

Chapter 4

The Canonical Incest Story

A decade after *Father-Daughter Incest*, Judith Herman published another important book: *Trauma and Recovery* (1992). The two nouns of the title largely define the discursive space occupied by the tellings of incest in the 1980s and 1990s. “Trauma,” a category elaborated by researchers in medicine, psychology, and increasingly in the humanities, refers to a psychic wounding that impedes a subject’s encoding of horrific experiences and creates a set of symptoms perhaps best known under the general rubric *post-traumatic stress disorder*.¹ Herman describes trauma as “an affliction of the powerless” and argues that it is the origin of the incest victim’s intermittent amnesia, intrusive flashbacks, and feelings of fear, distrust, and isolation (33). “Recovery” refers to both the victim’s belated reconstruction of the traumatic event and the healing associated with this process. Herman attempts to provide a balanced consideration of trauma and recovery, devoting half of her book to each topic. Yet the even division of the book belies the popularity of the concept of recovery in the 1980s and its weight in her book and many others. In the best-known books about incest—Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1981), Ellen Bass and Laura Davis’s *The Courage to Heal* (1985), and Jane Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres* (1991)—the emphasis is on recovery, in both senses of the term. So visible are these best-selling narratives that, in the cultural imaginary, they represent what the incest story is all about. This is the role of a canonical text: to provide a narrative—here one about sexually abused daughters and their recovery from trauma—that seems to speak for all.² The blindspots and possibilities generated by canonical texts of incest are the subject of this chapter.

For writers in the 1980s, trauma is understood to make recovery difficult, though not impossible. Herman explains that the experience of incest traumatically violates a child’s basic sense of trust and order. Such a trauma is especially difficult for an isolated and vulnerable child to process as memory or story. For Herman, recovery from incest often does not take place until a victim finds a community that provides a safe place for the belated telling of incest, a telling that will allow the victim to integrate her experiences into a comprehensible

story. This supportive community also has the responsibility of validating the victim's testimony, which may take the form of a written narrative about the past. Herman writes that the "survivor who has achieved commonality with others can rest from her labors. Her recovery is accomplished; all that remains before her is her life" (236). Defined in such terms, recovery holds forth the promise of a complete release from the traumatic past. The popularity of the canonical incest "recovery story" may then depend upon its reassuring message: the victim can get over "the thing."

The promise of recovery is also central to the work of feminist critics in the 1980s who wrote about the silencing of women in literary history and the need to open up the canon.³ In 1981, Nina Baym published an influential article about canon formation called "Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors." Her argument is that powerful American literary critics, such as F. O. Matthiessen, Jay B. Hubbell, Lionel Trilling, and Richard Poirer, have implicitly supported the exclusion of women authors from the canon by defining canonical American fiction as literature in which a male writer manages to overcome the obstacles presented by bad women writers flooding the market with a degraded genre: the "melodrama of beset womanhood." Leslie Fiedler writes that "our best fictionists" have had to "struggle" against these melodramas to get attention for their serious writing. This writing features another gendered contest; in celebrated novels by men, the isolated American individual (male) struggles against "the socializing and domesticating woman" (73). The best American fictionists thus give women "the role of entrapper and impediment" (75) to the expression of a fully representative, and ultimately triumphant, American (male) selfhood. Perhaps these narratives could be called canonical male recovery stories.

In a witty reversal, Baym describes the ennobling effort of the male writer to tell his story as a "melodrama of beset *manhood*." She also resurrects the initially unsuccessful attempts of women writers to produce this esteemed melodrama by positioning *men* as the entrappers and impediments to female selfhood. In the 1980s, women are more successful at turning the tables by writing a believable narrative about constraints imposed on women by men. Their recovery story is a tale of persecution and escape from male "entrappers and impediments" that also explains why women must refuse traditional domesticity. Women's canonical narratives of recovery thus implicitly rewrite literary and cultural history by placing women at the center of an earlier canonical American narrative about an individual's heroic resistance to a constrictive social order that needs to be reconstituted. Operating within this revisionary table-turning is a commonly shared assumption that the American essence is embodied in the autonomous individual who struggles to find freedom and redemption. This narrative presumption now draws upon the resources of feminist therapeutic literature but also appropriates the lineaments of the

melodrama of beset manhood, which itself is indebted to Puritan spiritual autobiographies with their stages of self-recognition, suffering, regeneration, and final admission into a purified community. Our focus on what have become canonical incest texts (texts that seem to “speak for all” incest narratives) suggests the relationship of these narratives to self-help literature by including two novels and one self-help book. While there is no doubt that women’s recovery stories are often utopian, or too neat and scripted in the way that consign “the thing” to the past, these narratives nonetheless provide an important challenge to earlier canonical conventions of collectivity and personhood (what we will later discuss as the “grandiose individual”) that have been narrowly defined as white and male.

As we have seen, there is energy and hope informing the utopian solutions of Louise Armstrong’s and Judith Herman’s analyses of father-daughter incest, work that we described in the previous chapter. Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, published in 1982, participates in the enthusiasm of this apparently revolutionary moment. As Morrison does in *The Bluest Eye*, Walker bravely depicts African-American women living with the double oppressiveness of racism and sexism. Yet unlike Toni Morrison, Walker has available to her the feminist incest story’s political analysis, and perhaps more important, she also helps to shape an emergent incest narrative about recovery. Walker’s novel begins with a pregnant, fourteen-year-old child’s effort to write a letter about traumatic experiences of incest that her “Pa” tries to silence: “You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy” (1), a reworking of the threat in Stein’s narrative that the father is being “killed” by the daughter who tells. Celie, the heroine and first-person narrator of the novel, suffers all the consequences of female sexual victimization that are described in Judith Herman’s *Father-Daughter Incest* and that Herman will later elaborate as post-traumatic symptoms: isolation, numbness, a dogged attachment to the caretaking role. Celie is also almost illiterate and yet trying to write her story, an essential method of recovery. Writing, as Walker’s novel reminds us, is also a means of gaining access to the literary achievement from which African-Americans were excluded by enforced illiteracy. Given these overwhelming obstacles to healing and witness, how does recovery occur?

Celie’s recovery is made possible when Celie discovers that “Pa not pa” (183). Celie’s real father, it turns out, was a man lynched by whites who were threatened by his economic success. The novel thus substitutes a narrative about deadly white economic paternalism for a tale of paternal incest within an African-American family, a transformation that recalls how, in *The Invisible Man*, Trueblood’s incest story reveals the white father’s exploitative paternalism. In Walker’s narrative, this switch allows Celie to make a quick turn from trauma to recovery. As Lauren Berlant explains: “This complex substitution of paternal tales effectively frees Celie to reclassify her experience as a *misunder-*

standing” (840). Walker’s novel needs this “misunderstanding” in order for Celie’s democratic business, Folkpants, to become the vehicle for moving a profoundly traumatized African-American daughter to the center of a new, redeemed America in which the past produces no lasting traumatic effects.

There is a gap between past and present structuring the novel, but this gap is not seen as symptomatic of denial or repression. Instead, the gap is empowering. In *The Color Purple*, Celie experiences multiple forms of oppression but rises above them. She writes ever more elaborate letters, discovers a sympathetic paternal legacy, and recovers other lost parts of her family and history, talks to supportive women to get a more expansive sense of herself, and then claims a fuller, prosperous life. Indeed, she enjoys the fruits promised by therapeutic recovery—self-esteem, a satisfying lesbian sexuality, enhanced spirituality—and also finds fulfillment in work. In Walker’s novel, then, African-American women are represented as both beset heroines and members of a redeemed community, a revision of the traditional white and male model of American essence that works to redress the exclusion of African-American women, both as writers and as subjects, from dominant forms of cultural representation. As Nellie McKay notes, “*The Color Purple* is important for what its popularity means in terms of the recognition it compels for the works of black women.” It also compels attention to “the experiences of black women” (249). In a study of the reception of the novel, Jacqueline Bobo explains that many African-American women saw the story as powerfully affirming their lives. Commenting upon Celie, for example, one woman told Bobo: “The lady was a strong lady, like I am. And she hung in there and she overcame” (278).

The Color Purple, a best-seller and Pulitzer Prize winner, also appealed to millions of other readers by opening up space—domestic and economic—in which beset characters achieve and enjoy a miraculous prosperity within a newly harmonious social order. As a reviewer in *Newsweek* exclaimed: “Alice Walker excels at making difficulties for herself and then transcending them” (Prescott, 67). Like most utopian novels, *The Color Purple* resolves in fantasy an uneasy social contradiction. Without any sense of paradox, the novel suggests that a form of capitalism that has objectified women and racial minorities can also be the source of their redemption. In *The Color Purple*, a renewed insistence upon the economic rewards of individual enterprise (Celie mimics her father by becoming a successful businesswoman) vies with the increased visibility and vocality of those, like the angry Sofia, who is beaten and imprisoned when she insists on economic and social justice. Celie seems to have it all: the rewards of entrepreneurial individualism and a unified, redeemed African-American community. In this way, Walker’s narrative temporarily elides and alleviates the continuing traumatic consequences of sexism and racism, which operate together to make “recovery” difficult. (The story’s elision of present pain may also be designed to deflect charges that it is another “harangue” by an

African-American writer.) The empowerment promised by recovery—reconstructing the past and healing from it—is thus achieved at the cost of acknowledging that the victim’s new and idealized identity as a healed survivor partakes in a cultural idiom of self-help whose comforts depend on looking away from continuing and collective sources of trauma.

Of course, not all readers celebrated Walker’s narrative of trauma, recovery, and social transformation. Feminist critics, for example, worried about the way the novel posits “a world of perfect, immanent understanding and homogenous sisterhood” that could not admit to its own exclusions (Kaplan, 142). But these arguments among feminists about the limits of “politically correct” sisterhood were largely drowned out. The most public criticism of Walker’s novel was not the feminist concern about utopian solutions as covering over differences between “sisters” (the novel is partly structured as a series of letters between two sisters) but that it was too harsh in its depictions of African-American men and of white racism. So, for example, John Simon, writing for the *National Review*, attacks the novel through the film version of it: “Miss Walker’s novel—far from the literary masterpiece it has been hyped into and unable to transcend the two humanly legitimate but artistically burdensome chips on its shoulder—feminism and black militancy—is still much better than the film” (56). The columnist Courtland Milloy challenges Walker’s effort to place black women at the center by reading the book as a thinly veiled attack by white men on black men, “I got tired, a long time ago, of white men publishing books by Black women about how screwed up Black men are” (B3). Another reviewer, Carol Iannone, undercuts the legitimacy of responses to the book that lend it canonical status: “The response to *The Color Purple* . . . can well be seen as a kind of literary affirmative action” (57–58). In retrospect, given the novel’s celebration of individual initiative and its vision of achieved social harmony, it seems incredible that the novel was so roundly attacked for its black and feminist militancy. Though the rewards for telling an African-American woman’s incest story are much greater for Walker’s novel than for Morrison’s, so is the punishment. The incest story that enjoys a reception as canonical fiction is also condemned as pseudo-literature by a pseudo-person, in other words, as a “melodrama of beset womanhood.”

Fierce attacks on the recovery story are also directed at the “bible” (a word that suggests its canonicity) of the recovery movement: *The Courage to Heal* by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis. Before writing this key trauma and recovery book, Ellen Bass, like Louise Armstrong, had already edited an anthology of stories by survivors, *I Never Told Anyone: Writings by Women Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse*. From the beginning, then, Bass’s work participates in the feminist incest story’s assumption of the importance of telling, but it emphasizes the difficulty of disclosing incest: “I Never Told Anyone.” The new recovery story’s emphasis is on how a “secret trauma” (to use Diana Russell’s phrase) is finally

told in a safe environment and on how this telling makes recovery possible. In this formulation of the incest narrative, the nature of the promised change is not the revolutionary national transformation promised by the feminist story and that Walker's novel incorporates. Increasingly, a focus on changing the self rather than the world begins to predominate in popular books about incest—and none is more popular than *The Courage to Heal*. This new emphasis attracts charges from critics that incest tellers are self-indulgent women feeding hysterically upon fantasies of victimization and encouraging others to do so. Telling incest stories is thus again linked to sensationalism. But while claims that Louise Armstrong's anthology was deliberately provocative depended upon a reading of her book's cover, with its little girls peeping through a bed frame, there is much more than a book cover at stake in attacks on *The Courage to Heal*. We are now in the realm of the big-time incest narrative. Recovery stories dominate talk shows and media stories. For a brief moment of time, incest is *the* story to tell.

We hope to offer a more nuanced understanding of why *The Courage to Heal* was both so appealing and so appalling and became canonical, the incest book for all people, and therefore the book to attack. While its critics often describe the book, and the stories it engenders, as formulaic, attacks often seem to be just as formulaic, focusing only upon points or parts of the book previously raised by other attackers (such as the notorious "checklist of symptoms"). What gets obscured by this level of discussion are the complex social conditions and struggles that have produced this way of telling incest and how this new kind of telling opens up promising possibilities. As we have seen with *The Color Purple*, part of that novel's appeal was its ability to offer an attractive fantasy of recovery emphasizing both personal prosperity and national well-being, a fantasy that obscured the effects of a deepening economic crisis and more cuts to social programs for the poor in the 1980s. Just as Celie's recovery seems to cut off her acknowledgment of her damaging past, so too does *The Courage to Heal* offer an enormously enabling fantasy that by the same token refuses a complex analysis of the very means of recovery, writing, that it so confidently touts.

Ellen Bass is a poet who discovered by teaching creative writing that "writing itself was healing" (18). Laura Davis was a student of Bass's who felt her "healing process" would be facilitated by writing a book with her teacher. *The Courage to Heal* is thus itself a personal recovery story. Neither Bass nor Davis is an academically trained psychologist. As Bass explains, her knowledge is based on what she has "learned from the experiences of survivors" (18). *Courage to Heal* thus participates in an older form of feminist grassroots work. Bass and Davis explicitly announce that they write "in the tradition of speak-outs" (13), but the focus of their consciousness-raising shifts. Unlike the earlier work of Armstrong and Herman that places women's experience in a larger

theoretical frame of patriarchy, here experience alone is assumed to provide unmediated access to the truth. In *The Courage to Heal*, stories of individual experience are by definition true stories. Because no effort is thus required to understand the mediation of “experience” by social and discursive structures, Bass and Davis unself-consciously encourage the production of “recovered” incest narratives of the sort that have led to so much public controversy. This is not to disavow the appeal to real, oppressive personal experiences that is made in these stories, but to show how Bass and Davis shape the form that this testimony takes.

Teresa Ebert sums up the feminist challenge to those who believe “experience” is foundational knowledge: “While it is true that a woman, a person of color, a queer experiences oppression, this experience is by no means self-explanatory: it has to be explained in relation to other social practices” (19). But if all of us right-thinking feminists know that the personal must be theorized, do we know how to do so? In a way, Bass and Davis are writing within this gap between the older political conceptual model of the past (the feminist incest story) and present, anxious experiences that have not yet been fully theorized but that are fueling the emergence of the increasingly popular conceptual paradigm of trauma.

As with *The Color Purple*, in *The Courage to Heal* there is a rewriting of the past that de-emphasizes the legacy of trauma so as to make recovery more available. Similarly, in feminist criticism of the period the emphasis shifts from exposing the damaging effects of past constructions of femininity to celebrating the previously unacknowledged value of women’s culture. New, more personable forms of feminism said less about male hegemony and instead focused on mother-daughter bonds and the nurturing, caring side of women’s cultures of domesticity.⁴ Of course, nurturance and care are certainly what all human beings need, especially battered and exploited women. But caring and being cared for are an understandable but limited definition of women’s desire. Women’s essential caring is a construction that seems merely the opposite of another naturalized essence, male violence. Furthermore, caring can become a form of control, as is shown by the quietly authoritarian voice of *The Courage to Heal*. The intrusive use of the second-person pronoun *you* has the effect of establishing the reality of the reader in an authoritarian way while seeming to provide a sensitive, caring mirror of the reader’s deepest feelings: “When you were abused, your boundaries, your right to say no, your sense of control in the world were violated” (39); or “if you breeze through these chapters, you probably aren’t feeling safe enough to confront these issues” (27). More widely condemned is the book’s use of checklists to help “you” decide if “you” were abused: “Do you feel powerless, like a victim? Do you feel different from other people?” (39). The second-person point of view, perhaps because it can seem so relentlessly devoted to the addressee, blinds Bass and Davis to the way in which

they are shaping the identity of the “you” and defining the trajectory of the victim’s story. In other words they do not think about the stance of the “we” who wrote the book.

Bass and Davis are not interested in listening for what is not sayable within the structure of the trauma and recovery story, for the message relayed by the gaps and fragments that have increasingly been studied by theorists of trauma and that we will attend to in our chapter on incest memoirs. Instead, they believe that telling and recovery are fairly simple tasks. To heal, reader/victims need simply to write about abuse in what seems to be an easily accessible “safe” context. To facilitate this process, Bass and Davis provide writing assignments through which survivors are told to “define your own reality” (31). In this way, women are instructed to write themselves into health and happiness. However, this is writing without acknowledged powers of equivocation. In other words, “you” are not encouraged to exploit the insight that the past is constantly being scripted and rescripted. Nor is there an emphasis on point of view, and its relation to competing social and personal agendas: who is speaking? Who is listening? In whose interest is a particular story being told?

Courage to Heal is a massively popular text precisely because of its promise to readers that they can completely make sense of their lives—and transform them—through a simple process of writing, and thus recovering memories. In the words of one incest survivor, chosen as the epigraph for the chapter, “Effects: Recognizing the Damage”:

People have said to me, “Why are you dragging this up now?” Why? WHY? Because it has controlled every facet of my life. It has damaged me in every possible way. . . . It has prevented me from living a comfortable emotional life. . . . If I had a comfortable childhood, I could be anything today. (37)

Here incest is clearly posited as the key to everything, an ordinary trauma. Recovery also promises a completely comfortable future. For Bass and Davis, it is not much of a leap to assume that the cause of all adult dissatisfaction is childhood sexual abuse, and a utopian future is promised by recovery, both cause and cure thus narrowly confined to the private sphere. As Bass puts it: “I want to see us all become whole—and not stop there. As we become capable of nurturing ourselves and living rich personal lives, we are enabled to act creatively in the world so that life can continue—the eucalyptus trees, the narcissus, the sunfish, the squirrels, seals, hummingbirds, our own children” (19). This fantasy is unappealingly reminiscent of advertisements for Club Med vacations. Recovery here offers the promise that women can take an extended vacation from life.

Because Walker in *The Color Purple* and Bass and Davis in *The Courage to Heal* promise readers a fantasy recovery in which survivors enjoy life in pros-

perous and happy community, the trauma and recovery plot looks in some ways like an ideological fairy tale. Not that this is a reason to condemn it: the celebration of sisterhood and the possibility of a community that will work to women's benefit is understandably one that many women embrace. Indeed its attractions become more obvious when compared with the familiar counterpart to the recovery story: the false-memory story, which often features sisterhood as a coven of witches who are falsifying the past and blighting the future of men. Arthur Miller's canonical play *The Crucible* is the paradigmatic contemporary example of this narrative of beset manhood.⁵ In her revision of the canon, *A Thousand Acres*, Jane Smiley works to expose the narrative of beset manhood as a monstrous fiction that powerful and seductive patriarchal figures tell and disseminate widely as a way of disavowing responsibility for their abuses of both real and "literary" daughters. Telling incest thus becomes a way to undercut the patriarchal cultural authority that produces and promotes the male canonical text. Smiley's novel, however, by transforming the incest victim into a tragic heroine, upsets the expectation that this process of recovering a traumatic past necessarily leads to the healing of self and community. At the same time, by insisting that the "melodrama of beset womanhood" is actually a tragedy, Smiley lends to the story the genre's seriousness and cultural prestige—and her own text makes a bid for canonical status.

In Smiley's novel, a daughter, Ginny, recovers submerged traumatic and incestuous experiences hidden within an almost mythically happy and prosperous white family. Revered texts—Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself*—are also disrupted and interrogated by the novel as sources of unacknowledged violence against women. Smiley's effort at canon critique closely parallels the story of canon-formation offered by Christine Froula, who draws upon Herman's *Father-Daughter Incest* to provide a theoretical basis for understanding "women's silence in literary history" (622). Froula argues that women as authors and readers are subject to violence enacted by literary fathers: "Metaphysically, the woman reader of a literary tradition that inscribes violence against women is an abused daughter. Like physical abuse, literary violence against women works to privilege the cultural father's voice and story over those of women, the cultural daughters, and indeed to silence women's voices" (633). Mirroring these ideas of canon formation as violent, gendered, and exclusionary, Smiley's novel uses recovered memories of incest to signify a woman's capacity to reconnect with deeply silenced "truths" about her personal and cultural subjugation.

As a result, the recovery plot in *A Thousand Acres* is familiar in that it partakes in the recognizable gesture of turning the tables on the melodrama of beset manhood. But Smiley knows that there are many similar stories being disseminated and that the incest recovery story can be put to a predictable use. In an interview, Smiley remarks: "There's been a lot about incest in literature in

the past twenty-five years, which is inevitable as women get their voices. They'll say what really happened to them and, in many cases, it was sexual abuse or incest of some kind. But often it's used as a punch line. All these things happen in the present, then they go back and say, 'Incest! Oh, that explains it!'" (Anderson, 1). What Smiley sees, and what informs her practice in the novel, is the way in which powerful but reductive points of view struggle for dominance, to become, as it were, the "punch line."

A Thousand Acres takes on canonical texts governed by points of view so powerful that they seem simply to express universal truth. Smiley's novel, as everyone knows by now, rewrites *King Lear* from the point of view of Lear's evil daughter, Goneril. Smiley challenges *Lear*'s misogyny, which makes Goneril a monster, by depicting her Goneril figure, Ginny, as bland and mild-mannered; she is the good, eldest daughter. Smiley also shifts Goneril's corrupted sexuality from the daughter's body to the father's as Lear becomes Larry Cook, an abusive father. As Ginny gains narrative authority, her sister, Rose, describes her never forgotten experience of abuse, and Ginny herself overcomes an internalized prohibition against remembering that she, too, has been sexually abused by her father. In the novel, the daughter's recovered memory of incest reveals the depredations of the sovereign power of the father and so argues for his repudiation. However, this memory does not provide either catharsis or an utopian alternative to the corrupted present. *Lear*, for example, is a kind of past, a locus of cultural authority structuring the novel, that can be powerfully reinterpreted but not easily shed.

Smiley's rewriting of *Lear* hopes to excavate the misogyny of the patriarchal bard by exposing the play's violently unsympathetic portrayal of unruly women. The novel's acknowledged—and rebuked—literary heritage also extends to American canonical literature and American constructions of the individual and his—we use the pronoun advisedly—relationship to the land. The phrase "a thousand acres" comes from Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself*:

Have you reckoned a thousand acres much? Have you reckoned the earth
much?

Have you practiced so long to learn to read?

Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all
poems,

You shall possess the good of the earth and sun . . . there are millions of
suns left,

You shall no longer take things at second or third hand. . . . nor look
through the eyes of the dead . . . nor feed on the specters in books,

You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself.

(26)

These stanzas introduce a number of concerns addressed in the novel. Whitman contrasts the reader to those who take things “at second or third hand,” who are, in other words, burdened by their relationship to the past. Americans are promised an unmediated, full present. By criticizing the idea of the full plenitude of the present, Smiley is also offering a critique of the recovery story’s participation in the celebration of present possibilities that seem to be disconnected from any sense of the past. Her novel thus suggests that recovery *of* a traumatic past does not ensure a complete recovery *from* it.

“Reckoning” a thousand acres might, it seems, limit the fullness of the present moment. The language of reckoning is that of the accountant, the counting house, of ledgers and bankers. Yet reckoning “the earth,” though it seems an impossible task, is perhaps a more noble one since the reckoning allows an inclusive stock-taking that the poem seems to approve of as it moves toward a celebration of possession: “you shall possess the origin of all poems, / You shall possess the good of the earth and sun.” This form of possession attempts to transcend the material acquisitiveness of the possessive individual by requiring so much acquisition that the territorial boundaries reckoned by the accountant disappear. But at the same time, the grandiosity of this project is linked to a grandiose individual and an imagined American community in which everyone is accommodated. This universalizing narrative is one that Smiley challenges.

Whitman’s grandiose individual is embodied in Larry Cook, whose name links him to America’s imperialist beginnings through the allusion to Captain Cook. His middle daughter, Rose, calls him “the great I AM” (211). Discussing the patriarchal base of American agriculture, Deborah Fink explains: “By controlling the land, wealth, and social services, men were in position to have their wishes heeded” (208). A web of moralized power relations promotes respect for asymmetric and gendered power relations on the farm. Ginny says, “Trying to understand my father had always felt something like going to church . . . and listening to the minister we had . . . marshal the evidence for God’s goodness. . . . Finally . . . the failure of our understandings was their greatest proof of all, not of goodness or omniscience or whatever the subject of the day was, but of power” (20). Because Larry Cook is presented as a center of authority, status, and wealth, the focus of the novel is initially on his ownership of the land and the legitimating structures that both naturalize his violence to his daughters and silence alternative perspectives on this behavior.

Yet the novel ultimately shows that as long as members of the family farm, including the farmer himself, believe in the absolute power of the father-

landowner, they cannot see the social and economic changes that are shifting power to new places. Indeed, what undermines the family is not simply allegations of abuse stemming from recovered memories of incest but the unacknowledged power of unseen economic forces, a point that is completely missed by critics who want to position recovered memories as the cause of all evil and the novel as a dangerous support for the recovered-memory movement.⁶ In the novel, Larry Cook's loss of authority is more closely linked to his economic decisions than to his daughter's allegations. Cook amasses a thousand acres, a size too large for single-family farming, by appropriating the land of his neighbors. He needs these increasingly large tracks of unfenced land in order to make possible the use of ever larger machines, such as the "new bigger tractors [that] meant greater speed and a wider turning radius" (206). Farmers are themselves thus implicated in the process of concentrating land in ever fewer hands to the point that they are themselves "industrial farmers" who rely on the labor of others (Vogeler, 30). Larry Cook decides to pass on this farm to his daughters and their husbands as a "corporation" (18).

There is a perilous moment of balance in this dream of something for everyone. But this fantasy of family harmony is already being undone at the moment of its conception. The family corporation is not even Larry Cook's own idea but Marv Carson's, whose name recalls several talk show hosts. The very insubstantiality of Carson, a faddish loan officer, allows Smiley to show that power is already shifting to places that are less palpable than the older form of patriarchal authority incarnated in Larry Cook. Ginny's husband, Ty, the "good" son-in-law, likes the idea of the corporation because he wants a hog confinement system or "Boar Boutique," but this form of livestock production leads him into debt—and a future with a corporate hog operation. Ginny and Rose carefully seal off from their youngest sister, Caroline (the Cordelia figure), the violence and drudgery on the farm so that she has no knowledge of her own past. As a result, though she is the one who has gotten away, she is also the one who wants things to stay as she imagines they must have been on the mythic American farm, a powerful cultural fantasy. Indeed, the emphasis on a romanticized notion of independent farmers working family farms obscures not only the oppression of agrarian women but also the economic transformations that have led to the triumph of agribusiness over family farmers. Caroline's investment in the myth of the family farm aligns her with her father, who does not understand challenges to his independence as effects of his own aggressive capital investments. He, too, has memory problems. And so it goes.

In Smiley's novel, the destruction of the family is, then, clearly the work of larger forces and so cannot be blamed solely upon Ginny's recovered memories. Before Rose tells Ginny about their abuse as teenagers, Larry Cook has already moved out; he has blamed his daughters for all his problems and rushed out into the storm, the act that leads Caroline to initiate her lawsuit;

and the farm is falling into increased debt because of Ty's investment in a hog confinement building. It is at this point that Ginny recovers memories of incest. Her recovered memories, validated by Rose's corroborating and never forgotten memories, are a sign that Ginny's own point of view is finally consolidating.

As is the case for many women who recover memories, Ginny's memories signify the emergence of a new point of view from which to take self-interested action. Indeed, the vantage point of the novel is her first-person reconstruction of the past. Her narrative authority requires, as we learn from the novel, that she not only challenge the naturalness of her subordinate position in her family but that she break strong ties of loyalty with her father, her husband, and her sister. Her point of view thus depends upon a radical autonomy that recalls heroic figures of "beset manhood" but is unlike the forms of new identity offered to incest survivors in feminist literature in which survivors claim a place within nurturing women's communities. Indeed, Ginny's sister Rose, the angry feminist who cannot forget her abuse, is shown to be too selfish and vindictive, too like her father, to be a reliable ally. Furthermore, while Rose is preoccupied with defeating her father, she has arguably suffered more deadly harm from the chemical residue that causes her cancer (and leads to the loss of the future through Ginny's miscarriages). In *A Thousand Acres*, the pervasive toxicity of the Cook farm is described through a metaphoric of "treacherous undercurrents" in which the polluted water flowing under the seemingly solid ground, a serious problem in the corn belt, is linked to both horrific repressed memories and unexamined economic pressures.

Ginny does not make a career of her role as a victim, though she remains angry about the "family values" of the farm, which are dependent on the subjugation of women and children to the will of the farmer. Her recovered memories of incest are an important way for her to clarify not only how much violence she has endured but how numb she has become to it. Here is where the feminist discourse about trauma and dissociation is especially useful to Smiley. Ginny's physical numbness, her passivity, and her amnesia are not only available as telling symptoms of the abuse victim but of "the private, secret traumas to which a feminist analysis draws attention . . . those events in which the dominant culture and its forms and institutions are expressed and perpetrated" (Brown, 102). These words offered by feminist therapist Laura Brown are part of an argument, a manifesto really, for the need to expand the range of experiences that are interpreted as traumatic: "a feminist perspective, which draws our attention to the lives of girls and women, to the secret, private hidden experiences of everyday pain, reminds us that traumatic events do lie within the range of normal human experience" (110). Incest, when linked to trauma, may then function as a key that renders visible the many invisible shocks associated with the experience of "everyday" femininity.

But not everything that Ginny and her family suffer can be attributed to her sexual abuse as a child, or, for that matter to her retrieving memories of that particular abuse which is shown to be part and parcel of a social, economic, and cultural “package.” Indeed, Smiley is all too aware of how incest can become the “punch line”—the origin of all damage. Rather than recovering a punch line, Ginny’s recovered memories of incest enable her to shift her point of view and her conceptual framework. She informs her husband Ty:

The thing is, I can remember when I saw it all your way! The proud progress from Grandpa Davis to Grandpa Cook to Daddy. When “we” bought the first tractor in the county, when “we” built the big house, when “we” had the crops sprayed from the air, when “we” got a car, when “we” drained Mel’s corner, when “we” got a hundred and seventy-two bushels an acre. I can remember all of that like prayers or like being married. You know. It’s good to remember and repeat. You feel good to be a part of that. But then I saw what my part really was. . . . You see this grand history, but I see the blows. I see taking what you want because you want it, then making something up that justified what you did. I see getting others to pay the price, then covering up and forgetting what the price was. Do I think Daddy came up with beating and fucking us on his own? . . . No, I think he had lessons, and those lessons were part of the package, along with the land and the lust to run things exactly the way he wanted to no matter what. (342–44)

This speech, located near the end of the novel, sums up how Ginny’s memories of incest allow her to challenge foundational myths of American collectivity by showing her what her part “really was.” As Michael Lambek and Paul Antze explain, “traumas offer a way of inserting a radical, often transformative break in the flow of a life [we could say “cultural”] narrative” (xvii). But in Smiley’s novel this break, though transformative, is not redemptive.

Smiley structures her novel with great care to make the point that the structure of the past involves a “package” or hegemonic ensemble that includes canonical texts that ennoble patriarchy and misogyny while obscuring the exploitation of women and the land, itself often understood as feminine (a point that Baym makes in “Melodramas of Beset Manhood”). The “package” also makes it hard to see that agribusiness has subjected the farmer-father to violent disruptions, sometimes in the form of “opportunities” that are rendering the one-man farm nearly obsolete. Incest, in other words, is only one of many vehicles for representing forms of systematic oppression and exploitation. Given the richness of her analysis of this “package,” it is surprising that *A Thousand Acres* has been selected by both its fans and its detractors as *the* par-

adigmatic novel about recovered memories of incest. Janice Haaken, for example, sees Ginny as “like the prototypical daughter in contemporary incest narratives” who moves from “an unenlightened to an enlightened state of mind” (*Pillar of Salt*, 20), and Elaine Showalter uses *A Thousand Acres* as her example of “the many novels and movies” that “continue to reproduce recovered-memory plots” (158).

Smiley’s insight that Ginny’s act of recovering memories can result in a new conceptual framework, one that might take American story of the “beset” individual in new directions, is obscured by those who respond to the novel by making incest into the “punch line.” Critics of the novel such as Elaine Showalter and Mark Pendergrast worry that the novel legitimates a feminist analysis that “incest” is the key and the father is to blame for the family’s breakdown and his daughter’s misery. But what the novel shows instead is that all of the characters are caught in a larger web of forces and discourses. Indeed, Smiley’s layered allusions to other texts challenges the ease with which “recovery” simply entails or equals writing, as it seems to in Walker’s novel. Ginny becomes self-conscious enough to better understand her positioning in cultural nets, and to a certain extent free herself, but she is not greatly rewarded; Smiley’s tragic point is that there is no outside to escape to. By the end of the novel, the dispersal of the family farm gives Ginny the freedom to become a low-paid service worker who lives on processed foods—and who occasionally takes psychology classes. Ex-farmwomen do not really have much going for them in a postindustrial economy.

A Thousand Acres acknowledges that the incest recovery story offers a belated, displaced encounter with the past. This novel, then, is not sanguine about the power of literature to mirror the past. Instead, it suggests that unitary, universalizing gestures of canonizing American history, including the belief in its inevitable repetition, may become a serious blind spot. The novel’s expansive vision of women’s historical experience, like Ginny’s, is thus purchased by understanding and breaking a repetitive cycle. And yet Smiley herself still has her fist clenched, still relies upon repetition to make her point, even her point that repetition is the point. And perhaps this is why the last paragraph of the novel continues to insist that recovered memories of incest constitute a hard truth—and a weapon, a “punch line”:

I can’t say that I forgive my father, but now I can imagine what he probably chose never to remember—the goal of an unthinkable urge, pricking him, pressing him, wrapping him in an impenetrable fog of self that must have seemed, when he wandered around the house late at night after working and drinking, like the very darkness. This is the gleaming obsidian shard I safeguard above all the others. (370–71)

The “gleaming obsidian shard” is not a quite a memory of incest, though it is linked to, and confirms, the act of incest. Ginny’s fictional reconstruction of incest is her hard shard of the past. This new view allows her to understand her father’s urges as blanketed in a selfhood—made foggier by drink—that acknowledges little outside of itself. And so the novel ends by staging the impossibility of a father’s remembering in order to demonstrate the necessity of a daughter’s act of revisionary memory.

Is it wrong or mistaken to use a daughter’s reconstruction of incest as if it were hard evidence? Smiley understands the difficulty of this question. In her novel, the too-good-to-be-true quality of the recovery plot begins to be commented upon within the recovery story itself. *A Thousand Acres* does offer a fairy tale, most obviously in its borrowing and reversing of *King Lear* in order to allegorize—and canonize—the recovery story, which dramatizes how a heroine is beset by the burdensome power of the father. But as we have shown, Smiley’s novel also insists that what needs to be recovered is a past connected to and responsible for forgotten incest, but not defined by it. The recovery story, here working against its own embrace of a clear and linear chain of cause and effect, is thus capable of providing a nuanced understanding of memory, recovery, and the claims of individualism. Smiley’s novel, in other words, questions the recovery story’s positing of a simple cause—the father, the male entrapper—from whom the beset heroine manages a heroic and satisfying escape. Curiously, such an awareness of the complexity of the project of telling and remembering incest is not always so available in narratives of false memory, in which a sophisticated understanding of memory’s malleability is expected to fuel a powerful challenge to the knowledge provided by women who tell. It is to false-memory stories that we will now turn.