Vol. 27, no. 2, Winter 2025

# Deconstructing *The Body Papers*: Multimodal Memoir as Feminist Archival Practice

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**Abstract**: This article turns to Grace Talusan's memoir The Body Papers (2019) as an important study of multi-modal composition as an archive of evidence, and a space to navigate intergenerational, medical, historical and sexual trauma through the use of image and alphabetic text. Moreso, this article demonstrates how the memoir utilizes archiving as method, disrupting dominant means of autobiographical production. Building on scholarship in Critical Disability Studies and Trauma Studies, the article shows how Talusan uses archival materials and methods to name and (re)claim sites and sources of violence, her memoir thus emerging as a site of radical deconstruction and narrative reorientation.

**Keywords**: memoir, multimodality, disability studies, composition, pedagogy

**Doi**: 10.37514/PEI-J.2025.27.2.18

Content note: This essay contains references to sexual violence

I first discovered Grace Talusan's memoir *The Body Papers*, winner of the 2019 Restless Books Prize for New Immigrant Writing, while cat-sitting for a friend, the small-yet-plump book propped on top of a tall stack in the corner of the apartment. I pulled it down, immediately intrigued by the image at the center of the shiny teal cover, a human-like figure made up entirely of scraps of documents. "United States Department of Justice," was printed on the left leg. The small fingerprints of a child were printed on the other. What I later learned, as I read the book in a single sitting, was that these were quite literally "the body papers" of the author, and a small sampling of the 50 scanned documents appearing throughout the memoir.

Talusan certainly isn't the first memoirist to include images embedded alongside alphabetic text. In my earliest encounters with autobiographical writing, I'd start at the middle of the book, studying the carefully chosen photographs of the authors and their family members in significant settings and at pinnacle moments in their supposedly extraordinary existences. Yet in autobiography, the materials felt additive, like bonus material, not unlike the special features on DVDs rented from Blockbuster. In *The Body Papers*–Talusan's interrogation of individual, intergenerational, and medical trauma, including incest and undergoing a preventative mastectomy—scanned documents achieve what alphabetic text alone can not convey; it is this melding of materials which effectively articulates Talusan's reckoning with painful and, at times, unspeakable experiences. In this, the memoir serves as a valuable repository of Talusan's memories as well as an

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archive of documents that validate and complicate those recollections. Yet even more than demonstrating the archive as an object, Talusan highlights how multimodal composition as an archival method can serve as a practice of radical deconstruction and narrative reorientation. Throughout the memoir, she places images against alphabetic text to name and re/claim sites and sources of violence. This is a transgressive move towards narrative repossession (Laub 85-86), resisting political/social/cultural attempts at silencing and diminishing the experiences of trauma survivors.

In the Restless Book Prize judges' commentary on their decision to publish *The Body Papers,* they state: "Talusan uses documents—such as immigration papers, cancer test results, and legal certificates—to map an associative path to memory and the epicenters of reverberating injury and trauma" (n.p). Though the judges situate Talusan's book as a "trauma narrative"—just as I, too, name her as a "trauma survivor"—in addition to the lens of Trauma Studies it is useful to analyze the book through a Disability Studies framework. Disability Studies increasingly grapples with the ways that disability is a fully embodied experience that "does not occur in isolation" (Kafer 8), inviting space "to acknowledge—even mourn—a change in form or function" (Kafer 6). This iteration of Disability Studies resists over-reliance on the social model ("fixing society") without devolving into the medical model ("fixing the body/mind"). A Disability Studies framework positions disability as relational and tenuous–an active, shifting state that very much aligns with the judges' language of "association" and "reverberation." Talusan's text moves in cycles, an endless grappling without the concise resolution popular in many trauma memoirs. Throughout the book, Talusan does not detach her preventative double mastectomy from the sexual abuse she experienced as a child, nor from her diagnoses with anxiety and depression. She allows her book–like her body–to hold multitudes.

Moreso, the emphasis Disability Studies places on disabled kinship and access intimacy (Mingus) is useful as Talusan traverses systems which often stigmatize and isolate trauma survivors. It would be easy to interpret *The Body Papers* as a tragedy; there is so much pain on the page. And yet, the book contains many sections highlighting communal care, including moments of "that elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else 'gets' your access needs" (Mingus). Talusan's mother, running the shower and helping her bathe after the mastectomy, "cooking all [her] favorite food, even though [she] had no appetite" (201-202). A picture of Talusan in a hospital hallway, keeping pace with her sister, Ann, after Ann's own preventative mastectomy. These moments are hopeful alternatives to common tropes of desolation and/or tragic submission that are imbued in many stories of illness. And though the memoir remains, at its core, an archive of an individual's journey towards better understanding and living with the impact of trauma, it is also an archive of the networks working to sustain Talusan's existence.

I believe *The Body Papers* would be a powerful memoir if it existed solely as alphabetic text. Talusan is a visceral storyteller, weaving descriptions of food, place, and character to convey joy and devastation amongst several generations of family members. Even the simplest sentences carry tremendous weight. "There are so many ways that life can break your heart," she writes (20). Yet, whereas this quote could be interpreted as passive—the heart is broken by life—Talusan actively *confronts* each heartbreak through her

compilation of visible, impenetrable evidence. Talusan's inclusion of photographs, government documents, and letters reveal systematic and familial perpetrators who committed violence against her, utilizing multimodality as an act of resistance. Perhaps the most striking inclusion is a family picture taken in front of the Statue of Liberty. In the image, five family members take up the foreground—Talusan's mother, two siblings, and her grandparents. Her grandfather, tall and thin with round glasses, stares directly at the camera. New York City is a stop on an epic road trip. Talusan's grandparents are visiting from the Philippines and her father is "excited to show his parents America" (111). It is in the backseat of their car, on this trip, that Talusan's grandfather begins to abuse her.

What does it mean to link one's abuser inextricably and visibly to one's memoir? Talusan does not change her grandfather's name or smudge details to eliminate identifiable factors. She does not use the language of legality present in the front pages of many memoirs. Talusan openly presents her grandfather to her readers, through name, face and age in which the assaults occurred. "This is what happened, and happened, and happened," she writes, compiling a list, beginning at "I was seven, and he was seventy," until "I was thirteen and he was seventy-six" (124-125). These declarative statements counter a question Talusan poses about her grandmother's refusal to acknowledge the abuse: "If you wish that something isn't happening, does it make it disappear?" (115). By archiving her experiences, Talusan demonstrates that the answer is *no*. The abuse does not disappear. By including the image of her grandfather taken on the precise day abuse began, Talusan illustrates that she *will not forget* and she *won't let others* forget. Through memoir, she shapes how others receive her experience.

Talusan's "collection of evidence" is increasingly profound when considering the level of scrutiny survivors must undergo when naming assault, as well as the many other factors that might prevent people from naming the experiences. "As soon as I told my parents what happened, they warned me to keep it quiet," she recalls. She adds: "They knew a story could destroy you" (127). Though she fears repercussions, even while writing the memoir, Talusan refuses to suppress her truth. Dori Laub, trauma researcher, writes that, "repossessing one's life story through giving testimony is itself a form of action, of change" (qtd. in DeSalvo 210). Here, Laub echoes Arthur Frank's identification of "the wounded storyteller" in which "telling stories is a form of resistance [in which] the flow of experience is reflected upon and redirected; resistance through the self-story becomes the remaking of the body self" (170). Echoing the fragmented image on the memoir's cover, such "remaking" is not complete recovery, or "return to normal" but instead, a restoration. Talusan does not give in to her suffering, but rather, rebuilds from it.

In the oft-cited Regarding the *Pain of Other*s, Susan Sontag writes: "Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us" (89). Though I respect much of Sontag's writing on illness and pain (her *Illness as Metaphor* a quintessential text at the intersection of Literary Studies and Disability Studies), I don't agree with her reductive claim about the distinct roles performed by photography and narrative. Memoirs often leave the readers—and the writers—with more questions than answers, further tangling the threads of truth as opposed to unspooling them. Of the abuse by her grandfather, Talusan

writes: "It is tempting to draw an arrow between cause and effect, but there is no making sense of what he did to me" (119). Similarly, I'd argue that the visceral response to a photograph depends on the viewer's relationship to the subject. Yet, as Talusan demonstrates, photo and text in conjunction can enable a deeper understanding and provoke a more visceral response than reliance on solely one medium. For example, the chapter "Monsters" includes official school photos alongside captions indicating the years kindergarten through eighth grade. To an unfamiliar viewer, these pictures are just like the standard school photos present in most American households, stuck in a wallet or on a fridge. Yet in tandem with the descriptions of abuse, the reader understands there is an alternate, devastating reality to what is present in the photograph. In the second photo, taken the year the abuse began, seven-year old Talusan looks forward, hair parted in the middle, with a smile showing adult teeth grown in. Unlike Sontag's analysis of war photography, in which the viewer becomes "a spectator of calamities that take place" (18), it is the normalcy, the everyday, of the school photographs that haunts here.

Talusan does not sugarcoat the impact that writing this story has on her body and mind. She writes: "Every time I write about this part of my life, I get a rash. I am covered in small itchy bumps on my trunk and arms and thighs. All the places he touched" (128). By describing the long-term visible ramifications of the abuse, she deviates from linear narratives of healing and social pressures to "move on" or "get over it." She heeds memoir scholar Louise DeSalvo's demands that "we not write what we think the culture wants to hear, that we not spare our readers the site of our bodies" (198). And though Talusan articulates disassociation—she recalls a picture she once drew of herself, in which her head floated above her body "like a balloon" (149)—her language throughout the memoir is heavily embodied; for example, she spends two pages describing a boil she picks until it pops. The boil is a metaphor for pain seen and unseen, the scar is from a wound, but it is also a mark—or perhaps, an archive of existence. Though she may at times feel invisible, the blood is a reminder that she is there.

Similar to her descriptions of physical pain and discomfort, Talusan acknowledges the ways "the dual experience of the abuse itself, visceral and disgusting, and the denial of the abuse drove [her] deeper into mental illness" (146). By capturing the impact cultural and social stigmatization and personal shame have on her actions, Talusan evokes the political/relational model of disability; her cognitive and physical being is shaped by her traumatic environment as well as the silence surrounding it. She writes that when depressed, "I'm full of guilt about my depression" and amongst friends she cannot completely be present because "this grayness thrives on isolation" (142). These descriptions–in the chapter titled "Unspeakable Sadness"— are juxtaposed against images of "Grace with her parents before they dropped her off for the first year of college" (136), and of Talusan with her arm around a friend, holding plastic cups at a party in their first apartment after graduation. In these photographs of key developmental markers the impact of Talusan's childhood abuse are ever present and—as the chapter title indicates—unspoken. And yet, the chapter concludes with a narrative turn in which Talusan's father reveals a letter sent years ago to his own father: "*I know what you did to Gracie. You are dead to me*" (151). Whereas until this moment Talusan's father downplays the impact of the abuse, in this moment we understand—as Talusan does—her father recognizes the

weight of what occurred, and imparts consequences on her abuser.

I have spent much time here focusing on the use of multimodal composition to convey Talusan's story as a survivor of sexual abuse. Yet, as indicated earlier in this essay, The Body Papers is an archival (re) collection of how multiple traumas resonate through Talusan's body, and shape her understanding of how she moves through the world. Throughout the book Talusan grapples with the impact of intergenerational trauma, including the ways colonialism may have informed her grandfather's penchant towards violence, and how her family was shaped by a failed immigration process. In addition to family and individual photographs, Talusan includes immigration documents–some still with redactions–which indicate governmental denial of the family's citizenship status. "CHILD," one document states in big bold letters, surrounded in an otherwise tight script. "Subject is a 9 year old child…deportability established…departure to coincide with parents" (66). In tandem with the documentation, Talusan recalls the laborious process—over six months—to retrieve her immigration files using the Freedom of Information Act. She writes: "The dozens of pages I had in hand seemed weightless compared to the heavy burden those missing pages placed on my mind" (73). Here, Talusan "breaks open lies of omission" (xi)—the Restless Book Prize judges' words—and "force[s] difficult questions to the fore" (Gilmore 14). As readers and witnesses to these exclusionary policies and other forms of institutional violence, we too must grapple with difficult questions: *How do gaps in time and/or evidence shape understanding about ourselves and others? What does it mean to tell the story of being "a subject"? How might the archive serve as a reflective point when faced with further administrative violence?* For Talusan, the process of narrative (re)construction means repositioning herself from the status of "other" and reorienting herself to the center, and thus, reclaiming her power.

One can not talk about trauma without addressing grief; the latter can reverberate decades after a life-changing act. Acknowledging the grief that has come post-spinal injury, the memoirist Christina Crosby writes: "I want and I need to remember the body I once was…Forgetting is impossible" (201). Similarly, Talusan uses the memoir form to chronicle and archive her body pre-and-post preventative mastectomy–a procedure also undergone by two of her sisters. In the chapter "Carriers," she describes the days before her mastectomy, stopping "in front of the bathroom mirror after showering to memorize my breasts…I thought of how the first buds appeared through my electric-blue dance costume at age eleven; how water felt like velvet when I swam topless with my girlfriends in the summer" (199). In this description, grief and joy co-mingle as Talusan prepares for the medically invasive procedure. As in previous chapters, she does not shy away from the truth of her body, noting, post-mastectomy, "I hadn't expected this hollowing out of my chest, and I was horrified by the concavity, this bowl scraped clean" (202).

And yet, amongst this grief, Talusan locates a group of other women who underwent preventative mastectomies, helping shift her outlook on the procedure. "I got better. I found community…I learned the term 'previvors'—those who haven't yet developed cancer, but who carry a predisposition," she writes (203). Through the discovery of new kin and new language "something inside [her] unclenched," opening up space to be "grateful for [her] breast mounds—a fair trade for peace of mind" (204). This transition away from

self-hatred and towards self-nurturing was facilitated through disability kinship, "fierce and patient and tender and rare…tinged with grief and pain and also with defiance" (Reaume). Just as Talusan can serve as a model for readers with resonant experiences, it is Talusan's connection to other "previvors" which enables her to value her new body and treat it with kindness.

"Feelings are not facts," is an oft-repeated phrase in the teaching of nonfiction. And though this can be an important distinction, the prioritization of fact over feeling has often been weaponized during the recall of trauma. In "Carriers," Talusan offers us both feeling and fact, enabling us to question what is (im) possible to capture through data. The chapter opens with the image of her test results "POSITIVE FOR A DELETERIOUS MUTATION," followed by medical jargon (190). This fact was instrumental in shaping her decision making process. Yet her test results can not capture the complexity of Talusan's embodied experience and her evolving relationship to her body as well as towards motherhood, which she, after much hesitation, decided against. The chapter ends with an image of joy—Talusan smiling wide and holding her young niece, Naomi, who years before survived childhood cancer. "Sometimes what you long for is what you already have," Talusan writes (207). Here, she evokes a hopeful defiance, harkening back to the shifting ways she viewed her post-mastectomy body. Talusan does not need to be a mother to have maternal bonds. She confidently deviates from socially constructed expectations.

The year after I first encountered *The Body Papers*, I invited Talusan to virtually visit a first-year writing class I was teaching on "Representations of Disability in Contemporary Memoir." Several students asked her the question of "why." *Why choose to write about painful experiences? What was the cost to her own well-being, as well as her relationship with her family members?* In response, Talusan recalled a phone conversation with a distant cousin on the day of *The Body Papers* official release. Having read of Talusan's abuse, her cousin deemed it possible to share the story of her own victimization by the same perpetrator. This moment demonstrates the radical, transformative possibilities of memoir, enabling survivors to express out loud what society prefers they keep quiet.

For Talusan, hearing her cousin's story validated her own experience, indicating a kind of reciprocal recognition. She understands the significance of this reciprocity. Talusan shared:

"People do tell me, mostly women of color, immigrants, Filipinx, will tell me they read my book multiple times and they'll write me messages… Even if they aren't writing an essay or story, they are writing to me, and I hope something is released from that" (class archives).

What Talusan describes is a kind of mutual witnessing facilitated through shared vulnerability. The "release" is a kind of productive undoing–an "unclenching" made possible through her readers textually marking their own traumatic experiences. Their writing is, thus, also an archival process, the message box a location to name what is often cloaked in silence. As such, Talusan's multimodal composition initiates a kind of domino effect, her proclamations enabling others to follow, to articulate and document what so

many others would rather dismiss.

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