

**AWP 2020 Presentation // Mapping the Edges of Our Wounds: A Writing  
Workshop on Anti-Restitution Narratives & Sexual Assault**

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Participants: Joyce Meier, Sarah Klotz

The following is a Lecture and Writing Workshop concerning sexual assault, the importance of anti-restitution narratives, and institutional rhetoric concerning victims/survivors and their stories. The Workshop was designed to help other victims/survivors process their experiences, but to also allow space for non-victims/survivors of assault to contemplate their own difficult experiences and consider how processing these experiences via poetry can help them empathize with others who have experienced different forms and degrees of trauma.

Since cultural and institutional rhetoric plays an important role in how victims/survivors feel about themselves, the presenters—all current or previous faculty at Michigan State University, a university that has been rocked by recent sexual scandal—believe that institutions need to continue addressing the way we talk about assault and survivorship, as these institutions also take initiative to continue the conversation on sexual assault and cultural change.

Crucial to finding the way is this: there is no beginning or end.  
You must make your own map.

*from "A Map to the Next World" by Joy Harjo*

## Outline // Mapping the Edges of Our Wounds

- ❖ Video presentation of “Victim-ed in Five Acts”
- ❖ Participants complete Parts 1 & 2 of Writing Workshop
- ❖ Introduction on Institutional Rhetoric & Cultural Change
- ❖ Summary of Lecture
  - Lecture is included with this outline. Please read entire Lecture *before* attending this event. We wish to make more room for writing during this time.
  - Conclusion on how workshops such as this can aid victims/survivors (and others experiencing or wishing to better understand personal trauma) and propel cultural & institutional change
- ❖ Participants complete Parts 3, 4, & 5 of Writing Workshop
- ❖ Time provided for participants to share out what they have written with other participants
- ❖ Floor opened for participants to comment or ask questions of presenters

## // Lecture // Mapping the Edges of Our Wounds // by Kimberly Ann Priest

I use the word "Victim" in the title of the audio we listened to as part of this workshop. I made a conscious choice in doing so even though the popular terminology for someone who has survived a traumatic event is "Survivor."

My decision to use the word "Victim" is guided by my conviction that "Survivor" is a cultural impulse toward a *restitution narrative*.

To be a survivor, according to the Oxford English Dictionary online is to be:

- A person, animal, or plant that outlives another or others; one remaining alive after another's death, or after some disaster in which others perish.
- *spec. in Law.* One of two or more designated persons, esp. joint-tenants or other persons having a joint interest, who outlives the other or others; a longer or the longest liver.
- *colloq.* One who has the knack of surviving afflictions unscathed.

While it is true that a trauma survivor remains alive after a traumatic event, and while it may be equally true that he outlived others who experienced the same trauma, it is doubtful that he is 'unscathed'; in fact, it may be argued that some *part* of his person no longer lives after the trauma. For instance, a limb may be lost or, as in the case of psychological trauma, a memory lost or compromised.

A restitution narrative aims to resolve an experience by fantasizing that 'everything is fine' after a traumatic or difficult event has occurred. In such a narrative, it is not acceptable—or even believed—that a wound may be left unhealed, a relationship permanently damaged, or a traumatic experience un-survived.<sup>1</sup>

The restitution narrative concerning a 'survivor' of sexual trauma typically asserts that 'everything is fine' because the assault is over and the assaulted has entered therapy which will, fantastically, completely undo any destruction the traumatic act has done. This is ludicrous; no one can predict if or how much a sexual assault survivor will recover from their experiences. In fact, I would argue that healing or recovery should not even be a specific goal.

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<sup>1</sup> Frank, Arthur. *The Wounded Storyteller*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 1995. pg. 77-84

In the case of sexual trauma, I believe the un-survival narrative—also known as the ‘anti-restitution’ or ‘chaos’ narrative—is actually closer to reality and its acknowledgement imperative to a victim’s emotional well-being. In *The Wounded Storyteller*, Arthur Frank defines chaos stories as having no “sequence” or “causality” and revealing “vulnerability, futility, and impotence” as well as the fact that “any of us could be sucked under”.<sup>2</sup> Referring to Holocaust stories, he states that there is a “hole in the narrative that cannot be filled in or. . . sutured”.<sup>3</sup> **“The story traces the edges of a wound,” he continues, “that can only be told around”.**<sup>4</sup>

But it is this *telling around* the wound that, over time, with distance and reflection, becomes *narrative*—the *anti-restitution* or *chaos narrative* that intentionally chooses to examine the edges of wounds with all of their rawness and agony is a story line in and of itself that will eventually become a quest to discover what can be gained, learned, or created from the trauma.<sup>5</sup> This is what Gregory Orr refers to when he speaks, generally, of writing poetry as a means of survival. Using a doorframe as a metaphor, Orr explains that the poem serves as a place of transition and safety. He likens the rectangular page with its poem to a doorframe that provides stability during crisis, such as an earthquake, and maintains that victims pass through a trauma by translating physiological or psychological affect into imaginative narratives.<sup>6</sup>

The initial chaotic “disclosure,” he asserts, has the ability to “mobilize healing powers by allowing individuals to speak or write about painful, taboo subjects.”

Orr’s conclusions are backed by studies published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* which examined “the effects of writing on people with chronic illness.” The study concluded that test subjects who wrote about painful incidences in their lives actually experienced the most significant improvement to their health in subsequent medical exams.<sup>7</sup> These studies demonstrated that the act of “translating experience into language is empowering.”<sup>8</sup> Orr states that this empowerment begins when silence is broken by a progressive disclosure starting with blurted speech and moving from journaling to memoir, and ultimately, to poetry. Orr argues the value of poetry, in particular, to this empowerment, especially because it becomes an art object with both aesthetic and auditory value.

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<sup>2</sup> Frank, pg. 97

<sup>3</sup> Frank, pg. 98

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

<sup>6</sup> Orr, Gregory. *Poetry as Survival*. University of Georgia Press: Athens, GA 2002. pg. 51-53

<sup>7</sup> Orr, pg. 90-91.

<sup>8</sup> social psychologist James W. Pennebaker, cited in *Poetry as Survival*, pg. 89.

Culturally, however, we are still uncomfortable with anti-restitution narratives because, as the poems recited in the video demonstrate, they do not proclaim that 'everything is fine.' On the contrary, they imaginatively trace the edges of a wound; even more than that, they ask us to examine carefully and reflect on how the narrated wound is understood in light of our own wounds. We are asked to participate in the drama.

Chaos narratives are specifically difficult because they are agonizing and wordless; they solicit a reader's or hearer's response. Raw, agonizing and wordless, and denying the fantasy of a restitution narrative, they are the first step toward acknowledging grief after trauma. Initially, this chaos is blurted or unable to discover its language. Both Frank and Orr insist that this raw disclosure is part of the process toward rediscovering self and constructing a communicable narrative.

*Healing* is not the goal of this disclosure since, like the word 'survivor,' *healing* suggests an ending point, an ultimate goal that satisfies our need for restitution. But this goal diminishes, even negates the lifelong grief and consequences born by a victim of a trauma.

In fact, I would argue that our noun-driven language—which assigns labels to life events and persons as they are represented by these event—actually works against an individual's need to embrace personal *process*, as well as allowing the idea of process to include experiences we consider, culturally, to be negative. As Megan Devine states in her book *It's Ok That You're Not Ok*, when it comes to the wounds left by grief and loss, "(t)here is not going back. There is no moving on. There is only moving *with*: and integration of all that has come before, and all you have been asked to live," (169).

In other words, painful or traumatic life experiences become part of us. They are never made "fine" according to a restitution definition; we are only made different.

Language that best communicates this process of integration in which a wound becomes an integral part of the mind, body, and emotions would be verb-driven. When individuals define themselves as persons who have experiences, they can say things such as *I have been victimized. I may be victimized again. This part of me survived. This part of me did not survive. I am surviving, but I am also experiencing permanent alterations. I am grieving. I am finding beauty in the pain. I am wounded and this will never change. I am learning new things about my past victimization. I am finding new ways to cope and survive.* And the list goes on and on. . .

But notice, the individuals are only defined by "I am." Everything that comes after is an indication of where they are in a process or moment of life. Verb-driven language that discards labels in favor of experiences and activities allows those experiencing the

repercussions of a trauma to integrate grief, shape their own identities (including identification as someone who has been victimized or as a victim), and throw off the pressures of achieving a specific restitution-focused goal.

When we allow victims to name themselves as such, honestly acknowledging the intensity of their grief, and honoring chaos stories as stories grounded in reality, we allow victims to be cared for<sup>9</sup> and multiply the tools necessary to imagining and honing chaos narratives into narratives that are imbued with a vitality and beauty of their own. Narratives that invite us to *sit with* the traumatic experience and its consequences. Such is the nature of poetry that makes art of agony and loss.

But this quest to appreciating the art that can arise from the voices of sexual assault victims begins with a personal and cultural respect for the victim's grief and its chaotic expression, suppressing the impulse to see their pain as something to eradicate and their expression as something to fix, avoiding our desire to "rush [them] to move on"<sup>10</sup> or denying their chaos—a response that only "makes its horror worse"<sup>11</sup>

To communicate what Devine states to victims at the beginning of her book:

Here's what I most want you to know: this really is as bad as you think.

No matter what anyone else says, this sucks. What has happened cannot be made right. What is lost cannot be restored. There is not beauty here, inside this central fact.

Acknowledgement is everything.

You're in pain. It can't be made better.

The reality of grief is far different from what others see from the outside. There is pain in this world that you can't be cheered out of.

You don't need solutions. You don't need to move on from your grief. You need someone to see your grief, to acknowledge it. You need someone to hold your hands while you stand there in blinking horror, staring at the hole that was your life.

Some things cannot be fixed. They can only be carried.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Frank, pg. 109

<sup>10</sup> Frank, pg. 110

<sup>11</sup> Frank, pg. 112

<sup>12</sup> Devine, Megan. *It's Ok That You're Not Ok*. Sounds True, Boulder, CO, 2017. pg. 3.



Glass  
Wound

Cloud  
Wound

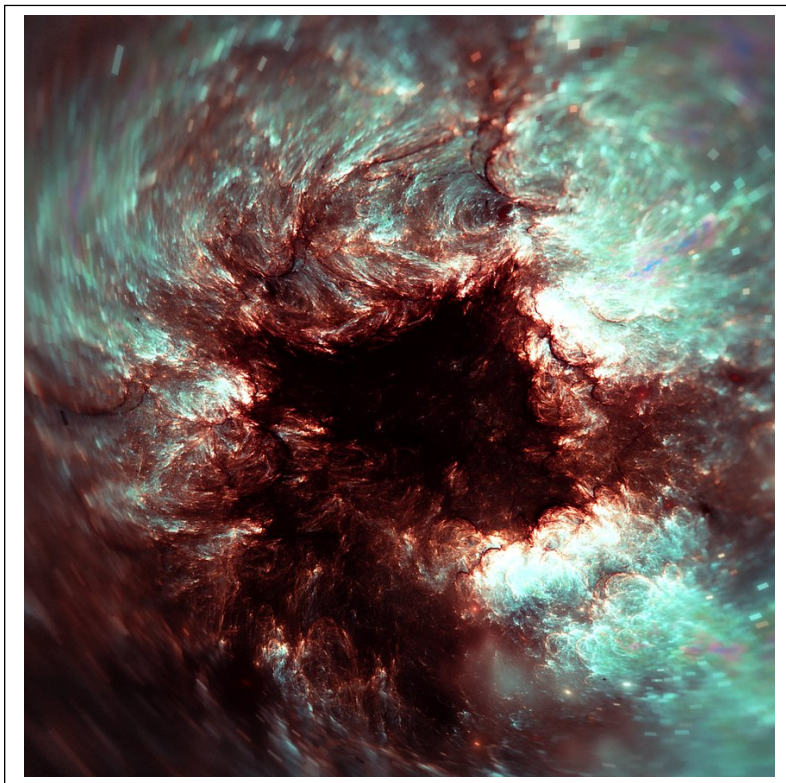






Tree  
Wound

Solar  
Wound





## // Writing Activity // Mapping the Edges of Our Wounds

In *Poetry as Survival*, Orr argues the value of poetry, in particular, to a victim's healing process. It is an art that allows for disclosure and initiates emotional stabilization; but, notice, it is also *an art*. As such, it is a communicative vehicle of shared humanity created for public exposure and mutual interpretation that transcends raw experience—the chaos narrative—and become *art*: objective, questing, and allowing the reader avenues into the author's experience from a variety of perspectives and angles.

In the following activity we will practice these moves.

### Part 1

Choose one of the photos in this packet and list all of its physical attributes using nouns only. Make a list of at least twenty words or phrases.

### Part 2

Answer this question: What does grief, loss, or anger feel like? Answer for one of these emotions. Try to write a whole paragraph to answer this question. Do not attempt to be poetic. Simply make statements about how the emotion feels physically or physiologically.

### Part 3

A prose poem straddles the line between poetry and prose. While it is shaped like a paragraph, it uses formal qualities of poetry such as internal rhyme, unconventional punctuation (or no punctuation), and metaphor to convey narrative or emotive expression.

Rewrite your response to Part 2 by replacing words or phrases in your sentences with items listed in Part 1, turning as many of the nouns into verbs as possible.

### Part 4

Using the results of completing Part 3, rewrite your prose poem to tell the 'story' of the wound in the photo. While doing so, replace all punctuation with a / or // and use the photo's title as the title of your poem (ie. "Solar Wound" or "Glass Wound").

### Part 5

Find a partner and read your respective finished poems.

## Generative Workshop Poem Example // Mapping the Edges of Our Wounds

### Part 1 (using Glass Wound photograph)

Pavement  
Cave  
City lots  
Eye  
Spider legs  
Scribbles  
Doodles  
Knives  
Ice  
Projector  
Window  
Sun rays  
Cuts  
Loose hairs  
Lake  
Layers  
Telescope  
Clouds  
Pen  
Ink  
Photograph  
Outlines

### Part 2

It feels raw and hollow. I scream silently when I'm grieving. Like a backwards scream and my gut inverts and my shoulders slump. Usually I can't even narrate what I'm grieving I just know the pain of it. Like when I first left my children when they were young adolescents and didn't know when I'd see them again. It was a horrible pain. I remember it slamming into me quite suddenly before I could even name the source of the pain. I remember balling up in my bed and almost never leaving it for seven days. I

remember sweating and shaking. Screaming “no, no, no.” Asking for my mom who, due to a stroke, is no longer able to communicate with me. I remember feeling that loss too, quite suddenly, and realizing that I had never had the opportunity to grieve that either. It was washing over me all at once. That’s what grief feels like: powerfully intrusive and hollow. It seems never-ending and just like it might kill you dead.

### Part 3

**Pavement** feels raw and hollow. I **cave** silently when I’m **knifed**. Like a backwards **city lot** and my **lake** inverts and my **scribbles** slump. **Sunrays** can’t even narrate what **ink**; I just know the **photograph** of it. Like when I first left my **outlines** when they were young adolescents and didn’t know when I’d see them again. It was a horrible **telescope**. I remember it slamming into me quite suddenly before I could even name the **eye** of the pain. I remember balling up in my **clouds** and almost never leaving it for seven days. I remember sweating and shaking. Screaming “no, no, no.” Asking for my **cuts** who, due to **layers**, is no longer able to communicate with me. I remember feeling that loss too, quite suddenly, and realizing that I had never had **loose hairs** to **window** that either. It was **icing** over me all at once. That’s what grief feels like: **doodles** and **spider legs**. It seems never-ending and just like **a projector** it might kill you dead.

### Part 4

#### **Glass Wound**

**Pavement** raw and hollow // **caving** silently when **knifed** // a backwards **city lot** or a **lake** that inverts // **scribbles** slumped // **Sun rays** that can’t narrate **ink** // just **photograph** // leaving **outlines** / young adolescents // a horrible **telescope** // slamming quite suddenly before naming its **eye** // balling up into **clouds** / never leaving for seven days // sweating / shaking // *no, no, no* // **cuts** who, due to **layers**, no longer communicate // quite suddenly / **loose hairs windowed** / **iced** over // **doodles** and **spider legs** // a never-ending **projector** killing her dead.