

## **chapter one**

### **A: Breaking the Silence**

This is an invitation to share in a moment of inquiry about writing, history, and sexual difference and to witness my attempt to write from — to speak with — desire in and about a search for a way to create a living language within which I can recognize and create my self (McMahon, 1986:1).

My mother believes that what you save from the past is mostly a matter of choice (Atwood, 1983:16).

For years, I did not think of my situation as abusive — then one day I did and it's made all the difference to me (Rockhill, 1987:34).

*The experiences which I describe and analyze in Chapter 1 all relate in some way to the fact that I was sexually abused as a child. This abuse, I now realize, shaped and organized my developing subjectivity. Inspired by the autobiographical work of Grumet (1981), my aim in Chapter 1 is to reconceptualize and reclaim aspects of my social history through narration, reflection and analysis. Through memory-work (Haug et al., 1987:14), my intent is to reconstruct, analyze, theorize and re-learn particular social experiences which I define as educational. My aim is to identify in these stories the dominant social practices which organized much of my learning, and to explicate what it means for me to talk about knowledge as socially constructed.*

*Until quite recently, I was unable to write the words, I was sexually abused as a child. Deeply attached to words through my love of language, not being able to write these particular words was for me a problem. Not being able to write these words meant that I continued to be controlled at some level by a past that I wanted to erase. Not being able to write these words meant that I was controlled by feelings of shame, feelings which continued to shape my experiences, reminding me that I was not quite right. Sensing that my experience of abuse was not a safe topic for public discourse (I should keep it secret), I internalized and made **natural** the feelings of shame.*

*Internalized, these feelings controlled me in a particular manner. In a rather strange way, I was able to pretend normality: I had not been abused. More bizarrely, I felt captive to feelings of specialness (that of not being normal). In effect, these illusions worked to separate me both from myself and from others. In narrating my experiences, I am beginning the process of saying NO to my illusions. In this NO, a NO denied me as a child, I am reclaiming and (re)cognizing an authority long ago stolen from me through sexual abuse. In this manner, Chapter 1 is more than an introduction and more than an exercise. It is an important social beginning; a subject in formation. Key to this (re)formation is my attempt to connect this process to an examination of how I understand and use the term 'feminist pedagogy'.*

Dear Lily, Andrew and Virginia:

**I am an Incest Survivor. I was sexually abused as a child.** Sexual abuse shaped and seriously damaged my life. For many reasons it is difficult for me to understand the ongoing effects of this abuse in my adult life. Only recently am I beginning to understand how my choices are shaped by a past of which I am not fully cognizant. In part, this understanding is related to my decision to write about the abuse I suffered as a child. It was not, however, until the latter stages of my PhD work that I was able to write or talk about the abuses which organized many of my choices. This inability to name key life experiences is significant in view of the fact that I have researched male violence against women for a number of years. The question of how I was able to write about violence in the lives of battered women without writing about the violences in my own is key to the work you are reading. It is this question which, in fact, provoked me to shift my focus from the subject of battered women to the subject of how forms of abuse shape and influence how I learn and develop. As a consequence of this shift, I have begun to examine how specific feminist practices enable me to read and write beyond experiences of abuse. At the same time, this shift is enabling me to write

beyond some of the limitations of academic practices which taught me to produce and reproduce social illusions.

I learned early and well how to produce social illusions in a schooling context. This is not a mysterious or difficult process. Quite clearly those who taught me to read and write also taught me that it was not safe to write about matters which would make either them or me uncomfortable in a classroom context. Stories which never addressed issues such as sexual abuse reinforced this teaching. Hence I, like others, learned early to divide my self and my world into categories such as private and public, practice and theory, good and bad. Once this method of learning was internalized, it was easy for me to assume that my experience of abuse was neither important nor appropriate. Thus, as a child being taught to read, write, and talk, I learned that abuse was an unacceptable topic for discussion. I learned that some topics are good and that some are bad. I concluded, therefore, that if the subject matter was unworthy of discussion, then I too must be unworthy. Hence, I must be silent. How could I know otherwise?

I am discovering that this way of learning is even more firmly entrenched in the organization of advanced academic practices. There are, of course, individual and collective exceptions. For example, at the collective level, there is an emerging and varied feminist, Marxist, and critical scholarship which is intended to critique relations of power. In keeping with what I perceive to be the spirit of this work, I have organized my text as a series of letters and stories within which I will examine and reconstruct some of the abusive practices which prevented me from knowing myself as an abused child and woman.

The following story was written with considerable ease, on one hand, and, on the other, with discomfort. Words flowed once I allowed myself to return to a past I had been taught to forget. Each memory, however, produced yet another memory. Some of them I chose not to describe, in part for my own protection and safety, and in part because I do not think they are key. I chose, however, to begin this work with the following story because it was from this perspective that I first began to disentangle myself from specific kinds of abuse.

## **B: Breaking the Sequence**

It is difficult, but not impossible to disentangle ourselves from the culture in which we have been formed. Autobiography provides the possibility of reconstruction (Grumet, 1981:336).

To ascertain where one is, when one is, one must locate the past. Location means identification and bracketing the past. Bracketing means looking at what is not ordinarily seen, at what is taken-for-granted, hence loosening oneself from it. As the past becomes present, the present is revealed. So it is we aim at freedom from the past, freedom in the present. Such objectives require entrance into the past as a first step (Pinar, 1976:56).

I was born in a small *university town* in rural New Brunswick. Our sprawling two-storey white farm house sat at the edge of town, bordered on one side by a working farm. The wonderful smells associated with the farm still linger with me. On the other side of our family property was a small urban-like street peppered with older, freshly-painted houses. Sometimes I played with the children who lived in these houses. Often I played alone. I loved the musty smelling attic of our house. I seldom ventured into the damp, dark basement except when I was told to fetch potatoes and apples from the old wooden bins. That old house sits, yet, on the edge of a small New Brunswick town.

Our family property consisted of several unfarmed acres. Neighbours farmed our corn fields in the summer. My parents were not farmers. Despite family responsibility for a large apple orchard and a very large summer garden, along with chickens and other small animals, my parents were considered town folks. In practice, Mom taught me the secrets of the ocean. She took me there to play. Dad taught me the secrets of the land and the woods. In summer, I learned how to graft apple trees, pick potato bugs and weed a garden. In the late winter I learned, among other things, how to sugar maple trees and how to rid the wild rabbits of ear mites. More than my father, my mother was privileged materially by an upper-class background. In practice, both my parents worked. My mother, Alese, worked at home raising five children - Robbie, Mark, myself, Peter, and Ricky. My father, Nathan, worked in the woods. He managed the work of other men. In spirit, my mother was an artist, my father a writer. I am told that my mother's third pregnancy was fraught with difficulty. She wanted a girl. My birth was a miracle, they say.

At the centre of our family property was a pond. In winter the pond was a skating rink. In summer it was a place to be avoided, though many secret summer hours were spent rafting on what I came to think of as the "polio" pond. Sitting at the edge of the swampy pond, I sometimes observed the New Brunswick herons flying overhead. I would listen to the croaking frogs or watch with awe the dragonflies as they buzzed about my head. My younger brother told me that dragonflies would sew

up my mouth if I talked too much. His words worried me. At the rear of our property was a wooded area. In what seemed like the centre of the wooded area there was a clearing. Through this ran a trickling brook. It was a magic place. Many a summer moment was spent with my feet in the brook. Here, I felt lovely and free. Stretching away from the wooded area were fields of corn. Raspberry and blueberry bushes grew along the fences bordering the corn fields, as did hollyhocks and morning glories. The fences connected the back of the property with the old barns leaning upright just behind our home, some distance from the pond.

The view from the front of our property was eerie and different from the view at the back. The marshes of New Brunswick are flat and desolate. At the same time, the marshes are expansive and beautiful, reaching out to the wildness of the high tides of the Bay of Fundy. Oftentimes we swam in the nearby ocean. I liked to gaze out at the marshes, remembering warm sands, the taste of dulce and the feel of early morning fogs. From the upstairs bedroom of our house I could see the road to Nova Scotia between the red marsh mud and the salt water dykes. The view was best in early spring and late fall, when the trees were bare. In the distance I could see the Nova Scotia border. At least I imagined I could. My view was only slightly obstructed by the intrusion of large radio towers. At night the towers shone brightly in the darkness of the marshes. I liked watching the tall radio towers because they connected me, or so I thought, to the rest of the world.

Fall is my favourite season in New Brunswick. Walking from my home to the centre of town took about twenty minutes. The walk to town and back is something I remember well. I felt good as I swished through the fallen leaves. In the near distance, church bells sounded with regularity. I imagined dancing through the leaves. I loved the sounds and smells. The smell of burning wood from nearby homes warmed me inside as I walked through the sunny, often chilly, air. Back and forth from home to town I walked through the fall, fearing little.

Saturdays were particularly happy days. Early Saturday morning, Dad cooked breakfast on the old wood stove. While he worked, he talked with us. I remember feeling grown-up. It was the way in which he asked questions, I think. Mom was often too tired to ask questions. And usually too tired to listen. The work of five children, the work of a home, the care of Dad, took all her energy. Saturday was also movie day. For ten cents I was occasionally granted two hours of magic of a different order. There were no televisions then. Even more important than my time at the movie theatre was the time I spent in the children's library, located in the basement of the university library. On Saturday mornings, I borrowed books. It was here that I learned to read and write long before I went to

school. It was here that I learned to believe in the power of words as I listened with awe to wonderful story-tellers. Best of all, I was free to wander through the old university library with its spiral staircases, imagining, as I quietly moved in and around the stacks of books, that I would one day read all those books. I imagined that I would be a teacher, just like Mrs. Patterson, my grade one teacher. Living in a small, supposedly safe community meant that I was allowed to roam about freely at a very early age, especially on Saturdays, when my parents were busied by weekend chores.

Between the library and the movie theatre was a small duck pond. It sat in front of the winter sledding hill from which, if I listened carefully, I could hear the sound of music from the nearby opera house. These were sites of pleasure. The sloping park area which housed the pond and the hill provided a natural division between the town and the university. I liked to walk through the park in the fall. Here I felt the excitement of the incoming university students. I didn't, of course, know them then as university students. I knew only the sense of excitement and colour which accompanied their movements. This excitement matched my childhood anticipation of more to come as my mother prepared my four brothers and me for yet another school year. I remember most the new pencil cases and the smell of new paper. Dad paid for them, or so we pretended. My memories of the duck pond, Saturdays, schools, libraries, theatres, music, books, fall, Mom and Dad, are inextricable.

Then everything changed although I am told otherwise. Inside I was different, I was changed, yet I had neither the words nor the courage to speak my difference. My secret was terrible and dark. No one understood why I began to wet my bed at night. No one understood why I wanted to spend weekends at my friend Margaret's farm, on the other side of town. I remember not smiling. My parents remember otherwise. Absolutely no one seemed to notice I was different. My parents' friends commented on my beauty. But being lovely on the outside didn't matter at all to me. My insides were too troubled. My parents remember that I talked a lot. I remember silence. I expect both memories are important. Sometimes talking is a way of forgetting. I remember the headaches. I remember the sleepless nights. I remember the nightmares: men who wanted to kill me chased me through darkened streets. I remember crying in the night. I found it difficult to hear Mrs. Patterson when she spoke in the classroom. I felt as if she were speaking from beneath tumbling water, or from the end of a long tunnel. She assumed I was daydreaming. I stopped imagining that I might one day be a teacher. Teachers were required to stand up in front of their students. I knew I wouldn't be able to stand up in front of people and talk. Not me. Everyone would know, I thought. No

longer did my imagination dance me through the leaves. The sound of ringing church bells irritated me. Mostly I felt ashamed, different. I am an incest survivor. I was changed.

My family emigrated to New Zealand just shortly before my twelfth birthday. Except for my older brother. He went away to an Upper Canadian university. I thought I might now feel safe. But I didn't. Inside I was still afraid. I wanted to tell my parents. I wanted to tell someone why I was different. Who would believe me? He had said it was my fault. He had told me that our parents would be angry with me. I believed him. It was easier in New Zealand. For a while. In a way, school was easier. Reading was a pleasure which enabled me to escape, when I needed to, from myself and from others. Teachers reported me a good student. Being a good student was easy. It was easy, that is, until I was expected to stand up or speak in front of my classmates. This was painful. Afraid, I would vacate my body so as not to remember.

Still, living in New Zealand was easier. There were the rivers, the ocean and the incredibly beautiful countryside. I felt safer with my older brother away at university in Canada. I remember laughing again. I recall hearing the teacher's voice. I felt safer, that is, until the night my mother was brutally raped as she walked home alone from a neighbourhood party. Seeing her tortured body early that morning and hearing her anguish as she later endured the brutal questioning and blaming by my father and the police was more than I (or she) could bear.

In my memory, the subsequent denial of my mother's abuse ultimately froze my own secret into a silence from which I was unable to escape for a very long time. The events of that night were not mentioned for many years. In this silencing I, like my mother, was ruled by unspoken fear and trauma. In time we would both forget, on a conscious level, why we were terrified to be alone. Consciously, I wanted to be normal, to have a *normal* mother. In this desire I learned to distrust and reject my mother, myself, and the fears which shaped us differently. Until the night of her rape, I had managed to survive my own terrible secret. Burdened by yet another secret, I learned to fear madness. Who would take care of me? My mother? My father, who had chastised and judged my mother? Men, who would rape me? I feared the terrible rage inside me. I worked to control it. At the age of thirteen, unable to speak the words which might free me, I remember wanting to die. Twice that year I was hit by a car. Each time they said it was an accident. I thought so too.

Returning to Canada with my mother and my younger brothers, without my father, who viewed New Zealand as his new home, was excruciatingly difficult. He had been a protector of sorts. In my memory, he left us. In fact, in a way, he did. He stopped sending money. My mother

took on a second job and began to absent herself even more in overwork and alcohol. I remember feeling responsible for her. She didn't, of course, need me. I needed her. But I didn't know that then. I also needed my father. But I didn't know that then, either. I've never really forgiven my father. Nor did he forgive me for not writing to him. I couldn't tell him about the physical pain I experienced when I attempted to write. I stopped writing. So did he.

It was agonizing to write with a war going on inside of me. Fear, anger, and the knowledge of something else ate away at my insides. Doctors called it ulcers. People continued to speak of my outside beauty. I resented my developing body. It made me feel obvious, which made me more anxious. I wanted only to hide. On the outside, life continued as usual. I worked. I studied. The work was easy. Often I forgot what I learned. I needed so desperately to forget. My hours were filled with part-time jobs, people who didn't matter to me and dates I can't remember. I never told. *What was there to tell?* In classrooms, movies, work places, Girl Guide halls, churches, restaurants, or in discussions with friends and family, no one spoke of a shame like mine. I assumed there was nothing to say. Classmates voted me beauty queen and cheerleader. The *honour* terrified me. Contradictorily, while seeking affirmation, I wanted to escape. I felt haunted. I began to actively forget. I sought refuge in marriage, a young husband and a baby. Nothing produced the peace I so desperately sought. At the age of nineteen I decided to end my life. It was just too painful. The doctor who sewed up my razor-slit arms listened. I told only enough to provide a reason for my suicide attempt. His way of questioning didn't allow me to trust that I could safely tell my whole story. I probably couldn't. It took me many more years to write **I am an incest survivor**. Amnesia persists. I still vacate my body when I am afraid. The ulcers are gone, however, and the war is lessening.

I remember little about my early schooling experiences. I do remember feeling lonely and different, older than my friends and classmates. Teachers, I recall, reacted to me in two ways: because of my reading ability, I was occasionally moved to an accelerated class; other times, teachers reported that I was not working to my potential. Mostly, I remember not wanting to be in the classroom, but contradictorily, I sometimes longed for its safety. Emotional and actual absences from school were common for me. My love of reading continued. One cold day in January, grade eleven, I remember, I decided to leave school. In actual fact, I didn't decide. I thought I was pregnant. I wasn't. But I didn't return. I imagined that working might be easier. When it wasn't, I imagined marriage and babies. Nothing helped me escape myself, except perhaps my decision to die. This was the choice which finally empowered me to



begin my long journey back, and ahead.

A brief encounter with a Freudian therapist enabled me to examine some aspects of the violence I had endured as an incest victim. For six months I sat in the office of a Dr. Brown and cried. In the silences between my tears, I could name only the shame and pain I felt. I could not name the abuse. Nonetheless, crying energized me. Energized, I decided to complete my high school education despite objections from my male partner, who felt threatened by this decision. His lack of support was manifested in his refusal to do child care so that I might study. In time, I ended my analysis, my marriage, and I entered the labour market as a relatively unskilled, underpaid worker and single parent of two growing boys. I recall thinking that I parented well. Sean and Ken were my reason for living. Then. Much of those years, too, is absent from my memory. I recall having no time to read or study. Somewhere in all of this I remarried and divorced again. I needed men. Then. It was through men that I defined myself. In sexual relations, I allowed men to possess me. Although not always, I recall.

Two years of intense therapy with a kind and gentle therapist and ten years of not always satisfactory work prompted me to take up my formal education again. Encouraged by Peter, and a dear priest friend, Augusto, I entered university for the first time. My original plan was to become a social worker or possibly a therapist, like Peter. Instead, I chose to major in religious studies. These were exciting and fearful years for me: exciting because I loved learning with others with whom I could identify; fearful, because I found it excruciatingly painful to write essays. I feared also speaking in groups of more than three. I did not connect these fears with the trauma of my childhood. Gently, Peter awakened in me a self that I'd forgotten. It was this work with Peter and my friendship with Augusto which enabled me to begin the work of healing. In their differing ways, they taught me that it was possible to reclaim my sexuality and my spirituality. Only later would I reclaim ways of learning. These reclaimings continue. Essay writing remains a problem.

I remember well my first years at university. Jennifer and Rosemary suffered with me my inability to write papers. Only later would I know this as related to abuse. Jennifer's and Rosemary's support enabled me to survive the system. Central to their love for me was the childcare which they so willingly offered. Sean and Ken speak happily of this time. In this friendship with Jennifer and Rosemary I began to know and to reclaim aspects of my womanness previously lost to me through abuse. I began to know differently my absent mother. Later I would know better my absent father. I remember three kind, excellent teachers, Sam, Louis and Paul. I think of them as mentors who guided and inspired me through a

very demanding interdisciplinary undergraduate program. An introduction to a Marxist perspective turned my world upside-down, and the beginnings of feminist work turned me inside-out. Though unable to write an essay without incredible anxiety, I nonetheless remember these years with pleasure.

Enthused and energized by new perspectives from which to view the world, I chose (or so I thought) to marry again. I completed my undergraduate work in religious studies, gave birth to my daughter Sarah, became a faculty wife, identified myself as a radical feminist, followed my partner to the east coast and took up graduate work in an anthropology department in the community in which we lived. At the same time, I began a two-year period of intense work in a women's consciousness-raising group. This deeply affected me and the scholarly work I was attempting to do. More connected to women, and women's interests, I began to critique every aspect of my existence. Curiously, even in the safety of our group, I did not talk or write about the abuse I had endured as a child. The group, however, proved to be a base from which I began to see alternatives in the areas of both relationships and academic practices. In the safety of this group, I began to voice my fear of writing and of speaking in academic ways.

Speaking about incest is almost as difficult as learning to speak about academic oppression. Like many women scholars I know, I sensed and sometimes knew that male teachers treated female students differently than they did male students. Hence, I learned to resent and resist the privileges generally accorded male students. Anger empowered me to learn with renewed vigour. Fears of essay writing began to lessen. Academically, I did well in the field of anthropology. Life had taught me well how to be an observer. With the help of an important male mentor, I learned better to read and critique the work of others. Feeling safe enough to critique the work which I produced came much later. Rarely did I allow myself to imagine how far I might proceed with a formal education. I didn't trust yet that I could do this work.

Despite an abundance of fears, I completed my MA work. This work was difficult and challenging. I was challenged by the immense responsibility of understanding the experiences of battered women. This was made particularly difficult by the fact that I was examining male violence against women in an all-male department. Naively, I assumed I could write about battered women in this all-male department whose members were unversed in feminist scholarship. In the last year of my two-year MA program, I was harassed by a member of this department. From his perspective, my thesis topic was *too sensitive an issue* to constitute serious academic work. Despite his abuse and the subsequent fear which his

abuse evoked in me, I managed to complete the work of my thesis. However, having begun to doubt even more the validity of my research, I was shocked when I received a Fellowship to continue this work.

In the safety of a new university setting, I began to confront a problem I had discovered in the work of my MA thesis. I first identified this as a problem of how to put myself, as a woman and researcher, into the text; how does one do research involving human subjects without making those people into objects, either in the research or writing process. When writing my thesis, I was frustrated by my inability to capture the complexities of the women's lives I was attempting to describe. The case histories I constructed appeared shallow in comparison with what I had come to know in my work with battered women. Further, I was frustrated by my inability to use and devise theory without overlaying the data with explanations which removed me from the everyday lives of battered women. Driven by a desire to do research differently, I struggled with this problem while completing the requirements of the program.

Motivated by readings undertaken outside the context of my formal studies, I began to suspect that my personal research problem was perhaps a universal one which could be addressed only among academics committed to gender issues. For this reason, I chose to leave mid-stream my studies in anthropology. My colleagues were supportive of my decision to work with scholars cognizant of feminist scholarship. At this time, I seriously considered leaving academe altogether, doubting less that I could do the work and more whether I would ever be able to address my concerns and questions in any formal academic setting.

Choosing to leave a program mid-stream was tough. Even tougher was finding an alternative place to study. The change meant that amidst an important, but slowly disintegrating marital relationship, I had to shift schools, move myself and my young daughter from one province to another, and begin my PhD course work. I had to complete an additional ten PhD courses and begin anew the study of another discipline. My decision to make this change was inspired by some other graduate students and a faculty member who were excited by the work they were doing in the areas of gender, race and class. The chair of the department suggested that I might hasten completion of my studies by writing course papers which would be the chapters of my thesis. With the exception of one paper, I did this.

Leaving a discipline which did not meet my immediate and long term needs meant that I found not one, but many, mentors. In this new environment I experienced the joy of working with students and teachers addressing explicitly, from a feminist perspective, the issues of concern to me in my study of battered women. I began at this point to better

understand that learning does not occur separate from everyday experience. In other words, I began to know more consciously theory as connected to practice. The excitement and fear I felt as a result of this new way of learning prompted me to enter another two years of intense therapy. This work with an analyst committed to dream therapy, enabled me to begin learning about myself and about new ways of learning. My nightmares lessened. I began to trust my body. This trust is important for incest survivors. It was this combination of immersion in feminist scholarship and dream therapy which taught me to imagine new ways of doing academic research. Throughout this time I continued to believe I was writing a thesis about battered women.

I first suspected that I was not writing the thesis I thought I was writing when engaged in producing a formal thesis proposal. After four attempts to convince myself and my committee that I was writing about battered women, I wrote for the very first time the words which would alter dramatically my identity as a woman and a scholar. In writing the words I was sexually abused as a child, I was both thrown into turmoil and energized by the freedom of putting these words to paper, although at the time I did not understand why or how. Energized, I applied and was accepted for a teaching position in the department of sociology at Memorial University of Newfoundland.

Until I wrote the words and began in earnest the process of freeing myself from my *silence*, I had not imagined that I could teach. My fears were simply too acute. I knew I could not stand in front of others and do the work of teaching. My fear had rendered me powerless. Nonetheless, I continued to prepare myself for this work. In this sense, I worked continuously to reclaim aspects of myself not located in silence. Key to this reclaiming project was my decision to analyze my abuse through writing. The effects of this analysis, however, cannot be understood apart from the social relations and practices which allowed me to feel safe enough to confront my fears and do the work. In and through this method of learning to identify myself through writing, I am also learning about the need for changed pedagogical practices. From my perspective of gender analysis, I have begun to understand how abuse continues to inform my developing subjectivity. I am discovering the extent to which all women are victims of male violence. It is this knowledge which prompted me to further shift the focus of my thesis. I decided finally that I could not justifiably write about battered women without writing about how I am coming to know my social self, a self that was abused. This text, then, became an exercise in methodology (of the therapeutic kind).

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Brookes, Anne-Louise. *Feminist Pedagogy: An Autobiographical Approach*. (1992) Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing.