

Chapter 5

The Science of Memory False-Memory Stories

False Memory Syndrome Foundation members, largely those who have been accused of child abuse and expert witnesses on their behalf, have compelling reasons to insist that repressed memories of abuse be verified by clear and convincing empirical evidence, precisely the kind of evidence often lacking in incestuous abuse cases.¹ While there are cases where a child with venereal disease or a bleeding vagina is admitted to an emergency room and evidence obtained of abuse, signs of molestation may not be at all obvious. Adults have been mistakenly charged with abuse as a result of misreadings of physical evidence, resulting, for example, from incorrect assumptions about what “normal” genitals and hymens are supposed to look like (Nathan and Snedeker, 180–81). And children enjoined to silence may long delay reports of abuse, with the result that physical marks of molestation, should they exist, would be healed by the time accusations are made. Without damning physical evidence, charges of incestuous abuse are hard to prove. If the memory wars reflect deep ambivalence about the declining fortunes of patriarchal authority, they are sustained by problems with collecting incontrovertible evidence of sexual abuse, whether to vindicate accusers or the accused. What is debated are less tangible archives of the past. As we have seen, proponents of recovered memory focus on psychological processes, such as repression and dissociation, that long impede the recollection of sexual abuse. Their antagonists, false-memory writers, proffer “scientific” evidence that demonstrates how easily memories are distorted. In particular, they discuss the nature of memory itself, aligning themselves with recent thinking about the reconstructive nature of memory. Recovered memories cannot be reliable, accurate, or objective, they argue, because those who study memory have demonstrated that memories are fallible, constantly shifting, and influenced by our present circumstances.

Because their arguments are tied to the findings of psychological researchers on memory, false-memory syndrome advocates at first seem more sophisticated than those naive therapists and clients who apparently share a deluded, outdated view that recovered memories of long-buried abuse can be

taken as the raw truth of the past. Yet paradoxically, because false-memory proponents are allied with those who stress memory's unreliability, some of these writers find themselves in the difficult position of being both delighted and devastated by the "scientific" descriptions of memorial processes that they are dependent upon. They are happy to insist that memory has a very uncertain relation to the past, which allows them to argue that recovered memories of abuse must be understood as impermanent confabulations of the present. Yet this view of memory is also potentially devastating because false-memory proponents want to be truth-tellers, and new views of the malleability of memory put into question their own ability to offer an unbiased view of events. The tension between new views of memory and traditional ideas about memory's unproblematic access to the past structures the peculiar nature of the anxiety that false-memory writers must try to manage in book after book attacking the recovered-memory writers. This chapter studies a narrative war in which commentators fight over territory: who owns the master plot for trusting or dismissing a story about recovering memories of incest? False-memory writers want their stories to convey historical truth, but their dependence upon narrative and their insistence on memory's shiftiness make it hard to elude the forms of fabrication that they so decry. They, too, are storytellers.

Though a dependence upon contemporary notions of memory is to a degree present in the arguments of every major writer in the false-memory movement, Richard Ofshe and Ethan Watters in *Making Monsters: False Memories, Psychotherapy, and Sexual Hysteria* (1994) have most scrupulously explained the relevance of these notions of memory to the false-memory argument. To demonstrate how fabrication is linked to memory, and thus explain the formation of false memories, Ofshe and Watters appeal to Donald Spence's *Narrative Truth and Historical Truth* (1982).² Spence's book is influenced by the interpretive turn, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, toward emphasizing the role of narrative in the psychotherapeutic process. Spence points out that therapists have shifted from Freud's belief in the historical "core" of each patient's memory, from believing analysis is a form of archaeology, toward a recognition of the importance of the patient's linguistic constructions of the past in providing an effective means of therapy.

Drawing upon Proust's novel as an aid to understanding the difference between "historical truths" and "narrative truths," Spence explains that "narrative truth" is articulated in the French title, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, which means "in search of lost time." This title places an emphasis upon the process of discovery and the author's evolving realization that "the same event can take on different meanings depending on the conditions under which it is remembered" (31). The French title, suggests Spence, conjures up a malleable and usefully literary view of memory. Opposed to this understanding of the

past are “historic” ideas of memory, neatly summed up by the English title, *Remembrance of Things Past*, which emphasizes not the search for a time that has been lost, but remembered things. The English title, says Spence, promises a record of “concrete objects and events that happened at some earlier period and that can be brought forward to the present. The focus is on the act of remembering, which, when properly carried out, provides an accurate, concrete encounter with ‘things past’” (31). Spence argues that while therapists should keep accurate transcriptions of the data that are the foundation for interpretation, these data should function as a reminder not to assume the adequacy of any one interpretation too quickly. “Historical truth,” then, is the stuff from which “narrative truths” are made. Spence legitimizes the psychoanalytic emphasis on narrative truth, on understanding the past as continuously being constructed, by demonstrating that it is congruent with experimental research on memory conducted by Elizabeth Loftus (now a key participant in the memory wars) suggesting the ease with which memories become distorted (93).

Ofshe and Watters import these ideas about the malleability of memory into their book on false memories in order to criticize narratives of the recovered-memory movement for displaying a misleading faith in memory as capable of providing an authoritative account of the past. Bass, Davis, Herman, and other feminist therapists, according to Ofshe and Watters, cling to an old-fashioned belief that memories house the past intact, crystalline, if temporally hidden by defense mechanisms such as repression and dissociation. Ofshe and Watters, like many other false-memory writers, explain that the persistence of this view of memory is shown in the way recovered-memory advocates describe memory as like a videotape or computer disc, metaphors suggesting that what is replayed is exactly what was recorded. So, for example, therapists may insist that repression hides past events in “storage” and therapy restores them to view. Quoting extensively from Spence’s work, Ofshe and Watters explain that therapy cannot provide patients with this kind of access to the truth of the past. Instead, information offered by the patient to the therapist actually “passes through several lenses each of which has the ability to magnify, diffuse or distort the actual events of a person’s life” (51). One lens is used, for example, when “the patient attempts to translate thoughts, feelings, and memories into words,” shaping a life history, a process filtered by other lenses such as “the patients’ understanding of what sort of language and topics are appropriate to a given therapeutic setting—and a given therapist” (51). Finally, we have the assumptions of the therapist, which give authoritative significance to what is being said. Spence notes that therapists “are, in effect, constructing an interpretation that supports our private theory or collection of paradigms. . . . Interpretations are persuasive, not because of their evidential value but because of their rhetorical appeal” (qtd. in Ofshe and Watters, 52). Spence here comes

close to describing the process involved in what is called the “false-memory syndrome,” the consequence of a therapist leading a patient to believe that she has been sexually abused.

While Spence’s theory of narrative and memory provides Ofshe and Watters with a way to undermine the authority and truth of recovered memories, his endorsement of a mediated and indeterminant narrative reality rattles their own confidence about what can be known about the past. There is a price to be paid for adopting new views of memory. According to Ofshe and Watters, Spence is left without a way to condemn “psychotherapy for its ability to create a believable but fundamentally untrue narrative” (52). And they report that they feel narrative creation in therapy is “disturbing” (53) and “distressing” (54). Without a definitive past as an anchor, Ofshe and Watters feel unmoored, sailing upon uncharted, choppy seas. Most devastating is the idea that without the ability to recover real events that carry inherent and unilateral meaning, patients are completely open to whichever winds of fashion their own therapists sail by: “Psychotherapeutic fashions, not being based on science, are formed by the culture and what groups of therapists decide among themselves. Because directions are determined by loose consensus, psychotherapy is extremely susceptible to the winds of the current zeitgeist” (59–60). Having appealed to what might be called a postmodern paradigm of memory that insists upon its shifting, constructive properties so as to discredit recovered memories, Ofshe and Watters try to dig their way out of the “pitfalls” associated with the doctrine of “narrative truth” by appealing to “historical truth,” the same elusive, archaeological nugget that recovered-memory advocates so prize: “Surely, the information provided by clients about their own histories cannot be totally distorted by the lenses it must travel through in therapy” (54).

Ofshe and Watters offer a very developed example of how this idea of lenses works when they discuss the case history of “F.T.,” first published in Robert Langs’s influential *Techniques of Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy* and reinterpreted by Charlotte Krause Prozan in *Feminist Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy*. According to Langs, his patient, Miss F.T., reported dreams, symptoms, and memories that Lang interpreted as stemming from penis envy and from his patient’s having witnessed a primal scene between her parents. Apparently, as a result of this analysis, the patient experienced quite a bit of relief from her initial symptoms of “acting out,” and her functioning improved. In her book, Prozan reanalyzes the case of F.T., proposing, as Ofshe and Watters put it, “that penis envy may have been an inappropriate diagnosis and that the patient had found the diagnosis meaningful only because she desired to please Langs” (57). Prozan notices that F.T.’s symptoms might now be read as clear signs of repressed sexual abuse, a diagnosis that she admits may be linked to therapeutic fashion:

In 1973 and before, analysts were looking for penis envy. In 1990, we are looking for sexual abuse. . . . Patient and analyst are living in the same culture, and are being formed by similar trends. They may collude in what they believe is an accurate diagnosis of the patient's problems. But because they are both culture-bound, the truth may elude them both. (59)

Here Prozan simply reiterates what has become a relatively standard understanding that the cultural narratives available for organizing experience into a diagnosis may not be isomorphic with the truth of experience itself.

Prozan's statement about narrative frameworks is, Ofshe and Watters conclude, "a rather devastating admission" (59). This harsh judgment is a bit puzzling since the idea that memorial pasts are malleable was initially proposed by them as an enlightened one: "While it's comforting to believe that all our experiences . . . are stored somewhere in our minds, this model of memory runs directly counter to almost all scientific studies and experiments on the topic" (38). And Ofshe and Watters laud the work of Loftus and Spence because it offers an alternative, presumably more defensible view that memory work is constructive, precisely the view that seems to inform Prozan's writing. Yet Ofshe and Watters now find this view "devastating" and lash out at Prozan (though she might be seen as simply putting theory into practice) rather than at Langs or even Spence, who first helps them make the case for the centrality of memorial reconstruction and interpretation.

Prozan, a self-identified feminist therapist, becomes Ofshe and Watters's target because they assume she is one of those dangerous, politicized therapists who implant false memories. The proof? First, after demonstrating that Langs's interpretation is governed by normative views of femininity and suggesting alternative readings of F.T.'s case, Prozan offers "the possibility that F.T. was sexually molested as a child" (206). Next, she admits that this new interpretation reflects a shift from a male-centered Freudian view to a feminist view that now has widespread cultural authority. This admission is itself a threat to the integrity of the past—the Freudian past in which women's stories of incest could be understood as fantasies, expressions of desire for the father. But Prozan goes further. Because Prozan explicitly says that the "truth may elude" both the Freudian and the feminist paradigms, Ofshe and Watters see her analysis as offering a damaging acknowledgment of the role of social forces in shaping analytical paradigms.

Oddly, Ofshe and Watters also try to suggest that Prozan's work is an example of the therapist's unwavering belief that stories of abuse are always true stories. Prozan, they assert, does not acknowledge the "pressure within therapy circles to *never* question the reality" of abuse narratives (60). However, it is Ofshe and Watters's own unwavering belief in her credulity that is exposed

in their reading of Prozan's text. Their interpretation is a defense, perhaps, against the anxiety created by her claim that feminism has altered readings of the past. Prozan explicitly recognizes that the abuse narrative she offers is only one possible interpretation of F.T.'s dreams and memories, though she also argues that her feminist analysis is able to account for features of the patient's narrative that Lang must ignore in offering his analysis. For example, she notices that Lang ignores the power that the father may wield.

Ofshe and Watters are increasingly agitated about the apparent chaos generated by the possibilities of reconstruction and reinterpretation offered by Prozan, imagining that suddenly there will be an infinite number of equally efficacious (or damaging) therapeutic interpretations about what really happened in the past. "By offering a history of abuse along with several other imaginative interpretations, Prozan seems to suggest that any number of narratives might have engendered confirming memories and proved equally effective in F.T.'s treatment" (61). Their worry about wildly proliferating interpretive solutions suggests that they have not fully acknowledged that social arrangements change very slowly, at least those that give rise to truly different, authoritative interpretations. The shift from diagnoses of penis envy to diagnoses of sexual abuse only took place after decades of feminist challenges to psychoanalytic views of femininity—and to the authority of a privileged male vantage point.

Indeed, the problem seems to be not that there are too many convincing therapeutic interpretations of women's experience but that there are not enough. The centrality of abuse narratives that Prozan comments upon, and sees vaguely linked to social forces and the media, has been made possible by an adherence to a single story line, now so familiar that it comes to seem natural rather than constructed. In fact, Spence's contribution, which has been valuably underscored by the false-memory argument, is to remind people of how naturalized the constructed narratives of therapy may become. Therapists forget that when diagnosing incest they are looking through several lenses. Yet Spence's way of addressing this problem also suggests ignorance about the power of cultural constraints: he imagines that the patient's free associations are rife with possibilities. Our point is that at any given historical moment most of these possibilities cannot be heard or articulated. The reductive scripts of both false-memory and recovered-memory testimonies are proof of this. As Janice Haaken has pointed out, both types of story often deny the "the diversity and nuances of injurious experiences within the family" ("Sexual Abuse," 121).

Despite their insistence on the malign influence of psychotherapy, Ofshe and Watters nonetheless offer the beginnings of a more broadly conceived analysis of the memory wars. Because of their careful attention to issues of interpretation that ultimately threaten them, they open up a space for a consideration of gender, power relations, ambiguity, and rhetoric as crucial components of the recovered-memory/false-memory debate.

Ofshe and Watters's anxiety about the difficulty of establishing the truth should not be construed simply as evidence that they are caught up in the vestiges of a dying system of belief in the past's accessibility. Like Spence, who also offers a place for verifiable historical data, they have a responsible concern with accountability, and its fate within very complex discourses about memory. Because of cases involving million-dollar lawsuits and the health of elderly parents, Ofshe and Watters have an understandable attachment to verifiable truths. Going to a therapist for comfort drawn from the able recasting of the past is one thing; going to court and using revisionary memories as evidence to sue a parent is quite another. Of course, narratives produced by the false-memory syndrome movement are dangerous too. False-memory advocates who serve as expert defense witnesses provide "scientific" narratives about memory that have a damaging power to rationalize the view that women are hysterical and unreliable witnesses. In this way the narrative truths of false-memory experts may work to suggest that there is no reason to listen to women's accounts of sexual abuse.

Whereas the desire of women to validate recovered memories produces appeals to child abuse statistics and to a recognition of the trauma found in domestic life, false-memory proponents use "science" to attack what they conceive of as a popular mode of irrationality, the belief in stories produced in therapy. In the background of false-memory arguments is the saving power of science as a grounding truth, one that also upholds the sanctity of the family. Frederick Crews, though not a scientist himself, has become the key false-memory spokesman for empiricism. In his attacks on recovered memories, Crews insists, first and foremost, upon the necessity for scientific, "empirical" criteria as a way of differentiating between real and false memories. Armed by an insistence upon "controlled studies," and "demonstrable proof," Crews cuts a rather ruthless swath through what he believes is the deplorable legacy of psychoanalysis as it is dramatized in recovered-memory therapy. According to Crews, Freud was a quack whose ideas about the mind have never been proven. Today Freud's blinded followers still find an intellectual home—in a morass of logically contradictory practices and beliefs that they perpetrate on helpless, vulnerable patients who are rarely helped and often harmed.

Crews's certainty, and his accompanying arrogance, are fueled by an idealistic faith in the "rational-empirical ethos." What false-memory and recovered-memory writers often share in common is an insistence on the existence of an unproblematic reality, "true stories," as Lenore Terr puts it in the subtitle of *Unchained Memories*. In practice, what this means is that both sides must downplay the complexity and ambiguity of the supposedly true stories they are telling, while holding their opponents to impossibly high standards for establishing the unvarnished truth. As a result, each gets to dismiss the other side while also making itself vulnerable to further attack. Crews, for example, claims

to offer the truth of science against the falsehood of hysterical opponents. But, of course, it is possible to conduct an analysis of empirical arguments that would look like Prozan's analysis of therapy, which reminds us how culture-bound these arguments are. Raw observations made by scientists are processed through different lenses because scientific work stands within traditions that offer different perspectives. This is not to say that there are no facts, but that the factual world is not devoid of ambiguity because there are different frameworks for making sense of data and scientists must construct narratives to convey their findings.

The writings of Crews make clear yet another problem with the idealistic attachment to a simplified version of the truth. Because Crews has a mission to defend truth from falsehood, there is no room for compromise. Eventually nothing, it seems, will satisfy him or achieve his aim to defend the truth other than the utter destruction of psychoanalysis and every related school of therapy. Not for him the "seeming rationality" of "moderate" positions. Responding to a therapist who in fact agrees with him that some memories are true and some are false, Crews accuses her of a lack of rigor and "middle of the road extremism" (249).

Crews's "exchange" with therapists in the *New York Review of Books* vividly highlights this polarizing dynamic. To exemplify its vituperative and unproductive nature, we can look at the "dialogue" between Crews and Prozan (a familiar cast of characters appears regularly in all of these writings). As we have seen, Prozan is particularly disturbing to false-memory writers because she acknowledges that diagnostic tools are culture-bound, which is not a controversial claim in many contemporary conversations about the production of knowledge. Crews uses a snippet of the quote from Prozan's book that Ofshe and Watters cite at greater length. In a paragraph devoted to "young [Freudian] fanatics" who believe that memories can be recovered, even back to the womb, he concludes with this sentence: "And in *Feminist Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy*, Charlotte Krause Prozan, who sensed which way the wind was blowing long ago, reports that whereas analysts used to be watchful for penis envy in women patients, today 'we are looking for sexual abuse'" (221).

Crews is unfair in two ways here. First, he suggests Prozan's guilt (and these therapists are criminal, according to Crews) by association. Her practices, as he views them, can be adequately represented by categorizing her with the more extreme and bizarre practices of recovered-memory therapy. Second, he quotes her out of context so that her acknowledgment of the cultural reinforcement for "looking for sexual abuse" becomes an unqualified endorsement of the practice. Crews is crafting a uniformly hostile argument designed to win unquestioning support for his view that there is no point to listening to therapists discuss the psychoanalytic process because, well, they are narrow-minded fanatics.

Understandably provoked, Prozan responds in a similar vein. Characterizing his critique as a “hit piece,” Prozan represents Crews as irrational, “polarizing the topic by vindictive, bitter, and emotional attacks against those who disagree” with him (235). But Crews has the last word in this exchange, and his response, of course, is not meant to seek common ground but rather to demolish her integrity as a therapist. He mocks her feminist analysis as based on the reading of only one feminist article about recovered memories of abuse, though her book actually includes a wide range of references to feminist scholarship that has informed her thinking. He also asserts that she takes her direction from ill-digested readings of incest survivor handbooks. Then, adding injury to insult, he draws from her case notes to insinuate that she has harmed a patient. To Prozan’s simple charge that she has been quoted out of context, he responds, “To be sure, that phrase was plucked from a paragraph in which Prozan displayed a momentary realization that diagnoses are subject to fashion. . . . the quotation accurately reflects her policy” (255). His sarcasm transforms her into an unreflective therapist who bullies her patients into illusory and destructive memories of child abuse.

Because Prozan is characterized as a faux feminist, she can be used to make “fashionable” feminism a target. This strategy is employed again in another of his contributions to the memory wars when he attacks two other feminist therapists, Adrienne Harris and Judy Messler Davies: “With their less than deferential reference to Freud, their portentous hints about the need . . . for altering ‘power within the family,’ and their scorn for the ‘magisterial’ (male) analysts’ ‘evenly hovering attention, neutrality and capacity to stand aside and objectify,’ Harris and Davies are mounting an unapologetic feminist assault on the traditionally masculine ethos of Freudianism” (245). Because Crews is a self-confessed “Freud-basher,” it is stunning that he here stands with Freud against feminists on the grounds that they are assaulting the “masculine ethos of Freudianism.” At this moment, his expressions of commitment to the “rational empirical ethos” and the “capacity to stand aside and objectify” can be seen to function as one rhetorical strategy of a male backlash against feminism and the feminizing of the profession of therapy.

Crews’s use of the Ross Cheit case reveals how tortured the logic of this backlash can become. Cheit, a professor at Brown University, recovered memories of being abused by the administrator of a summer camp who eventually confessed to the abuse. Given the way false-memory partisans have cast doubt on the veracity of women’s memories, it makes sense that only a male victim of nonincestuous abuse could provide for Crews a convincing example of a “true story” of recovered memory. The case is tricky, but Crews valiantly attempts to enlist Cheit’s substantiated memories of abuse for Crews’s “side.” First, Crews asserts that Ross Cheit’s memories of sexual abuse were “proved beyond question.” Though elsewhere Crews acknowledges the prevalence of sexual abuse,

this is the only time he firmly credits the truth of a story about recovered memories of abuse—and it puts him in an awkward position. Because he believes Cheit, Crews wants to prove that Cheit never really forgot his abuse. This way, Cheit's true story of abuse will prove the truth of Crews's position: only quacks believe in repression, and so recovered memories are quackery. Cheit's uncertainty about what happened to his memories helps a little; Cheit tells Crews in a phone conversation that he is "inclined to doubt that he abruptly and completely consigned his experience to oblivion" (165). In his original essay for the *New York Review of Books*, Crews had concocted a firm story to shore up Cheit's tentative words: "the adult Cheit *refocused* his faded but unrepressed experiences after he had read a book about pedophilia (as he did) and became morally exercised about it" (55).

This ringing conclusion is revised when Crews is informed by Cheit that he had read the book at the suggestion of his psychotherapist *after* his memories came back. Crews rewrites and comes up with this: "The possibility—indeed, the likelihood—that Cheit lost track of the incident at issue through an ordinary process of atrophy renders the example of his restored memory useless as proof of repression" (166). While it would seem that Cheit's story—he experienced anguish as an adult, went to see a therapist, recalled forgotten memories of abuse—serves to strengthen the validity of therapeutic accounts about long-occluded traumatic events that belatedly and painfully intrude into the present, Crews waves away these features of Cheit's story by turning the "possibility" of memory atrophy into a "likelihood" (165–66). In an "exchange" with Crews, Michael Erdelyi writes: "Ignoring for the moment the question of repression, which is a vast red herring in Crews's article, Cheit's recovered memory suggests that memories do not invariably decay over time. Even if, for the sake of argument, we chose to deny the existence of repression as Freud defined it—the exclusion of some memory or impulse from consciousness—inaccessible or forgotten memories *for whatever reason*, are still subject to recovery" (269).³ In Crews's response to Erdelyi, he makes no mention of Cheit, a "real-world case" (and Crews likes practical examples) that ultimately calls for too much openness to what would be called a "survivor story" if a woman told it.⁴

Crews's polemical tactics seem far removed from the presumed ethos of science as characterized by dispassionate, reasoned inquiry. Passionate rhetoric on the part of advocates on both sides makes difficult a productive discussion—productive of doubt as well as assent—of the issue of child sexual abuse and its representation. However, there are feminists among the false-memory movement who are genuinely interested in finding common ground with recovered-memory advocates because they understand that women's experiences of sexual abuse were long rendered invisible and silent. While a number of false-memory writers tend, like Crews, to make feminist therapy seem a monolithic and almost criminal practice, these writers complicate that story by

their very existence.⁵ Two writers who have been particularly important in this regard are Elizabeth Loftus and Carol Tavris.

Elizabeth Loftus is highly visible both as a memory researcher and as an expert witness for defendants in recovered-memory cases. In addition to numerous academic publications, she has coauthored two first-person popular books that recount “true stories” (*Witness for the Defense*, xiii) of her personal and professional experiences. In the most recent of these, *The Myth of Repressed Memory* (1994), she labels those who believe in repressed memories “True Believers” and those who challenge them as “The Skeptics,” a way of categorizing each side that makes clear which side she is on.

My research into the malleability of memory aligns me with the Skeptics, but I am also sympathetic to the True Believers’ concerns. I do not want to see a return of those days, not so very long ago, when a victim’s cries for help went unheard and accusations of sexual abuse were automatically dismissed as fantasy or wish-fulfillment and shunted away into the backwaters of public conscience. Nor can I automatically accept the idea that significant numbers of therapists are carelessly implanting memories in their client’s minds. I don’t believe the world is so purely black and white. (32)

And so she answers all letters, talks to both sides, and tries to remember that the debate is “not about sexual abuse or the hard-won gains of the women’s movement,” not about “ideology” but about memory (213). Only because Loftus does not see her research on memory as situated within political and discursive contexts, or on a terrain where a narrative war is taking place, can she claim that her work is above the fray.

Loftus’s research on the shiftiness of memory is put to a number of polemical, if not ideological, purposes. Spence uses Loftus’s work to legitimize his view that “narrative truth” emerges in the therapeutic process. For Spence, her work explains why it is no longer “scientific” to believe that undistorted, foundational truths of the past are easy to retrieve. Though this challenge to “historical truth” is disturbing to Ofshe and Watters, they also use Loftus, but to attack a particular set of narratives that have emerged in therapy. Ofshe and Watters, like Loftus herself, thus can retain a conviction about the unquestionable truthfulness of their own stories about incest and memory while challenging the truth of narratives about recovered memories. In recovered-memory arguments, however, Loftus’s research is criticized for downplaying studies that show the accuracy of long-term memory and for overgeneralizing her own findings, which do not focus on adult memories of abuse. Feminist proponents of recovered memory, because of their insistent focus on the relation between knowledge and power, are particularly disturbed that Loftus’s work on the

manipulability of memory abets those who would like past sufferings to “go unheard.” Bending over backward to demonstrate her awareness of this problem, Loftus actually cites concerns about her own work expressed by Judith Herman. Herman says that it offers a “new way to challenge the authenticity of child abuse and invalidate women’s testimony about child abuse” (qtd. in *Myth of Repressed Memory*, 213). Loftus’s research, as she admits here, functions in multiple ways as it is appropriated for different polemics. Indeed the anxiety created when reading this literature is caused by the effect on the reader of becoming invested in the truth of certain stories—those of recovered-memory proponents or those of false-memory proponents—only to have that faith betrayed. If, as Freud says, anxiety is the anticipation of danger, reading the opposing texts on recovered memory is likely to create anxious readers.

Loftus’s work seems less partisan than the work of those who both defend and attack her research. She is more open and counts herself a feminist who wants to acknowledge the frightening consequences of false accusations without denying the frequency of child sexual abuse. Yet her work straddles both sides of the memory wars not only because of her explicit desire to establish a middle ground but also because of an implicit structuring tension that exists between the stories she tells about her personal life and her research on memory.⁶ For example, Loftus’s first mass-market book, *Witness for the Defense*, contains a “true story” about an event that occurred when she was on the witness stand explaining how two mothers might have used leading questions to distort their children’s memories of being abused at a summer camp. Loftus was asked to be an expert witness because the idea of memories as formed through a manipulable process of rehearsal is important to new views of memory and to her own research. In the course of her testimony, the prosecutor skeptically asked: “You really don’t know anything about five-year old children who have been sexually abused do you?” At that moment a “memory flew out at me, out of the blackness of the past, hitting me full force.” She answers the prosecutor, “I do know something about this subject because I was abused when I was six years old” (149).

With the force of a blow, a forgotten and apparently unrehearsed memory of being abused by a baby-sitter suddenly emerges after many years, its truth uneasily opposed to the falsehood of children’s “rehearsed” memories or the “contaminated” memories that she produces in her laboratory to show memories are but “mist” (4). Nonetheless, in her second popular book, *The Myth of Repressed Memory*, she argues against the existence of “repressed” memories because they depend upon belief in an invisible, unproven mental operation, repression. In narrating her own abuse story, Loftus almost admits that her memory is governed by an unseen force: the unconscious? To the defense lawyer who thanks her for sharing her memory, she responds: “I’m not sure I had any choice” (151). At this moment, Loftus sounds remarkably like a

woman recovering a traumatic memory. Recovered-memory proponents have seized on Loftus's story to argue persuasively that she has not been able to integrate her own experience into her research; her straddling of two "sides" is then a manifestation of her split response to the issue of recovered memory.

Another interpretation is possible. If Loftus's doubt that she "had any choice" supports belief in spontaneous, recovered memories, Loftus perhaps includes her story about her abuse because it strengthens her credibility as an expert witness against the validity of recovery memory. Precisely because she has recovered memories of her own abuse, Loftus can be seen as unbiased when she disputes other women's testimony about recovered memories. After all, her traumatic memory (it hits her "full force") is a response to a question about her credentials: "You really don't know anything about five-year-old children who have been sexually abused, do you?" Oh yes I do, she tells him. I am an expert here too. This is a strange kind of credentializing, which depends upon Loftus's commitment to two very different narratives about sexual abuse and memory.

When she narrates another personal memory in *The Myth of Repressed Memory*, she chooses one that easily supports the thesis that memories are reconstructions. In this story, Loftus tells us about her mother's death, an event she also draws upon to demonstrate "motivated forgetting," a concept she finds more acceptable than repression because it is consciously willed: "When I think about my mother's death, for example, the images and emotions are so painful that I immediately push them away out of mind" (214–15). To depict a memorial truth "that never happened," she begins by describing what *did* happen one summer when she was fourteen: "one bright morning I woke up and my mother was dead, drowned in a swimming pool" (39). That, she says is the "happening truth," or what Spence might call the "historical truth." She also had adopted a narrative truth about these events, one that was suddenly revised, many years after her mother died, when her uncle informed her that she was the one who found her mother in the pool. Until this moment, she had believed that her aunt had found the body. For three days, Loftus developed ever more detailed memories of finding her mother until her brother called to tell her that her uncle had checked the facts and found that his memory was wrong. With a sense of loss and grief, she had to give up her newly minted memories, more coherent than her old fragmented ones.

Loftus's personal story of an invented memory is much more vivid than the ones developed in her laboratory in which subjects are led to believe that as children they were lost in a mall. While Loftus's story certainly depicts the malleability of memory, it does something more. Like the story about the baby-sitter who abused her, the narratives of her mother's death evoke our sympathy—and hence belief. It does not seem surprising that Elizabeth Loftus, a haunted woman, would continue to be concerned about "victims' cries" or why she would dedicate herself to exploring the way memories shift, separating us, pro-

tecting us from pasts that may be more ambiguous and disturbing than even the horrible stories we devise to represent them. Stories about false memories, like stories about recovered memories, are conditioned not only by ideological ends—which side are you on?—but also by their ability to shape the potential meanings found in our mundane but deeply felt pasts. Certainly Loftus tells us about the “new” story of her mother’s death as part of a power play; it provides compelling evidence for her argument about memory’s malleability. At the same time, her account of rescripting the past demonstrates that the “new” story of her mother’s death allowed her access to unmanageable material that her first story could not reach. Because the “new” story, awful as it was, gave her consolation, Loftus found it hard to give up.

Like Loftus, the feminist sociopsychologist Carol Tavris has become a public witness against recovered memories, though initially she was more interested in arguing that the early political feminist incest story about abuse is better for women than the feminist recovery story. By comparing her discussion of “survivor” narratives in her *Mismeasure of Woman* (1992) with an essay of hers published a year later in the *New York Times Book Review*, we can see how her analysis of recovery narratives changes and consolidates as it is retold in a different venue and at time when media skepticism dominates reports about recovered memories. Tavris, like many others in the debate, is ultimately pulled into the role of an arbiter between truth and falsehood. Her initial feminist analysis of how political and institutional pressures shape narratives of abuse becomes something quite different when redesigned for a more general audience. Her *Times* piece is a lecture about incest stories that largely consigns “recovery stories” to the realm of error. In return, those feminists who want to marginalize her political analysis are able to denounce Tavris as part of the backlash against feminism.

In a small section of *The Mismeasure of Woman* titled “Choosing a Story: Victims, Survivors, and the Problem of Blame,” Tavris probes the “misty intersection between political analysis and psychological trauma” (313) in an effort to answer the question: how did we get from Louise Armstrong’s political analysis of incest to a reliance on the highly individualizing narratives of psychotherapy? To some extent we have already told this story ourselves, but Tavris’s contributions are especially trenchant because of her keen appreciation of the cultural reinforcements for abuse narratives. Drawing on the work of Nancy Matthews, who has analyzed how, in the evolution of the antirape movement in Los Angeles, grassroots work incorporating feminist patriarchy theory was gradually replaced with state-supported and apolitical therapeutic programs, Tavris explains that decisions of funding agencies helped to define rape in the 1980s as an individual rather than a political problem. At the same time, the proliferation of public horror stories about child abuse deflected attention from Reagan’s cutbacks in funding for children’s programs, prenatal

care, and other forms of welfare to women, children, and families. The proliferating and increasingly personal narratives of “past” incest abuse were thus ever more at odds with the present social reality in which large numbers of children were (and are) being maltreated because of their growing impoverishment. With few resources supporting the grassroots feminist work that provided a broad political critique, therapy provided the context for personal stories about abuse and provided the place where anxieties about the changing role of women, expanded definitions of normative sexuality, and economic insecurity could be represented—and somewhat contained. Within the individualized and constrained discursive community of “survivors,” women talk about their difficulties and find an explanation for their problems: they were victims of abuse. Tavis notes that this story tells women that their problems stem from past events; their current realities, however difficult, are not the key issue. And by telling abuse narratives, women gain the support of other victims who offer them the comfort of shared understanding.⁷

Yet though the abuse story appeals to many women and decreases their isolation, Tavis argues that it does not work to challenge a system that provides ever less to those who have least. As she points out, middle-class survivors do better than working-class survivors because they have more options. Tavis’s expressed belief that survivor groups can make women feel better is mitigated by her political analyses of a narrative that focuses on “past reasons for current problems”: “It overlooks the current realities that entrap survivors, and, by assuming that all survivors share economic opportunities as well as psychological suffering, it blurs the different prospects that people have to recover from trauma and to make abiding changes in their lives” (321). Tavis does not deny that women are traumatized; instead, she challenges the political efficacy of conventional, highly individualized narratives of traumatic abuse. “Nothing changes.”

Tavis’s irritation with the success of what she calls “the sexual-survivor ideology” became more public as a result of an essay she wrote for the *New York Times Book Review*, “Beware the Incest-Survivor Machine.” The title, despite its jocular reference to Lewis Carroll’s “Jabberwocky,” suggests a paranoia about mechanically produced incest survivor stories that was absent from her book. Not surprisingly, the article contains very little of the powerful feminist political analysis that fueled her book’s critique of sexual abuse stories. Instead, she focuses on much-attacked books on incest, the best known, of course, being Bass and Davis’s *Courage to Heal*. Though Tavis mentions the social anxieties crystallized in abuse narratives, her review is primarily devoted to making the case that recovered-memory horror stories express a popular but outdated view of memory. Loftus’s work (not mentioned in *Mismeasure of Women*) and other accounts of memory are extensively discussed and complex views of memory contrasted with the simplistic stories about the past found in abuse-

survivor books. “Beware the Incest-Survivor Machine” contains no discussion of the economic resources of survivors or of federal cutbacks. In the last three paragraphs of her essay, Tavis finally does return to her book’s concern about the depoliticization of women’s victimization, but because feminist scholarship has been marginalized, her conclusion simply functions to add to the guilt of foolish “survivors.” Not only do abuse “survivors” tell misguided stories about the past but they impede social change.

Tavis’s patronizing account was bound to elicit angry responses that could ignore her now reduced political analysis. The *New York Times Book Review* printed two full pages of letters generated in response to “Beware the Incest-Survivor Machine.” The first letter is from Judith Herman, who begins, “As a professional authority on incest and one of the few writers whom Carol Tavis cites with respect, I must protest her mean-spirited and completely gratuitous attack on incest survivors,” and ends, “If Ms. Tavis is really so tired of hearing about incest, she should stop trashing other women and join with us to try to end the epidemic of sexual violence” (“Real Incest,” 3). The next letter reminds her that “child abuse and sexual abuse are not rare phenomena” (“Real Incest,” 3). Another tells Tavis that the crime of incest is often unseen and unprosecuted and asks her what she thinks victims should do. There is only one letter, written by a member of “a family in which one member . . . declared herself to be an ‘incest victim’” that applauds Tavis essay in an unqualified way (“Real Incest,” 27). Of course the nearly univocal quality of the responses to Tavis is a problem too. This “exchange,” much like the Crews “exchange,” is highly moralized and adversarial.⁸

In Tavis’s response to these letters, she reiterates her concern about real abuse and defends her feminism. To raise concerns about stories of abuse “does not make me antifeminist, any more than criticizing some policies of my government makes me anti-American” (27). Of course, in her review she never does criticize policies. This difference between the analysis in her book and the one provided in her review is significant because it means that Tavis’s essay in the *Times* does not do the kind of feminist critical work that she both practices and commends in her book. For her article in the *New York Times Book Review*, Tavis more narrowly, and predictably, focuses on survivors and therapists as causing sexual hysteria by manufacturing memories. Not surprisingly she, like Loftus, is now on the board of the False Memory Syndrome Foundation, whose profound influence on media coverage has been criticized by Mike Staunton in the *Columbia Journalism Review* as actively blocking the publication of stories that either challenge the phenomenon of false memory or try to investigate the FMS Foundation itself.

Also missing from the *NYTBR* exchange between Tavis and her detractors is any further analysis of the enormous market for “survivor” books, one of the explicit causes of Tavis’s alarm. She notes in her opening paragraph that more

than five hundred thousand copies of *Courage to Heal* had been sold by early 1993. The exploding market for survivor books and survivor groups worries writers on both sides of the debate. For example, an accused parent, Mark Pen-dergrast in *Victims of Memory*, and a victim of incest, Louise Armstrong in *Rocking the Cradle*, demonstrate a surprising congruence of opinion about the need to criticize the immense appeal of survivor experiences and cures as consumer products. Louise Armstrong, whose important early work we have already discussed, surveys with disgust the recent incest “scene” in her *Rocking the Cradle*: “More and more, breaking the silence—having come to be an end in itself—had come to seem bankrupt. Amazingly at the same time, it was obviously increasingly bankable” (206). Incest, she points out, is always on the menu of talk shows, and most magazines and newspapers have published numerous articles on the recovered-memory/false-memory syndrome. Offering and contesting incest therapy, writing and buying books about incest, constitutes a lively market for largely middle-class consumers. For Armstrong and Tavris, women who tell incest are, like Trueblood, interfering with uplift, but here the uplift of women. These tellers represent women in the worst possible way, that is, as stereotypic, passive victims, and make money while doing so.

Arguably, in the absence of political (public policy does not support the domestic work of women), social (women remain more tied to the private sphere than are men), or legal solutions (rape and child abuse remain difficult to prosecute), many women use the sphere of consumption, long a feminized domain, in an attempt to solve their complex problems. Shopping at a bookstore, a woman can buy a form of therapy. This product will also offer her advice about how to exercise her agency by choosing a therapist. (Indeed, a section on selecting a therapist is now a standard addendum to psychology books about incest). Through an act of consumption, then, such women can place themselves within the discourse of survivorship and satisfy their desire for an identity—often that of an innocent victim—that releases them from guilt about their ambivalent and anxious participation in family life. There are paradoxes, of course, in finding freedom in an identity linked to past victimization; but despite the passivity involved in the victim’s role, it is one that does provide opportunities for self-expression and feelings of change, “recovery.”

Those who join groups like the False Memory Syndrome Foundation also find comfort from an identification with other victims. Their individual lives become amplified and validated as members of a different kind of survivor group. The FMSF newsletter publishes letters, often from “dads,” who express their sense of betrayal by daughters and vent their rage at manipulative therapists. These are the kinds of stories found in all false-memory literature. In *The Myth of Repressed Memory*, for example, Loftus tells a representative false-memory story, the story of “Doug,” in a chapter entitled “The Family Destroyed.” (She does not seem aware that this title presumes that the family

was once happily unified—Doug’s view only.) Doug represents himself as an honest, caring, concerned father who cannot understand, and strongly denies, the accusations of his wife and daughters that he has sexually abused his daughters. Doug’s story, like many survivor stories, is told entirely from his point of view and emphasizes his victimization and slow recovery from the trauma he experienced as an accused father: “He is learning how to reconstruct his memories [“scientific” therapy?] by pushing the accusations, therapy, sessions, and trial scenes from his mind. While the recent, painful memories continue to intrude, he is becoming more skillful at fixing the earlier, happier memories in his mind, and calling them forth when he needs to remind himself that his family was together and happy, once upon a time” (138). By using the words “once upon a time,” Loftus inadvertently suggests that Doug is creating a fairy tale, one in which the father, like the father in Stein’s vignette, creates himself as a traumatized victim. That the false-memory movement is also participating in the construction and consumption of survivor identities and myths about the family has been masked because false-memory narratives are linked to a discourse of science and reason. For this reason, the survivor identities of “dads” may be more convincing, ultimately more viable than those of daughters. In our culture, it is women, not men, who are usually designated the prototypical, irrational, excessive consumers of trendy, psychologized identities.

The problem is that at the very moment that consumers, whether male or female, choose familiar plots of recovered or false memory to embody their experiences, the individuality of that experience becomes regulated. Yet that regulation allows enhanced representation. There is an evolution from a nearly formless telling such as Gertrude Stein’s barely intelligible vignette to the widely disseminated and recognized plots of narratives about recovered memories or about false-memory syndrome. The very availability of these genres has made them seem to be faddish products. In the America of the 1980s and 1990s, consumption and self-expression are intertwined. As Anne Norton remarks: “Consumption offers a mode of discourse, and an immanent symbolic lexicon, to those who lack access to the press, to publishing, to those political and economic institutions in which some speak and write authoritatively” (65). And we could add, consumption may increase access to these realms of authority. There is a certain cultural status and visibility attached to telling stories of abuse, whether by daughters or fathers like Doug. Yet as a result of an emerging middle-class consensus about the dangerous power of female psychologists, their emancipatory potential for women has been reduced.

Belief that accounts of male victimage are more real than women’s stories of their victimization is reflected in fears about a supposed cultural disorder—feminist hostility to the father—that recalls the Moynihan report’s concerns about the matriarchal black family as spawning a culture of pathology. In false-

memory literature, a powerful, male-hating, feminist community is accused of making men into marginalized victims. Though it has largely been women patients who have been accused of hysteria in the memory wars, there is an hysterical tone to some of these pronouncements, whether by men or women. A web site designed to provide legal help for men accused of incest, for example, provides a bizarre form of testimony to women's scary efforts to appropriate male authority. In a futuristic fable, Kenneth R. Pangborn explains:

The plan devised by the old elders of Female supremacy was one built on the philosophy of slowly boiling the frog to death. Cleverly devised sexual harassment laws made just about any act on the part of men actionable. Women used this to advance in the economic world, to seize power by inches.⁹

The imagery of the boiled frog in the aged, female supremacist's cauldron draws on the metaphors of the sexual abuse "witch hunt." That this rhetoric of the witch hunt is assumed to be disinterested by even a feminist such as Elaine Showalter is a sign of its broad popular acceptance. One consequence of this view is that it has become easy to think that women's narratives about recovered memories of incest are crazy, predictable, and reductive in their accounts of the past. Our next chapter, on memoirs about incest, will show how these narratives belie such expectations.