

**From Walls to Windows: Healing through Self-Revision  
in Dorothy Allison's Nonfiction**

Christine L. Massey

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Chair

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## ABSTRACT

In the following pages, I explore the connection between recovering from trauma and autobiographical writing. Using Dorothy Allison's nonfiction, various trauma theorists, and my own experiences writing nonfiction, I show how vital the role of writing the trauma is to the trauma sufferer. Trauma negatively effects identification with the self and causes memory of the event to become fragmented, instead of following the narrative form of other memories. This negative sense of self and the incoherence of traumatic memories disallows the trauma sufferer to make sense and come to terms with painful events. Writing the trauma can be a way of formulating it into a coherent narrative. Writing can organize the disorganized pieces of traumatic memory; once a narrative is created, understanding of the event can begin, and emotional recovery can occur.

While writing the trauma story is imperative, the trauma victim must first overcome roadblocks which prevent telling the tale. Telling can be difficult and painful, and I explore many of the aspects which prevent telling. I argue that the need to tell becomes so strong, not telling is no longer an option, as Allison continually proves in her work.

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## INTRODUCTION

Dorothy Allison on storytelling:

“Two or three things I know, two or three things I know for sure, and one of them is that to go on living I have to tell stories, that stories are the one sure way I know to touch the heart and change the world” (Two or Three Things I Know for Sure 72).

### Self-Disclosure

The act of disclosing traumatic events for healing purposes is not a new phenomenon. From talk therapy to talk shows, contemporary culture is familiar with the notion of personal disclosure. As Eugenia Georges in “A Cultural and Historical Perspective on Confession” contends, “[t]he disclosure of deeply personal topics as a therapeutic technique is an entrenched and long-standing feature of Western culture” (11). While some methods of disclosure are more healing than others, one thing is certain—humans seem to have a need to confess, prompting Michel Foucault’s description of us as ‘confessing animals’ (qtd. in Georges 13). We are both driven to confess and attracted to others’ confessions, a probable and partial explanation for the surge of popularity of the memoir or autobiography. If you have ever written your deepest feelings in a journal or diary, or felt compelled to speak to a trusted friend or family member about some emotional disturbance, then you have participated in the act of self disclosure. After this disclosure, it is probably fair to say that you felt better about whatever was bothering you. Drawing on Foucault, Georges maintains

[d]isclosure as a method of self-knowledge can be traced at least as far back as the Stoic philosophers of the first two centuries A.D. For the Stoics, daily inscription of one’s thoughts and actions in diaries, journals,

and letters was a means of knowing one's self in order to overcome flaws, and refashion the self according to a specific ethos or model. The objective of this reflective process was both moral and medical well-being, and ongoing attention to health maintenance was one of the significant features of contemplative self-disclosure. (13)

In the following pages I will explore the connection among trauma, emotional recovery, and autobiographical writing—a prevalent form of self-disclosure. Like many memoirists and trauma theorists, I believe in the healing effects writing has for those impacted by traumatic events. For many trauma survivors, writing becomes salvific; writing can lead to insight and clarity after suffering from trauma. When one writes the self, as autobiographers do, the focus is often events in one's life which have had an affect on identity formation. Writing the self, or writing to understand and inform our identities, reminds us of our complexities and our value, and can be especially beneficial for those who have suffered trauma. This kind of writing can give a voice to the voiceless, to those who feel silenced by psychologically painful events. Whether this silence is self-imposed or socially demanded, the effect is the same: an alienation which damages and fragments identity, and keeps the wounds of trauma open; though intermittently suppressed, trauma often presents itself and continues to negatively impact the already damaged psyche of the trauma sufferer. Kristin M. Langellier points out in her article "Personal Narrative, Performance, Performativity" that "[p]ersonal narrative is a performance strategy with particular significance for socially marginal, disparaged, or ignored groups [. . .]. Personal narrative as cultural performance has transformative power to assert self-definitions about who matters and what matters: the existence, worth

and vitality of a person [. . .]” (134). After trauma, identity is negatively affected and self-worth needs to be reestablished, an undertaking that many autobiographical writers attempt.

While self-disclosure of the personal, in some form, is not new, the genre of autobiography has become an increasingly popular mode of communication for marginalized groups. Vivian Gornick, in an effort to arrive at an answer to the question “Why Memoir Now?”, the title of her short article, conjectures that the recent surge of memoir’s popularity, particularly those authored by groups on the outskirts of society, is the result of “[. . .] thirty years of politics in the streets [which] have produced an outpouring of testament from women, blacks, and gays that is truly astonishing” (1). The recent surge in memoir popularity reflects a changing political atmosphere, where entire groups of people who once experienced mass silencing now feel it is their right to express their experiences in writing, to verbalize their lives in a way that validates them personally and before society. It is especially important for groups outside the societal mainstream (i.e., white, male, straight, middle-class) to feel authorized to write their stories. Often this authority comes slowly and painfully, and the writing may come first; beginning to write may help writers feel authorized to continue telling their life stories.

Dorothy Allison adds her name to the long list of memoirists with her 1995 memoir Two or Three Things I Know for Sure. In 1994, she writes Skin: Talking about Class, Sex & Literature, a collection of autobiographical essays, many composed earlier and published elsewhere, but it is not until 1995 that Allison tackles the traumas of her life in memoir. In her stunning memoir Allison constructs a personal account of the poverty, incest, and physical abuse she endures as a child growing up in Greenville,



South Carolina. Acute in its brevity and penetrating in its revelations, it is a text which draws the reader into Allison's world of intense self-disclosure. The essays in Skin are also unabashedly personal, and range in topic from her family to her relationships with women to herself as an author. While Two or Three Things I Know for Sure is Allison's first and only memoir, all of her writing has had an autobiographical tinge to it.

For those who endure traumatic events, a compulsiveness can occur, which forces them to write the same tale in different ways. This compulsion to write of trauma is seen in Allison's work, both in her fiction and her nonfiction. From her acclaimed novel Bastard Out of Carolina to Trash, a collection of short stories, Allison has grappled with the topics of poverty and incest, something with which she is painfully familiar. Timothy Dow Adams, in his essay "Telling Stories," conjectures that the reason for Allison's decision to represent her trauma initially in fiction has to do with the "difficulty of telling such a humiliating story through autobiography" (1). While this may indeed be the case, a more significant and telling factor of Allison's return to the topics of incest, abuse, and poverty proves trauma has a repetitive and insistent nature. As seen in Allison's work, writing does not always cure emotional trauma—it produces a calmer state which must often be continually maintained through writing.

Early in her memoir, Allison begins to describe her need to write autobiographically. She says, "When I began [writing fiction] there was only the suspicion that making up the story as you went along was the way to survive [. . .] But where am I in the stories I tell? Not the storyteller but the woman in the story [. . .]" (4). Allison becomes the woman in the story in her memoir, a character of her own creation. After writing fiction, after creating and bringing characters to life, it seems she needs to

do the same with herself: create herself and her life through a story from which she derives satisfaction. Writing her life stories allow her to construct, or more accurately, reconstruct herself through her writing, creating a necessary narrative.

Autobiographical writing validates experiences, no matter how painful. Writing trauma cannot take back what occurred and it does not strive to condone the event; it is not a magic elixir that erases pain, but writing painful events can foster deeper understanding, which can help us to accept the trauma as fact, as something that happened to us, not something that defines us, so we can begin to work towards healing. According to Janet Ellerby in Intimate Reading, “[. . .] if our narratives cannot always offer us the pellucid map we long for in our quest for a safer, more just, more benevolent world, if our stories do not always lead us to clear horizon of resolution and closure, they may, we hope, lead us to a greater measure of understanding of the ineluctable past” (xxi). I will focus on how Allison uses her writing to define and redefine, and understand her traumatic past in an effort to begin and sustain the necessary process of healing from trauma.

### (Re)defining Healing

What does healing mean? What does becoming healed constitute? How do we know when we have healed from traumatic events? The term “healing” is vague and overused, and therefore problematic. To heal seems so simplistic and self-explanatory that contemplation of the exact definition seems unnecessary. The seeming simplicity of the term is an illusion; really, healing is a complicated idea on which we need to elaborate. For my purposes, I would like to dispel the notion that healing means the move

from an abnormal state to a normal one. Healing after trauma, as I will illustrate, is not always an epiphanic moment; instead, healing through writing may be a continual process. Healing takes work and devotion, and can be ongoing. Healing from traumatic events is not an either/or proposition. To define it as such is to stigmatize and alienate the trauma victim. I challenge the idea that we either have healed from trauma and are normal, or we have not and remain abnormal. Healing should be thought of as a multi-layered, complex process. There are many facets of healing. Acceptance, transformation, and redefinition of the self are just a few of these facets.

In “Writing as Healing and the Rhetorical Tradition” T.R. Johnson wants us to understand healing as “[. . .] a process of coming to a vision of one’s self as flexible, as a changeful process always involved with the larger processes of evolving social contexts” (109). Writing can help remind us of our fluidity and allow us to see the self’s ability to be rewritten. Johnson invites us to think of writing that heals as working in the same way dreams do,

[f]or, in dreams, perhaps, we are free to manipulate symbols of various kinds to bring ourselves to a fresh imaginative vitality, a vitality that renders a sense of ourselves as processes, as changeful. Such a sense loosens us from trauma and its consequences and creates in turn a reason to hope. We might thus see writing that heals as writing that seeks to work in the way dreams do—such writing helps us to recover the strength to awaken the flux and flow, the multiplicity of the world. (109)

I see Johnson’s discussion as a much more accurate way to define healing. To discuss healing as the shift from an abnormal state to a normal one is not only inaccurate,

but damaging to the trauma sufferer as it insinuates that an individual is abnormal. In her nonfiction, Allison shows how writing about past traumas does not force them from her psyche, never to have them resurface again. In fact, she continually returns to the highly personal topics of incest, poverty, and lesbianism in both her fiction and nonfiction writing, proving that healing is a continual process; writing allows her not to suddenly become “healthy” by medical standards but to sustain some sort of emotional composure. The medicalization of trauma categorizes trauma as an abnormality which one must individually recover from if they are to live “normal,” fulfilled lives. According to Jenny Horsman in “What is ‘Normal’ in a Violent Society?”, “The medical model suggests that the person must heal and leave the traumatic experience behind” (36). She insightfully argues that “The conceptualization of a journey from sickness to health puts impossible demands on survivors of trauma—they are expected to put their experiences behind them and get over it” (37). This explanation offers an unreasonable definition of healing, which I find inaccurate when applied to emotional injuries. It does not recognize the differences between physical and emotional damage. For purposes here, the term “healing” will be used to describe an ongoing process, leading to a kind of emotional stability that comes from being able to speak openly about personal traumas.

Psychologist James W. Pennebaker has done numerous studies on the healing benefits of writing. In these studies he instructs test subjects to write about traumatic events and then proceeds to record their emotional responses after writing (See Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions. New York: Guilford, 1997). In his studies, writing about trauma is proven to have therapeutic effects on the writer. While interesting and relevant, Pennebaker’s studies do not explain the nearly uncontrollable

urge many trauma sufferers have to write. Often, it is not a choice. The need to write our traumas becomes so strong we can no longer ignore it. This need develops a surprising and frightful potency, a power we soon welcome as we immerse ourselves—lose ourselves while finding ourselves—in the writing process. For many, writing becomes the only way to express the unspeakable, and speaking (through writing) may be the only way one can express their pain and begin to make sense of traumatic events.

### Female Trauma, Female Autobiography

We often think of traumatic experiences as abnormal or unusual, when in fact, trauma is incredibly common and part of the human experience. Often, it is women's traumatic experiences that become labeled abnormal or unusual, which results in a society that can turn a blind eye to the prevalence of violence, in some form, against women. Female autobiography attempts to remedy this blindness by bringing traumatic, yet common, topics to the forefront. It is the private and secretive nature of female trauma that stigmatizes and then, continues to wound the individual beyond the actual traumatic occurrence itself. In her essay "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma," Laura S. Brown argues that male trauma is public and acceptable, whereas female trauma, which often remains hidden, has dimensions of aberrance surrounding it. Brown differentiates between acceptable male trauma and unspeakable female trauma: "War and genocide, which are the work of men and male-dominated culture, are agreed upon traumas; so are natural disasters, vehicle crashes, boats sinking in the freezing ocean" (101). These male traumas, Brown argues, are "rarely themselves harbingers of stigma for their victims" (102). It is women who have

been victims of rape, incest, and domestic abuse who are subjected to disbelief, criticism, blame, and hostility. Allison explains how long it took her to become “[. . .] a woman who can talk about rape plainly, without being hesitant or self-conscious [. . .]” (Two or Three Things 42). Women are doubly traumatized when they are taught to feel shame about the violence they endured.

In addition to shamefulness, women will often be subjected to others’ disbelief, a reaction which invalidates the traumatic experience. In Two or Three Things I Know for Sure, Allison tells us, “[. . .] thirty years later one of my aunts could say to me that she didn’t really believe [the incest had occurred], that he had been such a hardworking, good-looking man. Something else must have happened. Maybe it had been different” (42). While her aunt chooses not to believe Allison’s story of incest, telling the story makes Allison “[. . .] finally strong enough to know [her aunt] had chosen to believe what she needed more than what she knew” (Two or Three Things 43). Writing stories of trauma may not change how others feel about the trauma, but it can change how the individual feels about others’ reactions to her trauma. Allison contends that she is “no longer a grown-up outraged child but a woman letting go of her outrage, showing what [she] know[s]: that evil is a man who imagines the damage he does is not damage, that evil is the act of pretending that some things do not happen or leave no mark if they do, that evil is not what remains when healing becomes possible” (44). When we undergo the healing process, we move not from abnormal to normal, but from anger, pain, and other unproductive emotions, to more self-sustaining ones like acceptance, understanding, empathy, and the realization of our incredible strength.

Female trauma victims will find that even well-meaning individuals may attempt

to inadvertently reinforce the silence that reigns when women are forced to endure violence. An acquaintance of Allison's, a woman who is, coincidentally, a therapist, fears that with Allison's talk of sexual abuse, coupled with her lesbianism, "People might get confused. People might imagine that sexual abuse makes lesbians" (Two or Three Things 45). For someone like Allison who is trying to shed light on the prevalence of incest though her own incest story, this kind of reaction makes her question if telling her story is appropriate. While Allison wants to inform the public of incest through her story, the last thing she wants is to be seen as representative of all instances of incest, when every case is unique.

Allison worries about what others are going to think, and the comment from her acquaintance proves she has good reason for this concern. Allison continually struggles to feel authorized to write; she must constantly thwart others' perceived judgments. In Skin she admits she has "that voice inside [her], the one that murmurs continually. Maybe we shouldn't say anything, it whispers. Maybe if we are real quiet, the world will leave us alone. If I told as much of the truth as I knew, what would happen? [. . .] People would think I was a lesbian because he raped me, a pervert because he beat me [. . .]" (238). She worries what her past will say about her; she worries that others will incorrectly connect her past trauma with her present self, and see the traumas as the most powerful components of her identity formation.

Female autobiography which unabashedly tells of the violence perpetrated against women, and how this trauma affects its victims is immensely important for the individual sufferer of trauma and for society. When female trauma is discussed openly, without shame, the secretiveness historically surrounding violence toward women may become

less pervasive, as discussion of female trauma will force an entire society to acknowledge it as all too common and as something that needs to be prevented. Hence, the political dimensions of female trauma autobiography are undeniable.

### Saving Others, Saving Ourselves

Autobiographical writing can be criticized as selfish, self-centered writing, but this is rarely the case. The genre of autobiography could not boast such a large readership if these works were merely exercises in self-absorption. Readers are attracted to nonfiction that has a good story to tell, but also to stories in which they see themselves. As Allison's work shows us, autobiography reveals aspects of society, that are not uncommon, which we do not like to think about. Her writing, and others', represents clandestine, yet common, events which occur in society. Autobiographical writing can divulge events many deem uncomfortable subject matter, but often they are topics which need to be addressed. Addressing topics like sexual abuse, as Allison does, can have a healing effect, not just on the writer but on the reader as well, who begins to feel less alone and alienated after reading of individuals with similar traumatic experiences. Desalvo argues that autobiographical writers write for themselves and also "[. . .] to help heal a culture that, if it is to become moral, ethical, and spiritual, must recognize what these writers have observed, experienced, and witnessed. All are writing to right a human wrong—one that affected them, surely, but one that affects others, too" (216).

Allison writes for herself as much as for others. It is significant that her memoir is dedicated to her sisters, and Skin is dedicated to the women in her family. In Skin, she says her stories, especially the ones about sexual abuse, "are redress for all those like me,



whether they can write their own stories or not. My stories are not against anyone; they are for the life *we* need” (italics mine 218-19). In her writing she speaks for many—for those who are voiceless and for those who have not yet chosen to speak. Allison’s writing has important social implications—her candid discussion about violence against women highlights the frequency with which this occurs in society. The realization of the commonness of such events, and that victims like Allison are willing to speak openly about it, will lead to social awareness and eventually social change.

Allison writes with the hope that her words will begin to heal others as they have healed her: “Writing is an act that claims courage and meaning, and turns back denial, breaks open fear, and heals me as it makes possible some measure of healing for all those like me” (Skin 181). While she knows she cannot erase anyone’s pain, Allison sees her words as a launching point for wounded individuals to begin their own process of healing. Reading the words of others may give readers the courage to express themselves as well. Herman can also testify to the beneficial affect writing about trauma can have on others. She says, of her first paper on incest in 1976, that she “began to receive letters from all over the country from women who had never before told their stories. Through them, we realized the power of speaking the unspeakable and witnessed firsthand the creative energy that is released when the barriers of denial and repression are lifted” (2). When trauma sufferers realize they are not alone in their suffering, and are not the only ones who have endured the unspeakable, they obtain the courage to tell their own trauma stories. According to Maya Angelou, “through writing the ‘I’ becomes ‘we’” (qtd. in Desalvo 209). To feel a sense of comradery and belonging is significant for the trauma sufferer, who feels alone and isolated because of the traumatic incident. Beneficial for

both the reader and the writer, moving the trauma victim from “I” to “we,” as trauma autobiography does, is necessary for the well-being of many.

Writing can also be a way of teaching and learning from others. Allison says, “One of the reasons I write is to make up my own rules, discover my own tool, in order to show my sisters a few of the things I have learned. And in doing so to create a conversation between us so that I can get back from them the things they can teach me” (56). Writing can create and sustain discourse, and when we continue a discussion, new insights are gained and emotional turmoil can be lessened.

In Two or Three Things, Allison sees in her young niece that which she saw in the other women in her family, “that hungry desperate look that trusts nothing and wants everything. She didn’t think she was pretty. She didn’t think she was worth anything at all” (83). Allison has an overwhelming urge to save her niece, “to take her, steal her” away from the life with which Allison was once too familiar. She knows that saving her in that way is not possible, so she settles for trying to save her through story: “All right, I thought. That will do. For the moment leading to the next, the act of storytelling connecting to the life that might be possible, I held her attention and began” (Two or Three Things 84).

Writing is a way of saving others, in the sense of helping them heal from their psychic wounds, but we also “save” others by memorializing our wounds with words. Disturbed by the shoe box full of photos of unknown and forgotten family members that she finds at her mother’s, Allison makes sure she will preserve herself and her family in her writing. Lives are wasted when they are forgotten, when the stories are never told. In the shoe box “is a world of stories never told,” full of people “disappeared, anonymous,

the story we may have told then remade” (Skin 250). The idea of erasure, of not documenting our lives and being able to rewrite them, frightens Allison and motivates her to continue writing in order to save herself and others.

### The Nature of Traumatic Memories

Writing is an effective method of healing because, as Georges explains, “Healing is facilitated when symbolic therapies [language being an example] are used to effect changes in emotional and physiological states [. . .]” (12). When traumas occur, complex changes in our physiological state take place. Researchers have found that there is a difference between the way traumatic memories and regular memories are stored in the brain. According to Judith Lewis Herman in Trauma and Recovery, the problem with traumatic memories, why they resurface repetitively and are so bothersome, is their lack of integration with other memories. Telling the trauma story “actually transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the survivor’s life story” (175).

Herman continues by further describing the character of traumatic memories, which is

wordless and static. [. . .] One observer describes the trauma story in its untransformed state as a “prenarrative.” It does not develop or progress in time, and it does not reveal the storyteller’s feelings or interpretation of events. Another therapist describes traumatic memory as a series of still snapshots or a silent movie. (175)

In other words, traumatic memories are stagnant, and they can therefore stagnate identity development because traumatic memories undergo no progression, and no evolution; they just continue to be invasive repetitions which the sufferer will find unceasingly

disconcerting. Herman recommends that trauma sufferers attempt to create “out of the fragmented components of frozen [trauma] imagery and sensation [. . .] an organized, detailed, verbal account, oriented in time and historical context” (177). For some trauma sufferers, a verbal account is not possible; in such cases, a written account can be a more productive method of self-disclosure. Written accounts can provide the narrative structure needed to remedy the stagnation and fragmentation of traumatic memories, and allow for integration with other memories.

In addition to recounting the event clearly and descriptively, Herman argues that trauma victims must be able to connect events with resulting emotions: “The recitation of fact without the accompanying emotions is a sterile exercise, one without therapeutic effect” (177). After suffering trauma, we may not know how we feel, since it is often beyond our abilities of comprehension. We have nothing to compare the trauma to; nothing in our past experiences resembles or has prepared us for the trauma. This is when writing can be essential. We may not know precisely how we feel until we begin to write the trauma story, which allows us to step back from the trauma and analyze it more objectively.

In “The Intrusive Past,” Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, drawing on the theories of 19<sup>th</sup> century psychopathologist Pierre Janet, also note the nonintegrated nature of traumatic memories and the need for narration that enables incorporation with regular memories. They explain how “[t]raumatic memories are the unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences, which need to be integrated with the existing mental schemes, and be transformed into narrative language” (van der Kolk and van der Hart 176). Traumatic memories, because they are so overwhelming, remain unintegrated, only

to “[. . .] return intrusively as fragmented sensory or motoric experiences” (van der Kolk and van der Hart 176). These traumatic experiences “are encoded in memory, but not in such a way that people can acknowledge and accept what happened to them and go on with their lives” (van der Kolk and van der Hart 176). This is where the importance of creating a narrative of traumatic experience comes in. Unlike narrative memory, traumatic memory “stops the chronological clock and fixes the moment permanently in memory and imagination” (Langer qtd. in van der Kolk and van der Hart 177).

Traumatic memories must be transformed into a coherent narrative to allow all memories, traumatic and otherwise, to be culled together. This can be done “through the recital of the event to others and ourselves, and through the putting of this recital in its place as one of the chapters in our personal history” (Young qtd. in van der Kolk and van der Hart 171).

Trauma affects one’s sense of self in various and negative ways. The trauma victim develops a skewed and toxic sense of self when the trauma has not been effectively dealt with. Herman explains, “The identity they [trauma victims] have formed prior to the trauma is irrevocably destroyed” (56). And in the way small children struggle to develop a sense of self, trauma victims lose their sense of self and are forced to try to regain it or revise it: “Trauma forces the survivor to relive all her earlier struggles over autonomy, initiative, competence, identity, and intimacy” (Herman 52). Trauma invariably changes the sufferer. The person one was before the trauma no longer exists (Herman). The trauma victim must get acquainted with the newly formed self in order to accept the past trauma. Writing can allow a person to become acquainted with a self trauma has rendered unfamiliar.

Identity is a slippery topic to discuss. How does one define oneself? There is definitely not one right answer. Human identity is incredibly complex. In How our Lives become Stories, Paul John Eakin maintains that identity and narrative competence are inextricably linked. He explains: “When it comes to autobiography, narrative and identity are so intimately linked that each constantly and properly gravitates into the conceptual field of the other. Thus, narrative is not merely a literary form but a mode of phenomenological and cognitive self-experience [. . .]” (100).

He continues his discussion on the connection between identity and narrative: “What is arresting about this radical equation between narrative and identity is the notion that narrative here is not merely about the self but rather in some profound way a constituent part of self” (101). Therefore, proficiency in self-narration, as autobiographers attempt to be, is not simply a relaying of an already established identity, but may assist in the formation of identity, or at least some facets of identity. If identity can be created in this way, this proves the fluidity versus the stability of identity, and the profound effects writing can have on identity formation.

Identity is complex and ever-changing, which gives us all the opportunity to constantly revise our definitions of self. Revision work is especially important for the trauma survivor, whose sense of identity has been distorted by past events. Having the ability to revise how we view ourselves is an indispensable skill which many trauma victims lose. We live lives of incredible complexity. How can our ideas and thoughts about the events of our lives not get tangled up? Writing can help untangle the chaos of our thoughts. When we write, we are forced to slow down racing thoughts, to carefully and systematically make order of all the competing ideologies within us. Allison says that

“to ignore how much of [her] life was shaped by growing up poor and talk only about what incest did to [her] identity as a woman and as a lesbian” would not be representative of her struggles (Two or Three Things 15). Allison needs to tackle all these issues, sometimes separately, sometimes simultaneously, in her writing to confront these conflicting factors in her identity formation.

As Allison proves in her nonfiction work, writing one’s pain can lead to the capacity for revision of our multiple selves. Allison echoes the sentiment shared by other writers when she says that writing autobiographically gives her power she did not realize she had. With this realization of power comes the notion that we can control how we define ourselves. In the preface to Trash, a book of short stories, Allison describes her writing as such:

It was a rough beginning—my own shout of life against death, of shape and substance against silence and confusion. It was most of all my deep abiding desire to live fleshed and strengthened on the page, a way to tell the truth as a kind of magic not cheapened or distorted by a need to please any damn body at all. Without it, I cannot imagine my own life. Without it, I have no way to know who I am. (12)

As Allison illustrates, writing allows us to define ourselves how we choose, with less concern of what others are going to think. In life, we are forced to conform, to some extent, to societal expectations; when writing, this conformity is less required.

#### Trauma: An Impetus to Write

What always fascinates me about autobiographies which deal with trauma is the

author's ability to create something of literary value and beauty out of horrible events.

Authors may use their trauma to make literary art that is useful and positively received by others. Trauma is the driving force for creative literary expression for many writers.

Writers cannot help but find some pleasure and take pride in their literary creations, in the fact they are able to create literature, even if they are writing about traumatic, and often intimate, subjects. This pleasure found in writing our traumas is another way writing can lead to emotional recovery. In Writing to Heal the Soul, Louise Desalvo quotes poet Audre Lorde who says, ““You’ll always have the pain, you may as well use it”” (12). The idea of *doing* something with trauma, of making some sort of use out of emotional pain, while not a new concept, is a remarkable one. Using trauma as literary fodder can lead to a reconceptualization of the trauma. When something has purpose and becomes useful to us, when we can make something aesthetically pleasing, something others want to read, out of our pain, we can redefine a hated part of our pasts and work toward acceptance and redemption.

According to Desalvo, instead of focusing on the many negatives, we should begin to see the benefits of experiencing trauma. This may seem like an impossible task, but her quote from author Wayne Muller clarifies: “our own wounds can be vehicles for exploring our essential nature, revealing the deepest textures of our heart and soul, if we will only sit with them, open ourselves to pain,. . .without holding back. . .” (4-5).

Drawing on the words of Virginia Woolf, Desalvo contends “that the moments of profound insight that come from our soulful, thoughtful examination of our psychic wounds should be called ‘shocks.’ For they force us into an awareness about ourselves and our relationships to others and our place in the world that we wouldn’t otherwise



have had” (5). Sometimes our writing has the power to surprise and amaze us when we accidentally stumble into areas of intense self perceptivity we were unaware of before writing. While viewing the experience of trauma as having the potential to create life meaning and awareness, as making our lives richer through forced self-analysis may seem far-fetched, Desalvo’s theories have a optimistic insightfulness that is hard to ignore or discount entirely. As trauma autobiography proves, trauma can act as a catalyst for a self-exploration that may not have otherwise occurred. While trauma initially alienates us from others and from ourselves, it may allow us, as we begin to reconnect with ourselves, to understand ourselves and our relation to others in a more complete, nuanced manner.

Continuing this idea of using trauma as creative motivation, Desalvo quotes Alice Walker, who says that when we feel ““sick in heart, sick in soul”” we should do something creative (154). For Walker, of course, that is writing. Walker says the important “thing is that you are focused on creating something. And while you are doing that, there’s a kind of spiritual alchemy that happens and you turn that bad feeling into something that becomes a golden light. It is all because you are creating something beautiful” (154). According to Walker, it is not so much the trauma that creates beauty, but the energy we expel in transforming the trauma into literature. It is the literary work we undertake after trauma which can motivate creative and artistic impulses, and allow for the accomplishment of astonishing acts of beauty.

Allison utilizes various literary devices to capture her past traumas in a manner that captures the reader’s attention. She turns traumatic events and her feeling about these events into metaphors; the use of metaphors enables her to describe her experiences with

clarity and precision, and gives her writing a poetic quality. While the topics of her writing—incest, poverty, and abuse—are shocking, Allison use her abilities of literary creation to engage her readers in her powerfully written stories.

WRITING TO HEAL: DOROTHY ALLISON'S NONFICTION–  
TWO OR THREE THINGS I KNOW FOR SURE AND SKIN: TALKING ABOUT  
CLASS, SEX & LITERATURE

Unbound Narratives: Autobiography and Revision of Self

We are surrounded by and ensconced in a complex system of various competing discourses. In order to place ourselves in a meaningful position, we desire inclusion in the dominant discourses; we therefore become bound to various discourses. According to Charles M. Anderson, in “Suture, Stigma, and the Pages that Heal,” suture is when we “as viewers [. . .] move towards and are fastened into the subject position” of a particular discourse (60). Anderson says when we do this, “We trade who we are (or who we imagine ourselves to be) for a meaningful role in the discourse [. . .]” (60). But this meaning we seek through suturing is an illusion because “[s]uture inserts us into discourses that appear to give our lives coherence, wholeness, and meaning, but in that process, they also wound and break us, separate and alienate us, pacify us, and expose us to losses so severe that we can easily cease to be” (61). We cannot help but be influenced by various discourse communities, but often those ideologies that we bind ourselves to do not accurately represent us, causing parts of our selves to diminish.

Because dominant ideologies inculcate us all, breaking free from some of the tethers of the dominant discourse is a difficult but necessary task. Victims of trauma have been forced to question meanings more directly than others and are especially attracted to, but damaged by, suturing into dominant ideologies. Allison says:

I am trying to understand how we internalize the myths of our society

even as we resist them. I have felt a powerful temptation to write about my family a kind of morality tale, with us as the heroes and middle and upper classes as the villains. It would be within the romantic myth, for example to pretend that we were the kind of noble Southern whites portrayed in the movies, mill workers for generations until driven out by alcoholism and a family propensity for rebellion and union talk. But that would be a lie. The truth is that no one in my family ever joined a union. (Skin 24-5)

Suturing distorts who we are by commanding us to identify with experiences which are not our own and ideas we do not believe, and it provides conflicting subject positions. Often we are unaware of our own process of suturing, though the negative ramifications of suturing are present. The initially private nature of writing can allow us to feel safe enough to unsuture in our writing, to say what needs to be said with less regard for how society's dominant ideologies dictate how stories should be told. Allison poetically describes this loss of self through suture: "If we cannot name our own we are cut off at the root, our hold on our lives as fragile as seed in a wind" (Two or Three Things 12). She clearly acknowledges the damage and the loss that can occur if we allow the dominant discourse communities to characterize us. We become detached from ourselves, and can easily find a dissolution of the self occurs.

Suturing can involve attempting to fit into the romanticized myths society deems accurate representations of an experience. Allison tells us that because she did not see her family in the societal depictions of the poor, she still "[e]ven now, past forty and stubbornly proud of [her] family, feel[s] the draw of that mythology, that romanticized,

edited version of the poor” (Skin 17). American culture creates a version of poverty that neither she nor her family can identify with, though the temptation to fit the myth is often present. She says, “There was an idea of the good poor—hard-working, ragged but clean, and intrinsically honorable” (Skin 18). Because of this romanticized myth, Allison initially censures the stories she tells about her family in order to fit them into a certain ideological mold: “The stories I told about my family, about South Carolina, about being poor itself were all lies, carefully edited to seem droll or funny. I knew damn well that no one would want to hear the truth about poverty, the hopelessness of it and fear, the feeling that nothing I did would ever make a difference and the raging resentment that burned beneath my jokes” (Skin 22). She learns that not only do people want to hear the truth, but the truth will eventually be what she needs to tell if she is to avoid repressing parts of her identity. Unsuturing the self is difficult but necessary and writing is way of doing this. Anderson says he has

discovered that to discourse with the other, when the other is the fluid text out of which one’s story emerges, is not to be trapped and wounded by the words of the others nor to trade being for meaning, but to be released by those words, to experience a convergence of meaning and being, and to name a self not broken by discourse, but immersed in it, in charge of it, empowered by it. (62)

While she is once sutured to a mythical, and therefore inaccurate, version of her past, writing enables Allison to construct a more positive, loved, and still evolving version of herself.

Throughout her memoir, Allison proves her storytelling abilities through her

attention to craft. She uses vivid and creative metaphors and imagery which capture the reader's attention. In her memoir she jumps around in time, but manages to keep the reader oriented. The stories which make up the memoir are condensed for complete readability. In addition, she also clearly demonstrates how she maintains the healing process through writing. Writing her story allows her to take ownership of it, and helps her revise her ideas of self.

Allison assures readers, "Two or three things I know for sure and one of them is that telling the story all the way through is an act of love" (Two or Three Things 90). I would add that the act of storytelling is an act of self love; the ability to love one's self can be lost after suffering trauma, when self-blame and criticism replace one's capability to love and respect oneself. Writing trauma gives authorship to the victim, and this gives the author ownership of her story, versus allowing others to generate a tale. To write one's own story is to resist the story others would tell for you. Even when the story we must tell is terrible and difficult, telling it accurately and as it needs to be told is better than allowing others to tell it for us. Allison emphatically states,

The stories other people would tell about my life [. . .] –those are the stories that could destroy me, erase me, mock me, and deny me. I tell my stories louder all the time: mean and ugly stories, almost bitter stories; passionate, desperate stories—all of them have to be told in order not to tell the one the world wants, the story of us broken, the story of us never laughing out loud, never learning to enjoy sex, never being able to love or trust again, the story in which all that survives is the flesh. That is not my story. I tell all the others so as not to have to tell that one. (Two or Three

Things 72)

Allison tells her stories to avoid having them told for her, but also to avoid having the stories “the world wants” to tell be true. For her and many others, writing is a way to prevent stumbling into the stereotypical and expected narratives that others have specified. Allison feels expected to follow in the footsteps of her female relatives, and remain poor and abused throughout her life. Of her female relatives, Allison says, “Solid, stolid, wide-hipped baby machines. We were all wide-hipped and predestined”—predestined to lead the same tragic lives as the ones who came before, to follow the family legacy of poverty and sorrow, and to raise children who too would take this life path (Two or Three Things 33). Allison’s stories are an act of rebellion, a cry of survival, and proof of strength in the face of adversity, which no one expected from her.

Through writing she gains enviable wisdom. She says, “I am the only one who can tell the story of my life and say what it means” (Two or Three Things 70). Allison acknowledges the subversive power of writing one’s own story. Through writing, the trauma sufferer can resist the harmful and inaccurate narratives constructed by others, and the trauma sufferer cannot help but feel empowered.

Demonstrating constant attention to and effective use of craft, Allison uses a coat metaphor to explain her resistance to narratives other than the ones she creates herself. She says “incest is a coat of many colors, some of them not visible to the human eye, but so vibrant, so powerful, people looking at you wearing it see only the coat. I did not want to wear that coat” (Two or Three Things 70). Allison is adamant in her refusal to be seen as only a victim of incest. Writing allows her to convey her complexities and to show the nuances of herself, to prove to others and to herself, she is more than the past incest.

While experiencing incest has a hand in shaping who she is today, as do many other aspects of her past, none of these past events individually define her; she is in charge of these definitions of self, and she would have it no other way, as is evident when she says, “Two or three things I know for sure, and one is that I would rather go naked than wear the coat the world has made for me” (71). In many ways, Allison has chosen nakedness over conforming to societal expectations. Through her storytelling she exposes herself, and by doing so there is no possibility of anyone uncovering uncomfortable aspects of her life, and misjudging her. She has taken this power of exposure and judgment by others away by choosing to expose and analyze an entirely visible self.

Memoirists will concede that truth-telling frees them, unbinds them from their toxic and confining self narratives, and the narratives others would tell about them. In his essay “Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle,” Dori Laub explains the value of telling about trauma. A proponent of expressing emotions related to traumatic events, Laub finds testimony to be an indispensable factor in healing after trauma. Of Holocaust survivors, he finds they “needed to tell their stories in order to survive. There is, in each survivor, 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. One has to know one’s buried truth in order to be able to live one’s life” (63).

Allison succinctly explains her need to write in order to make meaning by writing, and more accurately, to create a life through writing that she can be proud of and feel in control of: “The story becomes the thing needed. Two or three things I know for sure, and one of them is what it means to have no loved version of your life but the one you make” (Two or Three Things 3). It is written testimony which allows trauma victims to claim



their experiences, to proclaim ownership of distressing events versus being a passive sufferer of trauma. When we are no longer passive, when we become active participants in designing our identities we are unbound from the harmful narrative told to us, the one we submissively accepted for lack of other options.

Allison unbinds herself from the narrative she has been told, by herself and by others. The narrative she once adhered to is not her story, and she no longer feels bound to it. She writes a new narrative for herself, a narrative which accurately depicts past events, and while these events are incredibly painful, acknowledging them in writing is less emotionally destructive than preserving the dominant narrative. She tells us what she has learned of society's ideas about poverty: "[. . .] the inescapable fact of being born in a condition of poverty that this society finds shameful, contemptible, and somehow deserved, has had dominion to such an extent that I spent my life trying to deny it. I have learned with great difficulty that the vast majority of people believe that poverty is a voluntary condition" (Skin 15). This is not the narrative she chooses to embrace. Her ability to unsuture from the dominant discourses on poverty and incest through writing facilitates her healing process by enabling her to understand herself and her beliefs.

Allison clearly describes how writing of past traumas is therapeutic. Writing allows her to distance herself from traumatic memories while at the same time confronting them: "Writing it all down was purging. Putting those stories on paper took them out of the nightmare realm and made me almost love myself for being able to finally face them" (Trash 9). Allison's words remind me of the child who is terrified of looking under the dark bed, but when she finally does, it is not so scary anymore and she is proud of herself for having the courage to look. The difference between Allison and the

frightened child, of course, is the child finds she has nothing to fear at all, whereas under Allison's bed there are indeed frightening, terrible discoveries. Nonetheless, she says writing about her past "[. . .] gave [her] a way to love the people [she] wrote about—even the ones [she] had fought with or hated," proving that writing can help us to see complexities in people and events we have previously missed (Trash 9).

Neither love nor hate is clean, simple, or detached from the other. Often emotions seemingly at opposite ends of the spectrum collide into one another, leaving us feeling tangled and unsettled. Writing is not simply a way to disentangle these emotions. Rather, writing can help us to see the naturalness of intertwined emotions and calm us in the face of these conflicting forces. In Two or Three Things, Allison says "[t]wo or three things I know for sure, and one of them is the way you can both hate and love something you are not sure you understand" (7). Here, she proves she understands that some things are ineluctably interconnected, and while some understanding of these interconnections occurs, complete comprehension does not have to occur for internal peace to be made.

Allison ends each section of her memoir with personal maxims, all italicized, and all beginning with the title of her book, "two or three things I know for sure." The phrase is borrowed from her Aunt Dot who is known to say, "Lord, girl, there's only two or three things I know for sure. Only two or three. That's right. Of course it's never the same things, and I'm never as sure as I'd like to be" (5). This seemingly paradoxical statement makes sense if we consider that the self, our identities, are in constant flux. Since who we are constantly changing, what we know to be facts cannot help but change along with this alteration in identity. Allison mimics her aunt, as there are actually eleven of these concluding thoughts, which are always poignant, yet never the same, proving

that she too acknowledges the ability of the self to change and be revised.

This preamble to her concluding thoughts becomes a mantra; eloquent and compact, each maxim, which often follow disturbing events in Allison's life, expresses a tone of repose and calmness, effectively illustrating her ability to accept, not condone, the events of her past, even if she cannot fully comprehend them. She shows readers, at the end of each of her sections, that she has unbound herself from dominant discourses which distorted her sense of self.

### The Relational Self

While I have discussed the sensation of autonomy that can be garnered from writing the self, in How Our Lives Become Stories Paul John Eakin argues "all identity is relational," which means this feeling of autonomy in autobiography may be fictitious, yet still important for the trauma sufferer to experience (43). Allison's nonfiction is undoubtedly relational, as she rarely focuses on herself in isolation from her family members; her family, the women in particular, are significant throughout her stories, and clearly significant in her identity development and her sense of self. It may be because of this relationality, especially when our relations to others has been spoiled in some way, that we need to write and feel a sense of individuality and autonomous creation.

Eakin quotes author Carolyn Kay Steedman who says, "Children are always episodes in someone else's narrative" (53). This statement inherently conveys a sense of powerlessness on the child's part, and when the narrative the child is forced to act in is harmful, evoking a feeling of power and control is vital. After trauma, especially familial trauma, writing relationally is a power reversal; the tables are turned and those who are

relationally connected, often family, become episodes in the narrative authored by the victim of the childhood or adolescent trauma.

To understand ourselves, we often need to understand others and the affect they have on us. When our relation to others is destructive, as it is in Allison's case, writing which is heavily relational is important. To avoid writing a relational life story after childhood abuse perpetrated by family members would be a way of skirting the true nature of the trauma and its effects. A damaged relational self especially requires an understanding of the self in relation to others.

Numerous times, Allison, like many other daughters, says she has become her mother. This is not simply her own definition; her aunt Dot says to her "You mean and stubborn and completely Ruth's daughter" (Two or Three Things 13). These words echo in her mind, leaving an indelible impression, and leads to Allison's own definition of herself, which she finds herself often repeating: "Mean and stubborn and Ruth's daughter. I don't hold grudges. I kick butt and keep moving. Mean and stubborn and Ruth's daughter" (Two or Three Things 14). Eakin says "the key environment in the individual's formation is the family, which serves as the community's primary conduit for the transmission of its cultural values" (85). It is her aunt who points out the similarities between mother and daughter, leading to Allison's embodiment of them.

She seeks to understand precisely what being like her mother means, as her mother made decisions when she was a child that have a deleterious affect on her. Allison is torn between fiercely loving her mother and attempting to understand the decisions her mother made, specifically the decision to stay with a man who would abuse her children, in a sense allowing the abuse to occur and to continue. Allison maintains it is not the

specifics of the incest which she needs to explore, but instead she writes in order to better comprehend her mother's decisions—decisions which shape her identity and profoundly affect her life as an adult (Skin 54). Allison contends: “[. . .] it is the questions of family and loss and betrayal I want to examine. I need to talk about my mother, about the choices she was forced to make, the impossible grief of her struggle to create a family and care for her daughters. How, I ask, can love and betrayal become so deeply intertwined?” (Skin 54). It is these ambiguous feelings toward her mother she attempts to untangle, though finds it an impossible task. The “child who loved [her] mother absolutely, and hated her every time she was late coming home,” and therefore leaving her alone with her stepfather, still exists, but some peace has been made with these ambiguities (Skin 55).

Analyzing herself as she attempts to understand her mother's decisions results in a level of comprehension about the way love and betrayal can become conjoined, and how her mother was able to impose these tangled emotions on her children. Allison finds she understands the link between love and betrayal more than she would like to—she has enacted this tendency on her sisters. She explains: “I come at my mother's life from my own, remembering that I loved my little sisters but wanted them to sleep closest to the door” (Skin 54-5). She begins to understand how self-defense and self-protection, sometimes at the expense of those we love, is the only way for an individual to survive. Through understanding her mother, she finds she understands her self, and the reasons for the decisions she makes in her own life.

## Transcending Silence

By writing of her childhood trauma, Allison defies the customary norms of silence practiced by her family members, particularly her mother. An emotionally reticent woman, Allison's mother prefers to suppress her pain and keep her past veiled in secrecy. She often relays innocuous details of her day to her children, "[b]ut behind her blunt account of the day's conversation was a mystery: the rest of her life" (Two or Three Things 24). Her aunts respect her mother's wishes to remain silent. This is in sharp contrast to Allison's continual need to speak through her writing. Allison's family, for the most part, upholds a tradition of silence, one she eventually breaks with her storytelling, an act of familial betrayal with which she must make peace.

Allison is aware of her family's secretive nature at a young age; in her memoir, she describes how a fourth grade assignment to create a family tree proves difficult and perplexing. The teacher instructs the children to consult the family Bible, a notion Allison's mother and aunt confront with derision: Aunt Dot replies with amusement of Allison's grade school teacher, "Girl is definitely not from around here" (10).

Neither her mother nor her aunt are able to or willing to provide information about their extended family. Even seemingly simple family facts prove vexing for the Allison family. Nine-year-old Dorothy remarks, "Aunt Grace once said that Granny had eleven children. I know six" (Two or Three Things 11). Her Aunt Dot, pondering this quantity of offspring, says, "Eleven? Was it eleven? I thought it was nine" (Two or Three Things 11). Allison's mother poignantly comments, "Child, some days we don't even have a family" (Two or Three Things 10). One can clearly understand the frustration and confusion Allison feels over her mysterious family tree. This silence and disconnection

from the family serves as a reminder that Allison's family is different from other families, families who would have family Bibles, but would not need this Bible to tell how many children a grandparent had.

Allison initially defines herself and her family in the same manner she assumes others do: "Peasants, that's what we are and have always been. Call us the lower orders, the great unwashed, the working class, the poor, proletariat, trash, lowlife and scum" (Two or Three Things 1). Whatever term is preferred, the experiences of individuals on the margins of society are similar. Their experiences remain unheard, invalidated, and nullified. The suffering Allison endures at the hands of her stepfather, she feels, is deemed typical of "those kinds" of people. Already silenced by mainstream society, her family evokes a double, self-imposed silence on themselves, one that Allison initially abides by until she can no longer ignore the toll silence inflicts on her. Though Allison tells of her family's silence, she also relays numerous stories she hears growing up, proving the silence she witnesses is arbitrary and random, making it more confusing for her.

Allison says that she is still asked, "Why? Why do you bring that up? Must you talk about that?" (Two or Three Things 43). She fights the discouragement and anger these questions induce. Her own uncertainty, paired with the objections of others, has caused her to ask those same questions of herself: "I asked those same questions until finally I began to understand. This was a wall in my life, I say, a wall I had to climb over every day. It was always there for me, deflecting my rage toward people who knew nothing about what had happened to me or why I should be angry with them" (Two or Three Things 43). Allison's wall is both obstacle and protection. While it acts as

protection against the possible pain others may cause, it also hinders her from creating meaningful personal relationships for fear of being hurt. She chooses to radiate anger towards others instead of having to tear down the protective wall.

She says she told this lie to others for years: “Me, I told people, I take damage like a wall, a brick wall that never falls down, that never feels anything, never flinches or remembers” (Two or Three Things 38). While she attempts to convince herself and others of her impenetrable strength in order to maintain her family’s prescribed silence, this finally becomes a lie she can no longer sustain.

Her family’s penchant for silence, though she transcends it, pervades her more deeply than she would like. She says she “know[s] [she] is the child of [her] family on the days when [she] hear[s] their voices echoing inside [her], telling [her] to keep [her] mouth shut and give no one a weapon to use against [them] [. . .]” (Skin 240). Defying her family’s traditional uncommunicative nature poses constant threats to her ability as a writer who discloses personal information, but her belief in the beneficial power of writing supersedes her ambivalence about staying quiet.

#### From Avoidance to Acceptance

In the introduction to Intimate Reading, Ellerby explains that “[b]ecause traumatic memories are so harrowing, discomfoting, and often unjustly degrading, survivors agree to suppress the truth of their experience” (xix). Before writing autobiographically, Allison tries to escape a distressing past by suppressing thoughts of her experiences. Allison makes a tacit agreement with herself not to speak about the abusive and incestuous events of her past, and refuses to admit to the effect the past has on her. She,



however, eventually realizes the negative ramifications of avoidance, and the ultimate impossibility of forgetting. She says, “I ran because if I had not, I would have died. No one told me that you take your world with you, that running becomes a habit, that the secret to running is to know why you run and where you are going—and to leave behind the reason you run” (Two or Three Things 4). Without an understanding of the reasons for escape, escape from past trauma is not entirely possible. The trauma is still there, unresolved and larger than ever.

The trauma sufferer, when working to suppress memories of a traumatic past, adds an injurious layer to the psyche through the act of inhibition. Dori Laub tells us, “None find peace in silence, even when it is their choice to remain silent. [ . . . ] The ‘not telling’ of the story serves as a perpetuation of its tyranny” (64). Lying to one’s self is also much more difficult than telling the truth. Maintaining the incorrect version takes hard work and can be more harmful than telling the actual version of what occurred. Daniel M. Weger and Julie D. Lane explain in “From Secrecy to Psychopathology” that “[s]ecrecy sets into motion a self-sustaining cycle of obsessive preoccupation with the secret. Attempts made to suppress the secret thought are responded to with intrusive thinking of the thought, which in turn engenders further efforts to eliminate the secret thought” (33). We can see how trauma sufferers continue to injure themselves by inhibiting traumatic thoughts. Aside from the injury caused by the trauma memories, working to suppress the trauma is itself turbulent and injurious.

By attempting to avoid her past, Allison explains how much of her life becomes the maintenance of her lies. She says, “I began to *work* even harder to put as much distance between my family and me” and “I kept the truth about my background and who

I knew myself to be a carefully obscured mystery. I *worked* as hard as I could to make myself a new person [. . .]” (italics mine Skin 22). To hide from one’s past is an unproductive act that cannot be done without diligence and hard work. It is constant, yet unproductive, work to try to escape the past.

As Herman asserts, “Atrocities, however, refuse to be buried. Equally as powerful as the desire to deny atrocities is the conviction that denial does not work” (1). Even if one works hard to bury their psychic pain, it will eventually surface and demand attention. Eventually, avoidance no longer becomes possible. Finally experiencing a “grief [which] came from the fact that [she] no longer knew who [she] was or where [she] belonged,” Allison decides to stop hiding from her past in order to find herself (Skin 33). This is when she decides to write, and she makes herself a promise: “to claim [her] family, [her] true history, and to tell the truth not only about who [she] was but about the temptation to lie” (Skin 34). When she decides to begin to write honestly, she is able to begin the healing process which includes finding and embracing a more authentic identity. Once she begins to tell her story, to write honestly about the rape, she says, “I started saying those words to get that release, that feeling of letting go, of setting loose both the hatred and the fear. The need to tell my story was terrible and persistent, and I needed to say it bluntly and cruelly, to use all those words, those awful tearing words” (Two or Three Things 42).

In Skin, Allison explains how “[she] passed whole portions of [her] life—days, months, years—in directed progress, getting up every morning and setting to work, working so hard and so continually that [she] avoided examining in any way what [she] knew about [her] life” (16). While this instinct to focus on work as a way of avoiding

emotional turbulence may not seem particularly alarming, avoiding examination of past traumas has frightening consequences: when we suppress certain aspects of our lives, we begin to lose ourselves. Allison says, “I believed that all those things I did not talk about, or even let myself think too much about, were not important, that none of them defined me. I had constructed a life, an identity in which I took pride [ . . . ] and I did not realize that the fundamental me had almost disappeared” (Skin 16). While she has constructed an identity, this identity is a fabrication because it discredits her past as a relevant signifier in her life.

#### Agency through Writing

Instead of being acted upon, as victims of traumatic events are—by both the trauma and by those who inflicted the trauma—writing gives the sufferer agency by allowing them to act. Suffering painful events often involves being in a situation one has little or no control over, as a passive and powerless individual. The act of writing is a deliberate and assertive undertaking, that which can work to reverse the damage caused by the powerlessness felt after enduring psychological suffering. Writing puts the trauma victim in the narrator’s position, hence allowing power of creation and definition. Laub says that “repossessing one’s life story through giving testimony is itself a form of action, of change which one has to actually pass through, in order to continue and complete the process of survival [ . . . ]” (70). Taking an active role in story creation after trauma, through testimony, is significant, considering the powerlessness felt during and after the traumatic experience. Authoring one’s story is a way to assume an empowered position; as storyteller the female memoirist renounces the submissive position she was and is

forced into, by the trauma and by dominant social norms.

Herman maintains, “Trauma robs the victim of a sense of power and control; the guiding principle of recovery is to restore power and control to the survivor” (159). When we write, we experience a power reversal. After being subjected to events in which we were powerless to control, our writing becomes something we can control. Herman explains in order for the victim to begin to feel empowered, “[s]he must be the author and arbiter of her own recovery” (132). We cannot control past events, but we do have the power to change how we feel about the trauma.

Allison’s wall metaphor extends to the conclusion of her memoir. She tells of a dream she has where she is before a wall which has her story written on it. She writes: “I stood in front of my wall [. . .] Words were peeling across the wall, and every word was a brick. I touched one [. . .] The brick fell away and a window opened.” (92). Her life is both a wall and a story, and it is the words of the story that enable the slow collapse of the wall. Using words she is able to slowly, brick by brick, deconstruct the traumas of her life and reach a sort of closure. Behind the wall she says is a window—glass which can be seen through, signifying clarity. A window is also something that can be opened if one chooses, signifying strength and choice. She can decide when and for whom she will open this window, instead of having a permanent wall between herself and the world. Once opened, windows let in fresh air, which signifies a cleansing renewal.

This metaphor shows revision of the self in the clearest sense—her wall has, through story, morphed into a window that she controls. No longer imprisoned behind her protective wall, her window allows her freedom and is a symbol of the mutability of identity. It can be opened, closed, or somewhere in between, depending on who she is at

various points in her life. The wall metaphor is especially effective—readers are given hope that healing after trauma is possible, as the healing seen with the metaphor is obvious and inspiring.

Eakin argues that “[. . .] the writing of autobiography is properly understood as an integral part of a life long process of identity formation, in which acts of self-narration play a major role” (101). Because of the window’s ability to be opened or closed, Allison’s self-narration, a process which informs identity according to Eakin, can now have a fluidity that the wall prevented.

In the dream, after the wall has come down, Allison says, “The last brick fell down. I was standing by myself in the rubble of my life, at the bottom of every story I had ever needed to know” (Two or Three Things 94). Through story, her wall has come down and she has begun a process of healing, though the bricks which made up the wall have not disappeared. The bricks of the wall are still present, though dismantled. The wall is in pieces and the individual bricks do not have the power to isolate or torment her as they did when they were a concrete structure.

## COMPLICATIONS

### Writing and Healing—My Own Reservations

I recognize that expressive writing for healing purposes could be criticized as a middle-class endeavor, an undertaking not available to those marginalized by society. It could legitimately be argued that writing may indeed be a relevant and healing expression—for those with access to educational opportunities, for those who are well-read and familiar with the genre of autobiography. I admit that being able to write about past traumas requires leisure time many do not have, creative beliefs many do not hold, and skills (both of emotional expression and literary self-representation) some have not acquired. What can be done about this, I do not know, though I am continually troubled by the idea that those who may need written self-expression the most may not ever have the opportunity for this form of creative expression.

This concern accounts for my attraction to Allison's texts. Clearly on the margins in many aspects of her life, from her socioeconomic standing to her sexuality to the abuse she suffered, Allison proves it is possible for someone outside the more respected middle-class not only to make a living writing, but to use writing as a method of self-discovery and as a way of maintaining emotional composure. Allison shows that the voiceless will not often be given a chance to speak; they must demand that their words be heard, which is why Allison chooses to speak through her writing as loudly as she does, "telling her stories louder all the time" (Two or Three Things 72). Allison makes sure she will be heard by telling her stories in a way which she feels does them justice. Telling her stories gives her confidence and self-worth, as nothing else in her life has done. While she is

deeply committed to her work with feminists groups, she still feels unsatisfied. It was not until she begins writing about her past did life and self-satisfaction become possible.

While writing can be healing, writing can also be proof of healing. That we are able to produce a coherent written narrative of the crises of our pasts proves we have begun a process of recovery. In her nonfiction, Allison, after many attempts and revisions, is able to produce self-sustaining works of literature. For her the writing came slowly, with much difficulty, and she was not initially happy with her work. While it seemed unsatisfying, this introductory writing allowed her to recover from her traumas enough to be able to write the way she wanted and needed.

#### Inadequacy of Words

While I believe in the healing ability writing about traumatic events has, I know writing is not a cure-all or a substitute for professional therapy. To believe so would be inaccurate and dangerous. Also, writing is not an easy way to heal after experiencing trauma; attempting to heal after trauma, through writing or otherwise, will be difficult and time-consuming work. And it may be work that is never complete. Traumatic events can overpower our coping abilities so thoroughly that no amount of writing can completely change our feelings about the trauma. Laub says:

This imperative to tell and to be heard can become itself an all-consuming life task. 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

thoughts, memory, and speech. (63)

Words can be inadequate in the aftermath of an act as unexplainable as incest. Allison admits that “[a]ll the things [she] can say about sexual abuse—about rape—none of them are reasons. The words do not explain” (Two or Three Things 44). Words sometimes lack the power of logical explanation, yet Allison has a theory about testimony: “My theory is that talking about it makes a difference—being a woman who can stand up anywhere and say, I was five and the man was big. So let me say it,” and Allison proceeds to say, write, explain, not in graphic detail, but clearly and carefully, what her stepfather did to her and her sisters (Two or Three Things 44).

Sometimes more than words would be necessary to convey brutal acts. Allison doubts her ability to communicate truth through words when it comes to some of her stories. She says, “The stories I could tell no one would believe. I would have to pour blood on the floor to convince anyone that every word I say is true” (Two or Three Things 51). For some of her stories, because they are so horrific, words would not be adequate transmitters of truth. Something else would be needed for complete veracity. With her mention of blood, images beyond mere self-exposure are evoked. While she discusses her willingness to go naked previously, this takes the concept of nakedness even further. Here she understands that the only way to convince others of some truths would require a violent self-sacrifice—a cutting open of the body—the ultimate mode of revealing the self.

Often the storytelling is never complete. Allison, with an air of mystery, says, “Behind the story I tell is the one I don’t. Behind the story you hear is the one I wish I could make you hear” (Two or Three Things 39). She informs readers that no story she



tells is complete; her stories have layers which she has chosen to leave out and may return to, or she has not yet figured out how to convey some of her stories with truth and lucidity. Either way, she allows others to know the stories she tells are not the entire story, are only pieces of a larger tale. Laub asserts that “[. . .] the imperative to tell the story [. . .] is inhabited by the impossibility of telling” (64). We must come to terms with this impossibility in order to be satisfied with what we are able to convey. Even if it is not the entire story, telling what we can is better than not telling at all.

### Limitations of Writing

Writing is not all we need after experiencing trauma.. Other activities have healing potential as well. Louise Desalvo reveals in her book Writing to Heal the Soul that during a time of grief, she develops an unusual need to prove herself an expert biscotti baker and provides a perfected recipe that she takes much pride in. Many creative activities focus our energy in positive ways which help us cope with trauma. Whether painting, or pottery, or physical activity, these may calm us and produce a sense of tranquility within us. When we write, we create a product we can be proud of; participating in something we can take pride in will also help us heal.

As Herman suggests, empowerment is the key to healing. Allison gives an account of her introduction into karate, and explains how it helps her reclaim and reconnect with her body. Writing about the experience allows her to articulate the effects of the physical experience. She says the karate class taught her “for the first time how to run without fear pushing [her]” (Two or Three Things 59). While she admits she is not good at karate, she says, “all I gained was a sense of what I might do, could do if I

worked at it, a sense of my body as my own. And that was miracle enough” (Two or Three Things 66). During a run before karate class, she experiences an intense physical sensation of healing, of emotional release: “Something in the bottom of my spine let go. Something disconnected from the coccyx that was shattered when I was girl. Something loosened from the old bruised and torn flesh. Some piece of shame pulled free, some shame so ancient I had never known myself without it” (Two or Three Things 64). To articulate this sensation of healing in words makes it more relevant and permanent because it crystallizes the moment for Allison so she will never forget that sensation of shame lifting from her body. Part of her craft is writing the body, a technique that is vivid for readers; as she describes how pushing her body physically, yet voluntary, reminds her she has ownership of her once abused body, the reader understands and envisions the physicality of trauma leaving the body. Writing this experience extends the healing effects physical exertion has for Allison.

For writing to be empowering, it is imperative that when writing traumas, we write right. Puns aside, there is a wrong way to write, a way which will not be a beneficial mode of self-expression. There is no guarantee that we will engage in the most healing way of writing the first time we attempt. Desalvo argues, “Only a certain kind of writing will help us heal,” that in which we connect events with emotions (20). Many attempts may be made before writing of this sort, that which can heal, is produced. During her mother’s illness, which eventually leads to her death, Desalvo explains how she feels a need to write, but finds herself “deliberately avoid[ing] revisiting [her] past in any detailed way” (18). Not only was this kind of writing not beneficial, it may have been harmful (Desalvo 18). She was using her “writing to fight the feelings [she] was having

rather than representing them” (18).

Desalvo explains how she has to learn to write in a healing manner. Writing to heal does not come easy for her; it is, initially, a conscious process. In my own experience with writing painful memories, I can attest to the difficulty of getting it right. The desire to write our traumas is often incredibly strong, but the actual ability to recount painful events is more demanding than one could predict. In my beginning attempts to narrate a tale concerning grandparents who choose to not have contact with me, I find I am evading the actual events. When I first sit down to write, I compose a tale which describes how things have changed at my grandparents from how I remember them as a child. In the story I am visiting them at age 17, and noticing how the yard where I used to play is now unkempt and overgrown with weeds. I focus on how I feel about this. [[Using the overgrown yard as metaphor, I construct a tale with a familiar lost innocence of childhood angle because adult perspectives change everything.]] I neglect to mention that the visit at 17 is the first one in nine years, and that it will be the last. The overgrown yard is not what disturbs me, though in my writing, I say it does. I avoid the true source of my discomfort: that my grandparents have, until my father’s death when I am 17, chosen to have no contact with me after the age of eight. The visit at 17 becomes the last time I see them.

Like Desalvo, it took many attempts for me to write right, to connect events with emotions, and therefore write in a productive way which can heal. Allison too struggles with writing that will be most conducive to healing. She begins to write painful stories, but decides to edit them and make them amusing; the people in them are considered merely eccentric. But, she says, “[n]one of it was worth the pain it caused me. None of it

made me or my people real or understandable. None of it told the truth. . .” (Trash 11). It is not until she “[begins] to write what [she] really [thinks] about [her] family” that the “compartmentalized life [she] had created burst open” (Skin 34). Honesty in our writing is important, but does not always come easy. Even as we yearn to express our pain in writing, we sometimes encounter resistance to telling the tale as it needs to be told. Allison explains, “One time, twice, once in awhile again, I get it right. Once in awhile, I can make the world I know real on the page” (Trash 12). Even with these odds of hitting an honest and healing vein, she still continues to write, always trying to get it– her writing and her life–right in the process.

## CONCLUSIONS

### Loss, Betrayal, and Reading Autobiography

Reading others' nonfiction gives me courage and motivation to write about events which had a negative impact on me and my sense of self. When reading others' accounts of deeply personal aspects of their lives, I feel a combination of envy and respect. I longed to have the bravery to write about painful events as they have. In Allison's work, I sense in her words a peace and tranquility that has come from the understanding of traumatic events she extracts because of her writing. Reading autobiographies continues to motivate my own written self-exploration.

I have written of the grief I feel about the grandparents who choose to have no contact with me. Before writing about these events, I was plagued with an incoherent anxiety surrounding what had occurred with my grandparents. I never actively chose to ponder what had happened, and when I found my thoughts involuntarily traversing to the incomprehensible past, I would, in an effort to still the thoughts, create a tale of lesser trauma. Similar to Allison, who initially avoided addressing the events of her past through suppression and lying to herself, I avoided mine by justifying and rationalizing the events versus relating what had actually taken place. I never completely acknowledged how I felt about the occurrence. Instead, I would tell myself what happened was not heinous. I had not suffered major trauma—there is no history of sexual or physical abuse in my past. To describe what happened as anything more than regrettable was an exercise in melodrama. To write my pain would be an act of egocentrism. Really, I had no story that would be of interest to anyone. In addition, I reasoned that the absence of grandparents isn't significant. Many people aren't even close

to their grandparents, only reluctantly visiting them on holidays. I was simply giving more weight to their absence than was necessary. As I told myself all this, I realized the dishonesty of my statements. As the forgotten grandchild, I chose to forget—for as long as I could, until finally the topic needed addressing.

Like Allison, I realized that much of what I told myself were lies, and these lies were damaging to my emotional well-being. I had become incredibly well practiced in the art of emotional restraint, and these justifications were merely another example of that practice. Before writing, I would never admit that my grandparent's decision to sever contact with me is distressing. I never wanted to connect the event to any of my own behavioral patterns, but finally felt the necessity to do so. Acknowledging this story would force me to acknowledge things about myself, about who I am and the beliefs I hold, which I did not want to admit. It may have been that for a long time I was not ready to tackle those issues. Eventually, I couldn't imagine not writing about the trauma in a completely honest manner.

Writing allows us to be honest with ourselves. Internally lying exhausts a lot of emotional energy. I had always described myself as having low emotional energy. I would become tired, though not physically, and feel myself shutting down, unable to speak, with a great desire to be alone, away from others so I could take a break from my performance of self. As explored before, suppressing our grief is a constant psychic drain on the individual. I recall waking up in the middle of the night and having to get out of bed to write parts of the story. These nightly sleep intrusions become so frequent I begin to make sure I have paper and pen by the bed before going to sleep. The story takes on a life of its own; it is forcing itself to be written. This is not the case today. Writing the

story which explores the complex emotions I have regarding being abandoned by people I once cared about deeply, extinguished the sense of urgency surrounding the event. During and after writing, I find relief ensues. A portion of my story follows.

### Forgotten

After giving birth to me, during an unusually heavy snowfall in southeast Virginia, my mother leaves the hospital with my grandparents, my father's parents, and they return to my grandparent's Norfolk home, where my mother and I will live for the next two years of my life; my father is not present, nor will he ever be. When I am two, my mother and I move a few minutes away to Virginia Beach. She works a lot, so I am with my grandparents often. I love being with them; they always seem to have something fun planned for us to do, so I am never bored. My earliest memories contain images of them and of me playing in their large backyard. They are, undoubtedly, my favorite grandparents, the only grandparents I know well. My mother's parents live in New Jersey, and we rarely see them.

At the age of five, my mother moves us to Wilmington, North Carolina, a four hour drive from where I grew up. Every summer up until I am eight, I spend several weeks in Virginia with my grandparents. Sometimes they come to visit us in Wilmington, which is always exciting since they stay in expensive hotels and eat at restaurants my mother could never afford to take us. I always feel spoiled and loved when they came, showering me with attention and gifts. While my mother and I never have much money, I don't remember feeling poor, not when I had grandparents who provided so much for me. This all stops, abruptly, when I am about eight and a half. Gone are the days of

Christmas, birthday, and just because presents. No more excited phone calls where I relay to them what I am doing in school. No longer am I invited to visit them in Virginia, and they never return to North Carolina, ever.

At seventeen, we receive a phone call from them informing us my father, a man I have never known, has died, has been shot to death by his current wife. While this is an odd occasion for reentry into my life, it is one I am grateful for. I can't express the excitement I feel when I am asked to come visit them. After a brief but enjoyable visit to my first home to see people I once loved so dearly, I am optimistic that a relationship between us will ensue once again. Instead, it is the last time I ever see or hear from them.

I am curious about what occurs before my grandparents decide to cut me out of their lives. This is something, until recently, I have never considered. Do they sit down at the dining room table and formally discuss it? Or do they casually mention it while watching the evening news? Who brings it up? Does one argue in favor of me, one against me? If so, which one? Do they weigh my pros and cons, making a list of the positive and negative attributes I have at eight? Pros—quiet, undemanding, can entertain herself. Cons—takes one bite of food before declaring fullness, won't touch bread crusts, highly attached to her mother. Is my list of cons simply too long?

That first year they decide to not have contact with me, do they involuntarily find themselves reaching for Barbie dolls at Christmas time before remembering they wouldn't be sending any, ever again?

Do they mourn? Does their decision feel like a death has occurred? Do they pretend that I have died?

Or is there no formal discussion at all? There is absolutely no contact with me



from age of eight until age seventeen. Then none to this day. So what happens when I am seventeen? Do they know the whole time during my visit as a teenager that they planned on not seeing me again? Was I disappointing? I want to tell them all teenagers are disappointing; it's a difficult age to be.

I wonder if they remember my birthday or know how old I am now? I do not know these things about them. I do not know if they are still alive.

I ask questions I cannot answer, questions that may not have answers. I can only learn to accept what has occurred and understand that I will probably never know answers to these questions. It took me years to acknowledge and even longer to write a coherent story, which exposed my entangled emotions about my grandparents, and examined how these betrayals have affected me.

I don't know if I could have done that without writing.

## Implications

There is power in words, power in representation through writing. Those who have been rendered powerless by traumatic events need a way to regain a feeling of power and control. Becoming the author of one's story is a way to achieve this sense of agency.

When we write, we distance ourselves from events and can become more objective in our analyses. The ability to be objective analyzers can change how we once thought, felt, and defined ourselves in relation to others and to our personal tragedies. When our thinking changes, our definitions of self change, and we can take advantage of the self's ability to be revised. This notion of self revision is a realization necessary for

trauma sufferers. With the realization of the self's mutability, trauma sufferers can begin to feel like creators of their own lives, instead of being passive in identity creation. We are always changing; the people we were yesterday are not who we are today. This is good news—because of the self's ability to change, active revision of identity is possible, and is sometimes a necessary undertaking, especially for those whose identities have been damaged through trauma.

Once we unbind ourselves from harmful self narratives, healing can begin. Often we do not even realize we are bound to narratives which harm us until we carefully examine ourselves and our ideologies. Autobiographical writing, by allowing for thorough analysis of the self, can make us aware of our tendency to conform to narratives which are not beneficial, to narratives which do not actually represent us or our experiences accurately. Once we realize this, we can free ourselves and develop our own, more healing narratives.

### Final Thoughts

I believe in the power of literature, in reading and writing, to change us, to make us better, more accepting, more dynamic individuals. Reading and writing does something within us, rearranges our molecules just a bit and makes us different for the better. Tell me you love to read, tell me you need to write, and I put you up there with animal lovers—with people whom I feel have an intrinsic goodness. This is why I teach—in hopes of producing people of that sort—people who couldn't imagine their lives without literature.

Our lives are stories, needing to be told and capable of revision. Sometimes tragic, sometimes joyful, our lives are never unimportant and never simple. Allison poignantly tells us, “Our lives are not small. Our lives are all we have, and death changes everything. The story ends, another begins. The long work of life is learning the love for the story, the novels we live out and the characters we become” (Skin 250). It is up to us to record the lives we have, to describe them with the detailed richness they deserve—before the story ends.

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