

# Multimodal Composing as Healing: Toward a New Model for Writing as Healing Courses

Cathryn Molloy

The course I describe here, WRTC 426: Rhetorical *Ethos* and Personal Disclosures: Explorations in Trauma Writing and Writing as Healing, asks students to explore the “writing as healing” movement in English studies and beyond in order to evaluate the efficacy of claims that writing personal narratives can heal individual pain and lead to clearer writing, thinking, and living for individuals and for communities. Students also consider trauma writing as they move toward their own theories of written emotional disclosure in diverse settings. The course grounds explorations of these topics by engaging with contemporary theories of rhetorical *ethos* and by exploring recent, related publications in health and human sciences.

## Institutional Context

James Madison University’s (JMU) School of Writing, Rhetoric & Technical Communication (WRTC) houses BA and BS degree programs for undergraduate students and small MA and MS degree programs for graduate students. Students in WRTC develop skill sets and habits of mind through which they might become “writers and technical and scientific communicators for lives of enlightened, global citizenship” (WRTC Mission Statement). In the vertical undergraduate curriculum of which this course is a part, students take a variety of courses involving, for example, language, law and ethics; medical writing and rhetoric; literacy and semiotics; digital rhetoric; teaching writing; and writing and rhetoric in the public sphere. The school of WRTC places emphasis, as well, on community-based learning, writing for non-profits, writing in electronic environments, and histories and theories of writing and rhetoric studies alongside histories and theories of scientific and technical communication. Like other programs emerging around the country, the WRTC undergraduate curriculum at JMU seeks to prepare students for worthwhile contributions to public and professional discourses of various kinds.

This course is meant to contribute to students’ programs of study by offering them space to think through how best to approach work with vulnerable writers in the community—something they all will do at least once and probably several times while in the WRTC program. WRTC offers community-based learning courses in, for example, writing in the health sciences, so this course seeks to bridge some of the more theoretical coursework with explicit preparation for work with writers in the community. Specifically, by asking

students to consider the power dynamics at play when vulnerable people are invited to “tell their stories” and connecting those conversations to the work they might do in community-based learning courses, internships, and beyond, the class attempts to bridge students’ moves from theory into practice.

### **Theoretical Rationale**

The notion that written emotional disclosures help those who have suffered from a variety of traumas and illnesses is extensively documented in experiments conducted in controlled settings; the last several years have ushered in a host of publications in the health sciences on the topic (see, for example, Duncan et al; Fogarty; Kersting et al.; Ogle). Likewise, the benefits of providing personal testimonies about illness or trauma-related life events have long been of interest to compositionists and rhetoric and writing scholars. In part, this interest stems from a concern for how best to serve student writers in diverse classrooms. Pedagogically focused pieces taking up personal disclosures and writing as healing in classrooms, in fact, were numerous throughout the 1990s and the 2000s. At one time, writing as healing was touted as the answer to the social epistemic, cognitive process and expressivist debates (see, for example, essays in Anderson and MacCurdy). Writing to heal, particularly when it is meant to address trauma, serves two purposes, say proponents: to help writers process that which muddies an inner life and to connect personal and social problems in order to advocate for important causes.

Scholars in a variety of fields have long since taken up spaces outside of classrooms where the wellness affordances of narrative disclosures regularly involve qualitative and mixed methods inquiries along with innovative programming (see, for example, Radcliffe et al.). Perhaps the most fascinating part of this more recent proliferation of interest in writing as a way of healing is the remarkable consistency among researchers who study the effects of narrative disclosure on psychological health by using experimental methods of inquiry in controlled settings, which stand in stark contrast to the largely anecdotal and abstract critical and theoretical approaches that mark the scholarship in writing and rhetoric on this topic.

Despite the growing consensus among healthcare researchers on the positive benefits of writing as a way of healing, however, less is known about what becomes of written emotional disclosures once they are shared with publics and what happens to writers’ social and intimate relationships once they begin to circulate their narratives for public consumption. There has been scant attention on the potentially problematic elements of personal disclosures for vulnerable rhetors—particularly when they are encouraged to disclose personal life events for the purposes of advocacy in circumstances in which power differentials are at play. When power is uneven, the primacy of institutionally driven ideolo-

gies infiltrate the writing scene in ways that are not always clear to the writers involved. For example, in an interview that is part of a multimodal study I am conducting with a colleague, a graduating African American student Jason (a pseudonym) spoke of how writing prompts in his social work courses compel him to divulge personal life events to his classmates. Through these prompts, Jason explains, his classmates have learned intimate details of some of his most painful memories—some involving brushes with the law. His classmates, says Jason, became preoccupied with his brutal experiences and began to bring them up in unrelated class discussions.

As Jason explains, “I’ve gotten a lot of sympathy and that’s not what I’m looking for. Like the things that I tell, and the things that I write about did happen, but I did not allow it [sic] to shape my whole life or my whole destiny or my whole life outlook. Just because bad things happened doesn’t mean I am a pity case. . . . And it’s like, ‘No I’m fine. Look!’” He reflects, “They often think, ‘this happened, so he looks good on the outside, but what’s really going on in the inside.’ And I’m like, ‘Nope. Nothing.’” Of the writing prompts that led Jason to these narrative disclosures, he muses, “So it almost seems like they have a set mold they want you to fit in to. So take your stories and make it fit.”

Writing to heal might very well be a positive movement. However, the pedagogy also has the capacity to carry with it narrowly defined, hegemonic dispositions toward trauma and recovery as well as to offer writers constricted inventional purviews within which to imagine and recast their experiences. Recently, the use of trauma studies and writing as healing in writing classrooms came under heavy scrutiny in the *Journal of Trauma and Dissociation*. In their article, “Potentially Perilous Pedagogies: Teaching Trauma Is Not the Same as Trauma-Informed Teaching,” social work researchers Janice Carello and Lisa Butler critique scholars in our field for their lack of clinical knowledge and relative naivety on the topic. As the authors bluntly put it, “students are in fact experiencing retraumatization and/or secondary traumatization in response to coursework” in writing (158), and when writing teachers use these pedagogical approaches inappropriately, “boundary and role confusion” are to blame (161). Carello and Butler suggest that trauma and personal disclosure constitute too complex a terrain for untrained persons to tread, a critique that has also come up in our own field (see, for example, Herrick; Micciche; Wood).

Likewise, Lynn Worsham offers a thought provoking critical take on personal narrative disclosure in her piece on writing in the posttraumatic age. Worsham wonders whether the “close relation between writing and healing” and the “enduring attraction in the discipline of composition studies to pedagogies of self-disclosure” rely on the “concept of experience” as the basis for “authority for knowledge,” which is “resolutely tied to liberal humanist notions of self, agency, and authentic self-expression” (177). Worsham wants readers

to think critically about narratives and the tendency for narrative fetishism to push up against storytelling and complicate its supposedly social role in knowledge creation.

Using this conversation and the disciplinary affordances of WRTC, students in this course carefully craft their own philosophies on writing as healing in order to become better prepared to work with writers in the community—in community-based learning courses, in internships, and beyond. We consider questions like the following:

- Do invitations to share personal experiences as valued forms of evidence tacitly ask writers to conform to predetermined narrative arcs that ultimately pander to powerful establishments and cut down on the possibilities for true healing and/or advocacy via story?
- Is “telling your story” a straightforward task, or is a rhetor operating under a number of conscious and unconscious pressures to produce certain kinds of acceptable narration at the expense of enigmatic, impactful and subversive storytelling capable of real attitudinal shifts?

These questions become the driving force behind the upper level special topics course I describe here.

In order to address Worsham’s concerns, the assignment sequence for this course takes inspiration from multimodal scholarship and includes both digital and traditional text-based assignments alongside field-based experiences and hybrid projects. As Jennifer Sheppard explains, “a pedagogy grounded in a multiplicity of literacies is always about more than simply providing students with the appropriate technological tools and a few skills necessary for them to use” since multimodal work presents us with “opportunities to further equip students with the literacies and rhetorical skills necessary to interact with the world in thoughtful, informative, and persuasive ways” (403).

Acknowledging the inherent richness of working multimodally, then, some of the assignments approach writing as healing through the idea of symbolic recasting, or using opaque and abstract symbols through which to convey complex and painful experiences, and multimodal assemblages, characterized by rich mixes of alphabetic text, images, and sounds, as replacements for linear, written narratives. These methods of composing encourage writers to process suffering while simultaneously avoiding the pitfalls of narrative fetishism and maintaining a stronghold over their construction of classroom *ethos*.

Students, therefore, complete projects meant to dismantle dominant narratives related to appropriate forms of healing (which often take a linear form) by using a painful event or circumstance from which they wish to heal and patching together sound, image, and text in a meaningful, nonlinear composition. This assignment attempts to minimize what Carello and Butler

call the potential for retraumatization or secondary traumatization in writing courses by asking students to withhold the literal events or circumstances that drive their compositions and, simultaneously, to reflect on the larger social and political forces at play that produce the environments in which their painful and/or traumatic experiences are possible. That is, if students were to tell their stories in linear form, their narratives might include private details that are very specific to their own circumstances. However, by collecting words, images, and sounds that they believe can recast their painful experiences, they inevitably collect universal symbols that point toward the larger forces at work in their private hurts. To illustrate, in one student's submission, she collected a wide variety of images and sounds related to misogyny, including, for example—lyrics from Robin Thicke's "Blurred Lines"; a tee shirt with the highly disturbing image of a woman being sodomized by one man while orally pleasuring another with the tagline "team work"; and sound bites from various feminist poets—in order to recast her own experiences. As her audience, we did not get the particulars of this writer's painful story. What we did get, though, was a very forceful montage of sexism, sexual violence, and fledgling efforts to thwart those brutal forces. Poignantly, this young woman's composition makes it clear that passionate acts of resistance are still no match for the pervasive misogyny in American culture.

Along with discussing important takeaways from each composition, students discuss their discomfort at having to remain curious about the particulars of each writer's exact circumstances. They confess wanting to know the story, but they also acknowledge the "potentially perilous" dimensions of that kind of sharing in a classroom. This line of reasoning leads the group to consider why they want to know private stories. How do narrative preferences develop, we ask? In order to formulate tentative answers, I ask students to patch together signs of voyeurism in contemporary life in order to write theoretical accounts of how narrative tastes might, in part, proliferate and press in on affordances (or not) for personal narration. For this assignment, students begin with similar symbolic collections of text, images, and sounds, but they distill these assemblages down to more traditional thesis-driven essays on how they believe narrative tastes come into being and how they believe these dispositions are sustained. As an intellectual exercise, this second project helps students to better theorize how the first project functions as an alternative to linear narrative accounts of painful experiences.

Students are then asked to conduct micro ethnographic inquiries within face-to-face or online settings where emotional disclosures are used for healing and/or advocacy purposes and to produce a seminar paper in which they take a position on writing as healing. In their conclusions to these seminar papers, students articulate how they might craft an approach to prompting writing in

diverse circumstances where healing vulnerable people is a goal. For example, two students observed local, open Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and concluded, in part, that they can see value in prompting vulnerable speakers to repeat empowering mantras, such as the well-known “one day at a time.”

Throughout the term, these projects are enriched by scholarship; students read interdisciplinary work on writing as healing, trauma writing and rhetorical *ethos*. If taught effectively, students might ideally go on to approach work with vulnerable people in community settings with care and attention toward the complexity of personal accounts as they circulate in local publics. At minimum, students might develop a deeper understanding of how their own acts of everyday emotional disclosure impact their public *ethos*.

### **Critical Reflection**

This course had many surprising riches when I taught it in spring 2014. Although students were skeptical of the idea of “disassembling narrative arcs” in order to create assemblages through which they would symbolically recast some remembered pain, trauma, or disappointment, their projects were astonishingly well done. One student, for example, begins his project with a voiceover of a poem he had written, followed by a video in which he uses Adobe Illustrator to show viewers the process of interpreting popular love songs from his adolescence; segments of each song play ominously in the background as his illustrations unfold for the audience. The images he constructs seem to suggest, without naming, a deeply personal set of events that led him to come to terms with his sexuality.

In the second project, students did not initially understand the connection between voyeurism and writing as healing. However, by bringing in work on false memory syndrome and creative nonfiction writers’ accounts of their own practices of truth-telling in narration, students later crafted thoughtful projects on surprising places where American cultural tastes for watching, scrutinizing and judging lurk. Some students were able to secure permission to perform field-based studies at local sites where they could evaluate how speakers make use of emotional disclosure in their attempts at healing, advocacy and empowerment; other students did similar work with online forums. Final papers revealed a range of rigorous, creative thought on writing as healing, trauma writing and rhetorical *ethos*.

All told, I was very impressed with the range of work these students were able to produce in one term and with the depth of conversation we were able to have during class meetings as a result of their efforts with the challenging readings and projects.

However, there was a glaring weakness with which we all contended during the semester: the deep divide between those who had taken the course

because they had experiences from which they wanted to heal through writing and those who had taken it because they were skeptical or even hostile toward the idea of self-disclosure and writing as healing in classroom settings. In the end, I found that perhaps neither group got entirely what they wanted from the course. Some students wanted to write more narrative accounts of their painful experiences and did not read the course description before signing up. The title, they said, made them think they would be doing their own writing as healing exercises. Once they heard other students' critical comments on the use of self-disclosure in writing for healing, they feared their classmates' reactions to their desire to write to heal in traditional ways. Other students took the course precisely because they wanted space to express their apprehensiveness about the psychoanalytic enterprise that drives the imperative to disclose personal information in narrative form in situations, like classrooms, where power dynamics are uneven, but they felt reluctant to do so since revealing such dispositions might have come across as aggressive or unkind to their peers.

At midterm, I conducted an anonymous Qualtrics survey to gauge students' evaluation of the course. Several said they were apprehensive about peer review and class discussions since they felt this divide to be present. As one student put it, "I think I would like to do some personal writing in this class and then reflect on the experience to see if it really does help or if it is just a fetishistic process." As another explained, "I feel like I have a good sense of how to judge *ethos* in others' writing pieces to heal, or what to do or avoid, but I still question if I can effectively apply that to my writing."

I too perceived tension when I posed questions in class. It seemed that some students were playing that perplexing game where they are attempting to understand what I most wanted them to think about the topic instead of openly positing their own ideas. Other students who have been highly participatory in other upper level WRTC courses were comparably very quiet. In order to mitigate these issues, I gave some flexibility with the final two projects, allowing some students to engage in theory-driven essays expressing their burgeoning understanding of writing as healing in the context of rhetorical *ethos* and their subsequent ideas on, for example, prompt design. Other students opted, instead, to try out some of the writing as healing methods that came up in scholarship in order to chart their effectiveness. Peer review groups were arranged carefully, with students grouped together who were working on similar kinds of things, and some students opted out of peer review altogether.

There was also relatively scant interest in developing a robust, nuanced understanding of rhetorical *ethos* despite intentions to the contrary. Seminar discussions were heavily weighted down with discussions of the opacity of memory; the tacit hermeneutic pressure in narrative writing prompts; the efficacy or not of writing out painful events; and ways to prompt writers that

might lead to safe and lasting healing. In end-of-term reflections, students noted, for example, “Although the class is not actually a psychology class, I learned so much about applied writing as healing and the benefits experienced by patients suffering from a wide range of mental illness and trauma issues,” and “It showed me a lot about writing as a healing mechanism, but without the mushy diary entries and stuff. It got down to the nitty-gritty material and helped me understand how writing can be therapeutic.” These outcomes were not entirely unwelcome, but I wanted students to leave with a more robust understanding of how rhetorical *ethos* as a concept challenges some claims to writing as healing. I did not, in the end, set out to teach a course that students would deem similar to a psychology class. I seemed to have stumbled into the very issue with which Carello and Butler grapple—writing instructors teaching outside of their own disciplinary purviews.

Although I tried to steer conversations back toward rhetorical *ethos* where I saw moments of its relevance bubbling up, there was a core vulnerability in the design itself that prevented this focus from coming to the fore. I realize, in retrospect, the need to spend more time on *ethos* scholarship and discussion early in the course so that the connections can happen organically later on. I also continued to research the topic on my own after I had populated a reading list for the term; I found a wide variety of scholarly activity in the health and social sciences on the topic of written emotional disclosure that I had not seen before. In the future, I imagine folding more of these readings into the course design.

In some ways, then, the limitations of the design speak to the issues that might emerge when an instructor crafts a course with a controversial topic in mind and introduces that topic to her students with critical questions from the start. Asking students to take up a long-contested pedagogical approach, adding a complex rhetorical concept to the fray, and assigning challenging digital and field-based projects on top of all of that is an overly ambitious course plan. I remember thinking, in the last several meetings, that we all seemed to be experiencing a bit of vertigo from all of the work that had been done. I wondered if the sheer frenetic nature of the course activities left them all feeling a bit confused.

In the future, therefore, I would modify the design to incorporate a four-unit approach to the fourteen-week term. The class would, then, spend a full three weeks on explorations into rhetorical *ethos*, three weeks on a sample of writing studies scholarship on writing as healing, three weeks on writing as healing work from other disciplines, and a final three week unit on memory. The final two weeks would be devoted to electronic portfolios of work with reflective introductions to the topics explored during the term and their contributions to this body of work through their projects.



Even with these limitations and plans for revisions to future iterations of this course in mind, I believe this class was a worthwhile experience for my students. The course roster included one woman who has graduated and moved on to work with an anti-trafficking program where she works with victims of sex-trafficking. Another is working as an intern at a local nonprofit organization meant to serve local victims of sexual assault. A third has secured a position with a nonprofit sexual violence prevention initiative. Several are enrolled in community-based learning courses where they will come into contact with vulnerable people. I believe the students have benefited from at least having considered the writing as healing movement in all of its complexities before taking on these positions. Moreover, I believe it is important for advanced writing and rhetoric student-scholars to engage in robust discussions on how rhetorical vantages might inform writing as healing research as well as clinical methods in unrelated fields of study; this course allows those conversations to happen.

### Works Cited

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- Wood, Tara K. "Overcoming Rhetoric: Forced Disclosure and the Colonizing Ethic of Evaluating Personal Essays." *Open Words* 5.1 (2011): 38-44. Print.
- Worsham, Lynn. "Composing Identity in a Posttraumatic Age." *Identity Papers: Literacy and Power in Higher Education*. Ed. Bronwyn T. Williams. Logan: Utah State UP, 2006. 170-81. Print.

## Syllabus

### Rhetorical *Ethos* and Personal Disclosures: Explorations in Trauma Writing & Writing as Healing

WRTC 426 Section 1

Professor Cathryn Molloy

Days/Time: Mondays and Wednesdays, 2:30 PM to 3:24 PM

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Welcome! In this course, we'll explore the psychoanalytic lineage of the "writing as healing" movement in English studies and beyond in order to critically evaluate the efficacy of claims that writing personal narratives can heal individual hurts and lead to clearer writing, thinking, and living for individuals and for communities.

We'll also explore the implications of the kinds of advocacy work (in, for example, online support groups) that rely on individuals testifying to trauma experiences in narrative arcs in order to determine (a) whether or not the traction gained for related causes are adequately weighted against potential psychic distress and vulnerability incurred by speakers themselves; (b) whether or not these points of departure for writers and thinkers lead to responsible, judicious citizenship and strong *ethos*; and (c) whether or not there is a relationship between speakers' demographic information (or social capital) and the likelihood that they will experience and/or succumb to an invitation or imperative to disclose. In other words, we'll take up questions like the following: Who is asked to disclose, in what contexts, for what purposes? Who is the audience for these disclosures, what does the speaker gain or lose through these procedures; what do audiences gain or lose through these disclosures? How do personal narrative disclosure arcs hold up to complex, nonlinear realities?

As well, we'll explore scholarly activity in the health sciences on the topic of written emotional disclosure as potentially healing in order to chart generative moments of interdisciplinary contact and conflict. In the end, we'll hope to generate a robust understanding of responsible approaches to the promising uses of writing as healing for work in the local community and beyond. We'll ground these explorations by engaging with contemporary theories of rhetorical *ethos*. Together, we'll consider the definitions of rhetorical *ethos* that contemporary rhetoric scholars make available, how these draw on and complicate ancient notions of credibility, and how the complex social dynamics at play in writing as healing

discourses are illuminated via *ethos* as a concept. Students, thus, will be invited to theorize rhetorical *ethos* by grappling with course content.

Course Objectives:

- Develop a critical understanding of rhetorical *ethos*, especially as it applies to contemporary contexts.
- Analyze and evaluate scholarly and popular writings on the value of writing and self-disclosures as mechanisms for healing bodies and minds with a particular emphasis on writings about traumatic life events.
- Compose an argument on the value of writing as a way of healing in various settings.
- Consider the disciplinary vantages that influence approaches to writing as healing prompts.

Reading List:

Collection of articles on Canvas (see schedule for specifics)

Berman, Jeffrey. *Risky Writing Self-Disclosure and Self-Transformation in the Classroom*. Amherst: UMass Press, 2002. Print.

Desavlo, Louise. *Writing as a Way of Healing*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2000. Print.

Fassin, Didier. *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Conditions of Victimhood*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2009. Print.

*Healing Words: Poetry and Medicine*. Dir. David Drewry. Perf. Peter Coyote and John Graham Pole. PBS, 2008. Film.

Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. New York: Basic Books, 1997. Print.

Pennebaker, James. *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions*. New York: Guilford Press, 1997. Print.

Grading Scale:

A	95	C	77
A-	92	C-	74
B+	89	D+	71
B	86	D	68
B-	83	F	65
C+	80		

### Final Grade Distribution:

- Project One: Dismantling Narrative Arcs project with presentation: 10%
- Project Two: Multimodal Assemblages project with Presentation (ephemeral signs of everyday voyeurism) 10%
- Project Three: Critical Evaluation of a local and/or online support or victim's advocacy group or an alternate Writing as Healing (WAH) or Trauma Writing (TW) site with presentation 10%
- Project Four: Final paper 25%
- Participation: 25%
- Reading Responses and Journal: 20%

### Tentative Schedule of Readings and Writing Assignments:

#### Week One

Tuesday	Introduction to Course
Thursday	Read: Lynn Worsham's "Composing (Identities) in a Post-traumatic Age." Response Papers Due. Project One Assigned.

#### Week Two

Tuesday	Read: Colleen T. Fogarty's "Fifty-five Word Stories: 'Small Jewels' for Personal Reflection and Teaching."
Thursday	Read: Wendy Ryden's "From Purgation to Recognition: Catharsis and the Dialectic of Public and Private in Healing Writing."

#### Week Three

Tuesday	Read: Michael Steinberg's "Teaching Composition, Writing Creative Nonfiction: A Personal Narrative."
Thursday	Read: Louise Desalvo's chapter in <i>Writing as a Way of Healing</i> . Project One Rough Drafts Due.

#### Week Four

Tuesday	Read: Desalvo's Chapter 2.
Thursday	Read: Desalvo's Chapter 3. Project One Due/Project Two Assigned.

#### Week Five

Tuesday	Read: Desalvo's Chapter 4.
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Thursday Read: Elaine Duncan et al.'s "The Effects of Guided Written Disclosure on Psychological Symptoms Among Parents of Children With Cancer."

Week Six

Tuesday Read: Michelle Payne's "A Strange Unaccountable Something: Historicizing Sexual Abuse Essays."

Thursday Read: Elizabeth Loftus' "Creating False Memories." We'll screen Loftus' TED Talk, "The Fiction of Memory."

Week Seven

Tuesday Read: Charles Anderson's "Sutures, Stigma, and the Pages that Heal."

Thursday Read: Gerard Hauser's "Attending the Vernacular: A Plea for Ethnographic Rhetoric." Project Two Drafts Due.

Week Eight

Tuesday Read: Jeffrey Berman's *Risky Writing*, Chapter 1.

Thursday Read: Berman's Chapter 4  
Project Two Due/Project Three Assigned.

Week Nine

Tuesday Read: Janice Carello and Lisa Butler's "Potentially Perilous Pedagogies: Teaching Trauma Is Not the Same as Trauma-Informed Teaching."

Thursday Read: Anette Kersting et al.'s "Internet-based Treatment after Pregnancy Loss: Concept and Case Study."

Week Ten

Tuesday Read: Berman's Chapter 7.

Thursday Read: Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery*, Chapter 1.

Week Eleven

Tuesday Read: Herman's Chapter 6.

Thursday Read: Herman's Chapter 9.  
Project Three Drafts Due.

Week Twelve

Tuesday Read: Herman's Chapter 10.

Thursday Documentary Film Screening, *Healing Words: Poetry and Medicine*.  
Project Three Due; Project Four Assigned.

### Week Thirteen

- Tuesday Finish and Discuss Documentary Film.  
Thursday Read: Melissa Goldthwaite’s “Confessionals.”

### Week Fourteen

- Tuesday Read: excerpt from Didier Fassin’s *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Conditions of Victimhood*.  
Thursday Read: excerpt from James Pennebaker’s *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions*.

### Week Fifteen

- Tuesday Read: Erica Meiners and Rovertto Sanabria’s “On Lies, Secrets, and Other Resistant Autobiographic Practices: Writing Trauma out of the Prison Industrial Complex.”  
Thursday Read: Michalinos Zembylas’ “Making Sense of Traumatic Events: Toward a Politics of Aporetic Mourning in Educational Theory and Pedagogy” and Tara K. Wood’s “Overcoming Rhetoric: Forced Disclosure and the Colonizing Ethic of Evaluating Personal Essays.”

### Assignment Descriptions:

#### *Dismantling Narrative Arcs Project with Presentation*

This project asks you to tell a story about your life—one, perhaps, that reiterates some event or symbolically represents some aspect of your life from which you wish to heal. However, instead of telling us a story about what happened and how it felt, and instead of offering an anecdote that illustrates the issue, you’ll create a meaningful and engaging assemblage to share with the group.

Rhetoric and Writing scholar Lynn Worsham explains that the assumed “close relation between writing and healing” and the “enduring attraction in the discipline of composition studies to pedagogies of self-disclosure” rely on the “concept of experience” as the basis for “authority for knowledge,” which might resemble social epistemologies, but is nonetheless “resolutely tied to liberal humanist notions of self, agency, and authentic self-expression” (177).

As you know from the course description and from our first class meeting, we’ll read various perspectives on the connection—inherent/natural or not—

between writing and healing. Most of these texts will take up writing as healing in a way that suggests *narration*; many will suggest an underlying trauma from which one might hope to heal.

Worsham wants us to think critically about narratives and the tendency for narrative fetishism to push up against storytelling and complicate its supposedly social role in knowledge creation. Critical questions emerge from her provocative essay, such as: Do narratives intended to heal actually generate narcissism? Do narratives intended to heal help writers avoid the difficult work involved in actually addressing their emotional problems?

I am, therefore, asking you to push back against narrative arcs—to dismantle them—and to explore the possibilities for giving an account of your life in a nonlinear and more opaque manner. In order to do so, you'll craft and curate a collection of sounds, images, text, and video to symbolically recast some issue or event from which you wish to heal. Your project, which you'll present to the rest of us, will keep us all intrigued and guessing. It will allow you to reveal only as much of your personal life as you wish. In the end, we'll want to discuss whether or not composing the project was a meaningful experience for you as well as consider the impact the project makes on your audience—the rest of us.

#### Evaluation Criteria

- The writer uses some combination of sound, image, text, and video to create a meaningful assemblage.
- Although the exact circumstances underlying the project are left opaque, there are overarching themes that emerge from the collected items, and these are arranged in a meaningful way.
- The presentation is approximately five to ten minutes-worth of material and is clearly polished and ready for an audience.

#### *Multimodal Assemblages project with Presentation (ephemeral signs of everyday voyeurism)*

A prepared talk punctuated by multimodal artifacts, this second project asks you to gather a number of disparate items in order to assemble a working definition of voyeurism in contemporary American life. If your musings do not quite reach a definitional stage, perhaps you'll keep things tentative and simply meditate on the concept in an experimental spoken essay.

In either case, the collection you assemble will be entirely of your own choosing, and the definition or musing you offer will have this same uniqueness.



However, as a class, we'll want to come to some conclusions on how these shades of voyeurism inform the narrative imperatives that are handed down to those for whom writing is touted as a way of healing from personal hurts/ from traumas. We'll ask: in these intimate exchanges, who benefits more, the speaker her/himself or the audience?

You can “assemble” a number of disparate items to discuss: personal observations, popular culture artifacts, scholarly texts, literary works, ephemera, etc. Think of your collection as offering the rest of us a set of textures of voyeurism you notice in everyday life/in academic culture/in literature/in popular culture.

Consider the following questions to get started:

- Is voyeurism only about sex/sexual gratification? If not, what else is it about?
- Some forms of surveillance are meant to protect individuals from harm/vulnerability. What else is at play in surveillance?
- What forms of looking/watching do you notice in your everyday life?
- How does gossip fit into this thorny issue?

We will begin to discuss this experimental assignment in class. Conceive of your piece as potentially unfolding in discrete but related sections. This assignment can be composed in academic prose or experimental creative nonfiction.

### Evaluation Criteria

- Writer has prepared approximately five to seven pages of compelling prose that address instances of voyeurism.
- Writer's delivery of her or his work is convincing; listeners understand the connections between the items the writer brings to their attention and the concept of voyeurism. The analyses of the various items given are creative and compelling.
- Images and other multimedia choices are clearly related to the talk as written and enhance rather than distract from the written talk.

### *Critical Evaluation of a local and/or online support or victim's advocacy group or an alternate WAH or TW site with presentation*

Now that we've been reading quite a bit of writing as healing scholarship from various fields, it makes sense to start to examine some real-world applications of writing as healing strategies. In order to do so, identify an online or actual support or advocacy group or site—one that has a clear relationship to writing as healing or to the use of written or spoken emotional expression for healing.

Decide in advance: what are the criteria you'd use to judge whether or not this group or site's use of writing as healing and/or written emotional disclosure is effective or appropriate? Which readings, which conversations in class, most influence those criteria? Make a bulleted list of your criteria. Next, collect data as an ethnographer might—take copious field notes, save artifacts, take photographs and screenshots, etc. Of course, all of these activities require you to secure permission from the sites' directors and from participants.

Using your data, judge the group or site against the criteria you've outlined, and craft your evaluation. Your conclusion should address the takeaway: What do you want your readers to understand or conclude? What might those interested in writing as a way of healing learn from your observations and insights?

### Evaluation Criteria

- Writer has chosen an appropriate site for research—one where writing as a way of healing and/or written emotional expression is used. Appropriate measures have been taken to secure permission from site directors and participants.
- Writer makes compelling connections between the observation and the writing as healing scholarship we've considered this term.
- Writers' analyses of data reveal creative thinking and a clear contribution to conversations surrounding writing as healing.

### *Final Paper*

As we approach the final phase of our work together, it is time for you to begin crafting your contribution to this topic, in the form of a ten to fifteen page thesis-driven essay that takes up one or more of the questions with which we began the course. Please review the questions that appear in the course description and the notes you've taken on readings and during class. Compose a proposal for your piece and be prepared to meet with me to discuss its development.

### Evaluation Criteria

- Writer addresses the course questions with which we began the term in a meaningful essay through which her or his contribution to the topic of writing as healing is clear.
- Writer makes judicious use of the various readings we've considered over the course of the term in order to enhance the essay.
- Essay is engaging and uses rich examples to enhance the claims the writer makes.

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