Rengger, N. J. (Nicholas J.). *Political Theory, Modernity, and Postmodernity: Beyond Enlightenment and Critique*. Oxford, Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1995.

Rocco, Christoper. *Tragedy and Enlightenment: Athenian Political Thought and the Dilemmas of Modernity*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1997.

Rottges, Heinz. *Nietzsche und die Dialektik der Aufklärung*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1972.

Sandkühler, Hans Jörg, Hrsg. *Europäische Enzyklopädie zu Philosophie und Wissenschaften*. 4 Bde. Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1990.

Saine, Thomas P. *The Problem of Being Modern, or, The German Persuit of Enlightenment From Leibniz to the French Revolution*. Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State UP, 1997.

Schmidt, James, ed. *What is Enlightenment?: Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*. Berkeley, Calif.: U of California P, 1996.

Schouls, Peter. *Descartes and the Enlightenment*. McGill-Queen's Studies in the History of Ideas. Bd. 13. Kingston, Ont.: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989.

Stackelberg, Jürgen von. *Themen der Aufklärung*. München: Fink, 1979.

Tallis, Raymond. *Enemies of Hope. A Critique of Contemporary Pessimism: Irrationalis, Anti-Humanism and the Counter-Enlightenment*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997.

Weiss, Christoph (ed.). *Von "Obscuranten" und "Eudamonisten": Gegenaufklärerische, konservative und antirevolutionäre Publizisten im späten 18. Jahrhundert*. St. Ingbert: Rohrig, 1997.

Wellmer, Albrecht. *The Persistence of Modernity: Essays on Aesthetics, Ethics and Postmodernism*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991.

Wilson, Daniel W. and Robert C. Holub, eds. *Impure Reason: Dialectic of Enlightenment in Germany*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1993.

Wilson, Ellen Judy. *Encyclopedia of Enlightenment*. New York: Facts on File, 1996.

Yolton, John W., ed. [et. al.]. *The Blackwell Companion to the Enlightenment*. Oxford, UK; Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1991.

So How Do We Tell the Truth? Life-Writing, the Confessional, and the Theories of Trauma and Testimony

LIZA POTVIN

When I was in graduate school studying poetry, the adjective "confessional" was a dirty word. My professor never stated this overtly, but when I expressed an interest in writing my term paper on the confessional poets, he suggested I might want to choose something that was intellectually more rigorous – poetry that had "more meat on its bones," as he put it. Except for Robert Lowell, the "father" of the American confessionalists, he explained, they were all a rather self-indulgent lot, focusing on sordid and overpersonal issues, and not to be taken too seriously in any real academic sense.

I thought about this a lot. I had encountered, in the fierce prosody of Sylvia Plath, a soul who spoke to my own, or what Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, refer to in their discussion of Nobel prize laureate for literature Elias Canetti, who narrates the effect that Kafka's correspondence had on him: "I can only say that these letters have penetrated me like an actual life" (4). Those moments of recognition, of the connection between testimony and life experience, seemed to me the most validating moments in literature. I did not yet know that women could write about their bodies, their pain, their angst with such candour, nor that their experiences would resonate for many other women. I did not yet know that I was preparing, psychologically, to write my own account of sexual abuse, nor that it would win the foremost prize in Canada for creative nonfiction, the Edna Staebler Award – a genre I had no idea even existed.[1] It would be many years before the privileging of genres like life writing, autobiography, memoir; certainly they were relatively unheard of, or unspoken of, in graduate school in the 1980's. The books we studied in our women's studies reading group (later to form the core of one of Canada's first Women's Studies programs) confirmed that my taste in literature followed the feminist dictum that "the personal is political," but we did not know how to politicize our personal lives nor how to challenge the canon of courses we were being taught.

1 *White Lies (for my mother)*. Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1992.

Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée
CRCL/RCLC June / Juin 1999
0319-051X/99/26.2/$10.00/©Canadian Comparative Literature Association

I have been teaching undergraduate literature for over a decade, and have become increasingly uncomfortable with telling my students that the speaker and the writer are always two separate beings, even though I recognize the rhetorical and pedagogical strategies underlying the necessary articulation of the "persona." But T.S. Eliot's assertion, his claim to the "objective correlative," comes at a cost. I see this in my students' expressions when they are told by other teachers that the writer's life has no bearing on the text itself, that the author is dead, and that students should have no interest in such biographical details. It would seem that we lose the imperative of the writer as witness, detached to the point of disengagement. Why can we not read literature anymore as David Copperfield said we should, "as if for life"? There are, after all, those writers who have believed themselves appointed – not always voluntarily – to bear witness to those ruptures in our culture where the official version of truth is challenged. So when my students look for "correlatives" between the historical context of a writer's life and the writing itself – which seems like a normal human impulse – why, I ask myself, does my training insist that I must discourage them from making such connections? Is it always wrong to pursue such a line of thinking? I have decided I am unfashionably idealistic in my desire that literature be accessible to students in this manner – a desire that sometimes outweighs my pedagogical urge to instill strong intellectual principles in them.

In the era of post-postmodernism, with its often impenetrable language, it is therefore with the relief that accompanies self-justification that I have stumbled upon the recent theories of trauma and crisis. One of the earliest and most significant of these is Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery*, written in 1992; Herman is also an important writer on father-daughter incest. This was followed by numerous other critical works on the subject of testimony, some growing out of an understanding of post-traumatic stress syndrome as it was popularized after studing veterans of the Vietnam War and Holocaust survivors. Elie Wiesel writes, in "The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration," that our era can be defined as the age of testimony: "If the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle, and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony" (9). What are the historical reasons why testimony, life writing, memoir, and the witnessing to crisis, have become privileged contemporary modes of transmission and communication? Why has testimony in effect become so central and so omnipresent in recent cultural accounts of ourselves? How is it, in other words, that the tides of fashion that once declared the confessional a debased genre have now reversed direction? Many new critical texts have begun to consider the role of testimony in documenting trauma, as Kali Tal does in her study comparing the testimonies from Holocaust survivors, Vietnam war veterans, and incest survivors. In *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literature*

of Trauma, Tal remarks that "[u]nlike the most playful of deconstructionists, [cultural critics] do not seek to prove that there is, finally, no place to stand. We have moved beyond the discovery of the reductive power of the question "why?" Every human being possesses a core set of beliefs rooted in faith" (5).[2] Or, as Alice Miller states in the quotation Tal includes as an epigraph, the "fact that a situation is ubiquitous does not absolve us from examining it. On the contrary, we must examine it for the very reason that it is or can be the fate of each and every one of us" (5). And Tal reminds me of the reason why such narratives have frequently been excluded from mainstream study:

> The speech of survivors, then, is highly politicized. If "telling it like it was" threatens the status quo, powerful political, economic, and social forces will pressure survivors either to keep their silence or to revise their stories....Bearing witness is an aggressive act. It is born out of a refusal to bow to outside pressure to revise or to repress experience, a desire to embrace conflict rather than conformity, to endure a lifetime of pain and anger rather than to submit to the seductive pull of revision and repression. Its goal is change. (7)

Cathy Caruth edited a collection of outstanding essays called *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, which consider some of the same issues and refers to witnessing as "the imperative to tell" (62). To return to the study called *Testimony*, written by literary critic Shoshana Felman and psychiatrist Dori Laub: these are precisely the sorts of questions which their work addresses. They conclude, after testing their questions in a classroom setting, that ours is an age confronting what they term a "crisis in truth." In an article entitled "Education and Crisis," Felman considers whether or not trauma can instruct pedagogy, and after teaching many courses in trauma theory, that there are several conclusions to be drawn: 1) testimony is pervasive, implicated in almost all kinds of writing; 2) testimony cannot merely report facts, but forces us to encounter the strange and the unfamiliar; and that, 3) the more such texts are considered, the more "we do not even know what testimony is, and that, in any case, it is not simply what we thought we knew it was" (7).

It is in the context of such significant studies on testimony that we ought to read two new critical works, both of which themselves question the appropriateness (and the appropriation of) the term "confessional" as applied to women's writing. I found myself frustrated with both of them initially because they still refer to the male authorities like Foucault to discuss the context of sexuality, and sometimes lapse into the poststructuralist discourse which has its roots in that patriarchal authority. Do we still need to make reference to the "daddies" in the field of literary study? It is true that both studies refute Foucault, or point out where his suppositions fall short of

2 For a review of Tal's study, see Gibson and Rai's review in issue 25:3-4 of this journal.

describing the experiences elucidated by the subjects in a discussion of the confessional texts by women, and I know that it demonstrates good scholarship to point to the "authorities" in the field, but it aggravates me nonetheless that all feminist studies feel inclined to do so. References to recent feminist scholarship in the theories of trauma and testimony, as well as the long legacy of critical studies by women generally, ought to suffice. This is not a criticism of the critics themselves, but of feminist academic criticism in general.

Suzette Henke's *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing* is an intense and well-researched consideration of a variety of women writers for whom writing was often literally equated with survival of trauma. Several of the authors considered here - H.D., Anaïs Nin, and Janet Frame - depended upon both psychoanalysis and scriptotherapy for significant periods throughout most of their lives. Otto Rank believed at first that Nin's obsessive journal-writing was a sign of addiction, but Anaïs was finally able to convince him that her diary functioned as a therapeutic tool, facilitating what Henke refers to as "abreaction" and the reconstruction of the fragmented subject. In each of the case studies considered by Henke, trauma emerges as a significant factor in the author turning to writing. The first chapter considers the preoedipal attachment which Colette had with her mother Sido, once lost and then later reclaimed through an emphasis in her writing upon matrifocal mythology; Henke suggests that this was a strategy employed by Colette to endure the conjugal brutality of Willy. Only after his death was Colette able to describe the painful period of her apprenticeship to him, and her ten-year "initiation rite" in scriptotherapy allowed her to reclaim her status as an autonomous subject. Willy made imperious demands upon Colette in the realms of love and literature, but refused to gratify her deepest needs for male approval and intimacy. A tyrannical editor and an unfaithful husband, he maintained control of Colette in the game of power that eventually destroyed their marriage, keeping his anxious pupil "dangling in terror" by masochistic strategies of lavish approval followed by devastating criticism. Henke documents Colette's psychic fragmentation well into middle-age, and shows her anger at Willy's infantilization of her, particularly in his having sold the rights to the Claudine novels to prevent her from claiming authorship. Renouncing romantic love, as Sido had, Colette increasingly turned toward memories of her mother to survive trauma, and Henke quotes Marianne Hirsch's study of the novels, which claims that the writing pulls in two directions, the matrifocal ultimately trumping over the patriarchal.

Like Colette, Hilda Doolittle also suffered from an obsessive need for male approval, and the trauma which haunted most of her early writing was witnessing a strange accident which left her father (who placed enormous pressure on her by referring to her as the "one girl...worth all his five boys put together") figuratively blind, castrated, and unresponsive to his daughter.

Hilda's childhood reminiscences are filled with the deaths of important female figures in her life: her sister Edith, her half-sister Alice, and her aunt Fanny - all of whom played significant roles in developing her sense of self. She was also traumatized by her grandmother's revelation of the Moravian cult of Wunden Eiland to which she belonged, a cult whose beliefs later surfaced in H.D.'s writing, and by being abandoned when she was pregnant. Freud encouraged her to write through this trauma. Henke analyzes *The Gift* in great detail, showing how the atrocities of World War I released the memories of childhood bereavement, while in *Bid Me to Live*, through a therapeutic catharsis H.D. was able to release herself from these torments. This chapter focuses on a psychoanalytic interpretation of H.D.'s life and works, showing how she shifts from a phallocentric universe, feeling betrayed by her mother and overwhelmed by her seemingly omnipotent father (whom she equates with God, and later replaces with male lovers) to a redefining of the Holy Spirit as female through a reclamation of what she calls "womb consciousness" and goddess imagery. Sometimes this interpretation seems stretched, as in Henke's assumption that all of H.D.'s writing can be read as autobiographical; in discussing *Bid Me to Live*, for example, she asserts that the characters "Bella/ Dorothy and the D.H. Lawrence persona, Frederico, are balanced as binary opposites in a highly charged melodrama, both tugging in different directions at the collapsing marriage of H.D./Julia and Richard Aldington/Rafe Ashton" (48). Later this seems contradicted by statements like "[t]he palimpsest of H.D.'s wartime experiences seems to get absorbed by an infinite deferral of textual traces that both reveal and conceal autobiographical dimensions of her tenuous emotional survival. While the argument that H.D. repressed many autobiographical elements in her earlier writing which were resolved in later fictions is persuasive, the strict Lacanian psychoanalytical interpretation of her statements and her fiction can seem forced at time.

A much more complex and disturbing case is the writing of Anaïs Nin, a writer whose work has always held a chilling fascination for myself and other incest survivors with whom I have discussed her diaries. Nin literally enacts the childhood fantasy of paternal seduction to which Henke alludes as a possibility in the work of H.D.. Certainly most of Nin's writing has always struck me as extremely narcissistic, eager to please men, and emotionally wraught with contradiction. This chapter does a wonderful job of unraveling some of these contradictions, since "Nin's diary functions both as an autobiographical text and as a work of skillful fabulation" because, as Nin herself states, "Lying is the only way I have found to be true to myself, to do what I want, to be what I want with the least possible pain to others. To sustain illusion I have to lie" (62). Nin felt betrayed by the father who abandoned her at an early age, and later "allowed" herself to have a sexual relationship with him in order to win him back. Only her writing sustained

her and prevented her complete mental breakdown, providing her with what Henke terms a kind of absolution – here we see Nin returning to the confession in its religious terms as well. This essay had great personal resonance for me: I related to Nin's repeated attractions to sadistic men like Henry Miller (I am reminded again of Sylvia Plath's line about surrogates in "Daddy," "the vampire who said he was you"), as, like many other incest survivors, I have married several versions of my father, inadvertently repeating the original scene of childhood betrayal. Here is the insight which Henke provides on the subject:

> Unable to possess the absent father, she was forced, psychologically, to become him. Elyce Wakerman notes in *Father Loss* that, in cases of father absence, "a fantastic idealization is likely to occur, and Oedipal longing, based on that idealization, intensifies rather than resolves. The girl is engulfed in a lifelong commitment to the perfect lover, a fierce dedication to the man that got away..."Frequently, the deserted daughter will attempt to ameliorate "the pain of her loss by incorporating some of her father's characteristics into her own identity..."Jessica Benjamin argues that women rejected by their fathers during the identificatory process of developmental rapprochement often seek paternal surrogates in the form of heroic sadists. The woman's masochistic acts of self-abnegation in such relationships are "meant to secure access to the glory and power of the other." (59-60)

This theory allows the reader to make sense of Nin's continual shifting from a mother-denying, male-identified subject who is constantly struggling to please, and the recognition of her victimization. It was the sharing of her journal with Otto Rank that gave her permission to explore her rage at her father, for he advised her to "Hurt Him....Abandon him as he abandoned you. Revenge is necessary" (65). Henke also offers a more reasonable explanation of Nin's choice to end a nearly full-term pregnancy as something other than selfish callousness (as some of her biographers have claimed), suggesting that Nin was numb and terrified when she made the decision not to have a child, fearful that she would lose her privileged male status and the affection of her husband. Again, in the context of Nin's trauma, this is more tenable, particularly since Henke is able to demonstrate, through quoting Nin's sense of sin and guilt as she laments: "To protect Henry, to be free, I killed the child. Not to be abandoned, I killed the child" (75). Again, Henke does a kind of double reading, suggesting that behind Nin's assertion that the abortion was heroic, the real story lies in Nin's future emotional fragmentation and nightmares resonant with images of interrupted maternity. In her journals, Henke finds evidence for post-traumatic stress disorder, suggesting that Nin continually reiterates symptoms of psychological dysphoria, a state relieved only by writing: "Work has been my only stabilizer. The journal is a product

of my disease,...but it is also an engraving of pain, a tattooing of myself" (79).

For New Zealand writer Janet Frame, both autobiography and fiction provided the catharsis which acted as a counternarrative to the years she spent unjustly incarcerated in mental hospitals where she was misdiagnosed as a schizophrenic. She lost her sister Myrtle in a drowning accident, and suffered terrible poverty as a youth, gradually withdrawing into a private world of imagination. In her fiction, she developed an alter ego named Istina Mavet. Henke is adept at giving a context for this bildungsroman, pointing out the gender differences between Frame's text and Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, seeing in the latter a pride in difference that is mirrored only by humiliation and low self-esteem in Frame's case; she points out the similarities between this work and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, particularly the failed suicide attempts. In Frame's case, writing literally saved her life: she was scheduled to undergo a lobotomy at the same time that she was honoured with a literary prize, the Hubert Church award, for her first book of short stories. The announcement in the paper caught the attention of one of her doctors, who granted her a reprieve. Henke reads her autobiography as a repression of the worst of the trauma which Frame underwent in hospital, as Frame reduced much of it to silence and refused any hysterical note. But even after she was no longer incarcerated, Frame was tormented by persistent nightmares of being locked up, missing her convenient social mask of schizophrenia. This essay documents how Frame was able to develop some aesthetic distance from her subject of madness by envisaging an imaginary Mirror City, and discusses some of the other strategies by which she was able to survive eight horrendous years in mental hospitals, often without even a pencil with which to write, a cruel fate for someone who asserts that "If I could not live within the world of writing books, then where could I survive?" (101).

Audre Lorde's coinage of the term "biomythography" to describe her work *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, is a deliberate amalgamation of autobiographical fact and mythically resonant fiction that articulates her identity in the context of racism, sexism, and homophobia. Likewise her writing *The Cancer Journals* allowed her to persist in the belief that surviving the experience of cancer and confronting capitalism and its perpetrators was not a journey that she was undertaking alone. It seems significant that Lorde was born almost blind and did not speak until she was four; her mother taught her language and provided what Henke terms a "preoedipal moment of peace, protection, and utter tranquillity" (105) which is later violated by her light-skinned mother's conspiratorial silences and apparent adaptation to white racism. Lorde sees herself and names herself as both a survivor and a warrior, a development which Henke discusses in terms of Kristeva's theories. Lorde is insistent throughout her writing that it is through the support of

other women that she is able to escape a sense of victimization, and believes that writing is the key to survival.

The final chapter in this book is a discussion of Sylvia Fraser's *My Father's House: A Memoir of Incest and Healing*. I remember reading this graphic work some years ago, and considering how little attention Fraser gave to her mother's role in permitting the father-daughter incest to occur (it was in part this recognition that prompted me to focus my work on the mother-daughter role in such instances of incest). The title would suggest that Fraser's main focus is still patriarchal authority; although the end of the text describes the release Fraser felt from recovering her memories of the sexual abuse, there is no turning to matrifocal imagery, as there is in virtually all of the other books discussed thus far in Suzette Henke's study (it seems odd that Henke does not comment on this aberration), no disavowal of male privilege for the woman who is a self-described "Daddy's princess" throughout the text. Although Fraser does tell her incredulous but sympathetic mother at the end of the book, and is offered emotional support, and does "tell" on her father, there is little beyond the act of having written the book that suggests that the catharsis here was as significant for Fraser as it was for the other writers under discussion, that she was "literally writing for her life," as Henke claims for all these authors in the conclusion.

But it is true that for each of the authors considered, "autobiographical testimony proved to be a powerful tool in the process of reconstructing the beleaguered subject and remembering the self shattered by traumatic experience" (144). This is a fascinating study, and a wonderful complement to the testimony theories developed by Kali Tal, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, lending credence to their work and expanding upon our knowledge of how critical self-expression is to women survivors of trauma.

Irene Gammel's collection of essays, called *Confessional Politics: Women's Sexual Self-Representations in Life Writing and Popular Media*, focuses on women's claim to write truthfully about their sexualities. She discusses, in her introduction, the tendency to equate such literature with personal confession, a genre which, because of its religious associations with sin, shame, and voyeurism, has made feminists weary of the sixties' slogan "the personal is political." It is true that when men write of sex, their work is considered "literature" (think of Augustine's Confessions, or Rousseau, or Henry Miller, or D. H. Lawrence, or Philip Roth) and not read solely as autobiographical – this double standard has long existed throughout the history of literature. Gammel's aim, then, is not merely to elevate the sexual confession as a gender discourse, but to probe the ways in which "telling all" can be a strategy for both revealing and concealing the true self – indeed, it often presents itself as a subversive mode used to "distance, disrupt, and warn," so that "[through] strategic confessional interventions, the very paradigms that encourage confessional readings are called into question" (11). In this, she is persuasive, as the variety of articles in the collection attests to. I was not, however, convinced that the three divisions into which the essays are organized, was more than arbitrary; the three sections, entitled "Confessional Interventions," "Confessional Modalities," and "Confessional Inversions" are perhaps useful as organizational devices, but they seem to overlap in asserting that their texts transgress or undermine the convention of the confessional, and in rather similar ways. What is most enjoyable about the collection is its cohesiveness. It is rare that one reads a collection of academic essays that so thoroughly connects the concerns of each writer. This seems not to be forced, either, since Gammel's introductory remarks at the head of each chapter offer natural links with previous writers in the collection, and emphasize their connectedness. What is remarkable about this is that she has not sacrificed diversity in order to achieve such cohesion. I do not often read a book of essays with the expectation that they will form a single narrative, but this book engaged me sufficiently that it was not only possible but desirable to read it this way, and to appreciate the happy coincidences that scholars can discover between widely varying forms of female expression: fiction, performance art, diaries, memoirs, and t.v. talk shows.

Part One, entitled "Body Politics and Confessional Interventions," begins with a consideration of the diary of Anne Frank. I have read a great deal about this text lately, as there is a resurgence of interest in literature of the Holocaust, and had expected nothing new to be revealed, but I was pleasantly surprised. I had no idea when, as a teen, I read this book, that most of its author's references to her body and her sexuality had been expurgated, and that the restored version was unavailable until 1989. It has always struck me, though, that this work, were it written by a man, would have been heralded in the literary community as the beginnings of the Theatre of the Absurd movement: here is an adolescent, trapped in a secret passage behind a bookcase, writing a diary on a near-daily basis and recording the movements in a restricted space occupied by people waiting for nothing to happen so that they can escape. And that such absurdity is normalized in the journal speaks volumes about the restrictions placed upon writing women's lives generally. Marion Bishop's argument is that Anne Frank deliberately withheld information about her sexuality (in editing her own journal entries before exposing them to another's gaze) in a protective gesture which signaled her awareness of the necessity of yet another kind of "safe space." Her claim is that Anne is, in the original diary, writing to herself as primary audience, "thus maintaining control of her sexual self-representations." Anne makes many references to literal silencing which are echoed in the denial of all access to her physical body; nonetheless she reconstructs her physical self in the inclusion of the photographs, by her desire to mirror herself in another

woman, and by her attraction to Peter, the son of the other family sharing the annex. Bishop maintains that Anne Frank achieved a voice as a writer because she remained connected to her writing, which "continues to resist the edict to silence, the injuction to disappear" (27).

Lori Saint-Martin considers three examples from contemporary Québécois writing, including the erotic pulp fiction of Lili Gulliver, novelist Anne Dandurand, and the intellectual giant Nicole Brossard. One cannot help but admire the eclectic range of her choices and the connections she is nonetheless able to establish between such disparate discourses. I like this writer's use of the term "hybrid" to describe the zone between fiction and confession that many of the writers, not just in this article, but in the whole volume, seem to occupy. Some of her assertions at the opening of the article strike me as overgeneralized and difficult to substantiate – for example, "the Québec tradition is similar to the French, which would explain why the longing for truth is less acute in Québec women's writing, why there is more playfulness, more blurring of generic boundaries, and less anxiety in their work." While this may be true for many contemporary women writers in Québec, I can think of many examples that would refute such a claim (Anne Hébert, Claire Martin, Marie-Claire Blais, to name a few), and it reminds me that many critics choose their examples to fit the Procrustean bed of theory (jouissance, in this instance) and conveniently ignore those examples which might contradict it. Nonetheless, her discussion of Lili Gulliver's work is fascinating; I wish Saint-Martin had explored more fully the reasons why this erotic writing is so popular. She glides over the comic, tongue-in-cheek parodies of eroticism and the bad writing, looking principally for those places where generic boundaries are reworked. To claim that it panders to traditional women and that "there is little here of a woman's authentic sexual desire" seems not just condescending, but a contradiction of the polymorphous perverse about women's sexuality. While it is probably true that Nicole Brossard's work does call for a change in power relations between the sexes, and someone like Gulliver does not, the latter also has a wide audience and it might be interesting to speculate why her appeal is so great (in the same fashion that Janice Radway and Kay Mussel, among others, have studied the appeal of Harlequin romances and what it reveals about their readership). There is, I'm suggesting, the same possibility that an author like Gulliver does not want to be taken seriously, that her writing may in fact be just as subversive as the other texts under consideration.

The next article does ask such probing questions, and weaves the texts together well while maintaining a longterm dialogue with such key questions. "What is the relationship between the best-selling and the "silenced" sexual confession?" (51) asks Irene Gammel in "Parading Sexuality." Again what I appreciated about this article was the introduction of unknown or forgotten women like the performance artist Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven,

whose parody of the pin-up girl in the 1920's and whose nude performances inspired women artists to support her for her desire "to make men confront their illogic" (59). Here Gammel comes closer to integrating the range of female experience of the "confession" without discriminating negatively between classes or genres. She considers how the tactics of shock and comedy and what she terms "linguistic code-switching" have been used as effective tools for women to demand their sexual rights in public and to undermine traditional confessional modes. Why were some of the diarists, all cosmopolitan German women, marketed as popular "confessions" while others were denied publication? In the latter category, Gammel launches a fascinating discussion of Helen Hessel, who wrote a collaborative sexual diary with her lover; the diary was denied publication, but her sexual life story entered cultural history when it was appropriated by François Truffaut in his 1961 film *Jules and Jim*. More than "confess," these women strategically used and abused traditional confession, "turning its conventions inside out in order to voice critiques against sexual norms and traditional forms of female sexual self-representations" (48). Perhaps the most important point she raises is that, during a period when male sexuality in fiction risked being censored as pornography (e.g. D.H. Lawrence), female "true confessions" of sexuality became so popular that they rivaled the serious naturalist fiction of men. After finally considering the feminist comedy of Svende Merian ("Do you take the pill?," she asks her male lover), Gammel concludes that all three of these women were inevitably victimized by society's misogyny, even as they attempted to challenge it.

This chapter is complemented by a subsequent one on performance art called "Raging Tongues" later in the book, in which Lynda Goldstein considers more contemporary examples of women performers who disrupt audience expectations. Karen Finley's sexual performance art both transgresses the confessional mode and exploits it to display her outrage at violence against women. I am grateful for the inclusion of these discussions of performance artists, whose courageous stage shows offer striking parallels to the relatively passive acts of reading literary texts. Much of the article engagingly summarizes Finley's act, in which she "disabuses her audience of quiescence," moving from a quiet soliloquy to a screaming rage in a mockery of female "hysteria." And Goldstein also describes Holly Hughes' performance for a largely all-female audience and her articulation of lesbian desire. She reads both performers' rage as "performative sexual confessions that simultaneously voice the incoherence of subject formation while constraining the confessor to a coherent identity" (103) – a conclusion very similar to that reached by Irene Gammel. Not having access to these performances myself, I particularly enjoyed descriptions of them, both informed by a thoughtful analysis.

The chapter by Natalie Cooke called "Mi rage" claims that poetry written by incest survivors creates a sudden sense of intimacy between poet

and reader that contradicts the sensationalism surrounding television shows on incest, which revictimize victims by subjecting them to "experts" for help and advice. Additionally, Cooke claims that survivor poetry permits the reclaiming of power for incest victims by offering another venue for rage in place of the shame and accompanying blame that usually follows the disclosure of sexual abuse. Again the religious connotations of "confession" are undermined by the poet's assertion of the violation of the self, as well as by the articulation of that self's survival. Certainly this echoes my own experience in writing about sexual abuse: writing was not only cathartic, but affirming in allowing me to reclaim my status as a subject of power rather than an object of violence. It had not occurred to me before, perhaps because the process was unconscious for me, but I think that Cooke is correct in maintaining that writing about incest requires aesthetic distancing devices: "Thus survivor poetry incorporates at least two levels of communication: the disclosure itself, in which the act of sexual violence is named, and a framing narrative in which the speaker positions herself in relation to the experience itself" (68). (This strategy is echoed repeatedly in Henke's study as well.) I particularly valued the way in which Cooke claims that these poets signal pain by gaps in discourse; again this repeats my own writing experience, because such fragmentation and blank spaces seem the only way to articulate experiences that go beyond language, that have no name. Betsy Warland, whose poetry is discussed here, calls this "my forgetting. mi rage/my mirage – no words," allowing that language itself can be deceptive, that words often serve as impediments in witnessing the truth.

Elizabeth Wilson's article also addresses incest and denial, and this chapter offers some necessary historical and cultural context to the previous one. She writes about the middle class family's backlash against memories of childhood sexual abuse, focusing in particular on the 1992 development of the False Memory Syndrome Foundation. She demonstrates how reluctant middle class America has been to accept the reality of sexual abuse of children, clinging to the Freudian notion of children's unconsummated desire for incest, and/or dismissing incest as a lower-class problem. She demonstrates that Foucault's assertion that there is more incitement to incest in the middle class is also accompanied by his denial of the reality of actual incest. Part of the problem, Wilson claims, has been the confessional rhetoric in popular self-help books like *The Courage to Heal* which may encourage women to search for memories of sexual abuse when there is evidence of other, less ideologically-loaded forms of abuse that may have been present in childhood. I am reminded here of Janice Williamson's *Cry Baby*, which frustrated me even more because it never completely acknowledges incest, but offers only hints and fragments and copious quotations about incest, allowing the reader to fill in the gaps. This makes for poetic writing, but teases the reader. Because of her father's suicide, Williamson cannot answer some of her recurring

questions or fill in the gaps in her memory with anything but fictions and speculations, but the father figure is often dead or absent in other incest memoirs and this has not prevented the survivors from fully confronting their pasts. Such stories seem to deny the validity of other incest accounts by suggesting the unreliability of memory and valorizing invention – a complaint which Elizabeth Wilson makes in her article. She concludes that "the very ubiquity of sexual abuse charges is now helping to undermine them" (95) and soberly states that

> If it turns out that the incest-recovery movement is focusing on sexual abuse to the exclusion of other forms of abuse that may be indicated – and thus recapitulating within the movement the hierarchyof abuse established by the middle class itself – it may turn out that the long-term results are less disruptive than hoped for. (95)

And disruption is precisely what confessional and testimonial writing offers the reader, as Anita Hill's testimony of sexual harassment against her former employer Clarence Thomas disrupted politics by the intrusion of personal trauma. Again it is useful to have the historical contextualizing of the theories offered in Gammel's text, and to have yet another "real life" story that provides another view of how a woman of monumental stature deployed one more strategy to undermine the conventional confessional mode. In contrast to the performance artists discussed earlier, Hill strategically sidestepped any show of emotion or rage. This clever political maneuver, Jessie Givner demonstrates, ironically created a public crisis which prompted a rapid and effective redeployment of traditional confessional hierarchies in the political arena and in popular media. Less engaging than some of the other pieces in this book, in large part because it is repetitive, the article nonetheless points to the double standard in the Hill-Thomas trial, whereby Hill was asked repeatedly by the senators to speak about sexual details, while Thomas maintained that discussion of private matters in the public arena of the Senate was inadmissible. Givner uses several devices to report on the media portrait of Hill as steeped in racist mythology about black female sexuality: she offers an analysis of the distorted Hill biography by David Brock; she compares the "spectacle" of Hill's photograph in popular magazines like *Newsweek*, which displayed "gigantic and multiple reproductions of her face for the public gaze" (125), while showing diminished photographs of Clarence Thomas; she analyzes the disruption of the trial during prime-time family television viewing hours rather than its being confined to the space of domestic weekday television time that is usually reserved for "women's viewing" and exploring female sexual trauma, a category which associates "low" culture, spectacle, and mass consumerism with the feminine, as the work of Tania Modelski has amply demonstrated. Givner concludes that the

uneasiness left by the trial in the political arena could mean that sexual trauma has become "unanchored from its traditional places to intrude into the political realms of high ideals" (129).

Part three of the book investigates the policing and normalizing of female sexual practices, and shows confessional inversions in popular genres, including pulp fiction, television talk shows, and letters to the editor. Perhaps the most engaging article in the collection is Cynthia Davis' "B(e)aring it All: Talking about Sex and Self on Television Talk Shows." This piece describes the "behind the scenes" manipulation of uninvited television talk show guests. She explores why the genre is immensely popular, referring to the pseudo-religious communal aspect of talk and claiming that it in fact serves bourgeois conventions of the confession which are occasionally transgressed in interesting ways. Davis questions whether or not the "talking cure," as first envisaged by Pappenheim, a female patient of Sigmund Freud (another fact I learned!), can resolve long-term trauma (her discussion of Pappenheim, who was cured and continued a long career as a women's rights activist makes for fascinating reading). It is no accident that the opposite view has recently come into vogue. Take, for example, a recent article in *The Globe and Mail*, which articulates the backlash against the feminized genre of talking: "Put a cork in it," the newspaper article is headed, and continues with the advice that "maybe it's time to reconsider the whole idea of expressing our inner feelings, and hark back to old-fashioned civility and reserve" (December 18, 1999). Or consider the response of the Brat Pack, the twenty-something novelists who are quick to lampoon their literary predecessors with such lambasting remarks as: "Canadian fiction has tended to deal with convincing readers of what they already know – that racism is a very bad thing, that childhood sexual abuse is a very bad thing and that poverty is a very bad thing" (*Globe and Mail*, April 24, 1999). It is no surprise that there is a reprisal against the confessional mode – talking is a way of recovering from painful experiences that was later appropriated and used against women, says Davis, and it retains its potential in a "feminine" forum like novels and talk shows where "guests' appearance may be initial steps, as attempts, albeit usually depoliticized, to effect some sort of transformation in other women's lives, not simply their own" (155). The underlying premise – that community and sisterhood can be achieved – expresses mass culture's utopian desires, and the 1996 cancellation of *Donahue* (who claimed to be a feminist) signals that the public discussion of such issues as incest, unemployment, wife abuse, and gay rights, does not always translate into entertainment or larger viewer shares, since feminism is not always a bestseller. What talk shows lack, claims Davis, are explicit political agendas and aims to further the goals of such a feminist community. This is a serious and compelling consideration of a popular genre that made me reconsider its significance.

Also included in part three is Marilyn Diggs' "Lesbian Confession and

Case History," wherein the author discusses how lesbian pulp fiction writers and autobiographers strategically appropriate negative labels and invert their original implications. This is not a particularly new or startling idea; various groups have reappropriated terms like "nigger" and "queer" to their advantage. What Diggs' work does offer is an interesting historical context for the pathologizing of lesbianism in the discourse of sexology, demonstrating how lesbians were frequently portrayed as a strange "hybrid" sex (a word that recurs throughout this volume, in varying contexts!). She gives us the case history of Miss L., one of Krafft-Ebing's patients, whom he depicted as unhealthy and immoral. Many of the pulp novels from the earlier part of the century reclaim "sexological rhetoric while subverting its usual diagnosis, elevating its eccentricities and making fun of what constitutes an 'inheritable taint' or 'pathological condition'." Likewise "Cross-dressing Confessions: Men Confessing as Women," by Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, explores the male urge to confess while wearing women's clothing, calling essentialism playfully into question since "the truth-effect of women's sexual confessions relies on the reader's belief in the coincidence between the writer's body and signature." Cross-dressing is a subgenre of the female confessional, she argues. When Laurence Housman (the younger brother of the famous poet) wrote *An Englishwoman's Love-Letter* in 1900, it was praised as "tender" and "exquisite," until the sex of the author was discovered and the work condemned as "unhealthy." She examines the text for its celebrations of same-sex relationships and critiques of gender roles and marriage. Janzen Kooistra reads the text as a "cross-dressing confession" in that Housman, a homosexual and a feminist, tried to pass himself off as a female writer, writing that "[i]f Housman takes up a female subject position in order to express publicly his love for Herbert Alexander, the writer's femininity seems both essential and constructed." She claims that he can come out as a gay man in the guise of the female confessional in a way that he could not in his autobiography. This essay is the least persuasive in the entire collection. Could one argue, by extension, that all male portraits of women in literature (I think here of Richardson's *Clarissa* or D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, for example) constitute cross-dressing or the expression of a male author's "inner femininity"? Such authors are, after all, parading as women in the form of the confessional too. But this is a minor quibble with the book, which I found a very satisfying and fascinating study.

I can confidently recommend both books for scholarly attention. They are both worth reading in depth and each should become part of the repertory of scholars working in his field. They should be recognized as part of the struggle to "confess" that the "crisis in truth" (which many trauma theorists refer to) is being addressed with honesty and truthfulness at last.

Malaspina University College

Works Cited

Canetti, Elias. *Kafka's Other Trial*. New York: Schocken Books, 1974

Caruth, Cathy ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995.

Felman, Shoshana and Dori Laub. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*. New York and London: Routledge, 1992.

Gammel, Irene, ed. *Confessional Politics: Women's Sexual Self-Representations in Life Writing and Popular Media*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1999.

Gibson, Nancy and Suhadra Devi Rai. Review of K. Tal's *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literature of Trauma*. *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue canadienne de littérature comparée* 25:3-4 (September/ December 1998). 677-80.

Henke, Suzette. *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998.

Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: Harper Collins, 1992.

Potvin, Liza. *White Lies (for my mother)*. Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1992.

Tal, Kali. *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literature of Trauma*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996.

Wiesel, Eli. "The Holocaust as a Literary Inspiration," *Dimensions of the Holocaust*. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1977. 4-29.

Williamson, Janice. *Cry Baby!* Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1998.

In The Thin and The Thick of Social Construction

WILM ROBERTSON

> There are philosophers of science who write essays defending torture as an instrument of public policy and others who disagree, but qua philosophers of science, they are no better qualified to discuss such matters than is a truck driver or a Xerox repair person. Likewise philosophers of science should claim no more expertise on the ethical issues than, say the man with an office adjacent to mine, who is a classical archaeologist; less, perhaps, since he is the world expert on ancient Mediterranean archery.
>
> -Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?*

Imagine a well-constructed police station. It is solidly built and possesses a number of diverse rooms (much more difficult to imagine what goes on in there), but it stands alone. Wide boulevards separate it from the rest of the city and it is protected by ramparts and a complex system of moats. It is very hard to enter and the policemen inside the building seldom emerge. Occasionally, one of them may stick his head out of a window and shout and else hang a banner from the roof. Both shouts and banners attempt to correct the behavior of the other inhabitants of the city. These citizens often speak carelessly. Sometimes they even write confusedly using words that lack clear definitions. This infuriates the policemen inside the building. They hate confusion, linguistic carelessness and (above all) ambiguity. They are the city's discourse police and it is their task to impose clarity upon their lackadaisical fellow citizens. Watch your language, they order, or we'll watch it for you. However, a difficulty always arises. They are usually rebarbative when approached and their shouts are often too highly-pitched to be easily understood. Their banners are written in a peculiar dialect of their own. In order to be policed, you must ask for admission. Since entry will probably be denied, you will then have to learn how to read the banners. It will prove to be an arduous undertaking.

Ian Hacking's analysis of the language of social constructionism provides an exemplary case. Hacking has observed what seems to be a problem and has set out to offer correction. The problem arises from the commonplace assertion that something, X, has been "socially constructed." (He begins chapter 1 with an alphabetical list of recent titles that have all asserted that

Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée
CRCL/RCLC June / Juin 1999
0319-051X/99/26.2/$10.00/