

Chapter 3

It's about Patriarchal Power White Feminists Speak Out

A few years after *The Bluest Eye* (1970) was published, white feminists begin to publish political and psychological accounts of incest emphasizing the despotism of patriarchal power as the cause of incest. Father-daughter incest becomes “a paradigm of female sexual victimization” within a radically unequal patriarchal society (Herman and Hirschman, 4). Through a broad emphasis on gender and power, the “feminist incest story” undercuts the claim that incest is only a problem of the poor and ethnically other. More dramatically, this emergent narrative shifts the responsibility for incest from the “seductive daughter” and the “collusive mother”—key actors in clinical explanations of incest in the 1960s—to the “seductive father” and the social and psychological supports for his incestuous behavior. As a result, the strong patriarchal family, often idealized as the origin of white, middle-class values, is represented as pathological and dangerous. This reversal of the dominant story contains within it legacies of the discourse it rejects, yet in this way too, the feminist incest story is marked by its struggle to tell incest in a new way.

Individual transgression is at the heart of understandings of incest as a sexual act, but who is the transgressor? A familiar answer, once a staple of psychoanalytic literature on incest, is the seductive daughter. This seductive girl also transgresses in telling an incest story; if she were innocent, she would not tell disgusting tales. The girl or woman who tells is thus doubly marked as a propagator of scandal. Inspired by the courage of African-American women writers such as Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, and Gayl Jones, white feminists in the 1970s began to publish women's accounts about their experiences of incest in order to challenge these normative beliefs about incest victims and incest narratives. “Many of the first, most daring, and most honest contributions to the public discussion of incest were made by black women,” writes Judith Herman, “and much of our work has been inspired by theirs” (Herman and Hirschman, 67). Feminist writers hoped to follow the example of black women writers by shifting the blame for incest, this time from daughters to fathers, making a scandal of male privilege instead of women who tell. What we are calling the

feminist incest story evolved in the 1970s and early 1980s, when feminists placed great confidence in the power of women's narratives to speak truth to paternal power and so undo it.

In this chapter, we will focus on two nonfiction books about incest: Louise Armstrong's *Kiss Daddy Goodnight* (1978), one of the first mass-market collections of first-person stories of incest to offer a political analysis, and Judith Herman's *Father-Daughter Incest*, an early and still influential feminist study of the psychological effects of father-daughter incest (1981). Both books assume that father-daughter incest is more prevalent than analysts and anthropologists had ever acknowledged, and both emphasize the importance of women's incest stories as a vehicle of social critique. They include no postmodern reflections on the "story" they are telling and, indeed, the power of these books is linked to their unassailable conviction that feminism has made it possible for women to tell formerly tabooed "real" stories and to uncover their significance for a larger analysis of patriarchy.¹ There is an odd sense these days that imperfectly reflective feminist narratives should be censored, as if there were perfect, "correct" stories to put in their place. A more flexible approach, one emphasizing cultural contexts, might understand that the representational strategies of the feminist incest story place it within a specific social context.

In the 1970s women's stories of incest took the shape of a critique of patriarchy because of the existence of a popular women's movement. The new authority of feminism can be read in its considerable success in changing the response to the incest story from a salacious grin to a raised fist. A crucial, authenticating claim of the women's movement has long been that women can come to understand their political subjugation by recalling instances when they were silenced and harmed by the men who ruled over them at home. Feminists have theorized that behind the sexual abuse of girls by fathers, uncles, and brothers is a system of unequal gender relations, patriarchy, that provides the ideological rationalization for male exploitation of the bodies and labor of women. Crucial to this political story is that well-known feminist slogan: the personal is political. The feminist incest story teaches its intended audience—women—that fathers are powerful and they, not mothers, are to blame for the harm done to daughters in the private sphere as well as the public one. Implicit in this reading of patriarchal power and violence is the message that women need to work together for political change.

With the benefit of hindsight, this analysis may seem mistaken in some obvious ways. It universalizes the incestuous father, who comes to represent all men, and the victimized daughter, who comes to represent all women. The powerful feminist critique of father-daughter incest thus squeezes as well as expands the allowable range of male and female identity and subjectivity. Yet the feminist understanding of incest is nonetheless persuasive. Using incest as

a paradigmatic example of the sexual exploitation sanctioned under paternal rule, feminists explain not only why patriarchy must be challenged but why such change is difficult. In a paternalistic system, the ruler father is also the provider. Because the father's ownership of property extends to his relationship with people living in his domain, he may certainly exploit them, but he may also be a source of benevolent caring. The father, then, may make sexual use of his daughter, but he also is her protector and provider. This patriarchal social system, then, creates the psychological conditions that encourage the reproduction of unequal relations between men and women. As Phyllis Chesler puts it: "Women are encouraged to commit incest as a way of life. . . . As opposed to marrying our fathers, we marry men like our fathers . . . men who are older than us, have more money than us, more power than us, are taller than us . . . our fathers" (qtd. in Herman and Hirschman, 57–58). By arguing that male supremacy creates conditions that encourage father-daughter incest "as a way of life," the feminist incest story works to break the bonds of gratitude and identification that, in a paternalistic system, lead subordinate subjects to accept a system of unequal power relations. In other words, the feminist incest story argues that the desires of the seemingly loving father are ultimately in conflict with the interests of the daughter. The idea that the father metonymically embodies the institution of patriarchy thus leads to a severe judgment about father-daughter relationships, which is misleading as well as enlightening. Not all fathers have the same power; not all daughters are equally powerless; not all gendered power inequalities within the family result in incest.

As an explanatory tool and form of protest, the feminist incest story does not always work, but in the late 1970s, it seemed more full of potential than of problems. Indeed, the telling of prohibited stories about incest once promised to galvanize a feminist social movement that could make the world a dramatically better place. Such first-person accounts of sexual abuse, highlighting the exploitative behavior of fathers and exculpating mothers, were a startling and inspiring means for advocating social and political reform. The best-known collection of such accounts, Louise Armstrong's *Kiss Daddy Goodnight*, was published in 1978 for mass market circulation by Hawthorne Books. Armstrong's book is not scholarly, although the first edition includes an afterword describing her research. She states that she spoke with 183 women, some referred to her by friends, and that these women were drawn from "all classes, races, and parts of the country" (232). She selected sixteen stories to highlight, largely because they would not scare readers too much. These are the stories of women "the majority of readers might think of themselves working next to" and who had an "ability to be clear in talking and in relating the specific effects of abuse on their lives" (232). This selection process reveals Armstrong's underlying concern that readers might consider her informants weird, unbe-

lievable, not like “normal” women. Her narrative thus implicitly records the enduring constraints placed on telling by the notion that women who tell incest are depraved and abnormal.

Armstrong understands the forces that inhibit telling, even if she cannot escape them. Indeed, the main accomplishment of her book is to provide a public analysis of why women have found it difficult to tell about incest. Armstrong argues that the secrecy surrounding incest is an effect of male power. Prohibitions on speaking insure the sense of shame and isolation experienced by victims while tacitly condoning the actions of perpetrators. *Kiss Daddy Goodnight* masses together accounts of the sexual assaults suffered by ordinary women who were, as Tillie Olsen put it in her book published the same year, muzzled by culturally enforced “silences.” Listening to the words of incest victims, recording them as Armstrong does, is a logical continuation of feminist practices of breaking silence that were born in small collectives and consciousness-raising groups. Rape, for example, was finally put into a social and historical context by feminist writers of this period, and, like incest victims, victims of rape also began to speak about their experiences in order to change a patriarchal culture that condoned sexual violence by defining victims as seductively “asking for it.”

Women’s groups and “speak-outs” were a way to make the sharing of personal experiences a strategy for uncovering shared realities of daily life and developing a new analysis of the relation between the private and public spheres. So, for example, in *Kiss Daddy Goodnight*, Armstrong features the words of individual survivors but provides a broader perspective drawn from feminist work such as the writings of Florence Rush, a social worker known for her inspiring theorizing of sexual violence: “Sexual abuse of children is permitted because it is an unspoken but prominent factor in socializing and preparing the female to accept a subordinate role; to feel guilty, ashamed, and to tolerate, through fear, the power exercised over her by men” (117). This theory of socialization lacks nuance, but it makes very tangible and familiar the dynamics of patriarchal oppression: the big against the little; men against women. Political movements need compelling metaphors, and shortcuts such as these phrases work very well to capture a truth of women’s quotidian experience in the interest of a larger political critique. However, they also may become naturalized and constricting.

Telling their stories of incest within the framework of a critique of gendered and unequal power relations, individual women demonstrated a relatively new power to resist conventional views of the family as a haven. By showing how dangerous paternal power can be, they also made a strong case for more equitable gender arrangements in the family. A strong case is necessary to motivate a desire for change. Suggesting the importance of this desire as a precondition, Susan Okin asks: “How much do we care that the family, our most

intimate social grouping, is often a school of day-to-day injustice? How much do we *want* the just families that will produce the kind of citizen we need if we are ever to achieve a just society?" (186). Though in this book we will chart the growing awareness—both within and outside feminism—of the incest narrative as a representational construct that can be read in competing ways, it is important to remember—remember this!—that when growing numbers of women first began to tell their memories of incest, they exposed the amnesia of a culture that had defined incest as that which did not exist in “our” families because barred by “the incest taboo.”

Armstrong's book begins with an account of her relationship to her father, who raped her when she was fourteen. What follows are chapters that include sections of letters written in response to requests she placed in newspapers and magazines for first-person accounts of incest experiences. The book also includes material drawn from interviews, and Armstrong provides interspersed information about how psychiatrists had previously responded to such narratives—often by assuming these stories were fantasies, or by blaming daughters for seduction and mothers for allowing “it” to happen. The letters written by incest victims recall assaults by male family members, many of them beginning in early childhood: “Dear Louise, Don't like to talk about it—think about it—although I am now a grandmother. I was only five. My mother caught my father in the act” (“Real Incest,” 17). *Kiss Daddy Goodnight* ends with an appendix listing social services that women might contact to get help. The book is thus structured to encourage its audience to acknowledge the hard truths articulated by incest victims and then get help or start giving it by working for political and social change.

Ten years later, in the introduction to the second edition of *Kiss Daddy Goodnight* (1987) Armstrong restates the political argument of her book because she feels it has been forgotten by the mental health experts now busy treating incest survivors: “our simple, homespun political analysis of the problem of incest as power abuse—one with long-standing tacit societal permission—continues to stand correct” (viii). Armstrong is talking about “power abuse” by men. Her book, focused on the suffering of girls and intent on relieving mothers and daughters of the blame traditionally meted out to them by professionals, includes only one account of a boy abused by his father and no discussion of abusive mothers. As a result, Louise Armstrong has been criticized for silencing accounts that complicate the feminist narrative of patriarchal victimization and womanly sisterhood.² Responding to criticisms about her focus on fathers and daughters, Armstrong has explained that she never denied that mothers could be perpetrators or that boys could be victims. Her point is simply that these less prevalent forms of abuse do not invalidate her gender-based analysis. Indeed, in her afterword to the second edition of *Kiss Daddy Goodnight*, Armstrong notes that the new “incest industry” still wants to

blame mothers, though fathers are primarily the perpetrators of incest, a fact key to her feminist political analysis.³

The “feminist incest story,” although now associated with “repressed memories,” usually emphasizes long-remembered but never discussed experiences, hence its emphasis on male power as a cause of silencing. In fact, silencing is the trauma. In Armstrong’s book, women catalogue effects—flashbacks, emotional numbness, problems relating to men sexually—of not telling anyone about sexual assaults that they always knew had occurred. Many of these experiences of incest are authenticated, though the pressure to validate experiences so familiar in the late 1980s and 1990s is absent in this book. For example, one woman’s father was convicted of child abuse; one father said, “I really don’t see anything wrong with it” (1987:45); another of Armstrong’s informants, assaulted by her older brother, had been diagnosed with gonorrhea at the age of three. In several places, however, incest survivors speak the kinds of words that will later fuel the memory wars. “Jenny” explains that “until about a year ago I had no awareness that any of it had happened. I had completely removed it from any form of consciousness” (23). Jenny’s memories return two years after she started talking to a college psychologist and after she began a relationship that “provoked a rush of memories.” Another woman, June, tells Armstrong, “My very first memory, at my earliest age, was when I was one (but I might have been three)” (117)—ages now considered too young for the reliable storage of memories—but she does not mention having any therapy. In other words, these descriptions do not emerge from some uniform experience of therapy. When the woman with lab reports of her gonorrhea tells her psychiatrist how her brother liked to “play doctor with her,” her therapist responds, “Well, it was just playing doctor” (183). There is no psychoanalytic juggernaut flattening out these women’s words, words that for the most part suggest the courage and resiliency of women who dared to talk about a forbidden topic.

Armstrong’s presentation of believable stories of ordinary women is meant to elicit a sympathetic response. Yet her care to be discreet is a symptom of her recognition that she might easily offend her audience. Her choice to feature informants who seem ordinary and normal is, then, an acknowledgment of a cultural tradition that frames women who tell incest stories as disturbingly exotic and seductive figures. Two early reviews of *Kiss Daddy Goodnight* demonstrate that responses to Armstrong’s book encouraged both sympathy and disgust. The *Library Journal* offers this friendly account of the book: “In the scanty literature on the subject, this work provides a useful, popularly written human document as well as a brief guide to sources of help for victims. It may well give some aid and comfort to library patrons and produce in others the indignation needed to get action to correct the problem” (Sweetland, 1276). This review assumes that bringing attention to a scarcely discussed

problem—incest—is a useful thing to do both to help victims and, by arousing indignation, to provoke action that might make it more difficult for children to be victimized. Notice, too, that *Kiss Daddy Goodnight* is not described as a feminist work but as a “human document,” a generous description, but one that dilutes Armstrong’s specific political analysis, which recommends challenging male power.

A review in the *New York Times Book Review* offers a strikingly different assessment. In the first paragraph, the reviewer, Raymond A. Solokov, begins by asserting that Armstrong is “right” to “urge a discussion of father-daughter incest so that other victims will gather courage, see that their plight is not unique and be able to do something about it . . . (and allegedly to pressure social-service agencies to drop their bias against incest victims)” (16, 20).⁴ By using the word “allegedly,” the *New York Times* review diverges sharply from the one in the *Library Journal*. The *Times* review proceeds to challenge Armstrong’s credibility in familiar ways. As Peggy Sanday has documented, disgust and disbelief have long characterized public responses to women’s accusations that they have been raped. Solokov deeply mistrusts Armstrong: “Her research was informal at best (I assume that she did not make it up entirely) and is, by professional standards, unreliable. But even by the looser standards of journalism this is a shoddy book, a string of ‘true’ confessions written in the coy style of pornography masquerading as science.” With these words, Solokov places Armstrong in a long line of licentious “false accusers”: Armstrong’s complaints about incest are an excuse to provide readers with dirty talk. The review goes on to explain that the book recalls “soft-core films” that “begin in a doctor’s office . . . establishing a legal claim for the film’s socially redeeming value.” Armstrong “covers herself with quotations from experts and a kind of feminist rhetoric, but then out comes the rough stuff.” The review concludes:

The publisher is promoting *Kiss Daddy Goodnight* as if it were a children’s crusade, but the jacket illustration shows a bed frame with cute little girls’ faces peeking innocently out from behind some black hearts. (20)

Solokov is clearly reading Armstrong’s book through the lens of a paradigm that understands incest stories as pornographic fantasies.

Although Armstrong writes to help women and to make a larger public “indignant,” the book’s cover does market incest as a fascinating, tabooed desire.⁵ The cover design thus supports the reviewer’s sense that only sluts would talk about experiences of incestuous assault and only for an audience looking for titillation. This kind of argument, of course, is easily deployed to blame incest victims for seducing parents or to argue that children always like it, as some therapists and sexual liberationists do. To avoid any implication in these two familiar explanations for incest, feminists rarely mention that a

daughter's reactions to a father's prolonged, invasive attentions may be informed by complex desires, which should not necessarily be considered "choices." Indeed the invocation of choice, as if desires were simply there to be claimed, is one way of making girls responsible for paternal assaults.⁶ Yet if it seems that much feminist writing about incest prudishly avoids discussion of either infantile sexuality or adult fantasy, it is useful to remember the dominant discourse that invisibly regulates it. This discourse says that the desiring child or woman is "bad" and asks for violent sexual assault. Because feminist incest scholarship is explicitly an intervention into a discourse about seductive children and adolescent girls that traditionally obscures the actions of powerful adults, it dramatizes children's innocence. And in so doing, it is in a position to be aligned with polemics about threats to children, "purity" movements, that originate in the New Right.

At the end of her book Armstrong writes: "The women in this book are saying important and serious things. I believe we are raising serious questions. I hope they will lead to further serious discussion" (242). The worried repetition of the word "serious" does not forestall *The New York Times* review in which Armstrong's "speak-out," because of its frank discussion of incest, is recategorized as pulp fiction, thus undermining her authority and professionalism. Unfortunately that judgment is validated by the book's cover. If illicit sex sells books, then women who talk about incest can be seen as more manipulative and sexually profligate than the men they try to expose. This is the default view of women's excessive speech and desires that has returned with a vengeance in narratives produced by the false-memory syndrome movement.

These two reviews of *Kiss Daddy Goodnight* show that feminist writings about incest are, from the beginning, read in dramatically different ways: as moral calls to solve a human problem and as sensationalist fabrications. Does one of these perspectives have more cultural authority? Certainly *The New York Times Book Review* is a powerful medium, and the discrediting of women's accounts of abuse continues to thrive in highly visible venues. But the *Library Journal* influences library purchases: twenty years later incest is accepted as a "problem," and library shelves display an assortment of women's testimonies about sexual abuse. The increasing ferocity of the battle over the status of memories of incest undoubtedly reflects anxiety about how to respond to the burgeoning literature about sexual abuse. Do these testimonies depict real conditions, or are they sensationalist fabrications? Yet though the issue here seems to be finding a single "truth," assessments of a story's truthfulness are made through increasingly visible and layered cultural frames—feminism, psychoanalysis, family values, and so on—that create fractures within and between those who tell and hear women's incest stories. It is perhaps this very dynamic of shifting perspectives that sustains the desire for an incontestable truth.

The difficulties with telling and listening to incest stories are exacerbated

within a cultural moment such as ours. Social realities are changing traditional forms of the family and economic transformations threatening not only the independent authority of the anxious wage-earning male provider but also the ability of social service agencies to provide adequate resources to women and children who need alternatives to those dangerous familial relations that defy popular rhetoric about traditional family values. Anxieties about family life reflect anxieties about the well-being of the nation, itself often portrayed as a family. Not only do political candidates appear as avuncular figures who talk about their traumatic war wounds and troubled personal lives, but they tout the traditional patriarchal family, which few of them have, as the bedrock of American life and values. Furthermore, they also insist on personal solutions for public problems. Millions of children in poverty? Tell their fathers to become patriarchal figures, a mode of reasoning that both obscures the power of economic structures—raising wages would be more helpful to both mothers and fathers—and masks any benefits to women of the decline of the traditional family structure, such as, obviously, independence from abusive men. The political does not become the personal without attendant problems for feminist analyses. Feminists, of course, have long been labeled as “antifamily,” associated with the political instead of the personal, because they have analyzed the way social and economic structures have shaped and transformed behavior within the family. Clearly, if feminists are not criticized for being too personal, they can always be criticized for being too political.

As we have seen, the theoretical analysis of incest is a crucial component of the feminist critique of patriarchy as manifested in the traditional, father-dominated family. With the publication of Florence Rush's book *The Best Kept Secret* (1980), which places the sexual abuse of children within an almost universal historical frame, and, more importantly for the memory wars, Judith Herman's *Father-Daughter Incest* (1981), feminist research on incest produces an authoritative analysis of the links between patriarchy, traditional family structures, and incestuous abuse. *Father-Daughter Incest* was published by Harvard University Press, and Herman was at that time psychiatric director of a woman's mental health collective. (She is now on the faculty of the Harvard Medical School.) In her first book, Herman's analysis, like Armstrong's, centers on the power relations that silence incest victims, though her recent work emphasizes trauma and dissociation. Because it once seemed so obvious that the political (patriarchy) could explain the personal (incest), Armstrong and Herman do not invoke psychic operations to explain why incest might be difficult to tell. Instead, they describe a patriarchal taboo on girls speaking about incest, but not on fathers committing incest. *Father-Daughter Incest* offers an understanding of incest that is very compatible with Armstrong's analysis of “power abuse” by men, though Herman is even more explicit about the importance of feminism to her argument. She forthrightly asserts that

a frankly feminist perspective offers the best explanation of the existing data. Without an understanding of male supremacy and female oppression, it is impossible to explain why the vast majority of incest perpetrators . . . are male, and why the majority of victims . . . are female. Without a feminist analysis, one is at a loss to explain why the reality of incest was for so long suppressed by supposedly responsible investigators, why public discussion of the subject awaited the women's liberation movement. (Herman and Hirschman, 3)

Herman adds, "It is no accident that incest occurs most often precisely in the relationship where the female is most powerless" (4). With these words, Herman decisively claims feminist ownership of the theoretical study of incest.

Judith Herman has more authority and institutional power than Armstrong and has exercised more influence on a range of discourses about incestuous abuse. Here is a woman institutionally positioned to tell a very believable story about incest, one that shares Armstrong's emphasis on the importance of naming oppression, though in Herman's writing therapeutic and political intervention begin to merge, as a changed psychology becomes the key to a changed, more equitable world. What is taking shape at the beginning of the Reagan years is a feminist view that revolutionary political change must follow revolutionary changes in the self; this view replaces an older notion that a political revolution would come first and lead to a changed humanity. Armstrong's book is written out of a conviction that incest victims do not need to change, they simply need to tell—and political change will follow. Herman shares Armstrong's view about patriarchy as the condition of possibility for incest but sees feminist therapy as the best place for telling incest and for beginning the arduous rebuilding of psyche, family, and society.

As was the case in Armstrong's book, *Father-Daughter Incest* crucially depends on women talking to women, this time in the form of a "semistructured interview protocol" (Herman and Hirschman, 69). Feminist discourse about abuse has begun to claim the authority of science. From their interviews of forty women conducted over four years, Herman and Hirschman developed a picture of the incestuous family that confirms Armstrong's insistence that the incestuous father "must have a sense of paternalistic prerogative to rationalize what he's doing" (*Kiss Daddy Goodnight*, 234). According to Herman, the incestuous family represents an extreme form of traditional family patterns. In incestuous families, fathers are dictatorial providers and mothers economically dependent, ill, or absent. In cases where the mother is dead, the daughter is forced to take on the mother's role—cook, cleaner, caretaker—because the father does not do "women's" work. Assenting to this division of labor and the rights it grants to fathers, women in these families, even incest victims themselves, tend to overvalue men and devalue women.

In place of the “seductive daughter” and “collusive mother” blamed for incest in earlier psychological literature, *Father-Daughter Incest* features the domineering “seductive father” who thrives within a pathologically traditional family structure. Within this structure, both men and women display extreme forms of stereotypic masculinity and femininity. Fathers are “perfect patri-archs” (71), controlling providers; mothers and daughters are helpless and def-erential to men. Herman’s feminist interpretation of incest makes compelling narrative and political sense as a description of privileged white families (Mor-rison paints a very different picture, one of paternal helplessness in *The Bluest Eye*)—and thus sets the stage for a standoff with the rival commonsense story of the virtuous middle-class family in which fathers are involved and nurtur-ing. Indeed, in the 1980s, as Tania Modleski has pointed out, one response to the feminist demand for more male involvement in nurturing was a spate of film and television shows in which affluent white fathers happily take care of little girls—and mothers are out of the picture.⁷ In the popular media, the father-daughter relationship that Herman sees as a pathological structure is presented as a heartwarming alternative to its implicit opposite, the world of impoverished and increasingly stigmatized single mothers.

In addition to a propensity to dismiss women and overvalue men, the daughter “inherits,” to use Herman’s term, a life marked by feelings of depres-sion and isolation.⁸ Because she possesses a dark secret, the daughter feels her-self a permanently estranged outsider to normal social life. In characterizing the feelings of the victimized daughter in *Father-Daughter Incest*, Herman does not discuss forgetting, repression, dissociation, or trauma. Her focus is on those who know but cannot tell because they do not want to defy their fathers’ orders. And when the victim does tell, perhaps motivated by a desire to protect younger siblings or in a desperate effort to gain an independent sexual life, Herman notes that family members tend to categorically deny the truth of the disclosure. Herman adds that even health care professionals are often uncom-fortable about having to listen to stories that shock their sensibilities. These days, of course, health care professionals are assumed to be so comfortable with incest stories that they eagerly implant them in their patients.

In the last part of her book, Herman explains that the daughter’s disclosure of incest is often resisted not just by fathers, who stand to lose their families, jobs, and liberty, but by powerful members of communities—judges, lawyers, ministers—who do not want to think that incest occurs in the traditional fam-ilies that they so prize. The daughter who discloses will thus encounter denial, resistance, and possibly violence. Herman argues strenuously that for these reasons the father should be removed from the home and the daughter pro-vided with support from her mother, if the bond between mother and daugh-ter can be restored. Nancy Chodorow’s *Reproduction of Mothering* was pub-lished the same year as Armstrong’s book and informs Herman’s

understanding of how the sexual division of labor in child-rearing results in a psychological basis for male domination and female victimization of the sort she finds in incestuous families. Yet while Chodorow emphasizes the centrality of the mother-daughter bond in order to offer a critique of its role in perpetuating the sexual division of labor, Herman sees this bond as something that needs to be reinstated: “Rebuilding the family begins with restoration of the mother-daughter bond” (145).⁹

What she actually seems to mean is not a restored bond, since a mother-daughter bond does not seem to exist within the family structure she describes, but a new, utopian one formed after mothers have developed enough autonomy to protect their daughters and transform their expectations about what women can do. Herman’s way of telling the feminist story thus allows mothers complete innocence but at the cost of placing an incredible burden on them for restoring a perfect relationship with their daughters. In making mothers so central, Herman again reveals the extent to which the feminist story is structured as a reversal of early psychoanalytic narratives that also made mothers key, but as actors responsible for causing incest (through their own sexual failures) rather than responsible for saving daughters.¹⁰ Herman’s reversal clearly depends upon “difference” feminism to make her case that women’s special maternalized relational skills could transform familial and social relations. This idealizing of the mother exists in tandem with other assumptions that undermine this sanguine view.

Herman understands that female desires are socialized within patriarchy, but she is not able to reconcile her psychoanalytic account of female desire with her political story about the father’s absolute culpability. Early in *Father-Daughter Incest*, Herman repeats the standard psychoanalytic account of female desire, merely adding that female desire for the father is a desire for power. She argues, in other words, that the daughter hopes to gain access to male power through an eroticized attachment to her father. But at the same time, Herman repeats the familiar Freudian explanation that the daughter’s incestuous wishes are not suppressed by a fear of punishment because the daughter is already been castrated, made a female. This Freudian account, which explains why the daughter has insufficiently internalized the incest taboo, refuses the obvious question: isn’t it the father who has not internalized the incest taboo? According to the “feminist incest story,” which Herman powerfully reproduces in *Father-Daughter Incest*, for men, the incest taboo scarcely exists because “male supremacy creates the social conditions that favor the development of father-daughter incest” (Herman and Hirschman, 62). Trying to extricate herself from a tradition of mother blaming and daughter blaming, but constructing a narrative that reproduces both a psychoanalytic account of female desire and a feminist account of female victimization, Herman’s narrative struggles but often fails to keep the father’s desire, as well as his power, in

focus. The very absolutism of Herman's depiction of the father/ offender may be an artifact of this struggle.

It is perhaps a measure of increasing feminist despair about the possibility of popular support for challenging the male monopoly of social power that Herman ultimately supports a program of changing fathers by fiat.

Many programs . . . share common features with systems of political re-education developed in revolutionary societies. Like political re-education programs, they are designed for men who have used their power to oppress and exploit others but who are judged not to be irremediably depraved. Like political re-education programs, they are coercive, they make use of intense peer group confrontation and support, and they require confession, apology and restitution. Like political re-education programs, they attempt to create a "new man." (161)

Herman does not notice that these boot camps would be just the kind that authoritarian men might relish attending. The one specific program that Herman commends for its efforts at reeducation is Parents United, developed by Henry and Anna Giaratto, family counselors who, in the 1980s, offered national training programs for social workers and therapists. The Giarratos argued that the cause of incest was instability in the traditional nuclear family that could be rectified by reinstalling the mother in her role as "bearer and traditionally the principal caretaker" (Giaratto, 34). After this primary support is established for the daughter, the father is "invited" to rejoin this "core" (that is, if he has fully acknowledged his betrayal of the father's role in a men's group).¹¹ It seems, then, that Herman's "new man" would then be the unlikely product of a program with a political analysis that is based on an implicit faith in the traditional roles that have long secured paternal authority. Her advocacy of a rigid and ultimately conservative form of treatment demonstrates just how intractable and "other" she believes male perpetrators are. At the same time, it upholds her faith in the magic of therapeutic treatment to function like a political movement, though this faith in therapy seems more justified when she discusses incest victims.

The therapies Herman recommends for victims suggest great optimism about change. She argues that group therapy and self-help groups may be particularly advantageous not only in resolving survivors' feelings of shame and guilt but in developing in them a feminist analysis for challenging "patriarchal assumptions about sexuality, motherhood, and child care" (Herman and Hirschman, 215). *Father-Daughter Incest* thus demonstrates how feminist mental health professionals, convinced of the need for a revolutionary redistribution of power in order to end male violence against women, come to redefine therapy as an interaction where, even if the social order—and men—

are hard to treat, at least female victims can learn to understand that they are not to blame for their own victimage. As Herman points out, therapy can also be a place in which to rethink ideas about “normal” male and female psychology and behavior. Rape hot lines, women’s groups, and health collectives make similar grassroots efforts to link individual treatment and social analysis. For Herman and many others, therapy cannot be seen as a retreat to the personal. It is a mechanism for bringing a political interpretation to women desperately in need of a larger framework for understanding personal crisis. Incest, described in Herman’s book as the deepest pathology of the nuclear family, becomes an obviously important site for feminist analysis and a transformative therapeutic practice for women.

Yet Herman’s expressed sense that male perpetrators are not very treatable and the growing explanatory power of “difference” feminism emphasizing women’s “relational” abilities and men’s lack of them constructs the symptomatic masculinity of the abuser as a foundational category even as it naturalizes women’s capacity to nurture. Not only does the near essentializing of the abuser’s gender create a theoretical problem (culture and history do not matter?) and a practical problem (how then should women contest violence against women?) but it sets the stage for men to notice the way in which they are being monolithically represented. Though Herman’s book got favorable reviews in a variety of professional journals, predictably several reviews voice annoyance at a form of feminist analysis that looks like male-bashing. In the *Atlantic*, for example, the reviewer notes that “the author is glumly aware that incest will persist as long as the patriarchal family system produces men who cannot ‘distinguish between sexuality and affection’” (Adams, 108). These words conjure up the stereotypic “humorless” feminist and her Sisyphean labors to end patriarchy. A reviewer in the *British Journal of Psychiatry* is harsher, noting that the book’s subject requires “a very much more careful objective analysis than the persecuted attitude to the male” (Gallwey, 318). Notice how Herman is here linked to paranoia and unreason. A decade later, in the “false memory” writings, expressions of disdain and irritation with feminist theorizing are replaced by outrage about injuries—false accusations—supposedly suffered at the hands of male-bashing feminist therapists who are incapable of objective analysis.

It is useful to remember that before there were debates about recovered memory, the feminist incest story (almost always about *remembered* incest) had already been read as pornographic and unreasonable. Yet it is also important to acknowledge that feminists, too, now find problems with the feminist incest story. For as important as it is to condemn perpetrators and to recognize the suffering of abused women, incest is not the key to understanding the situation of women. Material and social forms of gendered inequality are not simply caused by abusive fathers, who do not all have the same kind of social and

economic power. As an explanatory tool, then, the feminist incest story makes mistakes. In our view, these mistakes are small, given the energy for social analysis and reform that this narrative helped to inspire. Women's telling of prohibited stories about incest once promised to galvanize a feminist social movement that could make the world a dramatically better place. Even if a social revolution did not result from the feminist incest story, its legacy lives in an increased general awareness about violence in the family.

It is hard to admit that the revolutionary expectations associated with the feminist incest story seem dated, and not just because of the rising fortunes of conservative politics. As the number of non-father-headed households grows and the social and economic status of white men declines (despite the privilege that keeps them ahead of other workers, with black male workers a notable example), gendered models of power and change clearly need expansion and revision. Yet women who dare to tell still deserve a great deal of credit for making public a history of hidden domestic abuse. Thanks to African-American women writers and to the feminist scholarship of the 1970s and early 1980s, the interconnection between legitimized structures of patriarchal authority and occluded forms of coercive violence was, at least for a time, widely available. In other words, these women's narratives made it possible to understand incest as a familiar, not exotic, act; not only what paternal law forbids but also what it enables. The success of the feminist incest story, particularly as it has developed into a story of trauma and recovery, should not, then, simply be dismissed as evidence of a moral panic about child abuse or the self-indulgence of white, middle-class women.¹²

We are offering, then, not only a way to understand the feminist incest story, but a way to think about its relationship to what followed: narratives of recovered memories. Recovered memories became a subject of knowledge and debate as a result of a number of intersecting conditions that cannot be exhaustively catalogued but must be provisionally articulated if feminist frameworks for analyzing child sexual abuse are to be more fully understood as well as expanded. First, feminist analysts such as Louise Armstrong and Judith Herman, women whose work was inflected by a popular women's movement, had acquired enough institutional authority to shape a persuasive discourse about the links between patriarchy, incest, and women's social subjugation and psychological distress. Second, this discourse began to solidify in the early 1980s, when it found resonance with a politically powerful conservative effort to expose the evils of pornography and satanic abuse, two "problems" that were aligned with feminist concerns about patriarchal abuses of women and children.¹³ This alliance obscured a crucial fact: feminists defined the traditional family as sanctioning paternal abuse of children; conservatives defined the father-headed family as a haven for children.¹⁴ At the same time, in Reagan's first term, children were among the victims of massive cuts in social welfare,

health, and educational programs, allowing child abuse to function, as Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Howard F. Stein have argued, as a metaphor for “the complicity (and collective responsibility) in the implementation of local, national, and international policies that are placing our nation’s and, indeed, the world’s children at great risk,” a metaphor that is given tangible shape in the abuser who molests his own children (341). Last, the popular media, always looking for sensationalist human interest stories and responsive to the growth of scholarly and legal knowledge about abuse, initially supported the effort to find and punish perpetrators, while establishing itself as a moral protector of children, a stance that would eventually conflict with the cultural imperative to protect parents’ rights. However, neither stance—protecting children or parents—required a public agenda of restructuring society, since parents and daughters could be understood as either active deviants or passive dupes. Added to this volatile mix, creating anxiety and fear, was an underlying sense, still familiar today, that nameless authorities were covering up more than just assaults on children.

The contemporary metaphors of abuse and recovery contains a poignant residue of earlier feminist concerns about collective injustice that is not only masked by an emphasis on personal trauma but expressed by it as well.¹⁵ In recent women’s narratives of incest, present suffering may be displaced upon the past; the pain of the past may also be displaced upon the present. Popular accounts of sexual abuse in books like *The Courage to Heal*, for example, may be compensating for past pain levels that never were acknowledged. At the same time, women’s accounts of their memories of trauma also can function to sharply reveal and criticize present social arrangements. In women’s incest narratives, the recursive relation between past and present creates a circuit in which both past and present are often sites of displaced anxiety. Women’s stories about sexual abuse, such as the newly canonical texts that we will discuss next, remain important as representational spaces marking past and present pain—and the consequent need for a more equitable social order. The feminist incest story always kept this goal in mind.