

Chapter 1

Ordinary Doings

Recent debates about the truthfulness of belated memories of incest have highlighted the role of narrative in memorial representations of the past. As a result of this emphasis on narrative and the constructedness of memory, many feminists—and many of their detractors—have come to the conclusion that women’s stories about incest may tell us more about the distorting lens of memory and powerful ideological forces than about authentic experiences of incest. All narratives reflect social and political interests, but confessional narratives, more than other kinds of stories, evoke contradictory responses. While they seem at first to be urgent and authentic outpourings, upon reexamination they appear to be shaped by the needs of powerful inquisitors and hungry audiences. In the last decade, women’s memorial accounts of incest have increasingly been understood by many academics and journalists to be disturbing products of therapeutic intervention rather than independent accounts of real events.

Some feminists have seen this reading of incest stories as an antifeminist attack on women’s authority as reporters of the past, but others insist that skepticism about incest stories cannot be antifeminist—because they, too, are worried. Recovered-memory stories, in particular, have been described by feminists such as Carol Tavris and Elaine Showalter as debilitating tales featuring women as victims, not agents. These feminists, along with members of the False Memory Syndrome Foundation, have argued that it might be in everyone’s best interest if women’s incest stories were reprivatized: kept not only within the sphere of the therapist’s office but understood as bound by the even more private space of personal fantasy. The desire for a reconfinement of stories about incest is linked to fears about what telling incest has supposedly wrought: broken families, children suing parents, a growing number of disturbing novels and memoirs.

In this chapter we are going to suggest why it is nonetheless worth taking the risk of trying to uncover the complex ways in which incest narratives are told and embedded in the world. Despite the inevitable problems with narratives that attempt to uncover the truth of the past, the denial of any reliable his-

torical itinerary has its own dangers. As we will show through an analysis of Ian Hacking's *Rewriting the Soul*, which offers a sustained argument about the costs of talking too much about childhood sexual abuse and trauma, the effort to limit talk about the past is a gesture that often serves to consolidate the power to remember legitimately in the hands of a few.

The debate about recovered memories has produced, in a competitive way, intricate narratives asserting and contesting the links between sexual trauma and memory. The analogies used on both sides of the debate are dramatic, historical, and very rhetorical. So, for example, a segment of the recovered-memory argument, found in popular books such as Bass and Davis's *The Courage to Heal* and Herman's *Trauma and Recovery*, is constructed by pieces of the debate about the truth of the Holocaust. Because Holocaust deniers peddle a falsely benign past, recovered-memory advocates have found it useful to deploy the power of the Holocaust metaphor to suggest that deniers of recovered memories of child abuse are counterparts to Holocaust revisionists. And given the amount of media attention bestowed upon a vague concoction, "False-Memory Syndrome," a term invented by the False Memory Syndrome Foundation to suggest the craziness of those who claim recovered memories of incest, this analogy was perhaps inevitable. For recovered-memory advocates, the Holocaust provides a moralized lesson from history that lends support to the argument that false-memory proponents "abuse survivors" with contrived arguments, while it also emphasizes the truth of recovered memories of abuse (Lipstadt, 3).¹

Members of the false-memory movement employ another metaphor, the "witch hunt," to attack the recovered-memory movement. This metaphor transforms women with recovered memories into sexual hysterics. These crazed women apparently enjoy victimizing innocent people, "the falsely accused," who are charged with crimes and convicted despite a lack of evidence: "we are now experiencing the United States' third great wave of hysteria. I believe that more have suffered in its course than all those who suffered in Salem and the McCarthy era combined" (Gardner, 425).² Here, again, a moralized history lesson, involving powerful American communal stories about group-think and persecution, lends support to the argument that innocent people are suffering at the hands of recovered-memory victimizers. Simplified references to past events, especially the Salem witchcraft and McCarthy trials, emphasize the embattled reasonableness of proponents of false memory in the face of a resurgent and feminized form of American irrationality.

Such charged rhetoric makes it difficult, yet all the more desirable, to talk about the issue of sexual abuse and memory in a quiet, reasonable way, though reason is also a partisan in the debates about memory. Ian Hacking has written a philosophical work, often cited by analysts of women's incest stories, about multiple personality disorder and its links to concepts of child abuse, *Rewriting*

the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Science of Memory. In this book, Hacking attempts to separate the contemporary language of multiples, child abuse, and recovered memories from the words and meanings attached to childhood trauma in the last half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. Yet though his self-described “archaeological” scholarship promises relief from careless historicizing, his “distanced view of child abuse” (67) is actually part of the fray. In this chapter, Hacking’s discussion of child sexual abuse will be juxtaposed with American women’s stories of abuse written during the period that interests Hacking. These narratives do not emphasize psychic repression, and this means that we have chosen to examine transgressive stories, drawn from case records, letters, autobiography, and literature, that do not follow the familiar analytic plot line about women’s stories of sexual abuse as having a simple origin in the nets of psychoanalytic discourse. The stories that interest us thus provide a challenge to Hacking’s usefully representative assumption that tellings of child abuse have a very specific origin in late-nineteenth-century narratives about “shock,” in accounts of physical wounds that were transformed by Janet and Freud into narratives about psychic trauma. Hacking presents contemporary discourse about child abuse and trauma as a fabrication of the past, unlike the discourse found in archives, which supposedly reveals the actual past. We will challenge this way of framing the divide between past and present and offer a more dynamic account of how experiences are estranged from language and how they are recovered. We are thus creating another perspective on what constitutes responsible remembering. Since memory wars may be irritating, it is useful to bear in mind that a unified view of the past is only possible if alternative views are unspoken—or unacknowledged.

Of course, skeptics, observing the recent proliferation of incest stories, might well turn to Ian Hacking’s *Rewriting the Soul* for confirmation of their fears that contemporary narratives of child sexual abuse would be better left unspoken. Hacking argues that these new stories have a dangerous agency: “One should not dismiss the possibility that some of the increase in child abuse is due to the publicity itself, in that it makes available new descriptions under which to act, and then, by semantic contagion, leads on to yet worse actions” (238). Apparently, the present language used to describe child abuse does more than bury the past under an edifice of signs, “new descriptions.” These descriptions are capable of corrupting the present. Hacking makes those who attempt to address the problem of child abuse partly responsible for causing it through a process of “semantic contagion” (238).³

Certainly representations—the language we use, the images we see—do shape our desires and actions, though not in a simple cause-and-effect way. The relation between individual acts and the set of cultural representations and material conditions informing those acts is enormously complex. Hacking,

because he is interested in isolating structures of causation, often makes things too simple. To isolate the contemporary use of the phrase *child abuse* as a cause of child abuse reductively limits discussion of causes. For one thing, Hacking's focus deflects attention from perpetrators: why do perpetrators forget the desires and interests of daughters? under what conditions does sex become a form of disciplinary violence? what cultural definitions of the erotic inform their desires? Furthermore, a focus on the dangers of the phrase *child abuse* masks the significant ways in which, historically, a prohibition on speaking about abuse has served not to stop incest from occurring but to occlude responses to it. Silence frees the field for perpetrators. As Wendy Evans and David Maines point out, "the collaboration of clinical and social scientific theories" in the late nineteenth century supported a rhetoric about the incest taboo and dysfunctional girls that made incest and male perpetrators nearly invisible (306). Louise Barnett explains how these prohibitions shaped the reception of incest tellings: "The easiest attitude for a public that never spoke about such things was to assume that an accusation of incest could not be true. Even if it were, many would maintain, bringing it to light was the greater scandal, a corruption of public discourse" (22). By decrying the "semantic contagion" caused by speaking about child abuse, Hacking's rhetoric implicitly works to support a prohibition on telling in the name of public morality, without suggesting any alternatives.

Hacking not only attempts to chill present discussions of child abuse by arguing that our new descriptions contaminate the present, he also suggests these descriptions contaminate the past: "retroactive attribution of modern moral concepts" may make the past seem more corrupt than it really was. Hacking offers the following "trite" example.

Imagine some plain, but not entirely gross, case of sexual harassment that took place in 1950, behavior that contravened no law nor custom of 1950, and which hardly even infringed the canons of taste then current, in the social milieu where the event took place. If you tell me about the episode in 1950 terms, you certainly will not use the expression "sexual harassment." What was the man doing? You answer by identifying the action, telling me what the man was doing to his secretary, perhaps, and the way in which he said it. But now you can also answer the question "what was the man doing?" with "He was sexually harassing his secretary." This is the same action as the one you first presented in a more neutral way, but it is that action under a new description. On the other hand, when we ask whether the man intended to harass his secretary, most of us are less sure what to say. Today, in many milieus, we hold in contempt the man who says he did not realize he was harassing. And if he will not stop behaving that way, he is finished. But when we reflect on the 1950s man, there is a certain dimin-

ishment to the accusation if the very idea of harassment was not available to him. (*Rewriting the Soul*, 243)

Hacking's implicit question is: how can we now condemn the 1950s man if he could not have understood his actions as sexual harassment?

The ghostly neutrality of the man's actions, however, is being produced by Hacking's writing, though it seems at first only an artifact of a "doings" necessary namelessness. Hacking asks his readers to imagine a "plain" case of sexual harassment, but he does not provide a clear description of what the "man was doing to his secretary." Of course, he cannot be "clear" because the point of this exercise is to refuse to name what is happening and so remain, presumably, chaste, innocent of contemporary namings. At the same time, Hacking's refusal, one made in the present, may also be read as an aggressive suppression of information. The passage only admits that the action was something "said." A "plain case of harassment," as definitions of sexual harassment insist, would occur within a specific context in which one person has power over another and exercises it, often repeatedly, through unwelcome, sexually provocative words and actions.⁴ In a "plain case" of harassment, it would be difficult for a woman—in Hacking's example, "his secretary"—to resist such "doings" without jeopardizing her job. Hacking's troubling focus on the man's doings and complete lack of interest in the secretary's response (the classic male boss and female secretary roles thus repeated in the narrowness of Hacking's concern) allow him to blandly assert that in the 1950s "you" (which "you" is this?) would have had a neutral description for actions that "we" (which "we" is this?) would now identify as harassment.⁵

To accept Hacking's belief that a clear divide exists between "them" in the past and "us" in the present requires a good deal of confidence in the homogeneity of both cultural moments. Was the 1950s a decade in which there existed a consensus about "canons of taste"? Hacking insists that if a man did not think he was harassing, then "there is a certain diminishment" to present accusations about his doings (243). Because he takes as a given the absolute dominance of the boss's point of view (though he thinks he offers a universal perspective), Hacking can claim that in the 1950s, the man's doings were more or less "neutral," which is a way of saying that they were, at the time, not simply unnameable but also incontestable. His implicit belief that there would likely be no resistance to the man's doings requires that Hacking forget the point of view of the woman who was the recipient of these acts.⁶ The secretary, of course, might have felt scared and angry about "what the man was doing." She might not have agreed that the man's actions were "hardly" an infringement of taste; she might even have said something. The lacunae in Hacking's example reflects his own blind spot. Despite his claims to be conducting a Foucauldian archaeology, he does not engage in Foucault's effort to map not only

what a dominant discourse creates but what it excludes and subjugates. In other words, Hacking pays insufficient attention to the dynamic of power and resistance.

From a feminist perspective, the 1950s have long been linked to women's experience of a "problem that has no name," as Betty Friedan so memorably put it. That Friedan's book focuses only on the plight of educated, affluent, white women is proof that even this painfully articulated effort to name women's problems also rendered invisible the language and experiences of women with less visibility and social power. Indeed, it has only been very recently that writings of African-American women in the 1950s have been recognized as articulating resistance to the status quo. Examining contemporaneous reviews of Gwendolyn Brooks's only novel, *Maud Martha* (1953), Mary Helen Washington notices their inability to perceive the novel's "compelling themes," "the struggle to sustain one's identity against a racist and sexist society, the silences that result from repressed anger, the need to assert a creative life" (31). Hacking's imposed consensus, like the one operating in reviews of *Maud Martha*, simply ignores the feelings and words of those women in the 1950s who resisted and ultimately transformed normalized practices (ones that "contravened no law" and seemed not to infringe "canons of taste"). A feminist critic, Maureen Cain, pushes that subjugated knowledge into view: "Did not the relations which constitute sexual harassment exist before they were named and did not the women in those relations have an experience? Is not that . . . experience the reason that women wanted to take the personally risky and politically fundamental step of giving the experience a name?" (89).⁷

Hacking's "trite" example seeks to demonstrate the epistemological and moral problems associated with describing past actions in new terms such as *sexual harassment*. Indeed Hacking believes that commentators falsify the past by describing old, unnamed actions using such new terms. His point is that *sexual harassment* is a recent term and must mark a new category of experience. But do new terms always work this way? That someone did not know that she suffered from a disease called "diabetes" did not mean that diabetes did not exist. Naming, then, may not always falsify the past, and trying to avoid naming, as Hacking does in the interests of fidelity to history, has its own dangers. By fabricating an example that is "not entirely gross," he necessarily uses description to construct and contain the meaning of what happened in the past: in this case, men doing nameless things to women. Despite his anxiety about false attribution, Hacking himself uses signs to build an image of the 1950s that he believes represents the truth of the past itself. His descriptions are contrived and interested, but the real problem is his inability to acknowledge that anything lies outside them. In a sense, he has too much confidence in his own authority.

In a predictable extension of his argument, Hacking suggests that recovered

memories of sexual abuse involve the falsification of the past. He writes: “Old actions under new descriptions may be reexperienced in memory. And if these are genuinely new descriptions, descriptions not available or perhaps nonexistent at the time of the episodes remembered, then something is experienced now, in memory, that in a certain sense did not exist before” (*Rewriting the Soul*, 249). Hacking is here developing a postmodern argument that explains that recovered memories are false insofar as our present discursive milieu (our “narrative truth”) separates us from the past: new descriptions create new pasts. For Hacking, remembering involves finding the historically correct words for invoking the past (the “historical truth”). These are two forms of linguistic absolutism. In addition to arguing that narrative and historical truths are not so easily separated, we hope to show that nondiscursive conditions—historically contingent forms of embodiment of, and resistance to, power relations—have an instrumental relation to language. As previously unspoken doings emerge into representation, they challenge the comprehensiveness of dominant forms of language and knowledge.

Having drawn a historical line at the 1960s, the time before which charges of past abuse cannot “in a certain sense” be accurate, Hacking moves to what he sees as the real problem: women in therapy, especially “multiple personality therapy,” are using their “apparent memories” to fashion false selves. In this way, therapy leads women to “false consciousness.”

Not in the blatant sense that the apparent memories of early abuse are necessarily wrong or distorted—they may be true enough. No, there is the sense that the end product is a thoroughly crafted person, but not a person who serves the ends for which we are persons. Not a person with self-knowledge, but a person who is the worse for having a glib patter that simulates an understanding of herself. Some of the feminist writers . . . appear to share this moral judgment. They add that too much multiple therapy implicitly confirms the old male model of the passive woman who could not hang in, who retroactively creates a story about herself in which she was the weak vessel. (*Rewriting the Soul*, 266)

Women, it seems, are more harmed by therapeutic practices than by their “true enough” painful memories. Implicit here is another prohibition on women’s stories (or “glib patter”) about victimization, this time in the name of the laudable stoicism of the woman who “hangs in.” Notice how passive is the form of agency—“hanging in”—that Hacking extols.⁸ Yet for Hacking, “hanging in” is a powerful moral operation that protects a woman’s very soul, the core of her being, from the emptying-out process of therapeutic self-fabrication.

While feminists such as Carol Tavris, Wendy Kaminer, and Janice Haaken have expressed concerns about the political effects of women’s identifying

themselves as victims who need to be saved, all such concerns are not feminist. Indeed many false-memory proponents unilaterally blame feminism for *encouraging* women to think of themselves as victims, an argument that is meant to make all survivor stories seem deplorable, victim posturing.⁹ Hacking's language, which often follows the contours of the false-memory argument about the power of therapists to elicit false memories, dramatically features women losing their souls as they become pseudovictims. Indeed, the extent to which he represents women as pseudo-victims is stunning given that he is willing to acknowledge that their memories may be true. By emphasizing women's loss, Hacking also refuses claims made by female patients that recalling/narrating their experiences of abuse is empowering and a source of new discursive authority. For Hacking, these claims too become fabrications, glib patter, false consciousness. Yet it is useful to remember that other interpreters place the scene of a woman's "soul murder" *before* therapeutic intervention, in acts of violence, rather than after it. Leonard Shengold, for example, describes "soul murder" as an effect of an abused child having either felt too much to bear or having been exposed to too little (2). When "soul murder" is positioned this way, then the locus of dangerous fabrication lies in those who disavow the terrors of the familial past, not the therapeutic present.¹⁰ In Hacking's work, the individual as well as the social past is a place of greater integrity than the present, but it is important to recognize that this assumption is a crucial site of contestation in the memory wars.

Although Hacking sometimes aligns himself with feminists who are skeptical about the effects of therapy, his argument differs from theirs in its implicit effort to protect a discursive regime that operated in the past to privilege the boss's point of view by rendering it neutral. Remarking upon the problem of viewing one's discursive positions as neutral, Dean MacCannell and Juliet Flower MacCannell point out, "That some are privileged to think of their power as neutral, to think of themselves and those with whom they enter into power relations as free is based on the suppression of violence" (206). Actions in the past rendered blandly neutral by Hacking were contested by women struggling against forms of oppression without a name. Because he dismisses this struggle, Hacking's admonition against naming the past using new descriptions begins to seem a powerful move to enforce his reading of the past against the claims of new interpreters. As Hacking's book demonstrates, the inevitable process of rereading the past is disconcerting, especially to those who would like to settle on one authentic, seemingly apolitical and neutral meaning for past events—the one *they* provide, of course.

In another effort to draw a clear distinction between past and present, Hacking offers a brief history of child abuse that attempts to explain what can be accurately said about such past "doings." "The phrase 'child abuse'—that exact phrase—is seldom found before 1960; its predecessor was 'cruelty to chil-

dren” (56). Unlike *child abuse*, which is now supposed to be a classless evil, “cruelty to children” was connected to poverty and “not felt as the outstanding evil” (58). Furthermore “the man who beat or raped his daughter may have been called a beast, but there was no expert knowledge to help, cure, or manage that type of individual. He was a wretch to be punished” (59). This summary, which he expands elsewhere, accurately emphasizes the former centrality of the phrase “cruelty to children.” This phrase was often used by the late-nineteenth-century protection agencies that were indeed directing help to the poor, though Hacking ignores the importance of the growing professionalization of social-work “experts.” Entirely missing from his summary, however, is any effort to think about the victim of the “beast,” to whom Hacking is as indifferent as he is to his imagined “secretary.” He also refuses engagement with the multiple and shifting determinants of acceptable speech during this period. Not only does he not explain why so little discursive pressure was put on the “man who beat or raped his daughter”—deference to paternal authority? beliefs that sex with children cured venereal disease?—but he does not pay sufficient attention to the texts of new interpreters, located outside of scientific networks, who were challenging the fixed picture of the social universe offered by privileged male subjects.¹¹ It is to examples of these narratives, rather than the much-analyzed accounts of Freud and Janet, that we now wish to direct attention.

One set of narratives revealing the language women used to destabilize, though not defeat, the prohibition on speaking about incest has been developed and analyzed by Linda Gordon in several articles, as well as in her book *Heroes of Their Own Lives*. These narratives are drawn from the archives of three private social-work agencies in Boston during the years 1880 to 1960; about 10 percent of the case records in her sample were cases of incest, and most (98 percent) involved the sexual assault of a girl by an older male relative, usually the father (Gordon, *Heroes*, 207; Gordon, “Incest and Resistance,” 253). Acknowledgment of these cases was “in part based on [the] notion that it was exclusively a vice of the poor.” Yet although there were class boundaries placed on discourse about incest, the eventual cross-class legitimacy of this discourse was inevitable once the prohibition against speaking about ordinary incest was partially lifted. Perhaps that is why an organization that worked with the poor, the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children “considered incest cases ‘too revolting to publish.’” Moral opprobrium clearly was attached to incest long before 1960 and could be used to ban information about its frequency and ordinariness (Gordon, *Heroes*, 215). One of Gordon’s goals is “to situate incest socially and historically, in the ordinary conditions of girls’ lives” (“Incest and Resistance,” 254). The ordinary pattern of incest in the case records between 1880 and 1930 will be familiar to readers of Herman’s *Father-Daughter Incest*, a book that we will analyze more fully in a later chap-

ter. The pattern involves families in which a socially isolated oldest daughter with an absent or weakened mother has to function as a wife (housekeeper, baby-sitter, sexual partner) for a moralizing, tyrannical father. The earliest testimony about an incest victim that Gordon includes in her book comes from records in the 1920s that corroborate the incest experience of an oldest daughter. Social workers recorded many exchanges, like this one, that compel belief for several reasons. First, they are mediated through agency workers who often disdained the culture of their clients (*Heroes*, 14) and so cannot be accused of offering excessively sympathetic accounts. Second, these caseworker reports have the directness associated with the “note”: “About 2 or 3 wks after mo’s death one night fa came to the kitchen and locked the door, and made [Silvia] get on his lap, and had relations with her.” Though the father initially denied the charges and tried to get the other children to testify on his behalf, he was eventually convicted and sentenced to ten to twelve years (206–7). In her study of similar cases, Gordon found that girls, despite “canons of feminine acquiescence” (253), actively reported attacks, and child-protection workers helped convict perpetrators, though then, as now, there were concerns about false allegations (216). Between 1910 and 1960, attitudes toward victims shifted; preventative work became less active, and the crime of incest lost visibility as the problem of incest became “redefined as a problem of sex delinquency” (219). This new definition—*sex delinquency*—shifted blame from male family members to daughters, while still marking the resistance of abused girls, who often became “sex delinquent” to get the money to leave home.

There are other examples of partial narratives that can help illuminate how women both challenged and respected the prohibitions—linguistic, social, and economic—on telling stories about sexual abuse. Between 1910 and 1922, Maimie Pinzer, a working-class woman, wrote letters to Sophie Howe, a wealthy and charitable Bostonian. These now well-known letters were published by the Feminist Press in 1977 in an effort to restore to visibility the lives of “ordinary and powerless people” whose perspectives were not, at that time, often included in historical accounts (Rosen, xiii). Maimie’s letters include a revelation of abuse by an uncle that functions to challenge the moralizing voice of a male relative. Maimie, remembering the actions of her uncle, who argued at a hearing that she was incorrigible, writes: “This uncle is the same one who did me the first wrong, when I was a tiny girl, and any number of times since then” (193). Maimie’s first-person account surely gains credibility, though it could be seen as a way to explain her “fall,” because early abuse has been linked to later prostitution, for her an occasional occupation.¹² Further, the simplicity of this quasi-private revelation powerfully dramatizes the gap between her power to narrate her experience in a letter and her uncle’s power to narrate it in a court of law.

Providing another example of this kind of belated, almost invisible testi-

mony about nonincestuous sexual abuse, the historian Nell Painter suggestively reads the silences of Sojourner Truth's *Narrative* (1859) and finds a story about Sojourner's abuse by her mistress. With the help of an amanuensis whose presence is revealed in the *Narrative's* distanced point of view, Truth describes "a long series of trials in the life of our heroine, which we must pass over in silence; some from motives of delicacy, and others because the relation of them might inflict undeserved pain on some now living" (20). These trials may have included sexual abuse. Painter writes: "the sexual abuse came from her mistress Sally Dumont, and Truth could tell about it only obliquely, in scattered pages in her *Narrative*. Truth spoke straightforwardly about most of her suffering in slavery, "'this putrescent plague-spot,' but only vaguely about this" (Painter, 16). Truth's story was about things that she called "so unacceptable, so unreasonable, and what is usually called so unnatural" that readers who were not "initiated" might doubt her veracity (16). Painter points out that abolitionist literature actively circulated slave narratives about the rape of slaves by male slave owners, and Truth was unlikely to be reticent had this been the story she wanted to tell. There remained, however, abuses that were "unseen" by abolitionists and thus less credible (16). Truth knew her audience. Her story strategically omits what cannot be believably told, without allowing the "believable" to entirely determine what she says. Her "vague" tale points to a place of a "doing" that cannot be told because it cannot be credibly heard.

These narratives in which women tell about their experiences of nearly unspeakable doings are, by definition, spoken by social actors who assert themselves against the grain of a culture that suppresses such reports, even if, as Hacking correctly notes, exemptions were sometimes given to the poor because they were understood to be immoral and thus required to "confess."¹³ Yet though these women's narratives were fragmentary and did not often serve as the basis for public condemnation of an abuser, they mark an intervention of the kind that will eventually gain enough cultural authority to make women's incest stories a powerful form of contemporary women's memory, a form with the power to inspire a backlash. In early narratives of abuse, of course, that power is only nascent. Maimie's story was written long after her uncle had successfully spoken at the hearing that would define her sexuality as delinquent. Yet she did contest his story in a letter to a woman with considerable social status, exposing her uncle's hypocrisy. In alternative archives that are explored by feminist "archaeologists," new stories about child sexual abuse emerge at the turn of the century in the context of a changing cultural grid. As John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman have pointed out in their book *Intimate Matters*, sexual practices and their meanings became more heterogeneous as they were dislocated from a primary association with reproduction in late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century America. Women, supported by feminist reformers, protective agencies, and news media interest in sex

crimes, began to mobilize their own narratives about sexuality and gender. This mix of emerging subjectivities, expert discourses, and scandal was both volatile and productive (D'Emilio and Freedman, 166).¹⁴ Contemporary women's narratives of abuse thus have historical antecedents in the final decades of another century, one that shared with our own anxious time a fascination with and suspicion of women's narratives, especially those about sexual threats.

Gertrude Stein is the exemplary figure of innovative women's writing at the turn of the century, so it is not surprising that she self-consciously explored the limits of what was narratable about a father's "doings" to his daughter. Buried at the center of Gertrude's Stein's mammoth book *The Making of Americans* (1925) is an innovative vignette about a man's "doings" and a daughter's response.¹⁵ Though located in a novel that employs deliberately digressive and repetitive textual practices, this vignette is narrated in a surprisingly simple way. It has characters, dialogue, and a clear teleology.

It happens very often that a man has it in him, that a man does something, that he does it very often, that he does many things, when he is a young one and an older one an old one. It happens very often that a man does something, that a man has something in him and he does a thing again and again in his living. There was a man who was always writing to his daughter that she should not do things that were wrong that would disgrace him, she should not do such things and in every letter that he wrote to her he told her she should not do such things, that he was her father and was giving good moral advice to her and always he wrote to her in every letter that she should not do things that she should not do anything that would disgrace him. He wrote this in every letter he wrote to her, he wrote very nicely to her, he wrote often enough to her, and in every letter he wrote to her that she should not do anything that was a disgraceful thing for her to be doing and then once she wrote back to him that he had not any right to write moral things in letters to her, that he had taught her that he had shown her that he had commenced in her the doing the things things that would disgrace her and he had said then when he had begun with her he had said he did it so that when she was older she could take care of herself with those who wished to make her do things that were wicked things and he would teach her and she would be stronger than such girls who had not any way of knowing better, and she wrote this letter and her father got the letter and he was a paralytic always after, it was a shock to him getting such a letter, he kept saying over and over again that his daughter was trying to kill him and now she had done it and at the time he got the letter he was sitting by the fire and he threw the letter in the fire and his wife asked him what was the

matter and he said it is Edith she is killing me, what, is she disgracing us said the mother, no said the father, she is killing me and that was all he said then of the matter and he never wrote another letter. (488–89)

Although this story does not use the new description “father-daughter incest,” old taboos against speaking about incest are nevertheless resisted in this tale of a father who commences doing things that would “disgrace” his daughter. Indeed, in a small space, Stein provides the contours of a case study of sexual abuse in “ordinary middle class existence” (34), where such abuse was not supposed to exist. Elizabeth Wilson has written perceptively that in the nineteenth century, one of the ways in which the ideology of the white middle class justified the dominance of this class was by implying that “incest occurs more often in other classes or racial groups because these groups are morally inferior and are unable to restrain their animal impulses” (“Not in This House,” 41). This ideology, she suggests, continues to inform the false-memory syndrome movement and its denials that incest has occurred in the nice white families that make up the bulk of its membership.

Stein’s narrator tells the reader that a man engages in repetitive behavior: “he does a thing again and again in his living.” This generalized repetitive “doing” at first seems to be exemplified by an action that can be named: writing. The father repeats, and so does Stein, uncovering “the thing” through repetition. “There was a man who was always writing to his daughter that she should not do things that were wrong that would disgrace him.” This man seems to be giving “good moral advice to her,” to the daughter, whose morality we question since we are initially viewing her through the eyes of the father. Stein insists on the repetitive qualities of his letter writing: “always he wrote to her in every letter.” He wrote this in “every letter,” he wrote “often enough,” so that his morality and writing both come to seem weirdly obsessive.

The daughter, however, just has to write once, puncturing her father’s confidence in his own virtue, perhaps secured only through repetition. She reminds him of other, unacknowledged scenes of instruction, “that he had taught her that he had shown her that he had commenced in her the doing the things things that would disgrace her and he had said then when he had begun with her he had said he did it so that when she was older she could take care of herself with those who wished to make her do things that were wicked things.” The daughter’s stunning reminder of the things he has done to her causes his paralysis, a symptomatic revision of the trauma that transforms him into a victim and thus provides a defense against recollecting his role as the initiator of “wicked things,” though he never denies her account. Repeatedly performing his new victimhood in an emotional style usually associated with discredited, hysterical femininity, the father says “over and over again that his daughter was

trying to kill him and now she had done it.” The father’s language here is eerily familiar because the false-memory movement has popularized emotional narratives of fathers who claim to be victimized by their daughters.

In Stein’s vignette, the father’s announcement of his daughter’s attempted parricide is a moment of apparent power reversal in which the daughter, now given murderous agency, is provided with a name, Edith. The mother, a bystander who announces her allegiance with the father in her use of the pronoun *us*, asks, “is she disgracing us.” The father’s answer, “no,” narrows the scope of interpretive possibilities to what has happened between himself and his daughter, and he repeats, “she is killing me.” The emotional impact of the scene is created by the surprising strength of the daughter’s intervention, which challenges her father’s moral explanation for “commencing in her” things that would disgrace her. The father’s rationalization of his actions seems to hinge upon a distinction between what is acceptable for him to do in private and what she can do in public. Although this narrative is very wispy and oblique, it contains many features of later incest narratives. First, the mother’s position is uncertain. She seems unaware of what has taken place between the father and daughter yet predisposed to align herself with her husband: “is she disgracing us.” Second, the father rationalizes himself as a moral “teacher,” and he believes that he is a victim of his daughter’s hurtful accusations. Third, the father focuses on the daughter’s sexual propriety in the public sphere—or her lack of it. The focus on her sexual behavior deflects attention from his own behavior. All of these features help illuminate why it is difficult for the daughter to tell her story.

This vignette occurs in the “Alfred Hersland and Julia Dehning” section of the novel where a “new way to me of feeling living” begins to emerge (621), following the clearly autobiographical “Martha Hersland” section of *The Making of Americans*. Indeed, Stein scholars have long assumed that the narrator who proclaims, “I write for myself and strangers” at the beginning of this section is simply Stein herself. Yet this “I” is a more complex construction that becomes a subject of increasingly explicit concern in the “Alfred Hersland and Julia Dehning” section. What is the place of the real event in such a project? How has Stein both relied upon and transformed her own history in the act of self-consciously composing it? By asking these questions, we are suggesting that in *The Making of Americans* the boundaries of fiction and personal history are blurred. In this way, we are responding to the complexity of Stein’s project and also deferring to pressures to provide corroborating evidence for the truth of an incest story.

The personal experiences that Stein might have been drawing upon as she wrote this “incest” vignette have been documented by biographers, most notably by Linda Wagner-Martin in *Favored Strangers: Gertrude Stein and Her Family*, which places a new emphasis on Stein’s childhood and family life. This new form of feminist interpretation is itself highly controversial because of the

way it turns a female author's—Virginia Woolf's, Edith Wharton's, Anne Sexton's and now Stein's—purported experiences of incest into the “keys” to her literary work. But surely it is arguable that such autobiographical readings are meaningful even if they are not foundational truths. The story Wagner-Martin tells about behavior in the Stein household suggests that Stein may not have been a happy Buddha, the other popular picture of her life, because of her experiences within what looks like one of the “incest families” described by Judith Herman and Linda Gordon. In these families the mother is absent through death and the sexually abusive father is erratic and domineering. While Wagner-Martin does not mention the vignette we have included here, she does provide evidence from Stein's notebooks pointing to incidents where male relatives made sexual advances to her sister Bertha, and perhaps to Gertrude herself, when both girls were in their teens. Drawing upon the notebooks, Wagner-Martin comments that following the death of Stein's mother, “not only was Daniel [Stein's father] courting women but much more disturbing—he had approached Bertha sexually, ‘coming in to her one night to come and keep him warm’” (25). These words drawn from the notebooks seem to be reworked in a passage of *The Making of Americans* where the narrator comments on old men's desire for warmth:

Many old men do things to keep themselves warm then, when they are old ones and they are needing to be warm then. Some of them are cold then and they need to be warm then and need to be warmed up then, and some are shrunk away from the outside of them then when they are old men and need some one to fill them and they do concrete actions then and their generalised sensation is keeping warm then, their generalised intention is of keeping warm then. (490)

Old men understand their concrete actions as defined by their generalized intentions to keep warm. But how would these doings be understood from the point of view of the “some one” who must warm them?

Apparently Bertha Stein was not the only female in her family to be approached by a male relative, though Gertrude Stein's language about her own experience is elliptical. Wagner-Martin points out that

writing [in the notebooks] about an attempted sexual encounter was dangerous for Gertrude, particularly since she had been reared to avoid such topics. She added to the risk by combining her account [of Bertha's experience] with her memory of “my experience with Uncle Sol.” . . . In another note, Gertrude fused the branches of her father's and uncle's families to implicate both men in this pattern of abuse: “Father's loving children young girls. Uncle Sol, Amy [one of Sol's daughters], uncle to them?” (25)

The halting language of the notebooks suggests a tale of sexual abuse—father “coming into her one night to come and keep him warm” or “father’s loving children young girls”—that struggles to be told. In these passages, the tentativeness of Stein’s remarks reflects her doubt (note the question mark) about experiences that were not openly discussed by “children young girls” and, in this communal way, provided with legitimation. Though much disparaged as places where false memories are fabricated, survivor support groups today offer ratification of experiences that might otherwise not get a hearing. Stein’s story, then, reminds us of what may be at stake when these groups are attacked as functioning only to create fabricated memories.

The inaccessibility of Stein’s writing has been justly celebrated by post-modern critics, many of whom have privileged her later works that powerfully challenge conventions of realist writing. Yet attending only to the aesthetic achievements of Stein’s writing may downplay her long struggle to give voice to silenced, personal pain—and the extent to which this struggle shaped her experiments in writing narrative. Indeed, much of *Making of Americans* is devoted to her narrator’s digressive discussions of how hard it is to write when no one is listening, to her despair about her project: “I am important inside me and not any one really is listening” (595), or “I am in desolation and my eyes are large with needed weeping and I have a flush from feverish feeling” (729). Indeed, Stein was one of the few woman writers of her time who devoted a great deal of space within her texts to the explicit consideration of how to speak what should not be spoken or cannot be said.

The “incest” vignette provides one powerful example of a Steinian narrative that works against and within prohibitions against women telling stories about incestuous abuse, but it is only one of many in *The Making of Americans* that attempt to tell about nameless “doings.” In the autobiographical “Martha Hersland” section, one hundred pages before the “incest” story, the narrator writes that

many do something to a little girl who does not like it, she shows just then no sign of reacting to it, the little girl who does not like it. She is not angry, she seems not to remember then to be angry, her reaction is not there then to it. Then she does something violent to show it and often then the one that did something to that little girl is surprised at it, that one then has forgotten all about it. (379)¹⁶

In recent testimony about recovered memory, women claim to have recovered memories of events to which they long had no conscious access. But the little girl in Stein’s story does not forget what happens. Instead, she forgets to react to what is done: “she seems not to remember then to be angry.” This kind of “not remembering” might be described as an artifact of a child’s familiar vul-

nerability (“many do something to a little girl”) that inhibits an independent judgment of a doing. A gap also exists between the “doer” and conscious recognition of a doing. As in the vignette, the one “that did something to that little girl” is the one who forgets and is surprised by the forceful expression of the girl’s delayed anger.

This little story is interesting because it offers another way of thinking about why perpetrators forget *their* acts. In part because the little girl’s expression of anger is delayed, the original event has no troubling significance as far as the “doer” is concerned. At the moment when something is “done to a little girl,” no explicit, dissenting point of view challenges the doer’s interpretation of events. The little girl, on the other hand, knows something happened that she “does not like.” The issue for her is how to express her anger. Her response is delayed, violent, and still not fully narratable. In different ways, then, the doer and little girl are disconnected from the significance of a “doing.” The doer forgets an event that seemed ordinary; the child’s anger is out of sync with her experience. It takes the work of the narrator to connect the act and the girl’s anger. As the girl’s response becomes coherent, the past takes on a new meaning, especially for the doer, for whom the doing was never before explicitly resisted. In recent psychoanalytic literature, that gap between the event and its understanding within a comprehensible story is described as “trauma,” and it accounts for the victim’s rather than the perpetrator’s delayed comprehension of an event.

As these examples show, Stein’s effort to narrate women’s experiences provoked and explored fruitful difficulties. In one amusing but pointed demonstration of how women’s stories are occluded in a patriarchal culture, the narrator pokes fun at the Puritan heritage that constricts women’s sexuality as well as their ability to know what is happening to their bodies:

One once who was a very intelligent active bright well-read fairly well experienced woman thought that what happens every month to all women, she thought it only happened to Plymouth Brethren, women having that religion. She was a child of Plymouth Brethren and had only known very intimately Plymouth Brethren women. She had known other women but it had not happened to her to have known about this thing. She was a child of Plymouth Brethren and she thought that what happens to all women every month only happened to Plymouth Brethren women, women having that religion, she was twenty eight years old when she learned that it happened to every kind of women. This is not an astonishing thing that she should have believed this thing. (495–96)

Stein clearly understands the limits of class, community, and beliefs on what a woman can either say or know. Yet despite her broad perspective, the narrator

still does not use the word *menstruation* to describe “what happens every month to all women.” While she acknowledges this “happening,” she does not name it. As a result of prohibitions on speaking, women’s recollection finds a language of not quite knowing and not quite telling.

With this tension between the narratable and the unnarratable in mind, let us return to the “incest” vignette. This scene emphasizes the point of view of the father, with Edith’s perspective entering through the contents of a letter that is summarized by the narrator. The narrative form of Stein’s story thus dramatizes the centrality of paternal power. Yet though Stein does not give Edith a point of view and a story, *per se*, she does give her letter agency that is violent in its repercussions: the father is a “paralytic” ever after. While his body is explicitly immobilized, what seems to “kill” him is the way Edith’s intervention undoes his “virtuous” feeling, his way of understanding his own actions and securing a moralized identity.

Stein describes the father not as a hypocrite, or self-righteous, but as an ordinary man, among those who are “good enough men, good enough fathers, good enough husbands, good enough citizens” (491). And given this framework of ordinariness, these men have a generalized conviction that their concrete actions reflect their goodness and virtue. Further, their sense of their own integrity lends them authority to believe in their concrete acts that are “instructing to others so that other ones will know something” (491). Rather than using the language of true and false so pervasive in the contemporary memory wars, Stein emphasizes a dynamic process in which this morality is subject to reinterpretation. The father of the story is shown to have done something and rationalized it as an activity conveying useful knowledge to his daughter, even as what he has done contradicts the tenets of the moral code he believes he is enforcing—and to which he wants her to conform. His rationalizations are a dangerous form of forgetting, and he suffers the consequences when his daughter provokes his “killing” reinterpretation of his past behavior. He loses his socially constructed identity, his categorization of himself as a virtuous, good-enough father. He also loses his potency both as an authority and as an author (“he never wrote another letter”). The vignette explores the gap created between the father’s frame of reference and his nameless doing, a gap forced into view by Edith’s powerfully resistant perspective.

Stein makes clear that the father’s moralized framework is not individual and personal but culturally sanctioned, “ordinary.” Stein, then, is documenting evolving historical formulations of character and morality and the ongoing resistance provided by both concrete actions and emerging points of view. The dynamics of such a process have implications for understanding the past. In a discussion of the rise of new sexual stories, Ken Plummer describes a process that begins with the envisioning of a “feeling, a thinking, a doing.” These inarticulate preconditions for stories are blocked or fragmented; “nothing unusual

is happening at one moment and then some trouble appears at another” (126). He adds that the first narrations of a “doing” may be “little crimped tales” (127). Stein’s vignette and the other fragmentary abuse stories that we have included are examples of narratives that mark a moment when networks of social activity have shifted just a bit, rearranging conventional patterns enough to allow space for a story that accommodates experiences that are not supposed to be tellable without the provision of “new descriptions.” These new stories are fabrications, but they are fabrications linked to feelings, thinkings, and concrete doings that are slowly becoming narratable, defining a counterdiscourse that has not yet linked up with psychoanalytic expertise—and in some ways defies it by forgetting to forget and, eventually, remembering to tell.

When women start telling much more coherent incest stories to a much larger audience than Stein ever did, they do so because they have more cultural power (derived from complex sources) to attack paternal authority and morality, even to claim disciplinary power. Yet they continue to elicit sharply corrective analyses. In other words, stories representing the daughter’s perspective, although much easier to hear now than they have ever been before, still inspire resistance, as they did in Maimie’s uncle and Edith’s father. They are seen as sources of unfairness, of violation, of institutional oppression both by feminist writers who worry about the confessional and depoliticizing effects of survivor stories and by antifeminist writers who prefer more fixed and friendly accounts of the past, ones that do not challenge figures of traditional authority. The consolidation of these corrective texts is worrisome given the continued social power of normative views about women’s hysteria, tendency to lie, and vulnerability to manipulation (or willingness to participate in “witch hunts”). No wonder that feminists such as Rosaria Champagne and Judith Herman have decided that the best response is to assent to the truth and significance of survivorship. We want to suggest a more nuanced response, one that concentrates on the complex narrative transactions that inform a woman’s telling.

Foucault remarks on the usefulness of a discursive dynamism that opposes formerly entrenched truths without simply substituting another entrenched truth: “And if we want to protect these only lately liberated fragments, are we not in danger of ourselves constructing, with our own hands, unitary discourse?” (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 86). In this chapter, we have charted a dynamic process in which occluded memorial fragments begin to claim the narrative authority to challenge the neutrality and morality of those with privilege and power. In the following chapters, we continue to show that the meaning of incest—and the memories associated with it—is not simply located in mass hysteria or mass denial. Who has the power to tell a believable story of incest and in what context? This book’s project is to examine the production and reception of women’s incest stories, resituating these narratives so that it is easier to recognize different forms of telling, hearing, and remembering.