorists routinely observe, we have no concept of knowledge or history that is adequate to understanding and representing the events that constitute our epoch (see Caruth 1996; White 1992; Bernard-Donals and Glejzer 2003). This situation implicates us not only as scholars and teachers of writing but also as subjects of our time: as subjects *in* and *of* trauma.

For this reason, I also want to employ *composition* in the broadest possible sense to designate the primary task or project of human existence. Here, *composition* refers to the effort to compose a life, a sense of identity, place, and purpose—in other words, the effort to wrest meaning from senselessness. As Toni Morrison (1998) puts it, “We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we *do* language. That may be the measure of our lives” (22). How we “do language”—or what Morrison calls “word-work”—is what individualizes each of us; it is the groundless ground of identity and the very principle of individuation. For each of us, word-work will give us all we will ever know of substance, identity, boundary, location, relation, and purpose. And word-work will serve as the measure by which each individual life will be judged and the agency through which we will belong to our time. In this context, I ask you to consider what language, word-work, can *do* in a catastrophic age—what it means to compose identity, community, and culture if our history is to be understood as the history of massive trauma. This history implicates each and every one of us, not first of all as scholars and teachers of writing, but as subjects *in* and *of* trauma.

TRAUMA: EVENT, EXPERIENCE, IDENTITY

In the original Greek, *trauma* referred to a wound or injury inflicted on the body. In much of the medical and psychiatric literature of the late

nineteenth and twentieth centuries, trauma is understood as a wound that may be inflicted on the body, but the greater injury occurs to the mind. In contrast to physical and psychological trauma, which focuses on a devastating wound to an individual, *cultural trauma* refers, as Ron Eyerman (2001) explains, to an overwhelming wound to identity and meaning, a sundering of the social fabric, that affects a group of people that has achieved some sense of identity and cohesion as a group (2–5; see also Sztompka 2000, 449). Cultural trauma does not necessarily affect or afflict everyone in a community in quite the same way; nor is it necessarily experienced directly by any or all. In a catastrophic age, the “experience” of cultural trauma is highly mediated through news agencies and popular culture; thus, it has undergone, Eyerman explains, a process of selective construction and (re)presentation by professionals who have made at least some rudimentary decisions about how the traumatic event should be (re)presented. Cultural trauma, therefore, always involves what Jeffrey Alexander calls a “trauma process” that itself involves a crisis of individual and collective identity and, in his words, a “meaning struggle” over, for example, the nature of the wound, the identity of the victims, the attribution of responsibility, and the way in which these elements will be narrativized (qtd. in Eyerman 2001, 3). (For example, since September 11, 2001, the Bush administration arguably has been quite adept at managing the trauma process so as to shore up a narrative of nation and nationalistic identity and thereby to place us right where it wanted the United States before 9/11: in a second war with Iraq.) I want to focus briefly on some of the common elements of individual and cultural trauma, foregrounding those that are most consequential for composition, construed in both its narrow (disciplinary) and broad (cultural) senses.

In its most general and contemporary definition, *trauma* refers to an overwhelming, catastrophic event, one that occurs too unexpectedly to be consciously assimilated and known. Trauma is not “locatable,” as Caruth (1996) puts it, “in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* [and experienced] in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (4). A traumatic event is one that, in its unexpectedness and horror, overwhelms every resource that the individual or community has to understand and make sense of the event, leaving one or both feeling utterly helpless in the face of a force that is perceived to be psychically, if not also physically, life-threatening. Trauma overwhelms existing schemes of knowledge and interpretation, leaving the individual or

community without the means to make the event intelligible, controllable, and communicable. Thus, the traumatic event cannot be assimilated or experienced fully at the time of its occurrence, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who has been overwhelmed by trauma (see Caruth, 1995). Holocaust survivor and psychoanalyst Dori Laub (1992) explains,

The traumatic event, although real, took place outside the parameters of “normal” reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time. The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after. This absence of categories that define it lends it a quality of “otherness,” a salience, a timelessness and a ubiquity that puts it outside the range of associatively linked experiences, outside the range of comprehension, of recounting and of mastery. Trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect. (69)

To be traumatized, then, is paradoxically to be possessed by an event that one cannot take possession of through existing frames of intelligibility, such as narrative. To be traumatized is to be possessed by a past experience that was never fully experienced as it occurred. To be traumatized is to be claimed by an experience that cannot be fully claimed and subjectivized.

The immediate response to a traumatic event may include terror, loss of control, and an overwhelming fear of annihilation. Long-term residual effects may include any of the symptoms associated with posttraumatic stress disorder: panic, a heightened startle response, sleep disorders, depression, numbing, an inability to concentrate, dissociation, chronic dread, and death anxiety (see Herman 1992; Farrell 1998, 11–12; Brison 2002, 39–40). Although the definition of posttraumatic stress disorder continues to be debated, most descriptions of it focus on the disorder as a delayed response to an overwhelming event, a response that takes the form of repeated, intrusive thoughts, emotions, behaviors, or dreams that stem from the event. As Judith Herman (1992) explains, trauma so overwhelms and disorganizes the individual’s system of self-defense that each component of “the ordinary response to danger, having lost its utility, tends to persist in an altered and exaggerated state long after the actual danger is over:”

Traumatic events produce profound and lasting changes in physiological arousal, emotion, cognition, and memory. Moreover, traumatic events may sever these normally integrated functions from one another. The traumatized person may experience intense emotion but without clear memory of the event, or may remember everything in detail without emotion. . . . Traumatic symptoms have a tendency to become disconnected from their source and take on a life of their own. (34)

In his own effort to explain psychic responses to trauma, Freud suggested that there is a protective shield or psychic skin that, under normal conditions, regulates the flow of stimuli and information, a skin that maintains bodily and psychic integrity (1961, 29–30). This protective skin is overwhelmed and even shattered by traumatic events. While there is undoubtedly a neurological component involved in forming and maintaining this psychic skin, Eric Santner argues that it is primarily composed of symbolic materials that function as a boundary between “inside” and “outside” and that serve as a rudimentary interpretive filter for incoming information. This protective “skin” is primarily *textual*, Santner (1992) argues; it is a “culturally constructed and maintained organization”—in other words, a composition of sorts—that provides the ground for constructing individual and collective identity (152). It is the text and texture of expectations and associations that make up the parameters of the “normal”; it is a composition of associations, images, expectations, dispositions, and knowledge that forms one’s sense of trust in others and in the world. In short, it is ideological through and through.

In the wake of trauma, not only identity but this psychic skin must be constructed entirely anew and in the context of posttraumatic suffering. In *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*, feminist philosopher Susan Brison (2002) recounts her own experience of rape and attempted murder. She explains that the person she was before the incident was annihilated one sunny morning in France. As she puts it, she has “outlived” herself. Trauma, she observes, “unravels whatever meaning we’ve found and woven ourselves into”; it cancels every effort to stitch the “before” and “after” together into one coherent identity, into one coherent narrative (58). For Brison, survival confronts her with the impossible task of mourning a life—her own life—that has been annihilated by trauma; recovery requires that she undertake the impossibly difficult and consuming work of constructing another sense of boundary,

identity, relation, and location, one that somehow weaves the traumatic event into the fabric of a new existence.

What's more, the traumatic event, at its most extreme, fixes the individual in what Caruth (1996) calls the oscillation of a double crisis: between the crisis of death and the crisis of survival, between the unbearable nature of the event and the unbearable nature of its survival. Caruth asks, "Is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it?" (7). She explains, "for those who undergo trauma, it is not only the moment of the event, but of the passing out of it that is traumatic; . . . *survival itself*, in other words, *can be a crisis*" (1995, 9). Holocaust survivor and poet Charlotte Delbo figures this paradoxical in-between state in these words: "I died in Auschwitz, but no one knows it" (qtd. in Brison 2002, 37). About her life after Auschwitz, Delbo writes, "life was returned to me / and I am here in front of life / as though facing a dress / I cannot wear" (47). Caught between the crisis of death and the crisis of survival, the subject in and of trauma is inextricably tied to what cannot be fully experienced, narrated, or subjectivized and thus takes up the task of existence as an "unfinished becoming," as a radicalized process of composing that which finally cannot be composed. The subject in and of trauma is, as Petar Ramadanovic (1998) argues, "culturally and politically a diasporic subject, *en route* toward subjectivity" (55).⁶

TRAUMA: RHETORIC, NARRATIVE, MOURNING

While trauma arguably forms, in some fundamental sense, the rhetorical situation in which we find ourselves today, there may be nothing more apparently arhetorical or antirhetorical than the phenomenon of trauma, for it designates an expressive limit: the unspeakable event; the event that cannot be fully claimed and experienced; the experience that cannot, will not be put into words or woven into an existing narrative; the event that cannot, will not be communicated to another; the event that language can *do nothing* with. Writing about his own experience of the Jewish Holocaust, Primo Levi (1985) remarks, "Our language lacks words to express this offense, the demolition of a man" (9). Yet, trauma is preeminently rhetorical. It places the one it claims in a paradoxical situation: on the one hand, the traumatized subject is left in profound silence without the motivation or resources to construct a narrative; on the other, the traumatized subject is left with an overwhelming need to "tell what seems untellable" and to tell it to someone who is able to listen and *hear* (Culbertson 1995, 170; see also Brison 2002, 50). "There is, in

each survivor,” Laub (1992) explains, “an imperative need to *tell* and thus to come to *know* one’s story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. . . . Yet no amount of telling seems ever to do justice to this inner compulsion. There are never enough words or the right words, there is never enough time or the right time, and never enough listening or the right listening to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in *thought, memory and speech*” (78).

Perhaps this pure rhetoricity—the occasion defined by the imperative to express and represent that which eludes expression and representation—is what attracts, and will attract, those who, especially at this moment in our history, want to articulate a close relation between writing and healing; those who quite rightly want to proceed with the confidence that their pedagogy arises from and addresses the rhetorical situation of our time. Perhaps this desire, in retrospect, accounts for the enduring attraction in the discipline of composition studies to pedagogies of self-disclosure and personal narrative. Yet, the text of trauma cannot speak through the very concepts of experience, identity, and narrative that inform most of these pedagogies. Specifically, I mean a concept of experience (or “lived experience”) as the “ground” of and authority for knowledge; a concept of identity that, however much it may gesture toward social constructionism, postmodernism, or Bakhtinian dialogism, nonetheless remains resolutely tied to liberal humanist notions of self, agency, and authentic self-expression; and a concept of narrative that is invested with the authority and appeal of “the personal” and “personal voice” as the ultimate and original frame of intelligibility. In the discipline of composition, these concepts form what I will call, following Freud, a protective shield, as it were, that undoubtedly constitutes and preserves a limited disciplinary vitality (and identity) but at great cost to the vitality of composition, understood here in its broadest possible sense. That is to say, this conceptual shield provides the very terms through which we misrecognize—and, more seriously, disavow—the crucial work that words must do in a catastrophic age.

That work is the work of mourning, which is one of two responses to trauma that Freud explores. The other is narrative fetishism.⁷ The distinction between these two modes of symbolic behavior—mourning and narrative fetishism—complicates the relation between narrative and healing in ways that are critically important for the project of composition. Let me explain.

Narrative fetishism refers to the construction of a narrative that is consciously or unconsciously designed to purge the traces of the trauma

that calls the narrative into being in the first place. Freud contrasts the use of narrative as fetish to what he calls the work of mourning—or, that arduous process of “working through,” of elaborating and integrating the reality of the traumatic event into consciousness. Narrative fetishism, in contrast, results from an inability or, more likely, a refusal to mourn that protects the psyche by emplotting trauma in a way that disavows the very need for mourning. In particular, narrative fetishism substitutes for the painful work of mourning the *pleasure* of narrative, the pleasure that this genre provides through its power to compose—and, indeed, impose—a sense of order, sequence, causality, coherence, and completion. This power allows us to imagine we have mastered an event that has occurred entirely outside the parameters of narrative meaning. When narrative becomes fetishized, narrative offers a way of avoiding the residue of traumatic events, and the emphasis shifts to the economy of pleasure that narrative provides. Once fetishized, narrative serves as a symbolic strategy for undoing the need for mourning by simulating a condition of wholeness, often by locating the site or origin of trauma elsewhere (see Santner 1992, 144). (Here, it is helpful to keep in mind that one can acknowledge that a traumatic event happened and yet, through dissociation, disavow the traumatic impact of that event.) Narrative fetishism offers a way of “managing” trauma that does not demand—indeed, that disavows the need for—the kind of “working through” that true mourning entails. Narrative, in this case, does not lead to recovery or healing. Quite the contrary, it releases one from the burden, as Santner suggests, of having “to reconstitute one’s self-identity under ‘posttraumatic’ conditions” (144).

Mourning also involves the construction of a narrative—actually, the reconstruction of a history, and, in Dori Laub’s (1992) words, the “re-externalizing of the event”: “This re-externalization of the event can occur and take effect only when one can articulate and *transmit* the story, literally transfer it to another outside oneself and then take it back again, inside” (69). Mourning involves an effort to integrate a traumatic event that so overwhelmed the individual or social psyche that it could not be integrated as it occurred. Most importantly, the story that is transmitted to another in the work of mourning bears witness not to the *meaning* of the event but to *the truth of the event*—the fact that it actually happened—and to *the truth of its incomprehensibility*, to the impossibility of constructing a comprehensible story and an adequate representation of the event (see Caruth, 1995, 153–55; Bernard-Donals and Glejzer 2003, 13). The truth of trauma, in other words, is that it transports us to the

very limit of signification and understanding, to a woundedness that defies all healing” (Laub 1992, 73). Let me offer an example that may clarify the distinction between these uses of narrative.

Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* is arguably a work of mourning and a narrative that opens up the space for mourning by confronting readers with the truth of an unspeakable event and the truth of its incomprehensibility—as Barbara Christian (1997) puts it, the unspeakable truth of “the four-hundred-year holocaust that wrenched tens of millions of Africans from their Mother, their biological mothers as well as their Motherland, in a disorganized and unimaginably monstrous fashion” (364). *Beloved* was published at a time (1987) when this unspeakable event had, as Christian argues, “practically disappeared from American cultural memory for reasons having as much to do with the inability on the part of America to acknowledge that it is capable of having generated such a holocaust, as well as with the horror that such a memory calls up for African Americans themselves” (364). While Christian does not frame her comments in terms of the distinction between mourning and narrative fetishism, her argument suggestively points to the fact that throughout its history this nation has engaged in countless acts of narration—to be found in official histories as well as in art, popular culture, and politics—that have worked together to ensure the collective disavowal and forgetting of the individual and cultural trauma of American slavery and the Middle Passage. *Beloved* together with other contemporary neo-slave narratives represent efforts to disrupt this field of discourse by proposing what is needed at this time: a “fixing ceremony”—that is, a ceremony arising from African cosmology that serves as “an act of remembrance that initiates the healing of a psychic wound that was originally inflicted by an individual and collective act of forgetting” (Christian). *Beloved* explicitly stages just such a ceremony, not only for Sethe but potentially for every reader who is willing to undertake this work (*Beloved* 101). The novel confronts readers with the fact that the work of individual and collective mourning of the Middle Passage and American slavery has yet to begin, that history is precisely the way that Americans, regardless of racial heritage, remain implicated in the history of this trauma, that we are indeed subjects *in* and *of* trauma. The novel ultimately poses a question as simple as it is consequential: How will we belong to this time?

The distinction between mourning and narrative fetishism compels us to grapple with the proposition that there is no natural or intrinsic relation between narrative and healing, even though much of the literature in composition studies on personal narrative too often suggests

otherwise.⁸ Let me mention just a couple of examples.⁹ In *Teaching Lives*, published almost a decade ago, Wendy Bishop (1997) examines the therapeutic promise of expressive writing and personal narrative, recommending that we investigate the “personal,” “therapeutic,” and “affective” aspects of our field—as if these terms (“the personal,” “the therapeutic,” and “the affective”) were coextensive with one another (143). She writes, “The analogies between writing instruction and therapy have something to offer me and something I need to offer to the teachers I train.” In their introduction to *Writing and Healing: Toward an Informed Practice*, Charles Anderson and Marian MacCurdy (2000) seek to deepen and solidify the correlation between writing and healing. They place trauma at the center of their own pedagogy and urge us to do likewise, arguing that writing about trauma “transforms stories that have never been told into texts that bear witness to lived experience; [that writing about trauma] opens confusion and pain to the possibilities of wholeness” (16). Not only do their remarks suggest the fantasy of wholeness that characterizes narrative fetishism, their remarks also suggest that traumatic experience presents itself in narrative form, that “bearing witness” is a relatively simple matter of telling that story publicly (see also MacCurdy 2000). They also suggest that listening to the text of trauma requires no more skill than the empathy the “average” college student or teacher may be presumed to possess.¹⁰

Yet, if we understand composition in the broadest possible sense, we must confront a few difficult questions: How can teachers of writing know that a personal narrative about traumatic experience fosters the work of mourning rather than substituting for this important word-work the pleasure of storytelling? Are we certain that in inviting students to construct narratives of their own traumatic experience we are not merely inviting them to fetishize narrative—thereby exacerbating their woundedness—rather than truly mourning their losses? Are we certain that we should ask or encourage our students to undertake the work of mourning in required writing courses? Is the temporal structure of the pedagogical encounter (the class meeting, the conference, the typical semester-long course) sufficiently open and enduring to make such word-work even possible? Are writing instructors sufficiently trained to be “therapeutic” listeners who are able to truly bear witness to traumatic experience, and do we have sufficient time, patience, energy, and expertise to train students to listen and bear witness to each other in appropriate and productive ways? Is our disciplinary investment in personal narrative “innocent”; or is that investment a product of a wound culture

that would have us (students and instructors alike) narcissistically pre-occupied with and distracted by our own individual injuries rather than engaged in questioning the many ways in which we are already constituted as subjects in and of trauma in a catastrophic age?

As scholars and teachers of composition (in both the broad and narrow senses that I have given that term), we have an obligation to make ourselves and our students aware of our situatedness within a posttraumatic culture. As scholars and teachers, we must become aware of how we are positioned within a wound culture, and we must adopt as a professional ethic, “First, do no (further) harm.” In other words, we must be careful not to do more harm than good by encouraging students to reinvest uncritically in an economy of narrative pleasure, an economy that is indisputably one of the central forces at work in a culture dominated by the military-entertainment complex. This economy ensures that the everyday realities of racism, sexism, and economic disenfranchisement—what I might call the “macropolitics” of traumatic experience—go unrecognized for what they are. “Narrative is one of the principal ways we absorb knowledge,” as Morrison (1998) observes, and it is “radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created (7, 27). Yet, what kind of knowledge is created and absorbed through a narrative that disavows the work of mourning and substitutes for it the pleasure of the text? What kind of subject? This question, and its answer, returns us to the question motivating my remarks: How will we belong to our time?