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Women on the Ground: Bringing Theory and Activism Together Through Domestic Violence Narratives

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WOMEN ON THE GROUND:
BRINGING THEORY AND ACTIVISM TOGETHER THROUGH DOMESTIC
VIOLENCE NARRATIVES

by

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WOMEN ON THE GROUND:
BRINGING THEORY AND ACTIVISM TOGETHER THROUGH DOMESTIC
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University of Nebraska, 2011

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This thesis works toward bringing domestic violence activism and feminist theory together by refuting that these two approaches are necessarily in binary opposition. It is centered on changing the way we make sense of violence against women by addressing why the authors that include personal narrative in their writing should be help up as examples of theory. By analyzing literary domestic violence narratives, the author demonstrates that narrative is itself theory. In addition, this essay creates a third space where the author's own domestic violence narratives complement the literary narratives. The author shows how we can analyze victimized characters in story, literary non-fiction, and drama using the theories of domestic violence agencies. This creates a third space where narrative, personal expression and theory become one in the effort toward social change.

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Table of Contents

Introduction

I. Personal Narratives

12

II. Personal Narratives in Fiction and Non-Fiction Literary Books

23

III. Drama

31

IV. Closing

37

Bibliography

42

Introduction

Rather than the facile disavowal or depreciation of the academic project, I want to suggest that it too can exist as a site of co-optation, collusion, resistance, and transformation. While throughout these pages I may seem to be documenting how others maneuver the discursive spaces of activism [and] law [. . .] this text is also the product of my own negotiation of the contours of academic discourse, my own modest attempt to reenvision the prickly practice of scholarly inquiry. (Juana María Rodríguez, 36)

For decades, feminist activists have worked to support women who have experienced domestic violence or assault in order to create a society free of such violence. Recently, feminist scholars have produced theory on domestic violence, specifically violence against women. These two fields of activism and theory are mostly seen in opposition because personal political expression and scholarship are understood as binary opposites, but perhaps this binary is a false barrier. In fact, activism combines feminist theory and personal expression. Just as numerous third wave feminist scholars write about a third space between or beyond binaries, I maintain that there is a third space that combines feminist theory and activism against domestic violence through literature. For this reason, this project will focus on three different forms of literature in order to discuss its importance to creating a third space: narrative, personal narrative in literary books, and drama. The question to keep in mind is, “what does making sense mean in the context of violence against women?” (Price 5). This question is meant to be directed at my own attempt to make sense of domestic violence using the context of narrative, literature, and drama. How can I make sense of all the aspects of domestic violence through the ways it’s represented in print? This is the question I entered each text asking

myself, and I suggest readers ask themselves when reading any work that includes domestic violence scenes.

The title of this essay, “Women on the Ground,” may evoke an image of beaten women or suffering women. However, it also contains a positive metaphor. To be “on the ground” means to be deployed or called into action. In an effort to acknowledge both meanings, I hope that this title helps readers grasp the complexity of the situation. In Pat Murphy’s anthologized title story, “Women in the Trees” from the 1996 collection of domestic violence narratives edited by Susan Koppelman, the main character is a victim who only hears imaginary voices of support from the trees around her house. She sits in her abusive household and imagines what it would be like to have supportive women’s voices outside the second floor window she often looks out. In response to this metaphor, I created this title. Yes, women are still physically on the ground and suffering from abuse, but there has also been a call to action for women to climb down from Koppelman’s “trees” and enter the plane of action, contributing to vital work. This can be achieved by bringing those voices down to the ground and giving them flesh and bone through personal narrative.

Through my experience of being a master’s student in literature and my work as an activist at a rape and domestic violence center in Lincoln, Nebraska, I discovered a disconnect between the theory I was reading and the work I was doing. I wondered where third spaces, borderlands, and openings could exist? If a theory is as simple as a proposed explanation of observed events, then there has to be a strong connection between the events and the explanation. Theories are developed to be tested and examined against realities. As a scholar, it can be difficult to keep a balance between

theories and observed events. Barbara J. Risman, a sociologist, brings awareness to this difficulty when she explains:

Within any structure of inequality, perhaps the most important question a critical scholar must ask is, what mechanisms are currently constructing inequality, and how can these be transformed to create a more just world? If as critical scholars, we forget to keep our eye on social transformation, we may slip without intention into the implicitly value-free role of social scientists who study gender merely to satisfy intellectual curiosity. The central questions for feminists must include a focus on social transformation, reducing inequality, and improving the status of women. (445)

If a scholar is to maintain a productive academic career and a commitment to activism concerning domestic violence, then she/he must constantly keep Risman's point in mind. She must commit to making a difference and advocating for women through her scholarship. In an effort to do this, I will construct a defense of domestic violence narratives and other types of literature about domestic violence and their importance to creating a third space.

The inclusion of my own story is to give the reader a fuller understanding of what brings me to this topic of activism and theory and creates my own version of a third space. I made and created a space within this essay to include my own story. These are the memories that I've been led to believe aren't helpful to my exploration of theory and literature as a student, but I'm trying to prove otherwise. My goal with this exploration is

to craft an essay, “that shows and tells at the same time . . . the space where theory and practice meet in order to open new possibilities” (Rodríguez 31).

An integral yet often overlooked aspect of any type of theoretical work is the impact the writer and her/his own story has on that work. When we take note of this, however, the relationship between theory and activism becomes clear. Narratives aren’t just important to theory; they *are* theories themselves. If personal narratives are theories, then the perceived binary between the two is dissolved. This realization has been articulated by scholars Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald in their introduction to *Available Means: An Anthology of Women’s Rhetoric(s)*. They explain how women’s lives relate to their ability to theorize through narrative:

The very exigency of women’s rhetorical situations has left little room for leisurely or abstract theorizing, unconnected to practical action. But more to the point, women have purposefully sought to keep the context, the immediacy of experience, attached to theorizing rather than creating an abstract set of prescriptions disconnected from the contexts or stripped of the exigencies of everyday life . . . the texts here substantiate Minnie Bruce Pratt’s [statement that] . . . “I have written the stories that follow to give theory flesh and breath.” We hope that this anthology invites its readers to reconceptualize definitions of rhetorical theory to include women’s writing practice and to read women’s rhetorics *as theory* [. . .] storytelling becomes theory. (Ritchie and Ronald xxvii-xxix)

In Ritchie and Ronald’s groundbreaking collection, they introduce narratives as theory, which is also central to my goal in this essay. They and I aim to utilize Pratt’s

empowering words to “give theory flesh and breath” and make it living, changing and active. We can take theories on domestic violence and enact them on the ground. One important way to enact them is to tell our stories and listen to the stories of others.

An influential book about bringing together personal narrative and scholarly research is *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart* by Ruth Behar. In this book, Behar examines the implications of being an onlooker of tragedy. What are the expectations of observers and how can we, who advocate for victims of domestic violence, maintain a responsibility to victims? Vicarious trauma may be a negative effect of listening to devastating narratives for hours on end, but at the end of an advocate’s work day, what other work has to be done to create change? Behar usefully describes the barrier that lies between the advocate and the victimized woman:

As a storyteller opens her heart to a story listener, re-counting hurts that cut deep and raw into the gullies of the self, do you, the observer, stay behind the lens of the camera, switch on the tape recorder, keep pen in hand? Are there limits – of respect, piety, pathos – that should not be crossed, even to leave a record? But if you can’t stop the horror, shouldn’t you at least document it? (3)

While Behar is speaking about anthropology, what is a crisis center advocate and feminist scholar if not a student of human relationships? I cannot choose to just record the stories I hear every day. I owe these women who have been beaten something in return for telling me their story: I owe action. Advocacy work is focused on human relationships and if this work is done in tandem with scholarship then that connection can provide a third space. Why not bring these relationships into the scholarship? Without

including the stories I encounter daily, as an advocate, my scholarship doesn't form a complete truth. Because they are a single body, there is no separation between an author's scholarly self and activist self. By forcing myself to choose one "self," rather than acknowledging both, my work would become disembodied. So, I speak as a feminist scholar and as a crisis center advocate.

Believing that I must bring my whole self to my academic work and my domestic violence work motivated this project in theory and activism. How can I (or any one) be a mindful feminist scholar of literature while also being an activist? I can't keep these two aspects of my life separate, and I feel morally responsible for both. Yet, the theorists I have read who include a third space—bell hooks, Chandra Mohanty and Julia Kristeva¹--create theories that do not fully encompass my work as an advocate. These third spaces aren't necessarily meant to be utilized but rather thought about in academia. In searching for a third space to use when assisting victims, I realized there are other theorists, like Gloria Anzaldúa and Eli Clare, who enact and create a third space within their work. In order to avoid becoming a helpless bystander within this project itself, I have included italicized sections of my own experience. Not only do I work as a domestic violence advocate, but I also have experience as a child and young adult in a violent household. These excerpts of my story will be juxtaposed with theoretical analysis to simulate my experiences, which often interrupt a day and remain for me to ponder. Through my italicized narratives, I hope readers come to understand why including relevant personal narrative in scholarship can be useful and why it is necessary in some cases. My own background informs what I do as an advocate. In addition, my story intersects with other women's stories. I tell Jane's story to show what women come up against every single

day despite decades of feminist theorizing. In this essay, I aim to articulate the connection rather than the differences between those theories and realities of domestic violence.

As I walk up to the large, marble pillars of the court house on South Tenth Street, I put on a brave face. The glaringly white, shiny room almost makes me squint as Jane and I sit in plastic chairs against the wall inside. I approach the assistant's desk and she immediately puts her hand out for the paperwork, saying, "I'll see if there's a judge available." I'm in disbelief that there may not even be a judge available, but we sit together and wait. I sit next to Jane and think about her story. Her boyfriend beat her until she had to be hospitalized; from this she bears a scar above her eye. He killed her pets, her only comfort, in front of her, and then left Jane in another state while on a "vacation." He has now come back to find her. As the paperwork disappears behind a glass door reading "County Judge," I reassure Jane that I'm proud of all the work she has done to get to this point.

In order to continue, I must define what I mean by domestic violence. A pivotal text for me is Lisa Price's² *Feminist Frameworks: Building Theory on Violence Against Women*. This book's title creates meaning before readers even get to the contents, with "building" suggesting an active, ongoing process. Early on, Price delves into what domestic violence is determined to be according to several important authors in the field. Ann Jones provides a broad definition of violence, a definition which most domestic violence agencies accept. Price summarizes Jones' position:

Violence need not involve physical contact with the victim, since intimidating acts like punching walls, verbal threats, and psychological

abuse can achieve the same result. Jones herself then comments, “Behavior you might not think of as ‘violence,’ behavior you might think of merely as getting things off your chest . . . is violence if it coerces or frightens another person” (Price 12).

Domestic violence agencies aim to welcome as many victims of violence as possible in order to have the greatest impact in the community. Also, this definition allows women more agency in naming their own experiences, since women differ in what they describe as domestic violence against them personally.

On the other hand, some scholars believe that this broad definition does no favors for domestic violence theory. This opposing definition is much more focused. Price explains this counter definition by stating that, “though a wide range of actions may be harmful to women, only those involving physical force are properly termed ‘violence’ . . . the persistent direction of physical force against a marital partner or cohabitant” (15). Price supports this definition simply because, “a term limitlessly expanded becomes meaningless” (13). For the sake of analyzing literature, this narrower definition is more clear and useful. For my project, I define violence as physical, and abuse as sustained violence over a period of time.

This definition leaves a whole realm of meaning open, though, because it leaves out sexual violence among numerous other types of violence (emotional, financial, verbal . . .). Sexual crimes are part of feminist theory and research. Similar to domestic violence definitions, sexual violence definitions have been broken into two main groups: “there are two conceptual approaches to the issue: first, that crimes such as rape are best understood as ‘violence *not* sex’; second, that ‘violence *is* sex’” (Price 16). The first

approach, violence not sex, can be defined by the belief that sexual violence is not about sexual intercourse but about dominance. Feminist researchers Lorenne Clark and Debra Lewis describe the reasoning behind this methodology:

A sexual attack is, in itself, neither better nor worse than any other kind of attack . . . To treat rape as a sexual offense simply because it involves a penis and a valuable vagina, only reinforces the connections between women as property and women's sexuality as the source of their property value. (Price 17)

This argument establishes sexual violence as comparable to any other type of violence and aligns with the belief that "victims experience rape as a physical assault like any other" (Price 18). Similar to the first definition of physical violence, this definition of sexual violence is broad and leaves a lot to be decided by the victim of the abuse.

The second approach is defined by the belief that violence *is* sex. Expressly, sex itself is what is violent and not the brutality during the abuse. Price describes this approach and adds to this belief by explaining that:

It is materially significant that men assault women and girls in their sexual beings, most often directing violence at the parts of their bodies considered to be sexual – breasts, and mouths and genitals. The acts themselves, then, are sexual acts, however violent, and that sexual fact cannot be avoided or willed away. (19)

Not only does this definition match up with the ways in which abusers attack their victims but it also may better align with victims' perceptions of what happened to them. Most women that report being a victim of a sexually violent act to the local crisis center

define their experience as just that, a sexual assault. The type of violence is very specific and aimed at women's sexual organs. Again, when it comes to defining violence and sexual violence against women, the theories that seem to fit best are the most specific ones. So, for the parameters of this exploration, violence will be deemed only as physical violence and abuse as a continued use of physical violence over time. Sexual violence is defined as a sexual act that is violent and not a violent act that happens to be sexual.

These definitions do not take away the significance of the spectrum of violence against women, which includes physical, economic, psychological, and emotional abuse among other types. However, in order to focus my exploration of this intersection of theory and narrative it is crucial to make these particularities. For the remainder of this examination I aim to enact what Price describes as, "gathering many individual stories, applying to them judgment and analysis, and submitting the resulting general description to the public discussion and debate" (15). Price describes the power such research can have if, "repeated at many sites over time, this process draws us ever closer to understandings of violence reflective of women's experiences (rather than men's perceptions), which have the authority of commonality and critique" (15). I'm including literature as well as personal narratives in various forms to analyze women's own words. In this way I'm enacting not only analysis but also feminist activist empowerment theory on the chosen texts. Empowerment theory is one that local agencies in the Midwest abide by and it simply means that each woman that comes in is the expert of her situation so she is the one to make the decisions. Advocates can only provide options for victims and then women make their own choices, which emphasize their own agency in what's going to happen to them in the future; hence, this empowers women to have hope for the future.

Six minutes later a judge pops out and hands the paperwork back to the assistant without a word or eye contact with either of us. The assistant opens up the folder, types something and drops it on the counter. “Okay, here you go.” We step outside the office and I open the folder to read the verdict, “denied.” I read the judge’s “notes” that simply state, “too remote in time.” I reach for Jane’s hand and put the folder in her shaking fingers. “Jane, I’m so sorry. The order was denied.” Jane seems angry and yet she’s crying softly, “I knew this would happen. What am I supposed to do? I can’t go back home. He knows where I am. What is it going to take . . . Do I have to die before I’m safe?”

As I leave the courthouse and walk to my car I’m shocked. I encouraged this woman, Jane, to fill out a protection order, which took her over two hours to write. She had to recall the horrifying details of each attack and carefully document them in a small amount of space so a judge didn’t have to read too much. She had to stop several times from the fear. She had to find childcare for her baby that day. I was with her every step of the way and then went with her to file the order. Within 20 minutes at the courthouse a judge had told her that 22 days ago was too long ago to matter. A whole day seemingly wasted and yet I tried to focus on the positive aspects like doing all the work she did on her own accord and discovering her strength. The courthouse itself stands as a reminder of where Jane’s place is in this community. She was a tiny speck that went virtually unnoticed within a huge, gleaming white building.

Of all the texts that exist under the title “feminist,” how would one decide on the actual literature to do close analysis on? For this project, I chose personal narratives, literary stories and dramas because I wanted to broaden my range of analysis and make

connections between and across genres. My examples from each of these three genres are formulated around women's own stories and are all written by women. Finally, there's also a focus on the capacity for personal narratives to shape theories and to make a significant difference in how women practice activism.

As an inquiry prompted by the question, "What does making sense mean in the context of violence against women?" this introduction has initiated a conversation that will enable me to look closely at selected personal narratives, literary stories and a play. "Making sense," to refer back to Price's influential driving motive, means creating an epistemology which in turn creates theory. My purpose is to show how personal stories bring people to theory and carry the potential for social change. There are many questions still to be examined. First, where are these third spaces, middle grounds and borderlands for the women struggling with the realities of domestic violence?

I. Personal Narratives

Many feminist theorists and critics would call the work being done in this project and in the narratives I'm analyzing to be nothing more than self-serving. Such a critic, "believes such feelings, and the attitudes that inform them, are soft-minded, self-indulgent, and unprofessional" (Tompkins 1104). These traditional scholars believe that anything story-driven is second class and consequently "female." Behar illustrates this voice, which believes, "That all the variants of vulnerable writing that have blossomed in the last two decades are self-serving and superficial, full of unnecessary guilt or excessive bravado." However, Behar criticizes these scholars, whose attitudes, "stem from an unwillingness to even consider the possibility that a personal voice, if creatively

used, can lead the reader, not into miniature bubbles of navel-gazing, but into the enormous sea of serious social issues” (14).

This is a key point. Neither she nor I support the idea that writers must always include personal details in their work. What’s important about this argument is to note that professional pieces, such as research essays, conference presentations, graduate seminar papers and research collected in anthologies often lack the personal stories that shaped them. Each scholar writes from a personal standpoint, an embodied self, but the reader is often excluded from the knowledge of what brought this particular author to this topic. Often, it’s because of a personal narrative that may very well draw in the reader and make the piece more memorable. When building theory, readers cannot be left under the false understanding that there’s a separation between the work the author does and what the author believes in. To some scholars this is not only a false division but also elitist. As Judith Butler reveals in her work on identity, “the critical task for feminists is not to establish a point of view outside of constructed identities; that conceit is the construction of an epistemological model that would disavow its own cultural location” (201). Denial of embodiment and reality of personal situated-ness is a false representation.

Scholar Jane Tompkins struggles through similar issues between personal and professional identity when she writes, “[the] public-private dichotomy, which is to say the public-private *hierarchy*, is a founding condition of female oppression. I say to hell with it. The reason I feel embarrassed at my own attempts to speak personally in a professional text is that I have been conditioned to feel that way. That’s all there is to it” (1104). Empowering women to write what they know as meaning-making through

journals, diaries and letters is also theory, and if theoretical thoughts exist within these spaces then the dichotomy between personal and professional writing dissolves. It is only a front because everything is epistemological:

In reality there's no split. It's the same person who feels and who discourses about epistemology. The problem is that you can't talk about your private life in the course of doing your professional work. You have to pretend that epistemology, or whatever you're writing about, has nothing to do with your life, that it's more exalted, more important, because it (supposedly) *transcends* the merely personal. Well, I'm tired of the conventions that keep discussions of epistemology . . . segregated from meditations on what is happening outside my window or inside my heart.

(Tompkins 1104)

If scholars are to remain honest then epistemology and lived experience must be acknowledged in academic work. Even so, newer scholars come up against the fact that many of their predecessors and teachers may still be in support of the divide between being a human and writing professionally. For example, when discussing a personal narrative in a course on feminist theories, students are constantly pushed to ask, "So how is this theory?" The aim of this project is meant to expand the traditional definition of theory and acknowledge that works that are being labeled "mixed genre" or "autobiography" also contain the necessary attributes of theoretical thought. Especially when considering domestic violence and the lasting impact it has on a woman's life, if theory comes out of those experiences then those experiences should be included. For this reason, during the narrative portion of this essay I will include my own childhood

memories of being a witness to domestic violence. These memories become part of my daily work with victims. I often see my mother's face while hearing victims' stories.

One such story that includes devastating personal accounts of violence is Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, which is taught as Chicana theory. This book combines personal stories, stories of home, and private thoughts all embedded within political and social beliefs, which are seen as theory. Would this text have the same value if the reader didn't know that Anzaldúa had lived in Texas for most of her life and had experienced horrible violence at the hands of domineering males? Her work brings readers in with the personal accounts and haunting tales that tell the truth of the author's life and how it has shaped her own theoretical viewpoints.

Dr. Rusty Barcelo writes about Anzaldúa's impact within the third edition's introduction, states, "This is the legacy that Gloria and *Borderlands* has left me: to challenge myself to continue a type of activism in education that guarantees the work Gloria began" (Barcelo, 2007). The most important words in this quotation are "activism in education." Barcelo wasn't struck by the theoretical and political work done in the book; nor was she remembering Anzaldúa's personal story. The writer remembers how her work combined the two and promoted activism, and not only activism, but activism within and through education. Working in a third space between genres, Anzaldúa leaves readers with an urge to act and make change.

Anzaldúa brings the ideas of writer as personal storyteller and writer as professional scholar together when she speaks about how our Western culture chooses to oversimplify definitions. She writes, "In trying to become 'objective,' Western culture made 'objects' of things and people when it distanced itself from them thereby losing

‘touch’ with them. This dichotomy is the root of all violence” (59). This distance enables humans to harm others and feel justified in doing so. This speaks directly to my activist work at the crisis center because by creating a distance between the viewers and the victims, then viewers are allowed to feel safer. If this separation is achieved by the observers then they can feel as though it is only the victim’s problem. If we are to believe that it is the victim’s choice to be abused then it’s the victim’s fault and therefore observers begin to believe that they are safe from abusive situations. To simplify, if it’s the victim’s fault when they’re abused then as long as outsiders *choose* not to be victims then they can stay safe. This distancing of victims keeps observers from taking on social issues and understanding victims’ situations. Earlier in her work, Anzaldúa speaks directly to this point through her own personal story: “Through our mothers, the culture gave us mixed messages . . . Which was it to be – strong or submissive, rebellious or conforming?” (40). Binary opposites had an impact in Anzaldúa’s personal story and in her scholarly beliefs because the entire premise of her book is based on the opposition of *in* and *out* according to which side of the border line one was on. The key to understanding how Anzaldúa’s work is an example of creating a third space is that there is a binary with two sides but the borderlands is a third space where she posits that her personal story, poetry, code-switching, prose and theory can exist.

Binaries are a common factor among those writing about theory through personal stories on domestic violence. There’s the daily reality of safe/in danger, granted/denied and stay/leave. Scientists have even commented on the human urge to create such binaries despite the fact that they often oversimplify the situation. One such scientist is

Virginia Valian, who deepens our understanding of literature. Valian describes how binary oppositions are created and sustained:

Humans aim first for binary categories that have nonoverlapping characteristics. We are of course capable of creating more categories and of noticing overlap, but on grounds of simplicity, we prefer to create two categories and to have those two be as distinct as possible. A two-category system is fast and efficient, even if it sometimes leads to error. (Valian “Why Aren’t...”35)

These examples illuminate why we may choose to keep scholarship and activism, personal and political, and private and public selves separate. However, as Valian explains, “we are of course capable of . . . noticing overlap,” so there is room for the work I’m doing and for expanding what theoretical scholarship looks like as Anzaldúa did.

The dog woke me up with her loud and anxious barking. I stumbled into the other room and peeked around the corner. To my horror, mom and dad were fighting. It wasn’t the first fight they had in my childhood but it was the first I remember. I clutched the dog tightly around the middle to keep her from revealing my vantage point of the violence. When they weren’t looking I slid under the kitchen table to get a better view. Sweetie followed cautiously because she knew what Dad would do to her if she got in the way. Only her wet black nose stuck out from the shadow of the table.

Another author that bridges the gap between activism and scholarship to create theory is Eli Clare. Clare’s book, *Exile and Pride*, is labeled as biography inside the cover, but like *Borderlands*, it could also be categorized as theory. Clare isn’t only

writing his personal story; he is writing about how his story has shaped his political beliefs, which is the basis for theory. Also similar to Anzaldúa's work, this book's preface reveals the legacy of this type of writing. Clare writes on the very first page of the text that, "I want nondisabled progressive activists to add disability to their political agenda. And at the same time I want disability activists to abandon their single-issue political strategies" (ix). The author directly states what work this book is supposed to be doing, which is to extend beyond traditional genre limitations. If we are only to believe it's biography then one may not see its theoretical potential and political aims.

Again, one must ask if this work would have the same impact if Clare didn't include his own personal story, including his female to male transition, struggles with cerebral palsy and almost constant physical and sexual attacks as a child. When Clare describes the physical process of writing this book, he writes that the work, "center[s] on my body. The faster I try to write, the more my pen slides out of control, muscles spasm, then contract trying to stop the tremors, my shoulder and upper arm growing painfully tight . . . I experience the problem on a very physical level" (7). This passage brings forth new significance on the inclusion of relevant personal narrative to scholarly work because without personal story the reader loses the author's physical self and bodily presence. Clare's body is important to understanding his political beliefs in disability accessibility. Clare reminds us that as scholars, we are often asked to imagine a computer somewhere creating the scholarship we read rather than an embodied individual with struggles, and life stories to tell that greatly affect what the reader will take away from the work. Through revealing his life's stories, Clare moves readers to act, and to become activists as well as scholars.

More imaginative and metaphorical than Clare's personal text, Pat Murphy's "Women in the Trees," the title story from Koppelman's collection, is about marital domestic violence from the wife's perspective. This story details one wife's attempt to survive the daily struggle to live perfectly in order to keep her husband happy. There are multiple ways in which this wife (nameless in the story) frantically creates methods to achieve perfection so that her husband doesn't abuse her. She does his laundry daily with extreme care, explaining how "you place each shirt with its collar toward the back of the drawer, the buttons facing up. His shirts must be right or you don't know what will happen" (Murphy 256). Readers experience the wife's fear and anxiety along with her and yet the author extends the perspective, which makes this story particularly powerful when considering activism.

Not only are readers hearing the story of the wife, but we are also being put in her position. Referring back to Behar's belief that we must be vulnerable observers, the wife doesn't use "I" but instead "you," which asks the reader to become involved in her thought processes and decision making. Not only does this bring the reader into the story, but it also makes it seem as though the author is speaking to somebody who knows what she is talking about. It's as though Murphy is assuming that readers have also been through this situation and understand what this wife is experiencing, which suggests that readers analyze their own coping mechanisms in relationships.

Murphy takes this inclusion of the audience one step further when she has her main character state, "If he were to ask what you were thinking, you would lie" (257). So, here we see that she's addressing the common question from outsiders, "Why doesn't she just leave or change?" As the wife tells us, we would do the same if we were in her

place. This wife is developing her own theory on domestic violence while trying out different approaches within her relationship.

“Women in the Trees” is bookended with violent beatings. The initial assault is directly related to the efforts of the wife to avoid being beaten:

He was angry because one of his shirts had lost a button in the laundry, and you had forgotten to sew another on in its place. He yanked the shirt from the drawer, threw it at your face, and then came at you with his fists, punching you in the ribs, in the breasts, in the belly. After it was all over, you lay on the bedroom floor, gasping for breath . . . A week after the beating, you still felt a stabbing pain with each breath. (258)

Here, readers witness what happens when the wife’s theory of avoiding violence by being perfect fails her and she is sanctioned by her husband’s unspoken rules. The truth of domestic violence, according to such experts as Lundy Bancroft, is that trying to live by the abuser’s “rules” will fail because these rules are just a tool of control that ultimately, even if followed, will not stop the abuse. Bancroft is a psychologist who spent over fifteen years working with domestic violence perpetrators in order to help answer the infamous question, “Why Does He Do That?” with theory and intense testimonial research. Bancroft illuminates abuser psychology: “He invariably has a reason that he considers good enough. In short, an abuser’s core problem is that he has a distorted sense of right and wrong . . . abusing his female partner is justifiable” (37).

Abusers see their abusive behaviors as justified because they create rules and sanctions. Bancroft defines different types of abusers, although he stresses that men may be a combination of a few or a type that he has not defined. He is not trying to

essentialize but instead define in order for women to feel validated in identifying their partners as abusive. In “Women in the Trees,” the husband would probably be characterized as the demand man:

He expects his partner’s life to revolve around meeting his needs and is angry and blaming if anything gets in the way . . . The partner of this man comes to feel that nothing she does is ever good enough and that it is impossible to make him happy. He criticizes her frequently, usually about things that he thinks she should have done—or done better—for him. (78)

If there is no way for the wife to avoid the beatings, then her theory fails her. At this point in the story she has tried hiding and being perfect, which both fail. It’s not until the final scene of the story that we witness the thought process of the wife change through her internal monologue. Dinner is waiting on the table when the husband returns and the wife realizes, “he has been drinking . . . Surely he will be happy now: good food, a nice clean home” (Murphy 266). She has taken precise actions in order to gain a positive outcome, but she understands at this moment that, “as soon as you speak you have said the wrong thing. There was no right thing to say” (266). There’s no right thing to say because her theory is a coping mechanism that has failed her repeatedly and yet it’s her only option because she is living with an abusive man.

Without limitless options, then theory isn’t helpful because of many constraints that alter choices and narrow them down. Specific material conditions and barriers inhibit women’s ability to make a range of choices. When a person is forced into a survival mode of life then there’s no longer room for limitless options where the woman can create her own future options. Women are often stripped of the possibility of living

based on financial dependency, physical location, isolation, custody battles, pending court cases, pets, or they could even be stalked every moment by the perpetrator. Based on this short list of material conditions, it becomes clear why abused women often don't have the freedom to choose which existing theory to follow and how to change their lives in any immediate way that doesn't involve serious risks.

These types of stories illustrate that victims do and must build their own theories. Together, these three stories *are* victims' own theories combined with activism. These theories do not reside on a page or in an idea but rather are acted out within the lives of these characters, these people. This combination can be defined as theoretical activism where storytelling brings theory and activism together. When theorists write disembodied, impersonal texts, readers don't get a holistic depiction of authors, who become objectified others that aren't worth the time to discover. The texts used in this section only serve as brief examples of what the remaining sections of the project will spend pages covering. The basis for the rest of my research will always come back to the personal narrative as the core.

The linoleum was cold, burnt orange and yellow with cigarette burns throughout. I sat and whispered my wishes for them to stop but the dog only panted anxiously. My mom was crying loudly and as she reached for the phone, Dad smashed it with his bare fist. The bits of plastic rained down on the table like hail on a car. I held the dog's snout shut. Dad took Mom by the hair and swung her to the ground, moving chairs in his wake. As he dragged her into the dining room calling her horrid names under his breath, he suddenly lifted her by her neck against the wall. I remember the sound of Mom's body scraping up the textured wall and Dad threatening, "I can end it all right now and be rid

of you.” I knew he was strong but not as strong as he looked then and he was yelling words I’d never heard before. I couldn’t silently watch anymore. I screamed, “Stop!” and lunged at my dad. The dog sat in front of me.

II. Personal Narrative in Fiction and Non-Fiction Literary Books

Dorothy Allison and Joy Castro are both authors that utilize the sexualized trauma their narrators experienced at the hands of the father figures in their lives. There are some differences between the texts, though. One is that they would be shelved in entirely different locations in the book store. Allison’s book is a novel and Castro’s book is memoir. When considering what books to use in this section I recognized this distinction and yet chose not to let it limit my choices, because both fiction and non-fiction contain truth. Because Allison chose to call this book a novel, does that make the story of the main character any less real? No, this story plays out often in our agency.

In contrast to the narratives discussed in the previous section, these provide a more detailed life story beyond the snapshot the short narratives provided. By considering the intense scenes of abuse within *Bastard Out of Carolina* and *The Truth Book* I will explore how sexual trauma theory is enacted within the context of literary narratives. The significance, for this essay, is how the violent incidents were expressed in words and placed within these works. As in the previous section, these two books are not the only examples I could have used, but they are helpful in developing my ideas about narrative as theory.

Dad stood over the kitchen counter preparing to mix another drink. He slammed down the shot glass on the counter and sarcastically remarked, “Well, glad at least you’re home. Your mom got off work an hour ago and still isn’t home, probably out

spending my money.” He finally turned to look at me and the clear liquid he was pouring flowed onto the counter. “God damn it!”

“Look, Dad, I’m really not in the mood, so let’s just not talk to each other.” I walked toward the dining room ignoring him completely, and that’s when he started in.

“Just like your mom, treating me like shit. You know I work all day long and pay all the bills. I pay for the electricity, gas . . . ” With each point he made he counted on his thick rough fingers. It’s true he did work hard, but none of that matters when he’s scaring me.

“I meant it when I said I don’t want to hear it, Dad. I’m sure Mom will be home soon. She stops at Grandma’s on Thursdays after work, which you’d know if you weren’t drunk.” Since I was older, in high school, there were things that I could now say to him in reponse but that child-like fear still made my heart race and my feet want to run. Struggling to slow myself down, I walked into the dining room.

“Oh, that’s right, never want to hear Dad talk! Don’t give a shit about him; he just works to pay the bills. You never loved me.” He turned toward me, raising his voice, drink still in hand.

How do Allison’s and Castro’s work open new possibilities for “making sense” of sexual abuse? Allison makes sense of the abuse her main character receives by giving the reader pages of self-reflection from the main character, called Bone by her family. *Bastard Out of Carolina* details the childhood of a lower class, poor, Southern family, particularly the oldest of the two Boatwright daughters who is brutally sexually abused by her step-father, Daddy Glen. Bone’s mother struggles just to survive and isn’t able to give Bone the attention that she would like so we see Bone as always surrounded by

family and yet very alone. Daddy Glen uses emotional manipulation to try to persuade Bone that he is showing her love. While there are numerous scenes in the novel where sexual assault occurs, the most horrific final scene of sexual violence is what I will focus on for this essay.

This graphic rape scene begins as Glen sneaks into the house where Bone is alone. As Glen begins to rape Bone she realizes her life has been formed around her silence about her abuse. Allison writes the scene through Bone's internal monologue:

I wanted to scream but nothing came out. I remembered all the times he had lifted me like that before, lifted me, shaken me, and then pulled me to his chest, held me against him and run his hands over me, moaned while his fingers gouged at me. I had always been afraid to scream, afraid to fight. I had always felt like it was my fault, but now it didn't matter. I didn't care anymore what might happen. I wouldn't hold still anymore.

(Allison 284)

The repeated abuse Bone had received culminates in this most violent scene and while the violence is intense as she is choked, cut and punched, Bone doesn't describe it as a physical assault. Bone describes her assault as a rape in the story and this reiterates that the definition "violence is sex" is how victims perceive their attack. This specific attack is sexual and particular body parts are targeted, which makes this attack a sexually charged assault rather than a general physical attack. Glen's only name calling during this scene is even sexualized as he calls her a "little cunt" twice (284). The way Allison chooses to describe Glen's actions is sexually violent, as well. She describes his penetration when he "reared up, supporting his weight on my shoulder while his hips

drove his sex into me like a sword” (285). Bone responds to herself repeatedly, “Give me something. Give me something!” and this exemplifies that his sex is seen as a weapon and Bone’s is seen as a lack. When sexual violence occurs, the actual sexual organs are used as weapons.

It’s tragic that Bone doesn’t realize her own silence makes a choice to utilize her voice and her body until this point. Since Bone is a child, it isn’t until this scene at the end that she realizes her vocal strength but Glen still punishes her attempted voice and physical fight back. This text works to show readers just how privileged it is to keep asking, “Why doesn’t she leave? Or why doesn’t she do something?” We are asked to experience the assault from the powerless victim’s perspective at that moment. Bone’s sheer survival after a life of repeated assaults proves that she is not a powerless girl, but in that moment her choices are taken away. This book and this rape scene remind readers that theories on violence against women need to be free of the victim-blaming that so often occurs, even if it is unintended. We must keep asking “what” questions over “why” questions. For example, what can be learned from this literary narrative rather than why didn’t a particular character do something?

The agency I work at taught me this theory of asking “what” rather than “why” questions. This theory aids advocates in responding to victims and I wanted to move this theory from the realm of the agency into the literature I was studying. I read these texts just as I would read a person coming into the agency for crisis counseling. This theory of activism makes me a better reader through my ability to read these texts as lived experiences. In other words, to know how to respond to victims is to know how to respond to victimized characters. Since I’ve started working as an advocate, I take this

knowledge and the theories from the agency with me into every narrative I read, regardless of the form. In doing so, I'm asking readers to do the same with my narrative.

Ignoring the drama in the kitchen I sat down to the computer. As I was typing a heading to my senior English paper he came around the corner. He was visibly shaking and holding a Christmas tin. It was one of those decorative tins that people give filled with popcorn during the holidays. It's one of those gifts people give when they don't know the person well enough to choose a gift for them. Needless to say, we got a lot of them. His arm dented the can as he grasped it around the middle. I didn't even look up at him.

"Sometimes Kacey, I just wish I could die, I bet that would make you and your mom happy, wouldn't it!"

"Dad, why do you say stuff like that? You know I don't want you to die, I love you but you're drunk!" Now I was yelling.

He pulled a steak knife from behind his back and jammed it into the tin, still holding it against his stomach. "I wish I could just die, die, end it." With each mention of death he stabbed the lid again. The fast screeching of metal on metal rang in my ears with each forceful slice he made.

Differentiating between questions of "why" and "what" is perhaps even more important in Castro's autobiography titled *The Truth Book: Escaping a Childhood of Abuse Among Jehovah's Witness*. Castro's childhood memories are filled with manipulation backed by religion. Again, the abuse is perpetrated at the hands of her stepfather. As with the short story "Women in the Trees," the abuser first applies harsh and impossible to follow rules that the young Castro tries to follow, obey and remain

silent about. Her stepfather's tactics continually get more extreme and severe as the book unfolds:

As time passes, the rules intensify. Food becomes a measured thing. Each mealtime . . . we sit at dinner, our eyes on our plates. If we look our stepfather in the eye, ever, without being told, we're beaten. (121)

The threat of violence is always present for Castro, and the threat is enough to keep the young Castro and her brother in absolute fear and to modify their behavior in order to avoid sanctions. As with the other stories looked at thus far, academic theories on how to avoid the violence fail the victims as the abusers find other means of justification or power. Castro's use of first person puts the reader in the fearful and anxious position she was in as a child. The reader follows her horrendous abuse narrative, which is full of sexually abusive language as her stepfather mentions her "ass" and "titties" and their growth and change as she ages. Again, violence *is* sex in this narrative.

The same sorts of patterns are seen among abusers, but since I'm choosing to focus on the victims and their narratives, the abusers are not my main concern. Each woman has described her abuse in her own language and on her own terms. The importance of getting choice--after choice was once taken away--is the most important part of these literary examples.

Castro writes about her disassociation from the sexual abuse, both before and after these incidents of violence occurred, but it's her chosen descriptions of the abuse itself that make meaning of what Castro went through:

My stepfather takes my thighs in his hands and begins to squeeze them, pull them . . . His thumbs graze across the crotch of my underwear, but he says nothing and his face doesn't change, as if he hasn't noticed . . . again, they graze. Then the sides of his hands chop against my crotch . . . I stare up at the ceiling, its small white swirls of plaster, like the waves of an ocean. (128)

She has tried the same theories that other victims from the other literary narratives have, including avoidance and silence, "Complaining, moving, pulling away have not worked. Even crying . . . Now I just lie still, unmoving, unspeaking" (129). We see in this short passage that she changes her hypothesis about her reactions to the abuse. The "why" questions come pouring in to the reader's mind at this point, and blame is placed on Castro's mother rather than her abuser at that moment. This selection serves as an example of how my colleagues and I see this occur at our agency; so many parent/child relationships crumble after sexual abuse has occurred. The relationships surrounding these people are also deeply affected by the abuse between the victim and perpetrator. It's this ripple effect that brings over ten thousand people to our services every year.

"Dad, you're scaring me now, stop that." He intimidated me and I was moving toward the door. He was crying now, leaning over the sliced can. I frantically searched for my car keys on the table, and he immediately snapped out of his sadness.

"Oh, no, where the hell do you think you're going? I paid for that car, it's mine. You would run like a dumb slut, like your mom! Without me you would have nothing." He grabbed my arm and a hot wave dropped in my stomach.

“Let go of me now, now, Dad. I am done with you.” I ran for the door with only my cell phone and fleeting thoughts of what would happen if I left.

The painfully cold air seeped through my t-shirt within moments and my feet froze instantly on hitting the concrete. I heard Dad yelling inside and then the door locked. My dad locked me out. I began bawling now and running crazily in fear. I called my mom and she didn't answer. I didn't feel safe calling anybody else until I had found some kind of shelter or warmth. Once again too ashamed to knock on neighbors' doors, I ran to the park. I went into the unkempt bathroom and sat on the cold floor just crying in the dark. Who would I call? What would I say? Where would I go? What was I even doing?

Our park bathroom had always been low to no maintenance and had never been renovated so the small cement building had just been continually deteriorating. There was a piece of plywood across a deep hole and three circular holes in the top of it. Once inside the smell of damp, rotting plywood and urine mingled in my nostrils. I knew he would never check for me inside the bathroom. I halfway leaned on the spigot-sink trying to wrap my mind around what had just happened.

Scrolling my phone contact list I called Aunt Julie, Mom's sister. She picked up and said nothing but “I'm on my way.” I wanted to get out of the bathroom because it was so small and dark, but when I stepped into the light some loose dogs saw the movement. Two black labs started running toward me and I ran back into the bathroom and locked the stall door. Crouching in the corner I cried with my eyes as wide as they could open, the cry of fear. Rapid, hot clouds of breath pushed out of my mouth and I felt

utterly helpless. I closed my eyes and remembered hiding in other places like the attic and under the stairs when Dad would beat Mom but never had I been locked outside.

My tears began to freeze to my face making it hard to blink and my back began to ache from shivering. What seemed like an eternity later, Aunt Julie pulled up in the grass and we drove to her house. It was miles away from Dad but distance never seemed to change anything. She spoke to herself at first, “When’s this going to stop? I wish she would just leave.”

“Thank you, Mom didn’t answer and I didn’t know who to call...”

“Just relax, Kacey, close your eyes and relax, you’re okay now, it’s safe.”

I leaned my head on my hand and stared out the window. I was worn out. Aunt Julie kept glancing at me like a person checks on a sick animal in panic. At her house she walked me inside and laid me down on the couch. I slept almost immediately.

Mom shook me awake and whispered in my ear, “Kaaaacey, it’s Mom, let’s go home.”

Somehow hearing her say that made home seem nice, inviting. I was comforted in that state of half sleep and got into the car only to hear the same excuse my dad always received, “You know he was just drunk, Kacey.” Looking back I know that was the only response she could come up with that wasn’t a lie. I am grateful it wasn’t “all better” at that moment because I knew it never would be.

III. Drama

The books discussed in the previous section do work to help readers see what a lifetime of abuse does to a child. Through detailed inner thoughts and brave descriptions of the sexual abuse, readers are led into the problems with asking “why.” The narratives

from section one do work in allowing readers into the most intense snapshot of memories. Through these domestic violence and sexual assault narratives there are trends found among the process of changing the violent actions into written words. These literatures bring up important aspects of activism we practice at our agency. Without these narratives, advocates wouldn't know how to begin to aid victims and their families. When victims are pressured, pushed or too scared to share their narratives, then the stories never reach anybody and changes can't be made.

Another genre of literature that bridges the gap between theory and activism is drama, including scripts and productions. One such play is *In My Daughter's Name*. Amanda Thomas was a 27-year-old mother of two young children from Missouri. On February 28, 2009, Amanda was attacked and stabbed to death while she slept by Manuel Cazares, her former domestic partner when playwright Becky Key Boesen read about Amanda's death on Facebook, it struck and horrified her. She writes in the play, "the first time . . . when I saw that first article about Amanda's murder . . . [I] couldn't comprehend this scenario of this poor woman who had all her choices taken away" (84). Boesen was so angry that Amanda was trapped in this dangerous situation that she was moved to act, and what's most important is that she was moved to act by writing a narrative.

In My Daughter's Name follows a conversation between Boesen and Jody (Amanda's birth mother). The script came to life for eight performances at the Johnny Carson theatre in Lincoln, Nebraska in fall 2010 by the Angels Theatre Company. The night before the opening performance was the student viewing night and since I'm the campus advocate for University of Nebraska at Lincoln, I was asked to lead discussion

and be available during the show for those viewers who were triggered with flashbacks. That evening I realized what my thesis had to be about and I began my work. Jody and Amanda's lives are played out on stage in flashback scenes from Amanda's childhood through her death.

My mother and grandmother came with me to view In My Daughter's Name. Grandma leaned forward with eyes wide the entire show. It was three generations of women sitting together witnessing scenes from their own lives. Grandma's stories of violence rival what I saw my mother go through when I was young. I'm told Mom's previous marriage was even worse, as she was hospitalized more than once from her ex's abuse. He shoved her through a glass display case in a store. Grandma won't say much about what her marriage was like, but from what Mom remembers seeing, it was abusive.

Boesen placed herself in the play and this is where I see theory and activism come together, just as Anzaldúa and Clare enacted in their work. Boesen writes herself into the actions of the script because her story of understanding domestic violence realities is essential to understanding how the play came about. Much as I don't feel like this essay would be my essay without my personal narratives, Boesen didn't feel the play would be complete without her story of realization within telling Amanda's story. This allows viewers to hear and to place their own voices within the story. Boesen is confessional about the writing process and how her questions at the beginning of the interviews with Jody were not the right kind of questions to ask. In an interview Boesen stated:

I wanted to write this pretty, safe version of what happened . . . but that's bullshit, right? No one wants to watch that play, and it doesn't honor Amanda's experience. So I "mustered up every bit of brave" I had and

decided to really tell the story . . . that's how the Playwright became a character in this script. The only way I could tell this story authentically, was through my own experience. (performance program)

In order to fully experience the scope of Amanda's story and its effect on all those who knew her and discovered her through her tragic death, we must hear how Boesen struggled to understand her own thoughts and feelings about Amanda. In these statements from Boesen, it's evident that she was angry at first, then confused and then acted against the injustice she saw. Boesen enacts exactly what theory and activism can look like. She did her research, found out about all the domestic violence agencies in town, came to us and discovered what our empowerment theory meant and how we work. The result was a moving play that spurred an entire community to act on this continuing problem.

Most importantly for the sake of my project is that Boesen additionally includes an important aspect of domestic violence realities that revolves around law and enforcement: judges and police. Amanda's story is complicated by many factors including numerous protection orders that were ended by Amanda, which are called vacated orders. When audience members hear this they may judge Amanda and again, ask the question, "Why didn't she leave?" The playwright character voices the thoughts of those audience members by asking Jody, "So, let me make sure I've got this . . . there were two protection orders right?" Jody responds, "Yes. She dropped both" and the playwright responds, "Why?" (13). This short scene allows the reader to understand where both women are coming from.

In the dim stage lighting, I saw Grandma move during the horrifying rape scene and when I leaned forward to see what she was doing I was shocked. She was reaching for Mom's hand and crying, which made my mom cry. I felt so fortunate to still have them in my life. It was at that moment that I realized Amanda's story could've been my mom or grandmother's story. I put my arm around Mom. They were fully engrossed for the entire show. Afterward, they were the first two to stand and clap fervently. I was crying while talking and looking into the eyes of my mother and grandmother in the crowd, three generations of women whose lives were ravaged by domestic violence, and still are. I am reminded of all my horrible experiences as a child witness.

Boesen seems to play the role of researcher or student who simply wants to capture the story and put it in plain writing, but Jody makes it clear that this cannot be done. Boesen must discover how empowerment theories from crisis agencies could've helped Amanda and yet how police and judges failed to help her because they have their own theories on domestic violence. To create an even more complete picture, Boesen included the voices of those officials within the script. Through her character Officer Evans, viewers and readers perceive what officers were thinking about this case and their own struggle:

We go to these addresses and these women, they're a mess . . . we ain't supposed to get too personal. So we do our jobs. We follow procedure and we do what we can for the woman and the kids and when we can, we take the asshole down to the station . . . and then the woman calls . . . and she says she loves him and she wants him to come home . . . our hands are tied. We turn the creep loose . . . and the same shit happens all over again.

. . . again . . . each time, maybe we are a little slower getting to the woman's house . . . maybe we don't try as hard to call a first responder because she doesn't want them there . . . we stop holding the guy till she shows up, because what's the point? . . . my hands are tied. (70)

This takes the focus off Manuel as the perpetrator and puts the focus on the police officers who didn't help Amanda. The truth in this difficult situation is that Amanda's hands were tied, and she couldn't do anything else except try to figure out what to do to make it to another day. Many women know that things will only get worse when their perpetrators come back to find them after being in jail. Viewers understand the same situation later in the play from the perspective of the judges, who also see Amanda's behavior as erratic. They believe she destroyed the evidence in her own case because she hasn't accepted help that was offered in the past. These monologues from community officials help create a more holistic view of where the problems are, and this is where it becomes evident that viewers and readers must understand the theories behind domestic violence and allow emotions to lead to action. It's only then that we become women on the ground.

Activist and theorist Juana María Rodríguez addresses these multiple realities when she states, "languages of activism, law, academia, and technology are never fully contained; instead they tunnel into one another, remapping the disciplinary terrains they encounter. There is an extensive intertextuality between and among these spaces and their inhabitants" (36). Here, I'm reminded of my previous confusion and frustration about creating a third space or area where there's room for theory and activism to meld into the one action I believe they are. *In My Daughter's Name* provided the space. The

audience was a mix of community activists, students and actors, all of whom participated in a rich discussion afterward.

After the show Grandma, Mom and I went out to eat. For an hour, we sat and talked about the show. Grandma and Mom opened up about scenes in their own lives, stories I've never heard before. I had never seen my grandmother cry until this show. This powerful story released the most important women in my life from silence. When we recently heard that this play had been picked up by a larger touring company, my family all wanted to come and see the show that made our strong, independent grandmother cry.

IV. Closing

Inspired by this play and the narratives, I've tried to create a space where theory, activism and personal narratives all come together. My aim has been to create an intertextual piece that treats characters who are victims the same way we treat people who are victims. From the play, I've seen how people interested in neither theory nor activism can be moved to action by witnessing personal narrative through literature. My hope is that women in a different context, who know these narratives, can also be inspired to see them in other ways. Conversely, I hope women who know theory are introduced to personal narratives that *are* theories on their own and can enrich and complete scholarship.

Where does this exploration leave us? The reality is that activists remain generally uneducated about theory and theorists create words without taking action, which keeps this imaginary binary in place. Without hearing the same united message, change cannot be made and people will not act. The authors included in this exploration work together to join the many voices it takes to understand what making sense of domestic violence

means through the written words we have available. I want to contribute my voice, experience and scholarly work to both worlds, and add to the ongoing work of empowering women. For me, the end goal has always been to contribute to the empowerment of abused women. Despite many barriers, we must keep trying to see that activism and theory are one through the personal narratives of these victimized women. This lack of understanding harms our local community, even as Koppelman explains that it may be ingrained in U.S. society:

One part of American folklore often represented in the movies, but almost never in life, is the avenging behavior of fathers and brothers against the man who hurts their daughters or sisters. Where are those avengers in women's short stories? Where are they in real life? One thing that makes women feel shame when they are battered is that no one notices or intervenes; it doesn't seem to matter to anyone. When there is no intervention, battered women feel abandoned and, in some cases, worthless, sometimes hopeless and suicidal, and sometimes filled with a lasting contempt and/or distrust of people. They are the lost social community. (Koppelman xxiii)

Without hearing the same united message from agencies and academic research, change cannot be made and people will not act. These stories and people risk becoming a "lost social community." Where, in literature and life, are the champions for abused women? By keeping these stories and others sectioned off into academia they can't reach their full potential as stories that create change.

So what or who is the problem? This essay isn't about placing blame on activists and/or scholars or anybody else. This exploration is centered on changing the way we make sense of violence against women and why the authors that include personal narrative in their writing should be held up as examples of theory. Simply put, we need theorists who take into account realities of life when producing theory. One such way should be through the inclusion of domestic violence narratives in literature and literary study. This point is further explained by Torres:

I want to make clear that I do not wish to write an “anti-theory” essay. Theory itself is not the problem, and in fact serves many activist purposes – especially if authors are brave enough in this era of blurriness and fragmentation to name the oppressors and the oppressed . . . we should not be mad at theories themselves but at an educational system that does not make it possible for everyone to understand and use critical theories and academic terms. (Torres 65)

What became clear through working on this essay is that one cannot deny her own connection to her academic work. When I began to write this paper I didn't intend to write anything about my personal story, but as I started using only theory I realized that I wasn't utilizing a large part of my knowledge. Koppelman came across the same issue when beginning to create her collection of domestic violence narratives. She reveals, “I thought I could make this book and that it would be useful, but at the same time, I thought I could keep myself, my personal, real, private, historical self, out of this book. But I can't” (xvii). This type of writing does not change the focus of the work to non-

academic aims but instead enhances the academic aspect by including the reality of life for abused women and their theories on how to stay safe.

In this way, I've created a third space within this work by making room for personal narrative, literary narratives, scholarship, drama and analysis through close reading. Rather than searching for the third spaces that seem to evade usage, I've worked to create what Rodríguez describes as "my own modest attempt to reenvision the prickly practice of scholarly inquiry" through the creation of this third space in this work (36). Most of these women's lives have not included letters after their names or degrees of any kind, but that does not exclude them from understanding theory and how it could change their lives.³ I've worked through what "making sense" means for me as a scholar and domestic violence advocate and the third space where this essay exists is the result. My own personal narrative can only exist and be included within this third space.

Again, by turning to Torres (and hooks) for inspiration I find that this style is feasible and useful. Torres relates, "I began to realize that I was an expert on my experience in the world." Perhaps, this means there is a need for cultural reality theories in which women begin to understand their own lives and feel safe enough to write their experiences which become theory or perhaps scholars simply need to recognize the stories that are being written. Either way, this essay exists at a time when women are still being beaten, raped and then silenced and ultimately forgotten. Today, one in four women in the U.S. will experience violence in an intimate partner relationship during her lifetime. Every three minutes a sexual assault occurs (Voices of Hope brochure). One in three girls will be sexually assaulted before her 18th birthday. I hope this essay begins to

take these voices from the trees and give them the embodiment necessary to create social change. We need to become women on the ground.

Notes:

1. Hooks, Bell. *Feminist theory from margin to center*. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984.

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2. Lisa Price has a doctorate from the Research Centre on Violence, Abuse and Gender Relations, Leeds Metropolitan University, has taught Women's Studies at Simon Fraser University, and is a former Research Associate at the Women's Research Centre.

3. This quotation explains my aim to make this exploration useable and understandable to those people without letters behind their names:

Because academics are primarily focused on each other's work rather than on the material conditions of the world outside the university, such scholars spend much of their creative energy on catching the next new theory, the latest vocabulary [. . .] and anything else that will make them sound innovative as they present papers at professional conferences or publish in journals that nobody outside the academy read" (Torres 69-70).

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