Rhetorical Projections and Silences

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Rhetoric is the linguistic material of consciousness, and, ...
what haunts or remains lost to consciousness.

—Susan Stanford Friedman

In Susan Glaspell's short story "A Jury of Her Peers" (1917), the female characters establish a sense of rhetorical community and solidarity through the silent cover-up of their neighbor Mrs. Wright's fatal action against her abusive husband. The women gather with their own husbands at the Wright home—the scene of the crime—and notice the unwashed dishes and the last sloppy stitch of Mrs. Wright's "crazy sewing" (87). The disarray indicates to them that Mrs. Wright, formerly Minnie Foster, was distracted, abruptly interrupted. When the two women find in Minnie's sewing box the strangled body of her pet canary carefully wrapped in silk, their eyes meet "clung together in a look of dawning comprehension, of growing horror" (89). They come to understand Minnie's reason for murdering her husband; they discern from the untidiness, dead bird, and the broken door of the birdcage that her husband snapped the canary's neck. The women conspiratorially hide the box and do not mention the dead bird to Mr. Peters, the town sheriff; when queried about the empty cage they suggest that a cat must have caught it. The two women shelter Minnie rather than implicate her in the murder of her husband, and they express guilt for not noticing her situation earlier. Mrs. Hale says, "I might 'a' known she needed help, I tell you, it's queer, Mrs. Peters. We live close together, and we live far apart. We all go through the same things—it's all just a different kind of the same thing! If it weren't—why do you and I understand? Why do we know—what we know this minute? (91).
Similar rhetorical visions characterize the constructions of women’s communities in the three recent books: Cheryl Sattler’s *Teaching to Transcend: Educating Women Against Violence*, Elaine Lawless’ *Women Escaping Violence: Empowerment through Narrative*, and Jenny Horsman’s *Too Scared to Learn: Women, Violence, and Education*. These studies were not designed to highlight how differences complicate or enhance the building of women’s communities in shelters for victims of domestic and sexual violence. Yet, given the recent movement within feminist studies from the earlier temporal rhetoric of revelation, rebirth, and, re-vision and essentialist identity categories to the locational idiom and spatial rhetorics of multipositionality, relational subjectivity, and the geopolitical (Friedman), we might ask to what extent these works are predicated upon gender as the primary category of analysis? Are such configurations necessary to understand the pedagogical and political work of shelters? Do women’s silences and narratives of trauma, violence, and resistance throw foundational notions of experience and realist genres and into crisis? (Egan). Or as Horsman asks, “Have all the autobiographies about abuse merely created ‘contained and predictable narratives’ that lessen, rather than increase, the response that actually addresses the problem?” (32). These questions speak to the narrativization as well as the cultural consumption of women’s trauma, and in the words of Kali Tal how “the meaning of a traumatic experience is fought in the arena of political discourse, popular culture, and scholarly debate” (qtd. in Horsman 52).

In *Teaching to Transcend*, Sattler describes how women residents at a shelter in Florida and another in Washington D.C., like the female characters in Glaspell’s short story, rely upon one another’s protective silence (xviii), and how women often both suffer and escape in silence (9—10). In *Too Scared to Learn*—a study based on interviews with counselors, therapists, literacy and educators in Canada—Horsman argues that the cultural and institutional silences that surround domestic and sexual violence cultivates the assumption that violence is an uncommon event. Horsman draws on Kali Tal’s *Worlds of Hurt* to articulate common modes that promote such cultural silences, including mythologizing, medicalization, and disappearance. According to Tal, mythologizing turns trauma and violence into “containable and predictable narratives” (qtd. in Horsman 28). Medicalization draws attention away from the social and institutional elements of violence by focusing on individual trauma victims, who presumably need to be cured. And disappearance refers to the refusal to admit to certain kinds of
violence, such as the denial of women's accounts of domestic and sexual violence (27–28).

In *Women Escaping Violence*, Lawless is particularly interested in the narrative fissures and gaps in women's accounts of the trauma of domestic and sexual violence, as she puts it, in "that which is inscribed already on flesh and body [but] cannot be spoken" (61). Her study of the narratives produced by residents at a women's shelter in Columbia, Missouri powerfully demonstrates how women's "silenced pain might find a voice" (70). After listening to and transcribing approximately thirty survivors' stories, Lawless observed that narrative sequence tended to break down at points of acute pain and violence. Many of the women interviewed deflected attention from their own pain. As narrators, many women situated themselves as if standing "outside their lives, watching eerily, as though they were but witnesses to a life that had very little to do with them" (67). Sherry, one of the four women featured in *Women Escaping Violence*, constructs a narrative of "implied violence" and a disembodied rhetorical stance. She uses passive construction, for example, to discuss her earliest memory; at three years old she watched her father "get murdered" by her uncle. As Lawless notes, "a great deal happened that night . . . yet none of the sounds, the pain, the fear, are conveyed by her words." In this "nearly silent account, [t]he unspeakable . . . is left to the imagination." Lawless continues, "We 'see' her as though she is outside her own body looking in on the events in her life" (86). "Narratives seem to break down where language breaks down," but as Lawless recognizes, "perhaps language does not fail either; perhaps the failure is in the receiving of the stories, in the failure to discern what is being said" (66). Lawless raises a profound question: "How can we listen to [a survivor's story] without second-guessing the narrator, without pointing to her inability to 'tell' the pain and abusing her even further, and without generalizing to an entire population what it is she cannot speak?" (66).

Likewise, Horsman references literature that suggests that "problems with narrative sequence, language development, and attention may result from childhood experiences of abuse" (223). But she also acknowledges the potential ethnocentricity of assumptions about narrative coherence. What might be classified as chaos in one culture might be perceived as order in another (224). Horsman therefore makes an important distinction between the impact of trauma on ongoing memory formations, crucial to literacy learning, and the focus on the memory of trauma and false memory debates in popular and therapeutic discourses (221). Lawless
suggests that it is not the disaster that emerges through the disruptions and ruptures in women’s narratives but the “transformed woman who refuses to recount the disaster and privilege the subjectivity of her abuser” (71). Lawless found that many women in her study acquired narrative agency through “transformative re-membering . . . the creative use of the past in redefining the self” (Haaken qtd. in Lawless 71).

All three authors share the perspective that shelters foster community by enabling women to tell their stories and therefore to move beyond the notion that they alone are victims of violence. As Lawless puts it, “the act of telling a story is a creative act, a kind of performance, that takes words and language beyond their mere rhetorical power and enables them to work for the narrator toward transformation and self-representation” (106). Storytelling in the safety of the shelter can represent a “taking back of one’s own experiences, of reframing them for a [rhetorical] purpose: to get help, to evoke sympathy, to elicit understanding—even to shock” (Sattler 33). But as Lawless also notes, “a woman at the shelter is much more than just ‘her story’. . . . And gradually, as we [shelter staff, volunteers, residents, literacy workers, and researchers] . . . support her through ‘the system,’ we facilitate the work of those who seek to create a coherent story, a story that will ‘fly’ in court, that will gain her services, that will satisfy the prosecutor, that will be in the language others have devised—language that is far, far from the flesh-and-blood violence she still carries in and on her body, in her mouth, in her most private parts, on her head, in her ears” (38). Shelters are pedagogical and rhetorical spaces where residents are taught feminist values of equality and rights, concepts of self-worth, financial management, parenting skills, and how to navigate social and legal services. Workers in shelters confront on a daily basis the demands of multiple agendas (to maintain privacy and security yet meet the requirements of government bureaucracy and legal systems) and fight for legitimacy (Sattler xix). Moreover, as Sattler observes, shelters “incorporate and expand upon the concepts of feminist pedagogy recognizable in formal education” (xviii).

The use of consciousness-raising methods, associated with 1960s and 1970s feminism, is just one example of “feminist, political education in shelters” (36). Yet, consciousness-raising pedagogy must also “meet the reality of the need to create women who are self-supporting and self-nurturing, on their own” (87). The rhetoric of consciousness-raising implies a “before and after,” a temporal movement based on a series of binaries, including silence/speech and oppressed/liberated (Friedman 19). Teaching to Transcend likewise has an overall journey structure that
moves from women telling stories within shelters to a chapter on public activism. Sattler does not trace any one individual’s movement through these stages but claims that the first observable change of women in shelter is their “ability to verbalize their experiences of abuse” (27). She continues, “Because women recognize themselves in each other’s stories and because as they see themselves in each other, “they begin to see that their stories are not unique but are those of a people, a nation, of women” (34). Rhetorically, Sattler embraces universal claims and classifications, and in doing so she circumvents the differences upon which identifications are predicated and eludes the rhetorical resonance of the concept “a nation of women” with its obverse but no less troubling metaphor “women as nation.” Fraught with contradictions, the iconic use of female figures to signify national identity “often obscures or even embodies the inequities within the nation” (Friedman 26).

In A Rhetoric of Motives, Kenneth Burke highlights the paradoxical relation: difference is foundational to identification. “In being identified with B, A is ‘substantially one’ with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time he remains unique, an individual locus of motives” (21). Burke continues “to begin with ‘identification’ is . . . to confront the implications of division” (22). To be fair, Sattler does note that some conflicts within the shelter “get acted out as race issues,” and she rightly points out a “dialogue about cross-cultural communication is missing” within shelter pedagogy (84). But what may be read as a single ineffective generalization on a single page in a single chapter forecasts a prevailing conceptual problem in Teaching to Transcend that likewise originates at the rhetorical level of identification and projection.

Sattler frames her study with an analogy between African slavery in the Antebellum U.S. South and domestic violence against women, with the shelter movement as the Underground Railroad. According to Sattler, domestic violence and slavery share three characteristics: bondage, enforced silence, and the denial of resources (2). The shelter movement and the Underground Railroad involve the “involuntary slavery of a people and a dangerous escape, and each has used external assistance together with their own perseverance to break their bonds” (1–2). She notes the temporal congruence between the Underground Railroad and the shelter movement—namely, the founding of what may have been the first shelter in 1866—but she does not discuss in any detail the prevalence of domestic and sexual violence within slavery. Sattler notes other similarities, including the following: shelters are indistinguishable and dependent upon secrecy like houses on the Underground Railroad. When
women enter shelters they experience losses (loss of homes, family) comparable to those experienced by escaped slaves (3). Just as the Underground Railroad depended upon slaves helping slaves, the shelter movement depends on women helping women (10).

Yet, this analogy simultaneously distinguishes and collapses the categories “women” and “slaves”; moreover, in a footnote Sattler claims that the women referenced in her writing are “technically ‘free’” but that their “freedom is rhetorical rather than real” (2). The flawed analogy is most vivid in Sattler’s comparison of plantations and shelters. Sattler invokes the image of a plantation to describe shelter communities as spaces where people “flung separately into an unknown and assumedly harsh environment cluster together almost for safety, but certainly for security” (20). But plantations are institutions of slavery and its legacy, whereas shelters seek to rhetorically and materially “free” women from the legacies of violence. Horsman likewise invokes the historical violence of slavery as a legacy that continues into the present (26). But Horsman does so in order to create a historical continuum. The problem therefore lies not in the use of analogies or spatial versus temporal rhetorics but in the way that such comparisons, particularly in *Teaching to Transcend*, tend to overpower and therefore silence key historical and material differences.

In contrast, Horsman addresses the tensions among identifications by illustrating how communities can become fractured by difference. For example, she summarizes the legacy of residential school systems intended to assimilate First Nations. Instructors in First Nation programs “take it as a given that everyone [in their literacy programs] has experienced violence” (65). Horsman notes, “If learners did not experience the residential school system itself, they are sure to have experienced the violence of its aftermath and the ongoing racism and insults that have inevitably assaulted their self-esteem and pride” (65). Attuned to the prevalence of abuse in the lives of learners with intellectual or physical disabilities, Horsman also reports that “a common issue for many Deaf women [is] control” (59). More specifically, “women who have not had the opportunity to learn American Sign Language can remain dependent on family members or spouses to interpret for them, making it harder for them to resist the ways they are controlled and harder to leave [an abusive situation]” (60). Horsman’s forays into specific literacy communities and the challenges they face are brief, but they importantly point to the need for more sustained site-specific studies of the links between violence and education.
Horsman’s larger goal in *Too Scared to Learn* is to bridge therapeutic with educational discourses and to ascertain whether they might work together in community literary programs. She is critical of deficit models of literacy education that focus on individual deficiencies and thus ignore the social practices that create literacy and illiteracy. If such models are implemented in shelters, she rightly notes, they might very well re-traumatize learners and play into, what Lynn Worsham calls in another context, the “pedagogy of violence.” But Horsman makes a broader claim; she argues that “all learning must be carried out in recognition of the needs of trauma survivors. It is the needs of trauma survivors that should be normalized as an everyday part of education” (23). Horsman observes that “because literacy takes learners back to their failure to learn to read well as children, it may also take them back to memories of being a child—to memories of violence at home or school” (5). But later she points out the dangers of a presumption such as “all learners are in this together,” and she argues that literacy workers should not assume that learners share a common cause or presume that there will be a connection among women around trauma (152). Aside from the apparent inconsistencies in her position, the general configuration of learners as survivors is troubling because it universalizes trauma and violence and erases differences among learners.

Horsman is at her best when analyzing the limitations of therapeutic discourse and their connection to deficit models of literacy education. She extends her criticism of literacy models that reinforce rescue narratives to therapeutic discourse that medicalizes violence and obscures how violence is embedded within social structures (35). The pedagogical implications of such medical models for literacy education are clear. As Horsman correctly points out, “If trauma is a health problem [alone], it is easy to suggest that a woman ‘suffering’ from traumatic ‘symptoms’ should ‘recover’ before she participates in an educational classroom” (36). Likewise, she argues that the healing rhetoric that attributes to trauma a linear progression can undermine the goals of literacy work with survivors. “The conceptualization of a journey from sickness to health puts impossible demands on survivors of trauma—they are expected to be able to put their experiences behind them and get over it” (37). In her discussion of Aboriginal people, who she notes have the highest rate of illiteracy in Canada, Horsman introduces alternatives to the individualistic rhetoric of healing by taking into account the health and healing practices of entire communities (189, 187). Horsman also articulates the limitations of the concept of normalcy and the “suggestion that trauma is
outside the range of normal for women" (35). She concludes, "It is particularly important that literacy workers do not unintentionally reinforce social silences about the impacts of violence through unquestioningly using the terminology and conceptions from the therapeutic field as if they were simply facts, rather than socially constructed frameworks that reveal, conceal, and profoundly shape taken-for-granted responses to violence" (41). Yet, despite her critique of therapeutic discourses, Horsman suggests that literacy sessions might be co-led by literacy workers and counselors, with the caveat that literacy workers take responsibility to learn about the approach of community organizations and counselors and to inform learners about different approaches (257, 240).

Horsman recognizes the potential slippage between the roles of counselor and teacher when trauma enters the scene of education. She reminds literacy workers that in the absence of peer support they too may experience feelings of hopelessness, which could lead them to fall prey to rescue narratives and their appeal that only they can help the survivor (292). Horsman therefore urges literacy workers to become aware of the potential transference of emotions between instructors and students, to set and respect boundaries, to build upon survivors’ learned literacies, such as the astute attention to nonverbal communication, and to shift their understanding of violence so as not to isolate individual experiences from the layers of violence in society (319). *Too Scared to Learn* encourages literacy workers to develop an active integrated curriculum that engages the body in learning, provides opportunities to explore ambiguity and to foster learners’ abilities to play with multiple possible meanings of a text and to explore the social construction of experience and knowledge. Community literacy pedagogies often encourage learners to tell autobiographical stories, and Horsman herself advocates the expressive use of journals (169). Yet, she also expresses reservations about the exclusive focus on life-writing and the risks of self-disclosure for both teachers and learners in community literacy programs. Disclosures of trauma and violence can become overwhelming for instructors (170), as well as distressing for other learners who “may want the classroom to be free of the danger of having to hear disturbing stories” (117). But, and Horsman puts it nicely, if not used critically life-writing pedagogy can become “a device that simply encourages learners to write themselves into dominant discourses . . . rather than creating the potential for learners to challenge these discourses, creating new discourses that offer alternative accounts of their experience” (116).
Witnessing Crisis, Experience, and the Politics of Location

Horsman’s attention to the social construction of experience and the politics of location is reflected in her rhetorical stance. “I come to this research as an insider to the literacy field, not as an external researcher” (17). “I recognize that my knowledge is always partial, shaped by my own social location and multiple identities. . . . My English middle-class background is written on my body and heard in my speech. My lesbian identity might also have been recognized by some of those I interviewed, but my nondisabled and hearing status would go unnoticed by many—as simply normal.” She mentions those aspects of her identity that might make her “suspect” to particular learners, such as her advanced education or her lack of knowledge of sign language (18). Horsman employs the legitimizing force of experience to carve out her rhetorical position: “[M]y focus on violence has resonated with many literacy workers (and where they were present also with literacy learners). They have talked about their experiences and the issues in their contexts, confirming for me the importance of examining impacts of violence” (5). She projects rhetorical community through reciprocal reflexivity with those who contributed to the study as readers and learners. “The object of research did not stand still. Each group I spoke to or conducted a workshop with had the full benefit of whatever knowledge the research had produced to date, including my tentative analysis. Each group helped in the process of pushing the analysis further, sometimes sending me back to rethink, sometimes confirming a direction and adding new insights” (11). Both Lawless and Horsman challenge foundational notions of objectivity, opting instead for a “strong objectivity” characterized by critical descriptions of the social values shaping the research process and cultural beliefs that function as evidence (Harding 18–19). However, Horsman’s critical self-reflexivity as researcher is not carried over in a systematic ways, as it is in *Women Escaping Violence*, to her analysis of women’s narratives. *Too Scared to Learn* is an important study about the links between literacy, trauma, and violence against women that merits greater attention to the evidentiary and rhetorical functions of women’s stories and silences within particular contexts.

Like Horsman, Lawless organizes her chapters thematically but does more of the close-in analytical work. Her inclusion at the book’s conclusion of the transcripts of long narrative sections of four of the women interviewed and featured in the analytical portion of her study, uninterrupted by commentary, eliminates some of the repetition and back-tracking that characterizes *Too Scared to Learn*. One of the many
strengths of *Women Escaping Violence*, and its particular interest for rhetoricians, is its attention to how women's narratives are shaped by cultural scripts about violence (Hesford "Reading"), "scripts that guide us both in our actions and in our narrative retellings of events" (52). Lawless does not construct cultural scripts as static rhetorical forces; rather, she illustrates how dominant scripts about violence facilitate cultural silences and conversely how survivors appropriate them for contrary purposes. For instance, Lawless observes how many of the women she interviewed invoke religious discourse in constructing survival stories (30–31). Yet, she also acknowledges that many of the world's religions reinforce male dominance and female submission and that women's internalization of such values may help to sustain relations of dominance. For example, some women express guilt if they did not submit to abuse and forgive their abusers (82).

Lawless and Sattler both reference Ruth Behar's notion of the ethnographer as "vulnerable observer" and identify with "anthropology that breaks your heart" (Sattler 28; Lawless 2). Rhetorical studies has its own version of the "vulnerable observer," construed most recently as "rhetorical listening" (Ratcliffe). Sattler constructs herself as a "vulnerable observer" and readers as witnesses. "Although I have never been the victim of domestic violence," she discloses, "I have been stalked twice, physically attacked in the presence of onlookers who did not intervene, and I escaped a rape by what I can only call the intervention of the goddess" (xii). Similarly, though without mention of the goddess, Lawless opens her book with a poem (which we later learn is autobiographical) about a narrator who witnessed violent relationships between a husband and wife, and parents and their children. The narrator finds herself in this observant gaze: "a mirror image of myself/showed me the door and handed me/a bloody key./I escaped/wounded, but free." Here Lawless relies on the temporal rhetoric of early feminism, but these metaphors recede and advance throughout the book: "As I grew more involved with the stories from the women in the shelter and spent long, tedious hours transcribing the tapes of the women who had agreed to tell me their life stories and the stories of abuse they had endured, my mother's story and her mother's story began to haunt me, as did my own. . . . Even though my father is dead, my mother cannot tell her story; and even though it has been nearly twenty years since I left my first husband and his own angry violence, I am not yet able to tell that story" (158–59).

In Chapter 5, "Sharing Secrets and Making Noise," Sattler focuses on the Clothesline Project and its power as a public art activism to speak
through the cultural silences surrounding violence against women. The National Clothesline Project is a performance piece in the form of an actual clothesline from which survivors or family and friends of victims hang T-shirts that represent a particular woman’s experience. Sattler gives a good overview of the goals of the National Clothesline Project, which are to bear witness to and raise awareness about violence against women, to provide a nationwide network of support for survivors and to help with the healing process for survivors as well as those who have lost a loved one. She does not discuss, however, the complex strategies of representation; how, for example, survivors transform private pain into public discourse and negotiate rhetorical agency among contradictory cultural scripts and systems of representation. The Clothesline Project absorbs many of the rhetorical forms of mainstream culture (tales of excess, tactics of self-disclosure, and expert narratives), and yet attempts to turn the “othering” gaze back on itself and to demystify expertise (Hesford “Reading”).

The strength of Sattler’s study lies precisely in her recognition of the pedagogical imperatives of shelters and public-art activist projects such as The Clothesline Project. But Sattler’s rhetoric is more nostalgic than forward looking. *Teaching to Transcend* tends simply to review rather than to acknowledge the already critiqued rhetoric of second wave feminism, including the theory/experience binary. For instance, Sattler claims, “Theory bubbles below the surface for shelter workers, but for battered women, their experiences are preeminent” (37). She continues, “They express impatience with theory, feeling that it disembodies their experiences and fails to represent their lives. . . . [They] generally are not politicized about gender-based oppression” (37). These claims reportedly are derived from the two shelters she studied. But what is recognizable as theory and to whom is never questioned. She does not interrogate how experiential “truths” are shaped by theory, not to mention rhetorical conventions and contexts. As Lawless’ incisive analysis of women’s narratives so powerfully demonstrates, survivors do theorize their experiences. Their narratives and silences both reflect and project cultural scripts and theories of trauma, violence, identity, and difference. “Language is utilized to bear witness to their lives” (123).

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Notes

1. I use the terms “domestic violence and sexual violence” together to point out that most shelters for battered women (a problematic term because of its sole emphasis on victimization) also provide services for women who have been abused or sexually assaulted inside the private sphere of the home or outside the home. Lawless rightly notes the euphemistic entailments of the term “domestic violence”: “This violence is not “domesticated,” and the violence is not randomly distributed among members of the household” (45). With words like “domestic violence,” we “domesticate the crime” (45). Instead, Lawless refers to women who have been victims of domestic and sexual violence as “survivors,” “warriors,” and “fighters” (46). In my review, I have tried to avoid the term “battered” and to be as faithful as I can to the qualifications construed by the authors.

Works Cited


