**EVENT TITLE:** Documenting Trauma Narratives: Survivors in the Aftermath of Gun Violence

**EVENT DESCRIPTION:** Silence is the language of the trauma narrative. But what happens when the silence is broken? This session engages in dialogue with three survivors of gun violence, including those of school shootings, as they share their choices and processes for writing their personal narratives. Panelists will also discuss the social and cultural implications this type of written documentation has on advocacy work and healing.

**EVENT CATEGORY:** Nonfiction Craft & Criticism

**EVENT MODERATOR & ORGANIZER:**

Amye Archer (Moderator): Amye holds an MFA in Creative Nonfiction. Her memoir, *Fat Girl, Skinny*, was named runner-up for the Red Hen Press Nonfiction Manuscript Award. Her nonfiction has appeared in *Brevity, The Huffington Post, Marie Claire, Creative Nonfiction, Hippocampus, Scary Mommy*, and more. Amye teaches First-Year Writing at The University of Scranton. She’s the co-editor of *If I Don’t Make It, I Love You: Survivors in the Aftermath of School Shootings* (Skyhorse, 2019).


**EVENT PARTICIPANTS:**


John Fox (aka Artly Snuff) is a contributor to the book *If I Don’t Make It I Love You: Survivors in the Aftermath of School Shootings*. He was seventeen when he took his first college semester at the University of Texas-Austin. He was present the day of the shooting in 1966.

Marcel McClinton is a contributor to the book *If I Don’t Make It I Love You: Survivors in the Aftermath of School Shootings*. He is 18 and is a Houston-based gun violence prevention activist,
and gun violence survivor of a 2016 shooting outside of his church. Marcel has travelled America protesting, speaking, and lobbying with a number of different organizations in an effort to urge lawmakers to enact change, and encourage other young people to get involved.

Opening remarks and housekeeping announcements.

Megan Doney: Megan Doney is a contributor to the book *If I Don’t Make It, I Love You: Survivors in the Aftermath of School Shootings*. She is a professor of English at New River Community College in Virginia, and survived a shooting there in 2013. She is at work on an essay collection about this experience.

**OPENING REMARKS:**

Good afternoon, and welcome to Documenting Trauma Narratives: Survivors in the Aftermath of Gun Violence.

Before we get started, a couple administrative notes:

We’re delighted to be joined by an impressive panel today. You can read their full bios on the AWP website.

First we wanted to share more about how our project and interest in this topic began:

In the months before the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, we discussed ideas for a new anthology. It quickly became clear that gun violence, and those left in its wake, was of particular interest to both of us. For Amye, Sandy Hook changed everything, as it did for many parents across the country. Her twin daughters were the same age as the children murdered on that day, and she has been advocating for change ever since. And for Loren, she’d been writing about trauma for years after her own experience with sexual violence. She’s been interested in how individuals recover through the use of personal story, and has delivered many workshops on writing to heal.

So, we started our project with what we thought was a simple question: What happened to those who survived Columbine? We wondered how they moved forward, how they grew up and moved on, and what their lives looked like almost twenty years later. Then, the Parkland shooting happened, and it became clear that the intersectionality between trauma and mass shootings could no longer be ignored.

We faced many challenges when starting this project, the very first was finding a survivor who would talk with us. We started by reaching out to individuals who were publicly telling their stories after Parkland. We got some response, but they were often busy with advocacy work or tired of the media’s constant presence. Finally, it was through the Pennsylvania Chapter of
Moms Demand Action that we were able to connect with our very first writer: Jami Amo, a student who’d survived the shooting at Columbine High School.

Through Jami, we learned of survivor networks that stretch across the country and reach back decades. The survivors in these networks, like The Rebels Project, are fiercely protective of one another, and it took many weeks and months to earn their trust and prove our intentions, a task only accomplished with the help of Jami and others who were willing to vouch for us. We spent countless hours on the phone assuring the writers in this book that we weren’t media, but teachers, and that our book would be a historical preservation of what it is like to live in the here and now, in the aftermath of school shootings.

We learned that trauma often silences, and many communities represented in this book experienced silence in some way. Some chose to remain quiet after facing an intense media presence in the days after their shooting. Some stayed quiet out of respect for those who didn’t survive. A member of the Sandy Hook community told us, my child lived. I have no right to speak. Sometimes, the silence was cultural, as in the Amish community of West Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania.

This silence showed up often in this project. Especially during those early days. Some communities didn’t respond, others were near impossible to contact. We spent months trying to find a way in, to give everyone a chance to speak their experience and have a voice in this project, but in the end, some were not ready, and we respected their decision.

Silence was also intrinsic in the language. Some people we spoke with refused to be called survivors because they weren’t shot. Some who were shot refused to be called victims. We learned not to say lost. “My daughter was murdered,” a mother from Northern Illinois reminded us, murdered. A student who was at Umpqua Community College during the shooting told us over the phone, “We are all survivors. Even the ones not in the room. Even the ones not on campus that day. We are a community, and we mourn together.” There seemed to be rules about who was allowed to carry pain, a hierarchy of trauma—unspoken. We tried to learn the rules.

We also bore witness to the vicarious nature of trauma. Before starting, we knew this collection process wouldn’t be easy. So, we prepared. We reduced our teaching loads, started exercising and practicing meditation, started journaling, and found therapists. Despite our best efforts, the trauma from these stories and those telling them, found a way to seep into our daily lives. We cried a lot. We turned to our spouses, co-workers, and family members for emotional support, but in the end, no one knew what we were going through better than us. We spent countless hours on the phone with each other listening, talking, sometimes sobbing. We held one another’s pain when the weight became too much.

After a year of cultivating these personal narratives, we returned to our original question: What happened to those who survived Columbine? While the section in this book on Columbine reveals many answers to this question, we realized our project expanded way beyond our previous scope. What seemed so defined from the beginning, flowered into a desire to know more, which took us back more than fifty years to University of Texas-Austin where we then
worked forward. And what we unveiled through this expansion was a timeline of generational trauma told by those that lived it either through the lens of student, parent, daughter, son, best friend, neighbor, doctor, lawyer, husband, wife, etc.

This timeline provided answers, many of which can be found in these personal stories of letting go and moving on, managing survivor’s guilt, forgiveness, shame, denial, healing from physical and mental injuries, self-destruction, addiction, anger, love, and more. Yet, there is still so much left unsaid. So it’s our hope that as you read these stories, you’ll be as moved by them as we’ve been in order to find more answers to one of America’s greatest public crises.

To get us started, if our panelists could each introduce themselves and give a brief overview of their personal experience with trauma narratives.

MODERATOR QUESTIONS:

1. We learned that trauma often silences, and many communities represented in our book experienced silence in some way. Some chose to remain quiet after facing an intense media presence in the days after their shooting. Some stayed quiet out of respect for those who didn’t survive. What made you decide to break your own silence and share your story?

2. Follow up question - Deciding to share your story after experiencing a traumatic event is a very personal choice and a matter of trust. Once you decided to share your story, what was your process like when writing about it? For example, did you find yourself leaving out certain parts because they were triggering? Or, did you decide to write about the whole experience even though it might’ve been difficult?

3. Research has shown there are many benefits to writing and/or sharing trauma narratives as an avenue for healing. These benefits include the trauma memory becoming more organized, making more sense of the trauma, finding strength and resilience, the exposure of unhelpful beliefs, and the trauma event becoming less triggering. How did writing your story impact your own healing process? For example, did you feel less triggered by sharing your story? Did you feel stronger after you told your story?

4. Do you feel that sharing personal narratives written by those affected by gun violence can encourage social and cultural change? Has sharing your own story proved this to you?
PARTICIPANT RESPONSES TO MODERATOR QUESTIONS:

Loren Kleinman:

1. **What made you decide to break your own silence and share your story?**
   a. While not gun violence related, my personal encounter with trauma began on May 28, 2004, when I was forced into an empty bathroom and raped by the doorman at a nightclub. Like many survivors of trauma, I was living my life under a siege of silence, with the hope that someone would eventually hear me. For me, silence equated to a type of guilt: Somehow, I must have done something wrong to deserve this. Who would believe me if I spoke? Who would help me? This experience altered the way in which I lived my life, and for seven months I suffered from severe anxiety attacks, nightmares that replayed the rape, paranoia (e.g., the fear that it would happen again), health-related problems, flashbacks, and depression. I realized as the months went on that my only salvation was my art; my art was the one place I could go to, that if no one listened, the page would. It had no choice.

2. **What was your process like when writing about it?**
   a. I dove in, head first. I found the only way to write about my trauma was to write about ALL of it. I wasn’t worried about what I left in or what I left out. I just wrote down everything that came to me. What resulted was a stream of consciousness or a free write. Once I got all my thoughts, vulnerabilities, etc. down on the page, I let it sit for some time, a few days. When I return to the text, I see places I’ve gone to I hadn’t known existed.

3. **How did writing your story impact your own healing process?**
   a. Writing about my own healing process set me free. Through my writing, I learned my rape wasn’t my fault, and then I felt compelled to tell my story. Like Roland Barthes’ discourse on love, this was my discourse too. The love I had for myself pushed me to understand my trauma and forced me to break silence. Even if no one cares to listen, you're remaking your place in the world; you're retaliating against the boundary your suffering has imposed on you.

4. **Do you feel that sharing personal narratives written by those affected by gun violence can encourage social and cultural change?**
   a. Absolutely. Sharing personal stories is one of the most important ways to bring about change. We see evidence of this historically. For example Anne Frank’s
*The Diary of a Young Girl* provided a glimpse into Frank’s life during the Holocaust and provided in depth accounts of her ideals and optimism in the face of horror. Such vulnerability allows readers to connect with stories on a very intimate level and allows readers to bear witness to how these stories fit in with their own lives on a personal and social level. The results can be transformative and encourage an audience to make their own personal meaning, which, in a sense, is the power in the personal narrative, especially in the trauma narrative because it proves and supports the strength of those who’ve suffered and made changes based on that suffering.

John Fox (aka Artly Snuff):

1. **What made you decide to break your own silence and share your story?**  
   a. I didn’t discuss the incident at all for decades, not even with my wife. I started to talk about it when I was contacted by Keith Maitland when he was putting together his documentary, *Tower*. That was when I first met Claire Wilson, who was the woman I carried off the Main Mall while the sniper was still firing from the University of Texas Tower. I also met Neal Spelce, who covered the shooting for local media and Ray Martinez, one of the police officers who put the sniper down. I realized we had all been through the same mental wringer and it was comforting to me.

2. **What was your process like when writing about it?**  
   a. It was just saying what I had gone through that day. I simply re-lived it chronologically. It was easier for me having seen the Keith Maitland’s *Tower* so many times. *Tower* takes me right back to that day every time I see it.

3. **How did writing your story impact your own healing process?**  
   a. That day was over fifty years ago and the passage of time has aided a lot in helping me to deal with it. The impact of the guilt I feel has ossified within my psyche after more than five decades of not dealing with that moment.

4. **Do you feel that sharing personal narratives written by those affected by gun violence can encourage social and cultural change?**  
   a. The power of those stories had already begun the changing of our society and nation. Back in 1966, I felt very few people could relate to what I had been through, but now, there has unfortunately been hundreds and hundreds of similar stories published. The agony and the pain we felt is a common thread that runs
through the stories that report on all the school shootings that happen with such horrifying regularity today.

Marcel McClinton:

1. **What made you decide to break your own silence and share your story?**
   a. I still don’t feel comfortable labeling myself as a survivor, because I wasn’t shot. It wasn’t until the Parkland shooting two years later that I felt empowered enough to demand change alongside hundreds of thousands of other young people. I first co-organized March For Our Lives Houston, and worked with over 80 organizers to hold an event where 15,000 Houstonians marched, chanted and cried together. I found my voice in this movement after two years of silence. Speaking to the massive crowd about my story was exhilarating, and empowering.

2. **What was your process like when writing about it?**
   a. Very freeing. I felt that the more I shared my story the more I was impacting social change, the more I was also healing myself. Writing about my story allowed me to tap into parts of myself, especially the healing process, that I was unaware existed. I suppose that’s the power of storytelling, in that it takes you to many spaces.

3. **How did writing your story impact your own healing process?**
   a. May 29th, 2016 was dramatic, life-changing, and traumatic. I will remember the sounds of gunshots for the rest of my life. I will forever remember the look on the faces of the kids we hid. I’ll remember how shaky my hands were while carrying them into a back room, away from the windows. Before I walked back out into the lobby area to brace for the shooter’s possible entrance, I thought to myself, “I love them. I’ll do everything I can to protect them.” I strive every single day to keep that promise, for them, and for everyone. The only way I can keep that promise to everyone, and most importantly to myself, is through sharing my personal story.

4. **Do you feel that sharing personal narratives written by those affected by gun violence can encourage social and cultural change?**
   a. I’ve now protested, spoken and lobbied around the country. In June, I spent four days each week in Washington, DC to lobby for gun violence prevention legislation. I also had the incredible opportunity to meet with lawmakers leading on this issue, as well as some who greatly oppose the work we’re doing. I spent almost two weeks on the Road To Change, a summer cross-country bus tour with
students from Parkland, Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Louis. On Road To Change we met with survivors of mass shootings and inner city gun violence, and were tasked with working towards empowering each community we went to. We listened to stories, shared our own, and discussed ways to combat an issue every community faces. Each day was a new experience, and I went home in July feeling emotionally drained, but also reminded about exactly why I do the work that I do. I never want another person to experience fear, trauma, or death when our lawmakers have the ability to put forth legislation to prevent senseless gun violence.

Megan Doney:

1. **What made you decide to break your own silence and share your story?**  
   a. I felt that the voices of educators in particular were absent from public rhetoric and personal stories about gun violence. In the early days after the shooting, I frantically sought out memoirs, essays, and scholarly research about and by educators who had experienced gun violence, and I couldn’t find anything at all. This contributed to my sense of loss, despair, and dislocation. Deciding to write the book that I needed to read is fueled by my commitment to ensure that no other educator has to live through what I have.

2. **What was your process like when writing about it?**  
   a. The process is both intellectually stimulating, and emotionally draining. In the essay published in this collection, I tried to imagine what I would have needed to hear, and to pass on whatever comfort and wisdom I could to other educators.

3. **How did writing your story impact your own healing process?**  
   a. The healing process is ongoing, like any grief process: a few steps forward and then three back, as a wave of unexpected sorrow hits me. I was very affected by T Kira Madden’s essay “Against Catharsis: Writing Is Not Therapy” in which they remark that writing is the art which we must make believable to the reader: “the readers’ experience of the work” is what matters. I think of my writing about the violence as a language acquisition: learning the syntax, tone, vocabulary, and eventually, comfort, in a new reality.

4. **Do you feel that sharing personal narratives written by those affected by gun violence can encourage social and cultural change?**  
   a. I hope so. I concur with Marcel that it is taxing work; I coordinated a town hall with March for Our Lives in 2018, and experienced a dramatic plunge in my
psychological well-being afterwards. I’ve been on public radio, television, and newspapers. I want to make my voice heard, but to also maintain some measure of control over how I say what I believe needs to be said. I don’t formally align with any gun violence prevention groups for this reason. My story and the convictions that have been constructed as a result are mine alone.