

## Introduction

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This collection of articles has grown out of a rather simple, though earnest, interest in writings by women—many of them unknown to the reading public—who have experienced degrees of sexual abuse, most typically incest. *Voices in the Night*, edited by Toni McNaron and Yarrow Morgan, and *I Never Told Anyone*, edited by Ellen Bass and Louise Thornton, came out almost simultaneously in the early 1980s as a result of writing workshops organized by and for women survivors of childhood sexual abuse. The editors of both volumes point to the therapeutic benefits of writing about one's experience of childhood sexual abuse as an indispensable step towards genuine healing. In their introduction, McNaron and Morgan emphasize "the necessity and excitement of rendering women's lives into art as healing, enriching and affirmative experiences," since "otherwise this huge reality for one-third of all women will be romanticized or buried or trivialized or mocked" (17–18). Bass and Thornton define their goal in putting their book together thus: "to help give the sexually abused child a voice. She had been studied, evaluated, re-evaluated, and compiled into numerous statistics and case studies. But had this child ever spoken for herself?" (17). Supporting these beliefs, psychologist Judith Herman in her 1991 book, *Trauma and Recovery*, recognized the importance of "reconstructing the trauma story" as one of the major stages of the healing for survivors of traumatic experiences since "when the truth is finally recognized, survivors can begin their recovery" (3,1).

Herman defines the first stage of recovery in the context of counseling as that of "establishing safety" and the second stage as that of "reconstructing the trauma story" (3). But the process of writing about violence as described by McNaron and Morgan and by Bass and Thornton seems to indicate that creation of safe space occurs simultaneously as the telling/writing of the story. When women write about their experiences of violence, then, safe space is not a prerequisite, but something that comes out of the writing process.

Our 1993 Midwest Modern Language Association Meeting session titled "Women's Writing As Creation of Safe Space" was a rather casual offshoot of such knowledge and exploration as these books made possible of the relationship between women's sense of safety and their writing. We simply wanted to gather papers that would illustrate ways in which survivors of sexual violence

used their writing to create a safe space from which to speak, in order then to create more safe space, perhaps to be shared with others. This seemed to be by itself a worthwhile cause to base our session on, as we daily faced reports of various sorts of violence against women and our own increasing sense of personal danger.

The paper abstracts we received in response to our one-page call for papers in the spring of 1993, however, opened our eyes to larger possibilities. The scholars who wrote to us addressed the issues of childhood sexual abuse, ensuing trauma, and survivors' efforts to overcome the sense of imminent danger through writing. They also proposed to examine other related topics such as social violence against women, emotional abuse, definition of audience for and by survivor discourse, as well as linguistic and literary problems surrounding women's writing about experiences of violence. The session, which eventually became a double session, far outreached our initial expectations, growing into a multifaceted colloquium, with presentations including various eras—seventeenth to twentieth centuries—and various nationalities—American, British, Canadian, and German.

The range and number of paper topics proposed for our session only reminded us of the prevalence of violence against women in many societies, past and present. If one needs any "academic" and "professional" evidence—as if news reports are not depressing and convincing enough, or because they are too sensational to warrant level-headed contemplation—a number of recent publications provide proof of the widespread violence and demonstrate how such violence is condoned or even encouraged by the cultures and societies in which we live.

In *It Could Happen to Anyone: Why Battered Women Stay*, Ola W. Barnett and Alyce D. LaViolette quote statistics from the late 1980s that say "approximately 20%–50% of all female emergency patients (not just trauma victims) are battered women" and "women make 1,453,437 medical visits per year for treatment of injuries resulting from an assault by a spouse" (xvii–xviii). According to Ann Jones in *Next Time She'll Be Dead: Battering and How to Stop It*, all the attention paid by media and legal efforts made in the recent years have not helped to decrease domestic violence. "A few years ago the FBI reported that in the United States a man beats a woman every eighteen seconds. . . . Now [i.e., in 1992] it's *twelve*" (6, author's italics). The most reliable count, the number of homicides resulting from domestic violence against women, says that such violence is on the increase: "In Massachusetts, in 1989, one woman was slain by her husband or boyfriend every twenty-two days . . . in 1992 it is happening every nine days" (Jones 7).

In *Transforming a Rape Culture*, edited by Emilie Buchwald, Pamela Fletcher, and Martha Roth, the preamble defines "a rape culture," which is the culture in which we live, as follows:

What is a Rape Culture? It is a complex of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women. It is a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent. In a rape culture women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself. A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women *as the norm*. (vii, authors' italics)

Ellen Bass corroborates that "we live in a society where men are encouraged to do violence to women and children, subtly and overtly" (25). According to McNaron and Morgan,

approximately one out of every three girl children experiences sexual abuse in her family, and with figures that approximately 97% of all victims of sexual abuse are girls and not boys, we begin to place incest within the context of a sexist culture. Anything that happens to one out of every three girls is neither random nor exceptional. (14–15)

In an interview with *Ms.*, Ann Jones links domestic violence against women to the popular concept of romance and love: "The problem is that so much of men's controlling behavior is absolutely synonymous with what is described as signs of love in the 'true luv' [i.e., romantic myth widely circulated through popular literature and media] kinds of literature" (60). In *Interrogating Incest*, Vikki Bell also suggests that "normal sexuality, normal power relations and the normal family are implicated in incestuous abuse. The men who are known to have abused children are not perverted, but 'normal,' everyday men" because so much of the sociocultural norm of male sexuality is linked to aggression, domination, and violence (82). In the face of such cultural and societal assumptions (however hidden) that women are to be controlled by men even (or especially) with the use of violence, women do write both creatively and theoretically to have their voices heard and to create safe space.

Relevant to such societal acceptance and encouragement of violence against women, one crucial question emerged as we organized our session on women writing to create space: Can acts of writing—and their products—be dangerous for women who write to overcome their experiences of violence and ensuing trauma?

Historically, writing has been both a means of empowerment and a source of anxiety for women. Feminist scholars of earlier women writers agree that women writers had more obstacles to overcome before they could write than their male counterparts. Some scholars believe that it was a path of thorns even for more successful women writers. Scholars of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British women writers, for example, assert that women who attempted to write did suffer considerably from the incompatibility between

the contemporary definitions of the nature of writing and the socio-cultural ideals of femininity of their time. Writing was an act of self-assertion, a characteristic alien to behavior expected of women, especially well-bred ones. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that creation of literary texts was considered an exclusively male domain from which women were biologically barred; it was believed that "because they are by definition male activities . . . writing, reading, and thinking are not only alien but also inimical to 'female' characteristics" (8). Consequently, "those women who were among the first of their sex to attempt the pen were evidently infected or sickened by just the feelings of self-doubt, inadequacy, and inferiority that their education in 'femininity' almost seems to have been designed to induce" (59–60). Elaine Showalter, in *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*, concurs that "early women writers' relationship to their professional role was uneasy. Eighteenth-century women novelists exploited a stereotype of helpless femininity to win chivalrous protection from male reviewers and to minimize their unwomanly self-assertion" (17).

Other scholars emphasize the happier examples while acknowledging the difficulties women writers faced. In *Literary Women*, Ellen Moers discusses how Elizabeth Barrett (Browning) and George Sand "made those difficulties [that plague women's lives] into resources" (5). According to Moers, Barrett (as well as Sand) had it all: "She [Barrett] wanted fame: published in her teens and twenties, her poetry was hailed round the world, and she was nominated for the laureateship. She wanted a share in the normal masculine literary life, and . . . she saw that life come to her. . . She wanted love as well. . . She wanted more love; and it came, it came—" (7).

We probably should not forget either that for many a woman such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, writing was one of the few options, if not the only one, for earning a wage large enough to support herself or her family. These women wrote mainly or partly out of an economic necessity, rather than—or not only—out of a desire or a need for artistic self-expression. In such cases, writing as a means of economic independence, even with its own drawbacks, must have been empowering to the women themselves.

Today's scholars of women's writing echo the scholars cited above when considering women's relationship to the printed word, sometimes choosing to magnify only one of the two potentials of writing: the danger or the empowerment. Bass and Thornton optimistically observe that in their book "women . . . have transformed themselves, like phoenixes rising from the ashes, through their own words" and that "in this book, survivors of childhood abuse use the power of speech to transform, to fuse secret shame, pain, and anger into a sharp, useful tool, common as a kitchen knife, for cutting away lies and deception like rotten fruits, leaving the clean hard pit, that kernel of truth" about incest (22,59). In contrast, McNaron and Morgan hesitate to celebrate the coming of their book unquestioningly:

Often we wept deeply, not from content, but from uttering the taboo words in a safe, supportive environment. To write those same stories as narrative is a second and huge step because we put form around what has seemed so chaotic, we make public to strangers the most intimate truths about ourselves. We also give up control because we cannot know how a given reader will respond to us. (19)

Herman also recognizes the danger of self-exposure: "Those who attempt to describe the atrocities that they have witnessed also risk their own credibility. To speak publicly about one's knowledge of atrocities is to invite the stigma that attaches to victims" (2). As Thornton argues, many children do not speak up about their abuse because they believe that their "word alone will very likely not be honored" (18). A woman/child can be labeled liar when speaking the truth, and thus have that calumny of dishonesty piled on the previous pain and trauma.

In this volume, a number of articles address the question of the danger of speaking up. Diana Swanson considers Woolf's ambivalent relationship to a medium that both sustains her and renders her terribly vulnerable. Brenda Daly and Susan L. Woods both discuss the particular vulnerability academics open themselves up to when they write autobiographically. All three articles purport to discover why, if writing is risky, women still continue to try to write. Sonia Apgar's article details the recovery process undergone by women writing about past trauma. Other answers to the question are proposed by nearly all of the essays in the collection, most being psychological, but some even economic.

This question later grew into another, yet more complex one. Are women co-opted into the oppressors' group when they write their way into the mainstream, by accepting and even using the power dynamics that oppressed them in the first place? While this question lurks behind many of the essays, Annalee Newitz discusses it more directly in her consideration of the incest and pornography in Anne Rice's enormously popular fiction.

The concept of safe—or unsafe—home is inseparable from the act of writing for the purpose of creating safe space, because the home is a central spatial element to many women's lives and also because much of the violence women experience takes place in their home, belying the social myth that the home is safe space for all residents. Home is supposed to be, but often is not, safe for women, as is attested by the number of women battered at home and children sexually and otherwise abused by their family members. Mary Jo Dondlinger argues that a number of Emily Dickinson's poems can be read as symptomatic of just such a homelife. In some cases the family home or private acts of writing such as journaling may appear safe, but in fact are not. Certainly Dickinson is very protective of her writing, even within her home. Could the appearance of safety be a reflection of the deceptiveness of society's paternalistic

attitude towards women? Are victims of incest in some ways privileged in their comprehension of this?

When the home itself is threatened or transplanted, a new set of problems arise, as we discover in Lisa Logan's discussion of Harriet Spofford's fictive captivity narrative. The American frontier was a difficult place to maintain any sense of safety whether at home or abroad. Mary Sylwester's analysis of Rebecca Ketcham's trail diary reveals a woman desperately seeking a sense of home and security on the westward trail. One solution to the dangers of home suggested by Willa Cather is seclusion in a convent, a space which Linda Karell examines.

Another important question is this: Is writing—language—as dangerous to women as many homes are, or is there a kind of writing that is particularly safe? For example, does so-called women's language, valued and sought by feminist writers like Luce Irigaray, provide a safer medium for women writing about their experiences of violence? How much safer are journaling and more private types of publishing, such as magazines like *Ms.* that are geared towards a self-identified feminist audience or small circulation journals? Don't these publications also have their own codes of acceptability so that some writers may get censored and/or criticized when they have expected more sympathetic reception? If writing—language—and publishing have long been male-dominated and any changes that women may make are still only grafted onto the cultural base that condones or supports violence against women, could women ever find or create a safe home by writing at all?

From the anthologized articles focusing on nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century writing, it would seem that women have attempted many different strategies of voicing their experiences—encoding, symbolism, allegory, plot machinations—in ways that also protect them from discovery by all but the most sensitive or informed reader. The very secretive nature of much of women's early writing suggests a knowledge of its power and danger. Susan Anne Carlson explains how Charlotte Brontë's novelettes were originally written in script so small they require a magnifying glass to read.

More fundamental questions arise concerning the body—more specifically, the female body—space and writing and their interconnections. What kind of space can possibly be created by writing, and what is the process by which one creates it? Tomoko Kuribayashi proposes that Sandra Cisneros creates safe space through bilingualism, creates a house where neither the poverty and sexism of her Chicano home nor the violence and racism of the Anglophone world can hurt her. How does writing also relate to the body, when the wish to have a safe haven for their bodies is one of the reasons these women are writing? All of the twentieth-century authors under consideration in this anthology address these concerns, although perhaps none so felicitously as Alberta Hunter who, according to Kari Winter, wrote blues lyrics as a playful language of the body which in fact protected Hunter's lesbian identity. Unlike Hunter, Joy Kogawa,

according to Julie Tharp, connects the sexual trauma of her young protagonist to racial/ethnic oppression, in this case the oppression of Japanese Canadians during World War II. For both authors, however, a reclamation of the body's integrity is central to their writing.

Recently the newspapers have been flooded by reports on trials in which a parent previously accused of incest sues his/her child—and often the child's psychologist—for false charges and is granted monetary and other compensations. What alleged victims of abuse say or write is cast into dubious light by mass media. Articles and books published on the subject of false memory syndrome, such as Michael D. Yapko's *Suggestions of Abuse: True and False Memories of Childhood Sexual Traumas* and Mark Pendergrast's *Victims of Memory: Incest Accusations and Shattered Lives*, do address important issues that are potentially beneficial to authentic survivors of abuse. Retractors' newsletters and associations for parents falsely accused of sexually abusing their children do provide valuable help. The same can be said for books like *Wounded Innocents: The Real Victims of the War Against Child Abuse*, by Richard Wexler. But these can also lead to the assumption that what women—or children—say about their experiences of violence should always be taken with a large pinch of salt, if not downright suspected as false or exaggerated. Twenty years ago, women speaking out about the abuse they suffered were already not believed. According to Ann Jones,

Once feminists encouraged battered women to 'speak out' and tell their stories, as women in the antirape movement had done, the circumstances of the battered woman and of the rape survivor proved remarkably alike. Both were doubted and disbelieved, both were charged with making false accusations, both were blamed for provoking violence, both were said secretly to enjoy it, both were blamed for not preventing it themselves, both were shamed into silence. (8)

While the current atmosphere, created by the backlash against women working to stop violence against women, would seem to be a dangerous one in which to bring forth a book of this nature, the work done here provides needed affirmation of the efforts undertaken by women to survive and recover from genuine trauma.

The essays in this volume are arranged so as first to introduce the reader to theoretical frameworks that may help her better understand the following sections. The second section contains essays about nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century writers, and the third section focuses on mid to late twentieth-century writers. The essays also happen to share thematic and rhetorical similarities, however, in that the earlier writing frequently reveals a survival mentality in which women write of these matters only at great risk



to themselves; and the later literature reveals women writing from a more secure place certainly but still with the problems and ambivalence expressed by their foremothers.

Such is the range of issues addressed by the essays included in this anthology. Together the essays question, and explore, what safe space for women is, how women define and try to create it through writing, and how it can be dangerous to women writing at all. Which may, or may not, lead to creation of safe space within this volume.

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