

WHEN MY FATHER DIED IN 1976, I was thirty-five years old, but I had not yet become the person I wanted to be. A survivor of childhood sexual abuse, I suffered from shame and self-doubt so severe that my imagination had been constricted and my professional development impeded. As a young woman, I had, with fear and trembling, managed to become a high school English teacher, but I hadn't dared dream of becoming an author. Yet for victims of trauma, the act of authoring is an essential step in the recovery process: in order to reconstruct meaningful lives, they must put their traumatic experiences into narrative form. It is a task that, as Judith Lewis Herman says, "challenges an ordinary person to become a theologian, a philosopher, and a jurist" (*Trauma and Recovery* 178). It is also a task that creates a painful double-bind for the victim: as a result of her violation, she cannot imagine herself the author of her life, but in order to recover a sense of agency she must tell the story of her traumatic experience(s), complete with accompanying affect. Until she is capable of this act of narration, a victim may unconsciously constrict her imagination, as well as her life, in order to feel safe. In short, recovery is primarily, though not exclusively, a linguistic event, an act of authorship by which a woman transforms her victim-self into her ideal-self.

When I began a doctoral program shortly after my father's death, I didn't understand any of these things. Indeed, because

my father had abused my sisters much more severely, I didn't identify myself as an incest victim. Furthermore, I had not yet fully recognized that my mind—my intelligence and imagination—had been constricted by listening, fearfully, night after night, as my older sister struggled against my father's sexual advances. I now understand that, as a result of this fearful listening, I have suffered for years not only from "learned helplessness," but also from what Judith Lewis Herman calls "witness guilt." This guilt inhibited me, time after time, from imagining myself an author: what right did I have to claim a life in language, to become an author, when my sister had been denied authority over her own body? How could I go forward without her? How could I claim the power—the power to be heard—which she had been denied? In part because of my guilt, in part because of my shame, I dared not think of myself as an author at the time I began a doctoral program. I thought of myself primarily as an insightful reader who might become a professor and who might one day publish literary criticism. Gradually, however, with the encouragement of feminist professors at the University of Minnesota, I began to entertain the possibility that—if I had the courage to break my silence about childhood sexual abuse—I might become part of a community of feminist women, women who dared to write and speak with authority.

Unfortunately, because I was a graduate student when I finally recognized myself as a survivor of incest, I could not take the time to find a feminist therapist. Given my age and poor financial situation—I had filed for divorce after my first year of graduate work—my first priority was to finish my degree and find a job. After completing my course work and dissertation in 1984, I took a low-paying lectureship while continuing to seek a tenure-line job. When I moved in 1986 to take a one-year teaching position, I came close to a nervous breakdown: I felt that my plot had run out. With each new challenge, old fears of abandonment and self-

doubt intensified. I knew that if, by some miracle, I actually found a tenure-line position, I would have to move again. Having already lost my family, my home, and my community, I wasn't sure I could sustain any further losses. During the final year of my job search, I managed to survive by imagining myself a water lily which, though it might appear to float freely on the water's surface, is actually anchored securely, by invisible roots, in the mud. In 1987, when I finally found a tenure-line job, I considered myself reasonably safe. However, since I could achieve tenure only by speaking and writing effectively, I faced yet another challenge: imagining myself as someone who could speak, in the classroom and at conferences, and write with genuine (not feigned) authority.

Ironically, during the very years I was struggling to imagine myself an author, I learned that, according to Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes, "the author" was dead. Initially, since it appeared that neither of these theorists could help me to write with authority, I resisted their views of language, just as I resisted the views of French feminists such as Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva. To imagine my mind as having been invaded by the Father was a concept of language that I abhorred, undoubtedly because it paralleled too closely my experience of sexual invasion by the father. At the same time, I began to suspect that my anxieties about language—the pervasive self-doubt that inhibited my ability to speak and write with confidence—originated in my childhood experience of abuse and helplessness. The poisonous lesson of my childhood was that I could speak, I even could cry out, but no one would hear me, no one would listen. In what sense, then, did I possess language? What was the point of speaking and writing if no one listened? At the same time, I wanted, more than anything else, to be heard and believed. If I told the story of how my sisters had been sexually molested as children, I wanted people to believe that they had not fantasized this abuse, nor had they desired it. But who was I to challenge the Bible and Sigmund

Freud? As told in the Biblical story, Lot's daughters seduced him; they initiated the incest. I also knew from reading Freud—who concluded that his patients had fantasized paternal sexual abuse—that psychiatrists did not believe women patients who told them they had been sexually abused by their fathers.<sup>1</sup>

What I needed most—to examine the debilitating effects of paternal sexual abuse on a woman's ability to use language, to read, write, speak, and listen—was authority. It is difficult for women to claim such linguistic authority, according to some feminist theorists, because language is governed by the Law of the Father. Under this Law, women may speak, but their voices are ventriloquated; therefore, women must invent a new language. Without this new language, without a “mother tongue,” women could not speak or write their own desires. Since my own mother had almost no linguistic authority—she couldn't discipline her children without threatening, “Wait until your father comes home!”—I was skeptical of this notion of a mother tongue. My skepticism was intensified by that fact that during the 1950s, if my mother had tried to tell health-care authorities that her husband was sexually abusing her daughters, she might not have found anyone to believe her.<sup>2</sup> It was not until the early 1970s that feminists such as Florence Rush began to challenge Freud's view of father-daughter incest. And not until the late 1960s did women writers—such as Maya Angelou and Joyce Carol Oates—begin to tell the incest story from the daughter's perspective. So far as I know, the story has never yet been told from a maternal perspective.<sup>3</sup> Even though mothers clearly possess linguistic ability—in fact, they are more likely than fathers to teach children to speak—they have rarely had authority over public discourses, such as religion, law, history, education, politics.

Yet I have come to believe, with Mikhail Bakhtin, that “we must all, perforce, become authors.”<sup>4</sup> As Nancy Miller and Cheryl Wall argue, the “death of the Author” does not work for women

because it “prematurely forecloses the question of identity for them” (Miller, “Changing the Subject” 106; quoted in Wall 556). Women’s relationship to language differs from that of men: while sons assume they have a “natural” right to authority, a right to authorship, women have been taught that their rightful inheritance is maternal silence. Therefore, if it is true that “the author” is dead, I prefer to imagine that it is the father-author, the author who demanded silence from his victimized daughters, who has died. If this god-the-father-author is truly dead, it might then be possible for feminists, at long last, to redefine the act of authorship. Women have been engaged in this struggle, as I came to learn, for centuries. For example, in the eighteenth century, according to Susan Lanser in *Fictions of Authority*, women novelists began to redefine authorship as a communal rather than an individual act; yet so pervasive is the notion of individual authorship that narratologists have had no term for communal authorship. Unfortunately, until I began a doctoral program in feminist studies of literature, I knew nothing about women’s struggle to redefine authorship because, as an undergraduate in the 1960s, I hadn’t studied any women writers.

Like most women of my generation, I had been miseducated—denied knowledge of literary foremothers such as Edith Wharton or Virginia Woolf—while taught to revere male writers. As a result, while I thought of myself as a reader, I couldn’t imagine myself a writer. It was not until after the death of my father in 1976 that I declared, with newfound audacity, that Joyce Carol Oates, a contemporary woman novelist, deserved as much critical attention as Shakespeare, Twain, or Joyce. It was very important for me to finally claim the right to study the fiction of a brilliant woman writer, in particular a woman whose fiction illustrates Phyllis Chesler’s point that father-daughter incest functions as a paradigm of the imbalance of power in heterosexual relationships.<sup>5</sup> In Oates’s fiction men who marry women half their age—as,

for example, the wealthy Mr. Revere does in *A Garden of Earthly Delights*—are located on a continuum with those men who, like my father, take their own daughters as their wives. Because Oates's novels provided a feminist analysis of father-daughter incest, her fiction spoke for me before I could speak for myself. While some women refuse to read Oates because her characters are "frightening" (Juhasz 272), I am attracted to her fiction for exactly this reason: it enables me to confront the darkness. Oates's fiction provided me with a safe space—a therapeutic space—in which to imagine and understand frightening characters and events, some of them evocative of my nightmare childhood. Reading a woman writer taught me the power, not only of reading, but also of writing. That is why, once the women's movement taught me to think big—to think that I too might become an author—I was determined to write about the fiction of Joyce Carol Oates. My dissertation would be a rough sketch of this project; when I achieved a tenure-line position I would write the book. It was the boldest dream I had ever dreamt.

But by 1987, the year I finally found a job, the symptoms of my traumatic past had become almost overwhelming: when I spoke in public, I would black out, and when I wrote, I could produce words only after waging a painful struggle against my own increasingly rigid body. My recovery began when I began to explore, through an analysis of this physical symptom, my paralyzing fear of speaking and writing. Even before seeing a therapist, I suspected that this fear was rooted in a childhood myth, a myth that had provided me with at least the illusion of safety: if I were perfectly obedient, if I lay perfectly still, my father would not notice me. I would be safe from his sexual attentions. I hypothesized, as a child, that my father had abused my sister because she was "bad"—by which I meant that she was daring, a risk-taker. I would be safe, then, as long as I was "good." Once, in fact, when my father chastised me for a minor infraction of his law—I had

come home a few minutes late from a date—my fright was so great that I fainted. To my surprise, my disappearance act so astonished my father—or so I assume—that his anger turned to pity. As I explain in chapter 1 of *Authoring a Life*, I maintained this myth of the “good” girl because only by seeing my sister as a “bad girl” could I believe myself safe. The problem with this defense mechanism is that for years I was alienated from my beloved sister. Another problem, as Herman maintains in *Father-Daughter Incest*, is that such defense mechanisms create enormous amounts of psychic tension which may become manifest in a wide range of self-defeating behaviors.

In my case, it appears that the “good girl” of my childhood (the-self-frozen-in-the-past) tried to control the “bad girl,” (the-ideal-self-in-the-present), the transgressive daughter who dared to write and present feminist papers. According to the childhood logic of my unconscious, a woman with the courage to advance a feminist thesis would inspire the father’s wrath. As Roberta Culbertson says of a more severely traumatized survivor: “Finally free, she was silenced by her own memory; or more precisely, by the loss of the self who might communicate, by the continuing concomitant bodily reality of her wounding and her memories of it, and by the persistence of a limited survivor self” (173). I (the intellectual I) knew better, but my unconscious—my more limited survivor self—was resisting, armoring itself by way of physical rigidity. My body’s resistance to speaking or writing was exacerbating my struggle for academic and personal survival. After years of accumulated stress—divorce, doctoral program, job search, several new jobs and relocations—came the additional stress of earning tenure. In the past—when I heard my father entering the bedroom I shared with my sister—I recall being frozen with fear; now the symptom had returned, as if of its own volition. In response to intrusion,” says Ellyn Kaschak, “women do freeze more . . . and also maintain a tensor posture at rest” (48). Stress



often triggers physical symptoms, according to Herman, but flashbacks are more likely to occur if the trauma has been repressed. Because the psychic tension between my mind and body manifested itself in physical pain, a friend recommended that I see a chiropractor. However, in my state of hyperarousal—a state of “permanent alert, as if the danger might return at any moment,” as Herman explains (*Trauma and Recovery* 35)—I could not allow anyone, least of all a man, to touch me.

Instead, for the second time in my life, I sought a woman therapist. In order to feel safe, I had to find a feminist therapist whom I could count on to believe my story. Because Freud—as well as Jung, his famous disciple—had discredited the stories of incest survivors,<sup>6</sup> I feared that even in the 1990s some therapists might not believe me. Their disbelief would seriously impede my recovery, and, possibly, cause me further trauma. I knew that I must have a therapist who believed me: it was a matter of personal and professional survival. If I were to earn tenure, I had only a few months in which to overcome my speaker and writer’s block. Fortunately, through a feminist network, I was able to find such a therapist, and I began work immediately. Since I recognized that my intellectual “self” could not solve this problem, I deliberately made myself receptive to dreams and images. When an image of a woman-in-the-room emerged, I told my therapist. At once, she said, “Tell me more about her.” The woman was sitting in a chair, I responded, in the middle of an empty room. She looked as if she had been abandoned. “What kind of chair?” my therapist asked, “Is it upholstered, for example?” I answered, “It’s a plain wooden chair, the kind that the Shakers made—very simple, almost severe.” Shakers, she pointed out, practice celibacy. Did this mean, I wondered, that I was still afraid of sex? Did it mean, perhaps, that I did not wish to produce? One thing was clear: I was resisting linguistic production. These associations prompted recollections of my inner life.



In a jocose-serious voice, I explained my fantasy of an endowed chair: during my search for a tenure-line position, my mother—who had recently inherited farm land and mineral rights—would strike oil and, with her wealth, would endow a university chair. I would occupy this chair and, from this powerful feminist place, help to change the world. Since my reality principle was intact, I knew that such a miraculous mother-rescue would not occur. Finally, when these explorations of the woman-in-the-room appeared to be fruitless, I asked, “Perhaps I should redecorate the room?” “Oh, no,” my therapist said, “Get her out of there.” I understood, then, that she viewed the woman as stuck inside the empty room. Even though Virginia Woolf, herself a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, had argued that, if a woman wishes to write, she must have a room of her own and an independent income, this room had somehow become a kind of prison. The-woman-in-the-room, I came to understand, was not so much an image of my accomplishments, but an image of constriction, of my attempt to contain fear. As Herman explains in *Trauma and Recovery*, “In an attempt to create some sense of safety and to control their pervasive fear, traumatized people restrict their lives” (46). In fact, the image of the-woman-in-the-room may be a double-memory, an overlay of two moments of transition and stress: one memory from my adolescence, when I was about to leave my father’s house to go to college, the other from the time when, as a divorced woman, I left my husband’s house to complete my doctoral degree.

Shortly before I left for college in 1959, my father had walked into my bedroom while I was dressing to go out on a date. I was wearing only my slip, but what made the situation even worse was that my father, walking in a trancelike state, was nude. I was paralyzed with fear, but he didn’t touch me. When he finally left the room, I returned to what I thought was “normal.” Apparently, this traumatic moment—during which I felt vulnerable to paternal

attack—had remained frozen in my memory. Because stressful transitions often trigger flashbacks and hyperarousal, I was frozen with fear once again when, more than twenty years later, in 1986, I was about to sell the home I had shared with my husband and son. On this occasion, a therapist—whom I imagined as a mother-surrogate—helped me to overcome my fear long enough to sell my house, move to a nearby city, and take a one-year position as a professor of English. One year later, it was necessary to move again, this time to take a tenure-line job. I felt very much alone. Finally, I had a room and income of my own, but I could not write. Once again, I needed the presence of a maternal figure, someone capable of nonjudgmental listening. Kristeva explains why this is necessary when she says, echoing Melanie Klein, “I think that in the imaginary, maternal continuity is what guarantees identity” (quoted in Glass 22).

With a therapist who acted as maternal presence, I realized that the woman-in-the-room was afraid of moving out, afraid of moving on. At first I despised this frightened woman, but gradually I began to visualize her as a girl still locked inside her father’s house, listening to the sounds in the night, frozen with fear. This girl had prayed for her mother’s help, but she had not come. Finally, I realized that this child-self would not leave the room as long as I despised her; instead, I must grieve for her. As I searched my memory for farewell rituals, I recalled that on moving days I would always go back for one last look at each empty room. With the security of this ritual, I returned to the woman-in-the room to begin the painful process of letting go of a former self. Suddenly one day, the-woman-in-the-room appeared to me on the page of a large coloring book: as melting crayons flowed out of the room, coloring the yard, I watched the woman emerge from her isolated room. I had not noticed, until that moment, that the-woman-in-the-room had always appeared in static tones of gray. With the grief for this lost self, came the letting go. With the flowing of my

tears, my imagination was again in motion. At last, I could envision myself as part of the world, a world in “living” color. Now that these mute but painful memories were integrated into my new “self”—a more fluid narrative self—I felt that I would be able to write again. But could I speak in public? To reassure myself on this point, I transformed the woman-in-the-room into a an invisible maternal presence hovering just above my right shoulder. If I became nervous before presenting a paper, I could call upon this presence to absorb my fear.

Thus, I owe my recovery—a recovery that continues to this day—to a mysterious, moving image: the transformation of an image of a woman alone in a room, abandoned and helpless, into a nurturing maternal presence. I describe it as “mysterious” because, although the image itself is quite ordinary, I do not, even now, fully understand where it came from, or why it began to change. But the image did change, and I know that this moment of metamorphosis—a moment at which the frozen image became fluid—signified my return to health. My frozen self, a constricted identity impairing my ability to function, became part of a more fluid “author-self.” I understand this more fluid author-self, not as a “core,” but as a self which, though once injured by traumatic experience, is now healed, largely through a narrative process that enabled me to integrate frozen memories (images from the past) into my present life. As long as the affect of earlier traumas were stored as fragments, as suggested by the image of the woman-in-the-room, I could neither write nor overcome an often pervasive sense of helplessness. Happily, with the convergence of image, music, and color, I no longer needed to image my “self” as isolated in a room, frozen into a protective posture; instead, I could imagine myself as ontologically secure enough to venture outside the room and, in time, confident enough to welcome the linguistic flow of writing. According to my own reflective experience, then, Julia Kristeva is right: the subject is fluid, the subject is a process.

In retrospect, I understand that my father's struggle to maintain a unified identity—a dominant “core” of masculinity—made him a monster inside his own family, a monster unable to see his own double or, in Jungian terms, his shadow self. Within the privacy of his own family, his repressed self, his shadow self, emerged. Because my father had not integrated his shadow, it became destructive. Therefore, I found it frightening to claim my own shadow-self, my “bad girl,” but once I had accepted her, integrating her with the “good girl,” my author-self finally emerged. Through this process I have learned that in order to become an “author”—that is, to develop the courage to risk linguistic self-assertion—it is necessary to put “unspeakable acts” into words. Herman explains why this is so. Normal memory, she says, might be described as “the action of telling a story,” while traumatic memory, by contrast, is wordless and static” (*Trauma and Recovery* 175). Initially, Herman says, the survivor recounts the trauma “as a series of still snapshots or a silent movie; the role of therapy is to provide the music and words” (175). Probably because my traumatic experiences were not as severe as my sisters’—that is, I was not as repeatedly or aggressively violated as they—it took only a few months of therapy before I experienced the return of words and music, along with, in my case, color.

Since that time, I have come to view the creation of an ideal self and the writing of autobiographical criticism as parallel activities, activities which enable me to claim a sense of agency almost lost to me during my childhood. A survivor must tell her story, Herman explains, because “this work of reconstruction actually transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the survivor’s life story” (*Trauma and Recovery* 175). That is why Bakhtin’s belief, that “we must all, perforce, become authors” inspired the title of this study. Because Bakhtin’s concept of the author assumes a self-in-relationship—one cannot author without a listener or reader—it is congruent with my own experience: with-

out someone to hear my story, without someone willing and able to bear witness, I would not have recovered my capacity for self-authoring. Indeed, one of the most traumatic aspects of paternal rape is that the father, to whom the daughter turns for protection, is deaf to her voice. I reject this paternal notion of authority, along with this notion of authoring. To author a life is, for me, to bear witness, not only to my own trauma, but to the traumas of others. As Dori Laub explains, "Bearing witness to a trauma is, in fact, a process that includes the listener. For the testimonial process to take place, there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an *other*—in the position of one who hears. Testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude. The witnesses are talking to somebody: to somebody that they have been waiting for for a long time" (Felman and Laub 70–71).

As Ronnie Janoff-Bulman emphasizes, bearing witness is one way that survivors find meaning in their suffering. The question is, Should academic readers be expected to "bear witness"? My answer is a decided yes, but not all academics agree. For example, when I used the phrase "bearing witness" in an autobiographical-critical essay submitted to an academic journal, one reader objected. "Sorry," the report read, "the evangelical language of 'bearing witness' (used twice in this essay) makes me squirmy. Might be because a former chair, a weekend minister, used it in talking about what we do when we go to conferences." Were I still afflicted with shame, I might perceive such criticism as a lack of support, as abandonment. However, my ego is no longer so fragile; furthermore, because I wanted to publish the essay, I tried to determine whether this reader, having found the topic of sexual abuse too emotionally charged, was attacking my prose rather than acknowledging her own discomfort. As I know from experience, survivor stories make listeners uncomfortable. "It is very tempting," as Herman says, "to take the side of the perpetrator. All the perpetrator asks is that the bystander do nothing. . . . The vic-

tim, on the contrary, asks the bystander to share the burden of pain. The victim demands action, engagement, and remembering” (*Trauma and Recovery* 7). However, in this instance, the reader’s criticism of my prose was not an attempt to avoid engagement or avoid sharing the burden of pain; in fact, she recommended that the journal “pursue” the piece, which she found “provocative.”

But this mixed genre has its critics. For example, Daphne Patai argues that the feminist phrase, “the personal is political”—which, as she says, means “making public the long-neglected personal stories of women disrupts the traditional version of masculine culture and challenges the conventional boundaries between public and private life”—has been “reduced to near meaninglessness through sheer overextension” (53). On the contrary, academics have only begun to examine our responses, as readers and writers, to the violations of conventional boundaries between public and private life. Nevertheless, when feminists criticize the use of the personal in academic essays, describing it as self-indulgent, exhibitionistic,<sup>7</sup> or simply irrelevant, I take this criticism seriously. If it is true, as Daphne Patai argues, that autobiographical writing leaves us “with nothing more than a shared awareness that scholarly works do not descend from heaven, but are written by human beings” (53), what have we actually accomplished? For example, when I write about the sexual abuse of children, what difference does it make that I, like many women, have actually experienced such abuse? I understand that, for some readers, personal revelation would actually weaken my argument against male violence since, presumably, I lack the objectivity of a detached observer.

My answer to such charges is this: when Freud decided that his patients were not credible, that they were fantasizing sexual violation by their fathers, women did not have the institutional power—they did not have the public authority—to challenge Freud’s conclusions. As a consequence, hysterics were defined as liars and, for years, told to ignore their own experiences to achieve

mental health. Freud's lie—which, in a generous mood I call a “mistake”—forced me, while a doctoral student, to read the following theoretical nonsense: “If hysterics lie, they are above all the first victims of a kind of lie or deception. Not that they have been lied to; it is rather as though there existed in the facts themselves a kind of fundamental duplicity for which we would propose the term deceit” (Laplanche 34). What does Laplanche mean by the phrase: “not that they have been lied to”? He does not attempt to clarify the phrase, but instead obfuscates its meaning and confuses his readers. This way of doing theory has had severe consequences for hysterics—that is, for sexually abused women and men. It took the collective power of women, during the second wave of the women's movement, to challenge the damaging Freudian view of father-daughter incest which Laplanche reiterates in this passage. In the meantime, for almost one hundred years, victims of sexual abuse—including my own sister—were victimized by therapists who refused to believe them. Although victims cannot claim unmediated access to our experience—I recognize that patriarchal language shaped my experience and understanding of father-daughter incest for many years—survivors must claim the authority to name and theorize our own experiences.

It is only by developing feminist theories that we can defend women from potentially damaging theories. Regardless of race, as bell hooks argues, women must resist the impulse to leave the theorizing to white men, for theories which have not been tested by the experiences and insights of women can be used to oppress them. James Glass makes this point in *Shattered Selves*. As a result of his study of women suffering from multiple personality disorder—all of whom are victims of paternal sexual abuse—he argues that it is irresponsible for poststructuralists to base their arguments of fragmented identity on textual examples only. While I agree with Glass on this point, I disagree that the only alternative is to return to a concept of a “core” self. Since the concept of a “core” self



retains its associations with normative a “masculine” subject, I prefer Julia Kristeva’s poststructuralist notion of a “subject in process.” Significantly, and despite his commitment to the concept of a core self, Glass found Kristeva’s theory of a “subject in process” compatible with humane treatment of women suffering from multiple personality disorder. In my view, because theories of identity—of the self or the subject—have the potential to damage us, women cannot afford to leave such theorizing to men. Yet not all feminists believe that theory has value: Nina Baym states the case against theory in “The Madwoman and Her Languages: Why I Don’t Do Feminist Theory,” while Laurie Finke argues the case for theory in “The Rhetoric of Marginality: Why I Do Feminist Theory.” My position is that we must “do theory,” but we must, as Jane Tompkins suggests in “Me and My Shadow,” do it differently. Survivors of father-daughter incest must, for example, insist on the right to theorize our own experiences, not by avoiding emotions, but by including them in our analysis.

As Alison Jaggar argues, Western epistemology is “shaped by the belief that emotion should be excluded from the process of attaining knowledge” (lecture cited by Tompkins 123). This belief is, as Tompkins points out, oppressive to women. “Because women in our culture are not simply encouraged but required to be the bearers of emotion, which men are culturally conditioned to repress, an epistemology which excludes emotions from the process of attaining knowledge radically undercuts women’s epistemic authority” (“Me and My Shadow” 123).<sup>8</sup> Tompkins explains, “I saw that I had been socialized from birth to feel and act in ways that automatically excluded me from participating in the culture’s most valued activities. No wonder I felt so uncomfortable in the postures academic prose forced me to assume; it was like wearing men’s jeans” (124). Jaggers’ insight also enabled me to understand not only my own discomfort with academic writing but also how my father had developed the capacity to objectify his own chil-

dren. Because he had been culturally conditioned to repress emotion, he was deaf to the cries of his daughters. Indeed, his authority depended upon such deafness: as a father-author, he could not hear his daughters, nor could he see them as rightful owners of their own bodies. Rather, he had been taught to view them as his property. However, while Tompkins has decided that theory, “at least as it is usually practiced” (122), ought to be avoided, I believe it necessary to continue “wearing men’s jeans” (to use Tompkins’ simile) while, at the same time, feeling free to take the jeans off and stand “naked” before an academic audience.

Yet some academic readers respond with distaste—even disgust—to the nakedness of personal disclosures in academic writing. But what, exactly, is “good taste”? According to Richard E. Miller, taste is both “a way of being in the world in general, and a way of being in one’s body in particular” (271). As Miller points out, we may believe our tastes in writing or art are “natural”—for example, we may react with disgust at “hearing someone discuss a personal tragedy in an academic forum” (271)—but taste is, in fact, something we have been taught. Although Miller argues that taste is largely determined by “one’s social class or one’s schooling” (271), my experience of near-paralysis during the writing process suggests that taste is also determined by gender training. It would be in very bad “taste,” I had been taught, to disclose the trauma of childhood sexual abuse. Nevertheless, as I discovered, I could not make myself heard—I could not write with authority—until I had listened to my own muted body. As Miller suggests, “The writer’s response, during the process of composing, might be a site at which to explore the relationship between modes of writing legitimated by the academy and the circulation of cultural capital in our society” (273). From the pain emanating from my body/mind<sup>9</sup> during the composing process, I was forced to acknowledge that I had once been a form of capital, my father’s property. This familial lesson, reinforced by lessons at school and in church, had been “scored” deeply

into my body/mind. To free myself from this debilitating childhood lesson, I would have to transgress conventions of “good taste.”

How, then, would I speak to readers, particularly academic readers? Because mixed-genre writing includes emotions, which the academy has dictated shall be excluded, I have accepted the fact that *Authoring a Life* may offend some readers. At the same time, I am authorized to write in this mixed genre by the example of highly respected members of the contemporary feminist community. Two of the best known and earliest are the poet-critics Adrienne Rich and Susan Griffin; more recently Gloria Anzaldúa, Lynne Z. Bloom, Diane Freedman, Jane Gallop, bell hooks, Nancy K. Miller, Sharon O’Brien, Madelon Sprengnether, Jane Tompkins, and many others have also synthesized the autobiographical and theoretical (or critical). Yet, despite numerous successful models of such writing by feminists, my doubts and anxieties continue to surface as I write autobiographical criticism. One reason for my insecurity is that the synthesis of autobiography and theory varies greatly—ranging from Jane Gallop’s confessions of uncertainty while reading Lacan to the situational dynamics of television talk shows that often deny the power of theoretical analysis, or expertise, to survivors of sexual violence.<sup>10</sup> At least for a feminist audience, Gallop’s revelation of uncertainty makes her authorial stance seem less godlike and more appealing; by contrast, revelations of uncertainty by an unknown incest survivor may automatically disqualify her as an expert on the topic. The status of the speaker, and the context in which she speaks, make all the difference. As a survivor of father-daughter incest, I know how vulnerable one can feel when acknowledging such a history; at the same time, I believe it is important for survivors to claim the right to theorize their experiences in the effort to change a culture in which such violence occurs.

Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray address this very problem in an article called “Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuper-

ation?" They use a synthesis of autobiography (they briefly acknowledge the fact that they have been victims of sexual violence) and theory (Foucault corrected by feminist insights) to analyze the problem of confessional modes of discourse, primarily those confessional discourses that involve sexuality—including rape, incest, and sexual assault. After analyzing a variety of discourse situations, including television talk shows, they conclude:

Our analysis suggests that the formulation of the primary political tactic for survivors should not be a simple incitement to speak out, as this formulation leaves unanalyzed the conditions of speaking and thus makes us too vulnerable to recuperative discursive arrangements. Before we speak we need to look at where the incitement to speak originates, what relations of power and domination may exist between those who incite and those who are asked to speak, as well as to whom the disclosure is directed. (284)

Alcoff and Gray argue that survivors, in their "struggle to maintain autonomy over the conditions of our speaking out if we are to develop its subversive potential" (284), must claim the right of "obstructing the ability of 'experts' to 'police our statements,' to put us in a defensive posture, or to determine the focus and framework of our discourse" (284). This analysis, as well as the work of bell hooks, has helped me to articulate why it is imperative that trauma survivors, along with members of oppressed groups, maintain authority over their own discourse.

As I know from experience, even when the occasion to speak out is provided by feminists, it is difficult for a survivor to strike the right balance between self-disclosure and self-censorship, between autobiography and theory. For example, when I sent an autobiographical-critical essay to Diane Freedman who was editing a collection called *Nexus*, she asked me to revise, omitting some textual

references and providing more autobiography. Initially, because this request made me feel as if I were being asked to take off more clothing, I struggled to determine whether, by complying, I would be giving up authority over my own discourse. I finally recognized that Freedman's editorial recommendations would actually improve my essay, for in this case I was trying to hide behind theoretical/textual analysis. It was a strategy for armoring myself against the vulnerability I felt when writing in the confessional mode. As I wrestled with this issue, I determined that for me to speak with authority requires that I speak clothed in theory, whereas to speak strictly autobiographically means to stand naked, defenseless, exposed. This conflict—a conflict with myself, not with Freedman—forced me to acknowledge that I sometimes use theory as armor to protect myself and/or my audience from the embarrassment of emotion.

In *Authoring a Life*, a narrative of my survival in and through literary studies—a chronicle of my struggles to speak and write effectively—I strive to strike a balance between intellect and emotion. In the process, I sometimes encounter the conflicting conventions of genres, in particular, the conventions of autobiography and academic writing. In this way, I demonstrate—even as I tell—the manner in which I have been transformed by language, as well as the ways in which I am attempting to transform myself through language. The subject is fluid, according to Julia Kristeva; the author, as I imagine her, is also fluid, a work-in-progress, a collaborative subject. In chapter 2, "Pretending Not to Know, While Reading in the Dark," I illustrate how such a metamorphosis of the "I" occurs over time, largely through the intervention of the women's movement, but also through the therapy of reading in the dark. Chapter 3, "A Mother-Daughter Story," shifts the focus from fathers to mothers. It also illustrates the process of self-revision: in order to establish myself as a writer in the early 1980s, I had defined myself in opposition to maternal silence and victim-