

Introduction

Just thirty years ago, a good local library might have been able to provide its patrons with two or three books on the topic of incest. Today, incest is the subject of innumerable films, novels, memoirs, scholarly articles, and self-help books. The word *incest* might still provoke anxiety, but it is no longer as unspeakable as it was when feminists in the late 1970s proclaimed: incest is not the taboo, speaking about it is. It may even seem that incest is now talked about too much. Such a concern is based on the assumption that women's testimonies about incest have become formulaic, marketable products. Yet the belief, reassuring to some, that women's stories of incest are all alike, and most likely inauthentic, may work to muffle stories that women have only recently dared to tell. To encourage readers to think again about why telling incest might be both difficult and productive, this book charts some of the significant historical shifts in the discursive models available for telling and hearing about incest, shifts that have taken place in the last hundred years. We hope that this history will inspire readers to keep listening when women "tell" incest.

By the mid-1990s, women's incest stories were the subject of much public attention and controversy. This debate centered on narratives of the recovered memory movement (in which daughters recall long-forgotten experiences of incest) and opposing narratives of the false-memory syndrome movement (in which therapists are attacked for encouraging daughters to develop false memories). At issue was the truthfulness of a dominant form of women's "telling," what we call the "recovery story." In this particular type of narrative, a middle-class woman suffers amnesia about an incest experience until a therapist helps her to retrieve lost memories of it and eventually heal her life. Perhaps in response to notorious court cases, the favored response to such accounts, as witnessed in the national media, has been to debate their truth or falsehood: thumbs up or thumbs down?¹

Doubts about the legitimacy of incest narratives and the motives of those who tell them are nothing new. We will show how incest narratives are formed under conditions of uncertainty not only about "what happened" but about

who will listen. In our view, questions about the truth and falsehood of incest stories have tended to limit understanding of the pressures shaping these narratives. We also need to ask: why does an incest narrative inspire particular forms of resistance or acknowledgment? How have forms for telling incest changed? Under what conditions does a model for telling become dominant?

Telling Incest emphasizes clusters of incest narratives defined in relation to specific historical contexts, cultural politics, and kinds of reception. The form of incest that we explore in this study occurs when fathers (or close surrogates) have sexual intercourse with their daughters. This framing of incest will be neither precise nor broad enough to satisfy all of our readers, but it allows us to focus on characteristic forms of father-daughter incest. Though this book studies narratives, all of them marked by the gap between the experience of incest and its narrative representation, it argues that the experience of incest must be acknowledged as an actuality that puts significant pressure on models for telling. In first-person memoirs about incest, the narrative negotiation with an experience of incest is obvious. But the actuality of incest—what we call “the thing” (borrowing from Toni Morrison, who uses the term to gesture toward bitter historical realities associated with slavery)—also puts pressure on fictions about incest.

One way in which the power of “the thing” is demonstrated is in the persistence of the belief that incest is something that happens to *other* people. Which other people? Them.² The projection of the actuality of incest onto cultural others, often the poor and black, is a sign of “the thing’s” danger to imaginary, moralized communities. Fantasized moral havens provide a sense of order and safety for their inhabitants, that is, for most us. Another sign of “the thing’s” destabilizing power is the commonplace belief that incest happens more often in the fantasy life of individuals than it does in real life. Of course incest may be fantasized, no doubt often is, but what is interesting is the extent to which an emphasis on the place of fantasy functions as a disavowal of “the thing.”³ In our cultural moment, for example, the idea of incest as fantasy is often invoked to discredit the truth of narrations of incest and to call into question memories said to be conjured up in therapy. As we will show, many incest narratives are marked not so much by memory lapses, although these may be evident, as by the difficulties of finding a workable framework for telling. These difficulties include gaining a sympathetic audience, avoiding retaliation, and finding a way around the familiar and debasing personae associated with tellers: the liar, the seducer, the hysteric, the victim.

Our book will argue that there is a wide range of ways to tell incest. We focus on fictional and nonfiction narratives, although there are other genres in which telling occurs.⁴ For heuristic purposes, we have given names to several distinctive types of narratives—the “feminist incest story,” the “recovery story,” the “false-memory story,” the “incest survivor memoir.” However,

when we discuss the specific differences between groups of stories, we hope not to enclose them within one reductive narrative paradigm, understood as particularly faddish or conventional. Clearly incest narratives produced under different historical conditions are distinguishable from one another, but even roughly contemporaneous stories that share generic similarities are not simple clones of one another.

Our own process of coming to understand incest narratives may serve to illustrate why it may be difficult to acknowledge the complexity of stories located within a single genre. When we first decided to study the incest survivor memoir, for example, we were confident about what we would find even before we started reading. We were primed by the debate about recovered and false memories to expect that memoirs about incest would be stories about recovered memories. For this reason, we also assumed that our response to them should be to decide on their truth or falsehood. After all, because incest is defined as a horrifying crime and evil act, the credibility of an accuser and the factual basis of the accusation are matters of serious concern. But focusing on truth and falsehood kept us measuring the credibility of narrators and the credulity of audiences rather than asking why our response was so constrained.

Because our response to women's incest narratives was shaped by the public outcry about the dangers of false memories, we feared that incest survivor memoirs might well be exploiting women's various experiences of distress, making them formulaic and undercutting the seriousness of earlier feminist political analyses of incest as about power. We were surprised to discover that there was a significant gap between these often thoughtful and carefully crafted memoirs and their representation by many critics as self-pitying and naive victim stories. In addition, we discovered far fewer full-length memoirs than we expected to find, which led us to question the accuracy of the widespread perception that narratives of sexual abuse have reached an "epidemic frequency" (Crews, 129).⁵ Sobered by our experience of reading and analyzing incest survivor memoirs, we were reminded that even feminists, perhaps especially feminists, may abet such fears when trying to separate themselves from women who are assumed to be hysterical and invested in victim culture. We have learned to take to heart Tania Modleski's slogan about women in patriarchy: "One is a hysteric; two are a movement" (*Old Wives' Tales*, 22). Read more than two incest survivor memoirs, we discovered, and their class analysis and their challenging experimentation with narrative conventions of telling suddenly become visible.

Analyzing our initial skepticism about memoirs of incest, we were reminded how much the socially powerful rhetoric of the media reflects and plays upon our fears about being duped, fears exacerbated in an age in which unreliable and unverifiable information proliferates. Our effort to understand women's tellings of incest was thus complicated by our repeated efforts to sup-

ply the fairness usually lacking in media accounts of sensational events. However, we came to understand that our hope for magisterial judiciousness reflected an unconscious desire to meet requirements for credibility that the debate about true and false memories has vividly dramatized. As women and feminists, we are speakers who are, in the cultural imaginary, doubly linked to hysteria and unreason: No wonder that we were trying so hard to be reasonable and that other feminists in this debate often bend over backward to articulate an absolutely sensible position.

An important aid to discovering our voice was Janice Haaken's fine but obsessively responsible book, *Pillar of Salt*. Haaken's work on the sexual abuse recovery movement has been important to our own understanding of the political and social tensions fueling the memory wars. Although she is a therapist working in the trenches, and her perspective and concerns are thus somewhat different from our own, Haaken shares our desire to "move beyond the poles of 'true and false' recollections of child abuse" (2). Her method is to find a "third position" (8); but finally, it is hard to discern what that position is. Haaken attempts to be completely responsible, to address every point of view. Unfortunately, this practice makes her book confusingly inclusive, with the result that its interpretative stance is difficult to discern. Haaken's book showed us that the way out of the true-false dichotomy is not to be found in a narrative that aspires to an incontrovertible reasonableness.

As we have discovered, reason itself is a partisan in the recent controversies about the status of recovered memory. To show how the voice of reason is deployed in these debates, **Chapter 1, "Ordinary Doings,"** begins with a discussion of *Rewriting the Soul* by Ian Hacking, a prominent philosopher who has been influential in debates about how to understand claims of child abuse. Hacking tries to establish a historical genealogy for phrases such as *child abuse* and *sexual harassment* so that reasonable people might come to some agreement about what these terms properly refer to. Like many social constructionists, Hacking hopes to emphasize, in a productive way, the postmodernist understanding that reality is constructed by language. Yet to counter the new—and threatening—discursive practice he names "memoro-politics," Hacking himself scurries back to foundational entities—"character" and "the soul"—as places of refuge. His argument relies upon the solid truth of these terms, a truth that memoro-politics, allied with a coercive therapeutic science of the self, apparently undoes by encouraging women to rename and thereby invent the past.

Similarly, Allan Young, in *The Harmony of Illusions*, argues that post-traumatic stress disorder, sometimes assumed to be a timeless and universal problem, became "real" through the use of narratives, such as the various *Diagnostic and Statistical Manuals of Mental Disorders* and developing medical

practices. Like Hacking, Young offers a disturbing history of “a new language of self-deception” that justifies “the emergence of a new class of authorities” (4). Young’s investment in the determining power of language and social practices thus shapes his reading of traumatic memory narratives: they require “self-deception.” How, then, can he consider the impact of actual events, events that victims may not be able to name?

For us, incest is not simply an intrapsychic event, and it is not simply a narrative invention. Although we share with social constructionists an awareness of the constitutive role of language, and our book considers the social contexts for telling, we challenge the so-called reasonable story about *child abuse* by showing some of what such a story silences. Using case records of incest, the letters of Maimie Pinzer, the narrative of Sojourner Truth, and the writings of Gertrude Stein, we explore accounts, written in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in which women manage to narrate incestuous experiences even before those experiences are given the name *child abuse* or *incest*. These new interpreters of experience create a space for telling that is almost ghostly, so tenuous is its authority and its claim to be something other than an assault on public morality.

In the late nineteenth century, the dominant narrative about incest locates the actuality of incest in homes of the poor and the racially other, understood to be sites of immorality. So, for example, for a black man or woman to speak about incest is to reinforce the notion that the black family is a “tangle of pathology,” to use the words of the Moynihan report (*Negro Family*, 30). In **Chapter 2, “Signifying Incest,”** we discuss how two celebrated African-American writers, Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison, tell incest. In Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, an African-American father, Trueblood, tells a story about incest that both reveals the white father (as embodied in Mr. Norton) to be a perpetrator and allows Trueblood, as a perpetrator himself, to enhance his own paternal authority. This paternalistic narrative is challenged, we argue, by Toni Morrison in *The Bluest Eye*, a novel that attempts to narrate the story of incest from what was, in the late 1960s, the almost unimaginable position of the black daughter.

The cultural work done by these narratives is enormous, and this is why we devote a chapter to African-American incest novels in this book.⁶ They rewrite the received incest story so as to shift the responsibility for incest from marginalized and poor people to those whose social status and authority allow them to commit acts of incestuous violence and to silence speech about them. The African-American incest narrative thus gives shape to a realm of experience occluded by the dominant story, namely that slavery was a paternalistic institution in which white men economically and sexually exploited people that they defined as their dependents. While this rewriting of the official story may itself become a moralized enclosure, one that makes it difficult for African-

American women to tell about incest in their own families, it defiantly makes visible the larger social field in which incest takes place and explains why incest is projected onto culturally marginal people as something only *they* do.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, white feminists drew upon the writings of African-American women, not only *The Bluest Eye* but also Gayle Jones's *Corregidora* and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, in order to formulate what we call the "feminist incest story." **Chapter 3, "It's about Patriarchal Power,"** focuses on two influential nonfiction books, Louise Armstrong's *Kiss Daddy Good Night* and Judith Herman's *Father-Daughter Incest*, that tell a story about incest as an effect of patriarchy. The feminist incest story challenges official claims about incest that are predominant and pervasive in the professional discourses of anthropology and psychology: the claim that the incest taboo founds culture by requiring the exogamous exchange of women, making incest seem rare and outside culture; the claim that daughters who tell about incest are projecting their own transgressive desires for their fathers; the claim that cold wives and collusive mothers are to blame. Authors of the feminist incest story made these familiar claims seem strange by turning the tables. They collected women's stories to show that incest was not rare but ordinary; they challenged Freud's focus on the daughter's desire by focusing on the father's desire and power, an emphasis that lifted blame from mothers as well as daughters.

Patriarchal myths seemed to be replaced, at last, by women's truth. But producers of the feminist incest story did not see that by effecting a reversal, their story was shaped by the culturally powerful narratives that they had rejected. The feminist incest story, disseminated at a moment of high feminist expectation, assumed that speaking out is telling all—and that telling all would make possible revolutionary change. In this way, the feminist incest story was a paradigmatic instance of that smart but somewhat dated feminist sound bite: "The personal is political." Showing how gendered forms of social inequality distorted family life, feminists who wrote about incest were impelled by a belief that women's testimony about incest, the feminist incest story, would be productive of massive political change.

While these hopes were not satisfied, the feminist incest story did create cultural space for paying new attention to what happened to victims of incest. In **Chapter 4, "The Canonical Incest Story,"** we look at a few of the best-known books about incest written in the 1980s: Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Ellen Bass and Laura Davis's *The Courage to Heal*, and Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*. These incest narratives offer versions of the "recovery story." The word *recovery* has a double meaning. It refers to the act of recapturing memories of incest that have been disassociated and forgotten, and it also suggests the process of healing from a traumatic event.⁷ These narratives appropriate elements of the canonical American story about a beset individual's

(here an abused woman's) heroic resistance to a constrictive social order that leads to the creation of a newly redeemed community. The revolution promised by the feminist incest story never happened in the real world, but it happens rhetorically in the incest recovery story. This narrative model thus incorporates the energies of the feminist incest story in its promise to free the beset incest victim from an oppressive past.

The wide success, the marketability, of these recovery narratives has evoked both acclaim and condemnation. While some readers were grateful for narratives that celebrated new possibilities for survivors of incest—the word *survivor* itself suggesting a separation from a past scene of injury—detractors maintained that incest was now all too easy to tell, and perhaps the *only* story of women's distress that could be heard. In **Chapter 5, "The Science of Memory,"** we look at narratives that attempt to demonstrate that the proliferation of women's stories about recovering memories of incest is a symptom of the invidious power of therapists. We call these stories "false-memory stories." To readers unfamiliar with this jargon, "false memory" is shorthand for "false-memory syndrome," a syndrome that purports to describe the process by which patients come to believe in the truth of false memories, that is, in incest memories that are fabricated rather than recovered within a therapeutic session. In false-memory stories, the recovery of memories of incest never leads to healing. Instead, the false-memory story describes how therapists lead patients to believe that they are incest victims and then how parents come to be considered monsters by their deluded daughters.

By the early 1990s, the lineaments of the false-memory story were beginning to solidify. In this genre of narrative, a writer attempts to provide scientific evidence about how easily memories are distorted in order to invalidate women's claims to have recovered true memories of incest, especially in therapy. False-memory stories often provide thoughtful descriptions of the malleability of memory. Yet an insistence on the distorting properties of memory also becomes a source of anxiety for producers of this kind of narrative. Writers who attack "recovery stories" believe that they can locate the truth, which is that these stories are false. But because these writers have dramatized the power of narrative frameworks in constructing the past, they also reveal their own work to be highly mediated. Furthermore, false-memory narratives, which highlight the role of the market in promoting therapies and claims of abuse, also participate in the consumption and exchange of popular narratives about victims, a discourse they decry.

Nonetheless, the false-memory story, which structures a dichotomy between true and false memory, has demonstrated its dominance by effectively defining incest tellings as something to be debated. As Mike Males notes, although "sexual and other violent abuse of children" is a documented and severe problem, the supposedly false memories of those who tell incest now

seems to be a bigger crime (10). One way to think about the size of the problem is by looking at its coverage. In 1994, according to Mike Staunton, “more than 80 percent of the coverage of sexual abuse” in prominent weekly magazines “focused on false accusations involving supposed false memory” (44).⁸ Given this public framing of the topic of sexual abuse, it is not surprising that readers might have doubts about the truthfulness of women’s incest narratives.

Yet heightened skepticism may defeat understanding of new contributions to the expression of women’s subjectivity and oppression as still incompletely tellable. As we have already discussed, our skepticism initially made it difficult for us to understand the contributions made by incest survivor memoirs, the subject of **Chapter 6, “The Incest Survivor Memoir.”** These memoirs occupy a discursive space opened up thanks to the political and intellectual gains made by both “feminist” and “recovery” stories. However, they also challenge the view that healing is easy by emphasizing the damaging, long-lasting effects of trauma. These new stories thus make visible the difficulty of remembering and telling that many other tellers had downplayed. With the acknowledgment of lasting trauma in these new tellings also comes an increased understanding and analysis of the limitations of language and, therefore, of the inevitability of uncertainty, paradox, and reconstruction in giving public expression to private wounds. Incest survivor memoirs also offer a layered representation of both the event and the way fantasy can give shape to both the victim’s and the perpetrator’s understandings of an event. These stories thus contest the belief, further promulgated by the now familiar practice of couching the understanding of incest in terms of truth and falsehood, that fantasy is a falsehood and an event is the raw truth.

But if the literature of trauma disputes the possibility of a *fantasized* event causing trauma, is the reality of trauma thereby exalted and the fantasy life of trauma victims consequently ignored?⁹ Our reading of work on trauma suggests that trauma theorists strive both to consider the social and experiential sources of trauma and also how trauma is internalized and narrated. This negotiation often leads not to a forgetting of the place of fantasy but to an emphasis upon it, upon mechanisms of repression, dissociation, denial, and repetition. Interestingly, these are mechanisms that allow the incest victim and her therapist to direct their attention away from rather than toward the finding of facts.

It might also be said that psychoanalysis as an institution sometimes deflects attention from large-scale social problems like incest abuse. As Michelle Massé has pointed out, a focus on individual psycho-pathologies can blind us to the “larger cultural production of discipline and punishment” shaping “the individual psychodrama” (5). “Our repression-based analyses,” Massé writes, “thus construct a reassuring critical fiction,” one that draws attention to psychic mechanisms and thus relegates to the margins the external, social

sources of trauma (11). Critics like Mark Pendergrast believe that analysts of trauma unduly emphasize the factual basis of women's narratives about traumatic events, but Massé's words are a reminder that the psychoanalytic understanding of trauma may lead to forgetting as well as to remembering past traumatic experiences.

Although they highlight the artful reconstruction involved in narrating a terrifying past event, producers of the incest survivor memoir still insist upon the truth of their memories of incest, that "the thing" really happened, thus continuing to provoke incredulity and outrage. In **Chapter 7, "On the Borders of the Real,"** we discuss Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina* and Sapphire's *Push*, novels that also mix fiction and truth within the more hybrid genre of autobiographical fiction, a genre that is "not biography and yet not lies," as Allison describes it (*Trash*, 12). These novels seem to confirm expectations that incest is likely to be found in homes of the poor. They also might seem to favor traditions of the "recovery story" that exalt central characters as individuals who rise above their circumstances, or, in the case of contemporary incest narratives, who move from trauma to recovery and become "survivors." We explore Allison's and Sapphire's use of the resources of the recovery story to endow a culturally marginalized incest victim with full humanity and subjectivity, thereby allowing her to voice a believable account of the *difficulty* of rising above oppressive circumstances. At the same time, these novels encourage readers to believe in the exceptional individual: protagonists of these novels "push" impressively far. The uneasy but productive way in which the recovery plot is used against itself in these two novels offers another instance of a complex form of telling.

By the end of our book, readers will not have found a litmus test for deriving the truth or falsehood of incest stories. Instead, we hope to offer strategies for thinking about the multiple ways in which women have told incest stories and gained a hearing. In order to locate the historical shifts in the dynamic of telling and listening, it has been helpful to think about fault lines where the unsayable disrupts a dominant paradigm for telling. Cathy Caruth explains that deconstruction (which we could understand here as a method of struggling to express what cannot be spoken) comes to understand any text as a site of the possibility of a new reference, one that cannot be accounted for in "preconceived conceptual terms" (Caruth and Esch, 3). This way of understanding a text challenges the more constricted view adopted by Hacking and Young, which implies that only what is named can be real. Our own strategy for listening is to notice where emerging realities—new references—are marked in narratives about incest. These references disrupt familiar patterns of narrating and understanding incest.

One way to understand what Caruth means by "preconceived conceptual

terms” is to see these filtering terms as a master narrative, one that shapes expectations about narratives and their relation to a specific referential field, for us, incest. Texts that resist normative understandings, for example, the belief that incest is a taboo and rarely happens, may initially seem to be mistaken and then come to seem normative, for resistant stories themselves often give rise to a dominant narrative that will itself be disrupted by yet new tellings. This process is a complex and open-ended one, and our book only provides a limited set of examples. Nonetheless, we hope that it offers suggestions for rethinking and revising familiar ideas about what incest narratives sound like and what they mobilize. In the effort to describe, remember, and re-create the unspeakable, these narratives point to historical doings and fantasized residues of women’s experience, both authoritative and uncertain, about which we always need to think again.