

## CHAPTER 1

# Ties that Bind

### *Domestic Violence as Slavery*

Down on me, down on me  
Looks like everybody in the whole round world  
Is down on me

—*Down on Me*, African-American spiritual<sup>1</sup>

When I moved to Maryland in 1994, little did I know that I was only a short distance from where Harriet Tubman, known as “the Moses of her people,” conducted slaves from the Eastern Shore to Canada in search of freedom. She herself escaped in 1849, and guided slaves to the North until 1860—more than 100 years before I too walked on the Eastern Shore, so much like my home in the marshes of Florida. My focus, like hers, was on slavery, but particularly on women enslaved by domestic violence. I believe Harriet Tubman would recognize the evils of slavery in the plight of many supposedly “free” women today.

For most Americans, the word “slavery” automatically conjures the image of Southern black slavery prior to and during the Civil War. In fact, slavery has continued to be a reality for many women [and some men] within this culture, and if the category is broadened to encompass *de facto* ownership of one person by another, slavery clearly is a modern reality. Battered women’s traditions are strongly tied to those of African-American slavery; both involve the involuntary slavery of a people<sup>2</sup> and a dangerous

1. Although within this text, I argue that slaves could not be considered African Americans because of their position within society, the songs used throughout this text are taken from the work of Richard Newman. His 1998 text, “Go Down, Moses, A Celebration of the African-American Spiritual,” names slave songs as belonging to the “African-American” race. In deference to his work, when I quote lyrics from his text, I ascribe them to African Americans.
2. Jagger argues that women can be considered as a class: “. . . class society as creating broad social types of human beings. The nature of individuals is determined not only by the

escape, and each has used external assistance together with their own perseverance to break their bonds.<sup>3</sup>

My own exploration of these parallels began with the idea of the Underground Railroad, the secret network of abolitionists willing to assist runaway slaves. The accounts reminded me of the domestic violence shelter movement, with its roots in a similar network of feminists rather than abolitionists. As Dawn Bradley Barry summarizes, such networks have long been part of the subterranean world of women helping women:

American colonial women organized informal support systems to help battered women escape brutal husbands. When the first organizers of the American women's movement met in the 1840s for the primary purpose of securing the right to vote, the issue of male brutality was also on the agenda. Suffragist Susan B. Anthony is reported to have helped battered women escape their husbands during the same era. (1995, p. 16)

In fact, at the same time that Harriet Tubman and others were conducting slaves to safety, Martha White McWhirter was founding what may have been the first shelter, in 1866 (Bradley Berry 1995). However, the clandestine nature of the escapes by both women and slaves—by far the most obvious comparison—provides only one parallel. Also central to this discussion are the means and definitions of escape, and the similarity of shelters to stations on the Underground Railroad. Slavery and domestic violence share three key characteristics: bondage; enforced silence; and denial of resources, discussed here in terms of education or information. Escape requires breaking free from each of these limitations, thus defining the task of both movements against violence against women and against slavery.

### Go Down, Moses

The Underground Railroad, named in a time when slaves were beginning to disappear “as though they’d gone underground,” and when the railroad was a new invention, relied on the abolitionist tendencies of the Quaker Society of Friends as the backbone of its activism. Consisting of “stations,”

---

of production that prevails in the society they inhabit but also by their place within the class system of that society” (1988, p. 56). I extend this to incorporate women into “a people,” as slaves were so often referenced.

3. The categories of “women” and “slaves” overlap, of course, as women as well as men were enslaved in this country. However, in this analysis, I separate the categories for analytic purposes; the “women” in this writing are technically “free,” although as the analysis reveals, this freedom is rhetorical rather than real.

or houses where fugitives would be sheltered, it stretched from Texas to Maine and from Florida to Minnesota. Most slaves fled north, to free states, although others fled south, over the Mexican border or to the Florida swamps. When northern states no longer provided safe haven, slaves traveled even further, crossing the border into Canada. Many times slaves had to depend on their own ingenuity to travel from station to station and received minimal assistance in the form of transportation, food, and guidance. The role of conductors such as Harriet Tubman was to ensure that passengers on the railroad—who traveled at night, through the woods, largely on foot—made it from station to station, and finally to the north, often Canada (Ann Petry 1955; Buckmaster 1992).

The shelter movement, although also rooted in Colonial America, began in earnest in the 1970s in concert with the expansion of U.S. women's movement. Although it originated as a network of safe houses, much like the stations on the Underground Railroad, the movement solidified into formal shelters, which, borrowing techniques from rape crisis centers, formed hotlines, support groups, legal aid centers, and advocacy projects. However, although the movement professionalized, it retains key characteristics of the Railroad. Although they are now run on a somewhat larger scale, domestic violence shelters still tend to be large houses, indistinguishable by design from the surrounding community and families (Bart and Moran 1993; Jones 1994; Schechter 1982). These houses depended on secrecy in much the same way as the stations on the Underground Railroad.

Shelters also provide a web of safe places across the country. Anna Quindlen recently fictionalized this aspect in her book, *Black and Blue*, in which she reveals the existence of extended networks into which a battered woman can disappear and emerge in a new location with a new name and, it is hoped, a new chance. I myself have arranged for such transfers, coordinating transport across state and county lines, in the middle of the night.

Like the FBI's witness protection program, such work has significant drawbacks. As an extreme measure, such tactics are generally invoked when a woman has little other chance to escape pursuit and death at the hands of her abuser. To "go underground," a woman must give up her family, friends, personal property, and all things that serve to identify her. This loss of community and identity is painful (Bart and Moran 1993). Escaping slaves may have undergone this loss, too, giving up their homes and sometimes families for unfamiliar surroundings in return for a chance, but not a guarantee, of freedom.

### Way Down to Egypt Land

Harriet Tubman would sing, "Go Down, Moses," to announce her arrival to slaves ready to escape; women's shelters then, as they do now, may have used similar code words to assist women without endangering the women's

lives. *The Drinking Gourd* provides a noteworthy example. A familiar story in slavery, the song's lyrics provide secret directions to freedom:

*The riverbank makes a very good road  
The dead trees will show you the way...  
Follow the drinking gourd.  
The river ends between two hills  
Follow the drinking gourd.*

In the song, the drinking gourd refers to the Big Dipper, whose North Star remains a constant reference point in the sky. Some identify the river, which ends between two hills, as the Tombigbee River in Mississippi; other lyrics covertly name the path along the Tennessee and Ohio Rivers, which marked the boundary between the "slave states" and the "free states"—the land of Caanan, the promised land (Buckmaster 1992; Ann Petry 1995; Richard Newman 1998). Codes provide some measure of safety in an unsafe enterprise. Shelters often name themselves in code: Hubbard House (Old Mother Hubbard); House of Ruth ("Whither thou goest, I shall go . . ."); My Sister's Place (a euphemism complex enough to confuse most!).

Secrecy is as important now as it was then. In some shelters, women are not given the address; instead, they are given directions, sometimes partial ones, after which they must call back and receive further instructions. They are instructed not to write down the name of the shelter together with the telephone number. This convoluted process is intended to ensure that women are not followed and that should directions be left behind in a hurried escape, other women will not be endangered (Refuge House 1992).

### Tell Old Pharoh

The shelter network and the Underground Railroad share a number of features based in their construction outside the normative discourse of ownership, power, and control, central dynamics both within slavery and domestic violence. The Underground Railroad literally defied the laws requiring the return of slaves to their owners. In 1787, at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, the "fugitive slave and felon clause," giving slave owners a legal basis for retrieving fugitives, was introduced and later became Article IV, clause 2, of the U.S. Constitution. The United States went so far as to ask Canada, a refuge for many escaped slaves, for assistance in returning slaves; Canada refused (Buckmaster 1992; Ann Petry 1955).

Domestic violence has a somewhat more complex and convoluted legal history. While few laws *condone* family violence, there is a widespread tolerance and acceptance, particularly in the legal system, of noninterference in

“domestic affairs” (Bart and Moran 1993; Buzawa and Buzawa 1996; Jones 1994; Crowell and Burgess 1996; Schechter 1982). The narratives by survivors of domestic violence echo this again and again (Bart and Moran 1993; Buzawa and Buzawa 1996; Jones 1994; National Research Council 1996; Schechter 1982). Jane Wells’s true story, *Run Jane Run* (1996), recounts in more than 300 pages her brutalization, first by her husband and then by the legal system. In ride-alongs with police on their beats, I learned that there is little police dread more than “a domestic,” which many view as a private matter rather than a crime.

The abuse also finds inadvertent reinforcement in friends, neighbors, colleagues, relatives, medical staff, and others, who “keep women in line.” As Magda Gere Lewis describes it,

The power of patriarchy is such that the “refusal of the designated other to be dominated is felt as a personal assault” (Williams 1991, p. 66) by those who, from their position of power, initiate the violence. It seems that not the violation but our acts of self-defense come to be read as “antisocial” behavior and are thus used to reposition us on the disadvantaged side of the gender binary. In this case the power of the oppressor is such that it can create social support for acts of violence, a support that in turn justifies the use of more violence to counter challenges to the oppressor’s power to violate.” (1993, p. 33)

This dynamic reinforces the false notion that women deserve violence, either explicitly through dismissal, doubt, or denial; or implicitly, by the failure to provide assistance (Bart and Moran 1993; Jones 1994; Schechter 1982) (see Appendix A). This network has yet a more invidious aspect, composed of friends of the abuser—often a family who doubts the reality of abuse, or friends in the police force who ensure that charges are not filed, or someone who knows the location of the shelter where she hides. The question typically asked of battered women is, Why didn’t you seek help? The answer is obvious.

“Why didn’t you seek help?” I did. Early in our marriage I went to a clergyman who . . . told me that my husband had meant no real harm, that he was just confused and felt insecure. . . . Next time I turned to a doctor. I was given little pills to relax me and told to take things a little easier. I was just too nervous. . . . I turned to a friend, and when her husband found out, he accused me of either making things up or exaggerating the situation. She was told to stay away from me. . . . I turned to a professional family guidance agency. I was told there that my husband needed help and that I

should find a way to control the incidents. . . . At the agency I found I had to defend myself against the suspicion that I wanted to be hit, that I invited the beatings. . . . I did go to two more doctors. One asked me what I had done to provoke my husband. The other asked if we had made up yet. I called the police one time. They not only did not respond to the call, they called several hours later to ask if things had "settled down." I could have been dead by then! (Del Martin 1976/1995, pp. 46–47)

The need for objective intervention persists. Domestic violence's complexity marks it as a uniquely intricate, and difficult, crime. The dynamics of domesticity and violence seem contradictory; domesticity connotes peace, not conflict, yet contains both. Women flee violence, yet remain connected to their partners and their need for peace and harmony. Typically, such internal conflict results in women's multiple returns to abusive partners. This series of actions tends to be met with a jaded reply from police: "it's just a domestic," implying that intervention is worthless. If a woman returns to violence, who is responsible for the outcome? Few victims of other crimes return to the perpetrator, while this forms a common dynamic in domestic violence; when victims do return, crimes tend to be personal and emotionally difficult, such as battering and rape. Understandably, police and other law enforcement officers become frustrated with the ambiguity of such cases. Nonetheless, complex crimes demand no less justice.

As an issue, domestic violence has not often found or placed itself on center stage in general knowledge, or in studies of education; although the issue exists and is addressed within the feminist political movement, it is not recognized in proportion to its effects on women. Because of all of these silences, many misunderstand or ignore domestic violence as a minor or peripheral issue, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

Every 12 to 15 seconds, a woman is beaten by her partner in the United States (Dawn Bradley Berry 1995). In fact, battering is the single major cause of injury to women; this exceeds rapes, muggings, and automobile accidents combined (William French Smith 1983). In the United States, a woman is more likely to be assaulted, injured, raped, or killed by a male partner than by any other type of assailant; one of every two women is battered at some time in her life (NCADV). If a lecture hall full of students stood up one by one, every 15 seconds in recognition of this crime, it would take only 25 minutes for 100 to stand; less than an hour for 200; and in 4 hours, 1,000 students would be standing. This 1,000 would represent only one-sixth of the women who are beaten each day in the United States, and the approximate number of women who die at the hands of their abusers each year. These women are our students, our daughters, our sisters, our

colleagues, our neighbors, and our friends. If these statistics are shocking, consider the women behind them, who exist in unrecognized numbers and familiar faces.

### Let My People Go

It is no coincidence that slaves and battered women chose similar routes of escape; the dynamics of both settings are remarkably similar. The fundamental dynamic of both slavery and domestic violence is ownership of one human being by another.<sup>4</sup> In slavery, such a relationship was clear: slaves were literally bought and sold at auction; could be bartered to pay off debts; and had no property or personal rights of their own. Slaves could not even claim the rights to their children. What is shocking is that, as Dawn Bradley Barry relates, laws relegating slaves to be the property of their masters were based on common understandings about women:

In British, American, and many other societies . . . a woman was not a full human being, but property, first of her father, then of her husband. In fact, this idea was so widely accepted by the seventeenth century that the early American slaveholders adopted the law governing women to establish the legal status of slaves! (1995, pp. 17–18)

Ownership is synonymous with power and control.

Other parallels extend this analogy. Slave-holders (masters), barring some notable exceptions, exercised their power cruelly; male domestic partners (husbands, fiancées, boyfriends) exert violence against their female partners (wives, fiancées, girlfriends). Many slave narratives render detailed accounts of the abuse and suffering slaves underwent at the hands of their masters. Slaves had no choice about their entry into slavery. Kidnapped from their homeland, they were sold into slavery. Children born to slaves were subsequently born into bondage. Masters had total power over the lives and treatment of slaves, exercising that power by separating families, physically and sexually abusing slaves, and treating African and Caribbean<sup>5</sup> people as subhuman, failing to attend to the most fundamental physi-

---

4. Slaves were not considered to be fully human, as Article I of the U.S. Constitution makes clear. This article provides the formula for calculating congressional representation; slaves counted as three-fifths of a person. However, rather than perpetuate a racist stereotype, I refer to slaves as humans, which they clearly were.

5. These two locations were the primary source for the slave trade. At that time, these involuntary immigrants (Ogbu, 1978) were not African Americans, or Caribbean Americans, for a number of reasons. They had no rights within American society and had not intermingled to any great extent with "native" Americans.

cal needs for clothing, shelter, food, and health care (Buckmaster 1992; Ann Petry 1955). Slaves underwent nearly constant abuse. They had no hope except that their master, when he died, would grant their freedom in his will (manumission).

Similarly, a number of first-hand accounts of domestic violence survivors detail with painful accuracy the daily hurts and indignity of their lives (Martin 1989; Turner 1993; Wells 1996). In domestic violence settings, men exercise total power over the lives and treatment of women and children through economic, physical, and psychological control (Bart and Moran 1993; Buzawa and Buzawa 1996; National Research Council 1996; Jones 1994; Schechter 1982). Those familiar with the dynamics of domestic violence will recognize the power of denying education and communication to women. Slave owners, upon discovering that drums were used by slaves to communicate across plantations, banned their use. Later, they banned singing particular songs linked to escape (*Go down, Moses* was one) and talking among slaves, and any slave who learned to read or write had his or her right index finger severed (Buckmaster 1992; Ann Petry 1955). In *Run Jane Run*, (1996) Jane Wells writes of her abuser ripping the telephone from the wall, questioning all her friendships, and dialing the last number she had called to check up on her. This scenario plays out in different shapes and forms across violent relationships.

However, women do exercise a choice in entering a relationship; this fact often serves as an accusation as well: "She could have left." However, women enter relationships with abusive men under false pretenses, without enough information. Society constructs and reinforces unbalanced relationships in women's favor prior to the formal relationship, that work against them later. For example, what can be mistaken for chivalry or jealousy while a couple is dating can later be revealed as control. Men become violent after relationships are established, when it is difficult to walk away.<sup>6</sup>

Another key difference between battered women and slaves is the false hopes extended to women. The cycle of violence ensures the juxtaposition of their relationship at its worst and then at its best, simultaneously directing her to go, and to stay. This difference between the slaves' situation and that of battered women is critical; slaves could never go back; they knew with certainty that to do so would mean death. Women return to their abusers, sometimes many times, believing in hope—and often denying the signs that to return means death.

---

6. The idea that women should "just walk away" contributes in no small measure to prejudice against battered women. The dynamics of domestic violence, however, complicate this act; see Appendix A.



This comparison between slavery and domestic violence is not yet complete. Slaves, at the end of the Railroad, crowded into schools designed by free blacks to teach them to read and write. In order to translate escape into freedom, they needed education. The end of the Railroad was not the end of their struggle for freedom. Escape, although the most dramatic part of their experience, was not sufficient. Having overcome not only the physical bondage and enforced silence, they also had to find information, education for survival. This is the case for battered women as well. The book's title is taken from the idea that education allows women to transcend their abuse and to translate escape into freedom.

Few know the role education plays in women's escape. The Railroad analogy provides insight into the condition of women's lives when they arrive in shelters, similar to understanding a student's home life as it affects her schooling. Further, it reinforces the dimensions of volition, the courage necessary to escape. This point is critical: most literature concerns women running away. Slave stories lend perspective on *the courage it takes to run*. When women arrive in shelter, then, they are on the one hand battered; on the other hand, they are brave and resourceful. Both of these conditions set the terms for what becomes feminist education in shelters.

As the roots of these two movements are similar, so are the misperceptions about them. For example, the metaphor of "Moses" rescuing "his" people extends to domestic violence as well. First, it harkens back to the fundamental ownership problems embedded within both slavery and domestic violence. Are slaves, and women, "rescued," only because they "belong" to someone else? Second, and more important, it incorrectly focuses on action *on behalf of* women and slaves, *by others*. In reality, both shelters and the Underground Railroad were begun and maintained by victims themselves, albeit with the assistance of others (Buckmaster 1992; Tobin and Dobard 1999). This represents a great irony, as the act of leaving—when both women and slaves were and are in the most danger—portrays both groups as passive victims who would never have succeeded without help. Denial of the courage and fortitude that leaving entails is tantamount to reinforcing the learned helplessness that is a key component of slavery and domestic violence. In this work, I hope to disentangle these misunderstandings.

### Uneasy Silence

The reality of both slavery and domestic violence in America, like our history of race, class, and gender privilege, has long been muffled in a painful, uneasy silence. People have suffered in silence and where possible have escaped—again, in necessary silence. Current laws in the United States

declare that African Americans, as former slaves, are free; yet there exists a reluctance to discuss slavery, to make reparations, to acknowledge our role and complicity. And, even as the African-American slaves were [nominally] released, other populations—in this work, women of all classes, races, colors, and creeds—continued, and continue, to be enslaved in silence. The perpetuation of domestic violence fundamentally depends on this silence, and in part this silence also binds battered women's experience to that of the slaves.

In the case of domestic violence, the silence stems from a society that turns an unseeing eye through the legal system, judicial systems, and social services. Social structures reinforce the right of individual action and, particularly, the right to privacy. As a society, the strength of our belief in privacy virtually precludes another resource from battered women—the intervention of a stranger (Bart and Moran 1993; Jones 1994). Silence is also inherent in the way our judicial system differentiates domestic crimes from other crimes as though domestic crimes were not real crimes at all, but individual issues. The silence stems from ignorance or denial by otherwise concerned citizens. And the silence arises fundamentally from the women themselves who are trapped within violent relationships without many of the resources necessary to escape.

### **From Slavery to Freedom**

The purpose of this book is to reveal the educational and transformative potential of the “end of the railway” for battered women: the teaching, and learning, for and by women, that takes place in domestic violence shelters, and that can make the difference between suffering and survival. This is a book about the feminist education created within shelters, offered to and given by women who are victims and survivors of domestic abuse.

Throughout the work I maintain the link between domestic violence and slavery, both to invoke the power of this analogy and to provide insight into the dynamics of domestic violence. Slavery reminds us of the difficult journey necessary for escape, as well as the fortitude of those escaping. May we look back at domestic violence tomorrow as we look back on slavery today: with horror and regret.

Slavery also provides a reference to communities, a second theme throughout this work. The Underground Railroad depended on slaves helping slaves, from singing songs of hope and deliverance to teaching reading and writing. The domestic violence network is grounded in this same kind of community, where women teach each other the subtle dimensions of escape through ordinary activities. Later in the book, these two groups,

slaves and battered women, become inseparable, sharing the key to the cipher of freedom.

The implications of women's learning in shelter extend outward both in terms of activism and education, as illustrated through the Clothesline Project. In short, this work invokes the struggles of two groups, one in the past and one in the present, offering one way of viewing education as the practice of freedom.



## CHAPTER 2

# Education in the Company of Women

If anybody asks you what's the matter with me,  
Just tell him I say  
I'm running for my life.

—*I'm Running For My Life*, African-  
American spiritual, ca. 1848

Maslow, who organized human needs by priority, tells us our fundamental need is shelter. It is easily demonstrated that higher goals languish in the absence of shelter and other basic needs. Not surprisingly, women enter temporary shelter not as an act in itself, but as a stepping stone to seek permanent shelter. This fundamental need, more so than desire or any other force, pushes women into domestic violence shelters. But the definition of shelter also inherently implies safety; shelter from the enemy as well as the elements.

The safety inherent in shelter assumes paramount importance to those subject to slavery; here, still more parallels between domestic violence and the Underground Railroad arise. First, shelters and stations on the Underground Railroad are contested ground. They are spaces of danger as well as escape. They place both fugitives and those who shelter them in jeopardy. While women arrive laden with the violence(s) that drive them to seek shelter, slaves brought the threat of slave-catchers and legal repercussions. Like slaves eluding capture, women enter needing safety, but are accompanied by danger. Women enter shelter needing solace, but enjoy little calm. Slaves' journeys were also fraught with danger, hastily conducted in the darkness. Both groups' actions require quickness and agility in the most anxious of situations. Women face the pressure of time, as shelters are short-term solutions at best; a *long* stay might be four to seven months. Stations on the Railroad provided only short-term shelter; only by reaching the North could slaves relax slightly. Slave-catchers patrolled borders for runaway slaves, returning them to slave masters in return for bounty for the catcher, punishment for the slave. Once a slave reached the North, freedom

could be stripped from even rightfully freed slaves, as slave-catchers invaded the North, capturing African Americans for resale. By escaping an abusive marriage, women may lose their children, jobs, and rights to their personal property. Survival forces truly high-stakes learning and decision making.

Despite the dangers, shelters and stations provide the only measure of safety available. Partly because of their contested nature, women enter shelters cautiously, and are accepted cautiously, because one woman's survival depends on the safety and silence of the next. Safe space is invoked from the moment of the first call to a shelter hotline: women are told that the shelter is confidential, secret, safe. No one can find her there. It is the space behind the cabinet, under the cellar door, in the corner of the barn, spaces where Railroad participants hid silent women away until dark. It is also one of the few paths to survival.

To ensure this degree of safety, women are given rules to follow when coming to shelter: no one must know the location; she must not contact her abuser; she must not place other lives in jeopardy. Shelter directions are given in partial forms, not unlike a detective or mystery novel in which clues lead to other clues, and only in a roundabout way to a solution. Volunteers are cautioned that this silence must extend around them no matter where they go: the simple act of acknowledging a shelter resident, former or present, in a shopping mall might be enough to make either of them a target, if the volunteer is recognized as a link to the shelter.

These acts reach beyond simple assurances of safety. They are ritual reassurances in which shelter workers, volunteers, and residents wrap themselves, to vouchsafe their own lives. Similar characteristics are woven throughout *The Story of Jane*, Laura Kaplan's retelling of "the legendary underground feminist abortion service." Kaplan relates the ritual of naming all the women in the group "Jane," for a variety of reasons including safety:

Jane seemed a good choice. No one in the group was named Jane and Jane was an everywoman's name—plain Jane, Jane Doe, Dick and Jane. The code name Jane would protect their identities while protecting the privacy of the women contacting them. Whenever they called a woman back or left a message for her, they could say it was Jane calling. No one else would know what the call was about. (1995, p. 27)

Despite the fact that shelters have, through the years, suffered somewhat less than abortion clinics, which by their very nature are public spaces, both rely on secrecy. I watched the domestic violence community in Florida collectively shudder after learning that shots were fired at Hubbard House, the shelter in Jacksonville. An abuser, learning of the location, appeared at the door and demanded his wife. When she did not appear, the man shot out the

locks in the front door and entered the shelter, to the jeopardy of all residents and workers inside. Worse, he violated the confidentiality of the shelter location for the future.

In an almost ironic twist, safety demands other rules: no weapons, no drugs, no unaccompanied minors in shelter. Each of these would endanger all of the women present. It is the weapons clause at one shelter that stays in my mind. One night, past midnight, I answered a call from a woman who had left her husband that night. He had loaded his truck with guns and told her that when he returned from work that night, he was going to kill her. In desperation, she followed him to work, smashed the window of his truck, stole his guns, and called the shelter. As I took her frantic call, reciting the rules and structure of shelter (it's a big house, we share chores, no drugs, no guns) she related what she had done. I will never forget shivering in the dark yard with a sheriff's deputy, waiting for the truckload of rifles the deputy would dismantle. It is necessary, to work at a shelter, to forget or pretend to forget that shelters exist because women are hunted. And that standing in the way of a hunter and his prey can get you shot.

### **Women's Work, Women's Space, Women's Refuge**

In addition to the psychological elements of danger, fear, and the necessity of speed, shelters have a number of key features that predominate this discussion as well as the narratives of the women.

- Shelters are small—often fewer than 20 women and children.
- Shelters are cross-generational, with women of all ages and life experiences.
- Shelters are intimate settings by virtue of their size and house-like settings.
- Shelters group women across race, ethnicity, and language.
- Women stay in shelters for a short period of time, ranging from a day to a few months, but in general their time is about two months.
- Finally, shelters have varying amounts of structure in terms of standard “curriculum,” house rules, and guidelines.

Shelters rise from a tradition of “private,” “domestic” spaces, those single-sex spaces and connections formed across backyard clotheslines and borrowed sugar. Women have, throughout history, created politics within and outside of the “domestic” space that was their allotted purview. Women used politics, influencing or taking action through personal and group action against wrong or intolerable situations. Many women took action informally rather than challenging the social order, according their actions a

higher chance of success. Women assisted each other with abortifacents, intervened in domestic disputes, and exchanged knowledge about birth control, acceptable sexual practice, medicinal remedies, and child care. Sometimes these politics resembled intricately pieced Amish quilts, rigidly ordered, as when matrons proscribed social regulations; more often they were the patchwork of my grandmother, who pieced together any resource she could find.

“Necessity,” it is said, “is the mother of invention.” My grandmother, too poor to replace a faded tail light, painted its interior with cherry-red nail polish and passed inspection. Through fiction and history, there is a long line of women, like my grandmother, who have worked to liberate women, inventing solutions and spaces where there had been none. Women like my grandmother, operating singly and together, have invented many things—perhaps the most powerful of which is space for one another apart from the frenzy of social expectations and traditional roles. This creation of educational space is part of the domestic violence movement, as well as the history of the larger feminist movement. Like the women they were intended to serve, these spaces adapted multiple forms and functions, from the most ordinary to extraordinary. Such spaces layered multiple functions, often serving an important educational role because they were comprised of women with one purpose but who remained open to many others. Careful examination of these spaces challenges traditional ideas of educational settings.

Consider the elements of teaching and learning within the traditional teaching of women’s craft from woman to woman as one example of how education can be framed differently than the traditional schools-teachers-students model. I have recently become interested in quilts, not only for their patterns and intricacy but for the women they represent. *The Quilters*, a play about women during the Western expansion, lovingly illustrates the development of different patterns from the minutiae of women’s lives: flying geese, fence rail, log cabin. Pierce and Suit tie past with present, noting: “Early quilts were pieced together from the remnants of daily life and warmed our sleep; art quilts pull together the threads of modern life and warm our souls” (1994, foreword). Here, the ordinary becomes extraordinary.

I never learned to sew as a young woman, disparaging any domestic, “feminine” skill. Today, though, I turn to other women for instruction in quilting and search for the community I hope will follow. Sewing settles me in my family’s traditions. Years ago, my grandmother crafted “crazy quilts” out of scraps of my childhood clothing—the dress with the pink parasols I was so proud to wear in my preschool picture; my mother’s 1970s Easter dress with its psychedelic swirls; the pieces of my life. If she were here, she would be piecing my wedding quilt with me, saving the remnants of my



dress for another creation. My mother recently created a quilt for me as well; I tell my house guests about it as I put them to bed. I tell them the stories of women's spaces, of my mother and my grandmother—of my icons and emblems of the space that women have created.

My grandmother's and mother's quilts are echoed in the work of Faith Ringgold, who moves the idea and ideology of quilts from the simple metaphor of women, stitching together—women who have been called [albeit in jest] the Women's Sewing Circle and Terrorist Society—to quilts that tell more literal stories. Ringgold's story quilts draw the viewer into her space, the space of women's and children's stories, and their lives. Her quilts teach more than appliqué techniques; they tell the story of family, community, of longing and sadness, of happiness and being together, without fear or prejudice. Her quilts tell the story of the women in this work—of piecing their lives together out of leftover scraps and memories, and of using quilts to echo “an important motif in African-America folk-tale literature, in which slaves told of ‘flying’ to freedom as wish fulfillment or as a metaphor for escaping from slavery” (Broude and Garrard 1994; Ringgold 1995; Tobin and Dobard 1999). The stories of the women living in this book, facing violence in their lives, form part of this long tradition of women's craft and women's space, stitching their lives together, looking for freedom.

### From Parlor to Politics

Although this work is not a historical treatise, it is useful to think back through our mothers, as Virginia Woolf suggested, to trace the relationships that brought about domestic violence shelters (formerly, battered women's shelters) in today's U.S. society. The theory of separate spheres introduced by Rosaldo although now widely disputed, gave birth to the concept of “domestic space” as that space occupied by women, largely in the home. However, in an exhibition in the Smithsonian Institution's Museum of American History, the signage argues that home spaces were more permeable than generally ascribed: “the parlor was the space within the home where private life and public life met.” The very notion of “parlors” implied a particular class of women, largely those in the middle to upper class. In addition, the events to which they refer took place in the late 1890s, with the beginnings of women's suffrage and their more formal, or deliberate, involvement in politics. Nonetheless, prior to that time, women of all races and classes were still involved in politics. As a domestic referent to the realm of national politics, quilters named their new patterns after presidential politics, choosing sides and platforms (Duke and Harding 1987).

Women's other “domestic” work was similarly revealing. Andrea Atkin (1997) writes of a “porous border” between the public and private

realms. Their work points out the influence of women both in the private sphere (as in personal influence on friends and spouses) and the public sphere. Even women's early friendships were political, according to Freedman:

Private "sisterhoods," Nancy Cott has suggested, may have been a precondition for the emergence of feminist consciousness. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, intimate friendships provided support systems for politically active women, as demonstrated by the work of both Blanche Cook and Nancy Sahli. (1995, pp. 86–87)

One way in which these women crossed the border between the two spheres, according to Atkin, was through domestic objects like pincushions and needlebooks, on which they imprinted messages and images meant to influence (e.g., pillows might proclaim the virtues of a political candidate). In some ways this activity perfectly encapsulates the role of women in early politics: they created small, pragmatic objects, leveraging their status as moral influences (untainted by the world outside their homes), to plow personal inroads into politics. Atkin points out that these acts were at once both radical and conservative. This above all describes the essence of the early women's movement.

Early women's groups were naturally the most reflective of the "domestic" sphere [or have been perceived through scholarship this way]: largely charitable, social, or literary groups, their politics was of a personal nature (recapitulated, interestingly, in the consciousness-raising groups of the 1970s; see chapter 3). From these early groups, clubs were formed, followed by programs for community improvement and reform. Freedman writes that the progression illustrates the politicization of women's institutions:

The exclusion of women reporters from the New York Press Club in 1868 inspired the founding of the first women's club, Sorosis. The movement then blossomed to dozens and later hundreds of localities, until a General Federation of Women's Clubs formed in 1890. . . . Although club social and literary activities at first appealed to traditional women who simply wanted to gather with friends and neighbors, by the turn of the century women's clubs had launched civic reform programs. Their activities served to politicize traditional women by forcing them to define themselves as citizens, not simply as wives and mothers. (1995, pp. 90–91)

Women expanded outward into the religious domain, leveraging their domestic roles for a voice in politics. Women's formal entrance into politics—through their parlors—involved issues that were seen as symbolic of

family values in public life. These women argued that the home was affected by the society that surrounded it; as the *Smithsonian* notes: "Women reformers used their concern for home and family as a justification to take place in politics." This concern led to women's founding of, and participation in, a variety of formal political organizations beyond their "suffrage parlors." These organizations included women's clubs, the temperance crusade, women's suffrage societies, women's trade unions and consumer leagues, all of which served as alternative political parties or sites for social change. These groups were not insubstantial; by 1910, membership was over 1 million (Freedman 1995); and by 1915, collective memberships were as large as 3 million (*Smithsonian* 1996). These groups utilized networking as their powerful basis for social change. Some of their changes included child labor laws, Americanization of immigrants, abolition, labor unions, and health care, as well as kindergartens and education. They claimed that "politics is housekeeping on a grand scale" (*Smithsonian* 1996). Later, women's politics was institutionalized, notably by the nineteenth Amendment granting women suffrage but also by organizations such as Hull House, founded in 1889 by Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr. Hull House was, quite literally, the use of "domestic space"—a former home—as a setting for reform (in this case, in the settlement movement). The use of a home itself as a settlement represented a female-defined domestic space enabling women to use—and reclaim—gender concepts as a source of empowerment. As the *Smithsonian* concludes:

Between 1890 and 1925, women developed a powerful political language and imagery, applying the values of home and family to public life. While women's political culture empowered them at this period and served as a bridge from the private to the public sphere, it also set patterns and boundaries for women's political participation that have continued to the present. (*Smithsonian* 1996)

More recent times present a similar dynamic: "[o]n August 26, 1970, the fiftieth anniversary of passage of the Nineteenth Amendment granting women the suffrage, women from all over the country joined in support of the Women's Strike for Equality" (Klein 1984, p. 1). She tells us that:

housewives, secretaries, lawyers, mothers, grandmothers, and students were drawn together out of a sense of injustice, personal frustration, and the need to change inequities in the treatment of women. (1984, p. 1)

(For a timeline of the women's movement from 1970 to 1992, see *Ms.* magazine, July 1992; see also *The Women's Political Action Group*, 1992.)

With such a history of women's movement around "domestic" issues, it is no surprise that women also spearheaded the movement against violence within the home, so-called domestic violence. These original networks of women, concerned with social issues, link the present with the past: the anti-slavery movement, embodied in the Underground Railroad; and the eventual social network of women who formed the shelter movement for battered women as well as the underground web of information on abortion clinics. In some ways, only the language has changed: instead of women's clubs, the 1970s had consciousness-raising and affinity groups; the 1990s has women's organizations. The networks of concerned women are the same, embodied in different individuals and, with time, somewhat expanded causes.

### Shelters as Communities

Like their earlier female and feminist counterparts, shelters rely on the tasks associated with keeping a home and minding children to lay the groundwork for community as well as politics. Shelters in the format of group houses create an atmosphere of shared space and shared lives, as well as shared responsibilities. Consider a plantation, where new slaves, flung separately into an unknown and assumedly harsh environment cluster together, almost for safety, but certainly for security. Within the life cycle occur points of juxtaposition and separation, and the space a person occupies when they occur defines them. In other words, situations in which women find themselves in new groups or newly alone hold potential to create entirely new things, such as safety, security, learning, community. Laura Kaplan found this same link between literal space and political learning in her work with the underground abortion group Jane. She writes:

There were unexpected consequences from using apartments for the abortions. Sometimes five women waited together in the living room. When the first woman came out of the bedroom, relieved and no longer pregnant, the tension in the room lessened. If she survived, then, most likely, each of them was going to survive. Whether they were teenagers or older married women, rich or poor, whatever their color, an instant camaraderie developed among them . . . counseling for an abortion was a time of crisis in a woman's life, when she was more open to new perspectives. [Jane] could use that opportunity as an educable moment to show her how her personal problems connected to a broader social picture. . . . If she questioned society's attitudes about abortion, she might begin to question much more. (1995, pp. 85, 87)