Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?

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MICHEL FOUCAULT argued that speech is not a medium or tool through which power struggles occur but itself an important site and object of conflict (Foucault 1972b, 216). He also claimed that bringing things into the realm of discourse, as the confessional structures of the Church brought bodily pleasures into discourse and thus "created" sexuality, is not always or even generally a progressive or liberatory strategy; indeed, it can contribute to our own subordination.

These claims are at odds with each other or at least point in different directions. The first suggests that movements of social change should focus on the arena of speech as a central locus of power. The act of speaking out in and of itself transforms power relations and subjectivities, or the very way in which we experience and define ourselves. But the second claim warns that bringing things into the realm of discourse works also to inscribe them into hegemonic structures and to produce docile, self-monitoring bodies who willingly submit themselves to (and thus help to create and legitimate) the authority of experts. In particular, discourses about sex, Foucault warns, are far from liberatory. These discourses developed from a punitive structure within Catholicism (the confession of sins for penance and absolution) into an evaluative structure within psychotherapy (the confession of trauma for diagnosis and treatment). In both cases the speaker discloses her innermost experiences to an expert mediator who then reinterprets those experiences back to her using the dominant discourse's codes of "normality" (Foucault 1978, 67). In this way the speaker is inscribed into dominant structures of subjectivity: her interior life is made to conform to prevailing dogmas. Thus, Foucault's description of the confessional depicts it as an effective

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mechanism for enhancing the power of its administering experts, subsuming subjectivities under an increasingly hegemonic discourse and diminishing the possibilities for transgression or intervention by individuals within its domain.

It is within the contradictory space of these two claims—that speech is an important object of conflict and that disclosures increase domination—that we would like to initiate a discussion of the discourse of those who have survived rape, incest, and sexual assault. This discourse is relatively new, yet now in the United States it is accessible every day on television talk shows, on talk radio, and in popular books and magazine articles. What is the political effect of this speech? What are its effects on the construction of women’s subjectivities? Is this proliferation and dissemination of survivor discourse having a subversive effect on patriarchal violence? Or is it being co-opted: taken up and used but in a manner that diminishes its subversive impact? Our motivation to reflect on these issues emerges from our need to reflect on our own practices. We are two women who share three traits: we are survivors, we have been active in the movement of survivors for justice and empowerment, and we also work within (and sometimes against) postmodernist theories. We have also been affected by the distancing and dissonance that institutions enforce between “theory” and “personal life,” which splits the individual along parallel paths that can never meet. This article is an attempt to rethink and repair this dissonance and to begin weaving together these paths—and their commitments, interests, and experiences.

The principal tactic adopted by the survivors’ movement has been to encourage and make possible survivors’ disclosures of our traumas, whether in relatively private or in public contexts (Bass and Thornton 1991, 260). This strategic metaphor of “breaking the silence” is virtually ubiquitous throughout the movement: survivor demonstrations are called “speak outs,” the name of the largest national network of survivors of childhood sexual abuse is VOICES, and the metaphor figures prominently in book titles such as I Never Told Anyone, Voices in the Night, Speaking Out, Fighting Back, and No More Secrets (Adams and Fay 1981; McNaron and Morgan 1982; Bass and Thornton 1991). Speaking out serves to educate the society at large about the dimensions of sexual violence and misogyny, to reposition the problem from the individual psyche to the social sphere where it rightfully belongs, and to empower victims to act constructively on our own behalf and thus make

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1 VOICES can be reached at VOICES in Action, Inc., P.O. Box 148309, Chicago IL 60614; telephone 312-327-1500. The metaphor of “unsilencing” what has been made secret is also found in Fay et al. 1979; Rush 1980; Butler 1985; Gallagher 1985; Polese 1985; Johnson 1986; Russell 1986; Clark 1987; Danica 1988; and Sanford 1982.
the transition from passive victim to active survivor. As one book on the subject of incest stated, “We believe that there is not a taboo against incest, merely against speaking about it. And the reason for this taboo, once examined, is clear: if we begin to speak of incest, we may realize its place as a training ground for female children to regard themselves as inferior objects to be used by men. . . . By beginning to speak about it, we begin to threaten its continued, unacknowledged presence” (McNaron and Morgan 1982, 15). Furthermore, survivors who often have been silent because they feared retaliation or increased humiliation and who have been carrying around the burden of a hidden agony for months, years, and even decades report that the experience of speaking out is transformative as well as a sheer relief. As Nancy Ziegenmeyer—the woman who made history by allowing the Des Moines Register to use her name in recounting the story of her rape—put it, “One of the most important things I’ve learned is that I found my sanity when I found my voice” (Ziegenmeyer 1992, 218).

On the other hand, the speaking out of survivors has been sensationalized and exploited by the mass media, in fictional dramatizations as well as “journalistic” formats such as the Geraldo Rivera and Phil Donahue television talk shows. The media often use the presence of survivors for shock value and to pander to a sadistic voyeurism among viewers, focusing on the details of the violations with close-ups of survivors’ anguished expressions. They often eroticize the depictions of survivors and of sexual violence to titillate and expand their audiences. Survivor discourse has also been used in some cases by the psychiatric establishment to construct victim- and woman-blaming explanatory theories for abuse, such as the argument that some people have a “victim personality.” These discursively constituted subjectivities are then made depen-

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2 See the chapter “Breaking Silence,” in Bass and Davis 1988, 92–103, esp. 95. More recently, it has been suggested that we can even go beyond surviving; see, e.g., Dinsmore 1991.

3 See also Kelly 1988, 13.

4 We offer support for this claim in Sec. III below.

5 One of the authors of this article was interviewed for a local television news show about sexual violence. In a half-hour of videotaping, she said three sentences about her own experience and the rest of the time offered political analysis. In the aired version of the interview, all three sentences about personal experience were used and only two other sentences of analysis made it past the editing process.

6 There is a market among pornographers for survivors; e.g., Penthouse magazine paid Jessica Hahn—a rape survivor from a highly publicized case involving television evangelist Jim Bakker—large sums of money to pose and has tried to entice other publicly known survivors to pose.

7 Scores of “self-help” books maintain that, as Richard Carlson says in the title of his book, “You can be happy no matter what” (Carlson 1992). If the source of happiness lies within, no matter what one’s circumstances, then only one person is to blame for one’s misery. Susan Faludi offers a useful discussion of the “masochistic personality
dent upon expert advice and help. In short, survivor discourse has paradoxically appeared to have empowering effects even while it has in some cases unwittingly facilitated the recuperation of dominant discourses.

This double effect coincides in an interesting way with Foucault’s disparate claims about speech. Foucault suggests that confessional speech is not liberatory but is instead a powerful instrument of domination (Foucault 1978). Yet he has demonstrated (along with others) that speech is an important site of struggle in which domination and resistance are played out. For this reason, Foucault’s analyses offer a useful frame for our considerations of survivor discourse; they help us to reflect upon and to evaluate the dynamics of speaking out as a political tactic. Foucault will not, however, be the focus of this article, nor will his accounts sit in judgment over our discussion. Rather, we will set ourselves up as the “experts”: fallible, partial, and momentary, but capable of judgment nonetheless without outside expert mediation. We do not want simply to assume a traditional expert role for ourselves but instead seek to reconfigure the practices and meanings of expertise, toward legitimating survivor discourse.9

Within a general account of speech and discourse we will explore the transgressive character of survivors’ speech. Then we will discuss Foucault’s account of how the confessional mode of speech participates in the construction of domination. Through specific examples we will subsequently consider the multiple and subtle mechanisms by which dominant discourses have co-opted our collective speech and whether this tendency toward co-optation can be effectively resisted. One of our central concerns will be how the tendency of the confessional structure to disempower the confessor can be overcome. Finally, we will offer some constructive and reconstructive suggestions concerning the use of speaking out as a political tactic.

I. Speech and discourse

“Speech is no mere verbalization of conflicts and systems of domination ... it is the very object of man’s [sic] conflicts” (Foucault 1972b,
Speech is the site of political conflict because speech itself is that over which there is struggle. Philosophers have often relegated themselves to an analysis of the content of speech, distilling the lived reality of speech into a set of propositions which could be analyzed through procedures of logical and empirical analysis (Foucault 1972a, 231). More recently, however, many philosophers (on both sides of the analytic/continental divide) have pointed out that there are other features of speech which deserve more than sociological or stylistic analysis. Speech is an event involving an arrangement of speakers and hearers; it is an act in which relations get constituted and experience and subjectivities are mediated. These facts bear on the propositional content of speech, but they also suggest that an analysis of propositional content alone can provide only an inadequate account of the full meaning of any speech act. In order to assess the diverse variables that are involved in any particular discursive situation we must avoid reducing speech to a collection of propositions and recognize it as a temporally specific and spatially specific event.

In any given discursive event there will be a normative arrangement in which some participants are designated speakers and others are designated hearers. In many speaking situations some participants are accorded the authoritative status of interpreters and others are constructed as “naive transmitters of raw experience.” Such situations reveal clearly that speech not only contains sense and reference but also sets up roles for participants and determines relationships between these roles. Consider the arrangements of speaking in a classroom, in a courtroom, in a psychiatrist’s office, or in a child’s bedroom. Moreover, the particular roles we are assigned to play affect our internal experience of ourselves as well as our construction of what it means to be a self. What happens to your speech and sense of self as you move from the role of professor in a classroom to the role of daughter or son when visiting your parents should not be construed as superficial to your “true” self that lies submerged beneath the influence of such changes. Your true self simply is that changing self. This is part of what it means to say that the structures of speech acts mediate our subjectivity and experiences.

The arrangements of speaking will affect the subjectivity and experience of survivors in both political and metaphysical ways. Our power relationships to those with whom we are speaking and our sense and

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10 The concept of mediation comes from a Hegelian tradition that opposes the notion that experience or the self exists in a pure, uninterpreted, directly apprehensible state. For Karl Marx, labor or practical activity provides the mediator between human beings and nature, whereas for Foucault, discourses and epistemes would seem to play this role. But the critical point here is that no entity such as “human being,” “nature,” or “experience” can be described or apprehended prior to its mediation. See “Mediation,” in Bottomore 1983, 329–30.
knowledge of ourselves and of our experiences will both be changed by the structural arrangements of the discursive event.

Foucault introduces the concept of discourse as distinct from speech or a collection of speech acts. The term "discourse" for Foucault denotes a particular configuration of possibilities for speech acts. Through rules of exclusion and classificatory divisions that operate as unconscious background assumptions, a discourse can be said to set out not what is true and what is false but what can have a truth-value at all, or in other words, what is statable (Foucault 1972a). Discourses structure what it is possible to say through systems of exclusion such as the prohibition of certain words, the division between mad and sane speech, and the (historically contingent) disjunction between true and false. In any given context there may exist more than one discourse, although discourses will exist in hierarchical relations with one another.

Foucault's account of discourses refuses to attribute their ultimate features to the conscious intentions of speakers. The structural regularities of a given discourse should be understood in relationship to the interchange between discursive elements, not by reference to a level of manipulation and intentionality conceptualized as existing somewhere "behind" the discourse. Just as conversations have a dynamic all their own that can seem to carry speakers along, so discursive events—whether written or spoken—are guided, constrained, and organized by rules "never formulated in their own right" (Foucault 1970, xi–xiv; see also Foucault 1973, xvii).

This analysis can usefully be applied to survivor speech. The speech of survivors involving reports of their assaults has been excluded speech, constrained by rules more often implicit than explicit but nonetheless powerful. At various times and in different locations survivor speech has been absolutely prohibited, categorized as mad or untrue, or rendered

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11 The analysis in this paper is primarily applicable to the experiences of survivors who are female. We stress that this is not because we do not recognize the existence and special difficulties of male survivors. The significant majority of sexual violence occurs between perpetrators who are male and victims who are women or children (because so many sexual assaults go unreported, all statistics are provisional, but the portion of sexual violence that fits this model ranges between 80 and 90 percent). Our focus on female victims is not based solely on numbers, however. The strategies by which survivors are silenced vary by the gender of the survivor. The violations and silencing of women and children are intrinsically connected to the societal system of male dominance and to ancient structures of asymmetrical discursive relationships. To some extent children occupy the same position vis-à-vis dominant male power regardless of their gender. But there are unique differences in the relationship women and girls have with the dominant discursive structures. For example, while a young girl may not be believed or may be called crazy when she discloses incest, a young boy is more likely to be silenced through homophobia. We regret that we have not had the time or the space to explore adequately the specific silencing strategies imposed on adult male survivors, but it is likely that we will not be the best theorists for that issue in any case.
inconceivable: presuming objects (such as a rapist father) that were not statable and therefore could not exist within the dominant discourses. The speech of incest survivors has been especially restricted on the grounds that it is too disgusting and disturbing to the listeners’ constructed sensibilities, which often continue to receive deferential preference. Incest survivors have also been construed as mad—“hysterical” women who are unable to distinguish reality from their own imaginations. Truddi Chase recounts how her father kept her silent by telling her that “no one is ever going to believe a word that you say, so my best advice to you is don’t say anything” (Chase 1990). Dominant discourses have assisted such silencing strategies through formation rules that invalidate “rapist father” or “rapist boyfriend” as an object of discussion or analysis; one’s boyfriend or father could not simultaneously be one’s rapist.

A variety of discursive strategies have operated to preempt or to dismiss the speech of women and children generally and survivors in particular (Brownmiller 1975; Rush 1980; Davis 1983; Delacoste and Alexander 1987; Estrich 1987; Warshaw 1988; Madigan and Gamble 1991). Within the arena of legal discourse, much of survivor speech continues to be excluded in most states because husbands cannot be charged with rape and because children are generally considered incapable of giving credible testimony. Women who are accusing boyfriends, women with histories involving any criminal or drug-related activity, and women who wait too long to report (so that an examination for physical evidence cannot be performed) are usually excluded from speaking in courtrooms. Within more informal discursive arenas, women and children historically have been prohibited from speaking in any public place; this is now changing for women but not for children. Homophobia operates to intimidate male survivors from speaking out, although as one authority on the topic puts it, “A child molester is neither heterosexual nor homosexual. He is a child molester” (Sanford 1982). The ideology of machismo also shames male survivors to such an extent that they are less likely than females to tell anyone. For survivors generally, incest accounts and reports of acquaintance rape have had less credibility than accounts of stranger rape. But even reports of stranger rape have been discounted unless the survivors looked and acted in certain ways. Older women and women who are not conventionally attractive often have a

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12 Many prosecutors still routinely refuse to put forward cases that involve a child's testimony against a male adult's unless there is “corroboration” by physical evidence or by an adult witness. And many prosecutors will defend such decisions, arguing that although they themselves believe the child, it is extremely difficult to get juries to convict solely on the basis of a child's testimony.

13 Most perpetrators against boys under twelve also assault girls (Rush 1980).
harder time getting acceptance for their accounts. Then again, women who are considered “too sexy” and women who are prostitutes are either not believed about rape or held responsible for it. Women from oppressed races who have been raped by white men are much less likely to be believed than white women reporting rapes by men of oppressed races. Lesbian survivors may be believed, but their rapes are more often discounted as less important (and may be seen as therapeutic). Survivors of multiple incidents of sexual violence are not believed. Survivors of especially heinous ritualized sexual abuse are not believed. The pattern that emerges from these disparate responses is that if survivor speech is not silenced before it is uttered, it is categorized within the mad, the untrue, or the incredible.

Foucault’s concept of discourse helps to explain why feminist remaking of sexual violence has incurred so much resistance from the dominant discourses. Given that each discourse has what Foucault calls its own “positivity” that sets rules for the formation of objects and concepts, new and anomalous objects and concepts will implicitly challenge existing positivities. Discourses must be understood holistically as interconnecting elements. In Foucault’s view, the rules for formation of concepts and objects do not exist prior to or apart from the system of statements but emerge from the configurations of the speech acts and their interrelations (Foucault 1972a, 79). Given this, a change in statements alone or the emergence of new statements that do not cohere with the whole will have a disruptive effect on discursive formation rules.

Survivor speech involves multiple such effects. It is transgressive first of all in simply challenging conventional speaking arrangements: arrangements in which women and children are not authoritative, where they are often denied the space to speak or be heard, and where their ability to interpret men’s speech and to speak against men—to contradict or accuse men—has been severely restricted to a few very specific types of cases (e.g., in U.S. dominant culture, a white woman may speak against, and

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14 For example, Sandi Gallant, a police officer and investigator with the San Francisco Police Department, says of ritual sexual abuse cases, “The reason so few of these cases are successfully prosecuted is that the information is so unpleasant that no one wants to believe it. The investigators hear these stories and they say to themselves, “No, this can’t be true,” and so they don’t write it down, they don’t document it. . . . The most unfortunate thing is that the victims are so often accused of making all this up. The victims end up being the suspects, and the suspects end up being the victims”; see Bass and Davis 1988, 420–21.

15 Liz Kelly (1988) offers an insightful discussion of the ways in which the dominant categories of sexual violence and conceptualizations of sex offenders in the literature of psychology and sociology function to minimize the acknowledged harms to victims and deflect responsibility from the perpetrator. Thus, they function in general as an attempt to minimize the disruptive potential of survivor reports on dominant discourses and practices.

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may even be encouraged to speak against, an African American man or a Latino). The case of Anita Hill demonstrates this transgressive quality of survivor speech. Despite all of Hill’s extensive personal and professional credentials, her sexual harassment allegations against Clarence Thomas in the fall of 1991 elicited fantastic hypotheses about her psychological and emotional motivations from U.S. senators and members of the press and were not allowed to thwart Thomas’s appointment to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Survivor speech is also transgressive to the extent that it presumes objects antithetical to the dominant discourse. Given that such terms as “husband” have historically been defined as the man to whom a woman has given unconditional sexual access, the term “husband rapist” will necessarily transform our previous understandings of the terms “husband” and “rapist,” which in turn will affect how we understand “wife,” “woman,” “sexuality,” “heterosexuality,” and even “man.” The formation rules that determine the generation of statements and that tell speakers how and in what circumstances they can meaningfully form and utter specific statements about sexual violence will also be affected. The simple use of the term “husband rapist” will therefore have the effect of calling into question rules of the dominant discourse for forming statements about whether a rape occurred and how to distinguish rape from sex.

To the extent that survivor speech acts cannot be subsumed within a given discourse, they will be disruptive of its positivity and at least point to the possibility of a different set of formation rules. The tendency, however, will always be for the dominant discourse to silence such speech or, failing this, to channel it into nonthreatening outlets. Silencing works by physically denying certain individuals a speaking role—for example, through institutionalization, denial of access to listeners or readers, or the controlled administration of drugs. But dominant discourses can recuperate their hegemonic position even when disruptive speech is not silenced by subsuming it within the framework of the discourse in such a way that it is disempowered and no longer disruptive. Strategies of recuperation include categorizing survivor speech as mad, as evidence of women’s or children’s hysterical or mendacious tendencies, or even as testimony to women’s essential nature as helpless victims in need of patriarchal protection. The feminist movement has helped to reduce the effectiveness of silencing techniques by creating forums where survivors can speak—in magazines, newsletters, journals, support groups, and demonstrations. As a result, the dominant discourse has shifted its emphasis from strategies of silencing to the development of strategies of recuperation.

One important form of recuperation that Foucault discusses results from the mere negation of a dominant claim. When resistance takes the
form of a simple negation, it remains within the same economy of meaning and signification and in fact can reinforce the dominant status of the negated term. The primary example to which Foucault refers is the way in which the repression of talk about sexuality in Europe and the United States in the Victorian era reinforced the very power and significance of such talk: the more it was repressed, the more eagerness and pleasure there was in the telling and thus the more incitement to tell (Foucault 1978, 23, 33, 45, 48–49, 71–72). (Foucault does not deny that repression caused suffering but claims that it incited pleasures and produced a new economy of desire as well.) The key point here is that disclosure and repression are mutually reinforcing, so as to constitute a single economy of discourse. It was from within the repressive Victorian era that discourses about sexuality proliferated, with myriad institutionalized explorations, new categories, sexual identities, performative descriptions, and so on.

The disclosure of survivor discourse may at first appear to exemplify this form of recuperation. If the survivor must overcome great odds simply to disclose a sexual assault, the political significance of that disclosure may appear to exist in inverse proportion to its repression and therefore even to be dependent on its repression (Foucault 1978, 6–7). The discourse by survivors about their experiences of sexual violence, however, is not the same in structure or content as discourse about sexual identities, practices, or pleasures. Whereas the exhibitionist pleasure of reportage about sexual practices and pleasures increases proportionally with the degree to which such reportage is frowned upon, a different economy structures reports of sexual violence. The survivor who reports sexual violence may feel empowered politically, but that does not generally outweigh the pain and humiliation of disclosure and its recollection of the frightening and agonizing assault and abuse (Ziegenmeyer 1992). Moreover, if disclosure can make the survivor feel courageous and transgressive, this represents a positive intervention into patriarchal constructions of subjectivity and is not simply caught within the recuperative machinations of power.

We would suggest that survivor discourse is closer to the discourse of the mad, as Foucault discusses it, than to the discourse of the repressed. Survivor speech is positioned (or at least has the potential to be positioned) not in an oppositional but still harmonious complementarity with the dominant discourse but rather in violent confrontation with it: its expression requires not a simple negation but a transformation of the dominant formulation. The point of contention between dominant and survivor discourses is not over the determination of truth but over the determination of the statable. When we claim, for example, that our husband/father/brother/boyfriend is our rapist we are often faced not
with disagreement but with charges of delusion, hysteria, and madness. Elly Danica writes that when she tried to tell family members that her father raped her, “I don’t get disbelief. I get shocked outrage. How could I do this to him? How could I even think this about him? How could I be such a mean and awful bitch?” Such responses confirmed his warnings to her: “Do you think anybody will believe you? . . . I [will] tell them you’re crazy. I’m your father, they’ll believe me. They’ll never believe you.” Finally she says, “I am silent. I have lost the ability to speak. He said if I told anybody he would have me locked up for being crazy. Or he would kill me. I no longer have the courage to speak about anything” (Danica 1988, 37, 50, 54). How many women consigned to “madness” began their journey in this way?

Our conclusions at this point must remain cautious. Given the structured nature of discourses, survivor speech has great transgressive potential to disrupt the maintenance and reproduction of dominant discourses as well as to curtail their sphere of influence. Dominant discourses can also, however, subsume survivor speech in such a way as to disempower it and diminish its disruptive potential. These discourses should not be conceptualized as static, unchanging, or monolithic entities but as fluid, as flexible, and as capable of transforming to accommodate survivors’ speech while not significantly changing the underlying systems of dominance. Certainly some have argued that this is occurring in major U.S. media, where previously excluded survivor speech is now included in ways that do not seriously threaten patriarchy (Armstrong 1990). We will consider specific examples of recuperation to determine whether and how the disruptive potential of speaking out can be actualized. First, however, we will look at the effects of a very specific discursive arrangement, the one that most often frames survivor speech: the confessional.

II. The confessional

According to Foucault, the confessional structure achieved a central role in the civil and religious practices of Western societies from the time of the codification of the sacrament of penance by the Lateran Council in 1215 (Foucault 1978, 58). The confessional constituted an imperative to speak those acts that contravened the law, God, or societal norms. In speaking these acts, the agents of the actions would ostensibly be transformed. The confessional would realign the speaker’s desires from the illegitimate to the legitimate and thus change the speaker’s very subjectivity from bad to good, from outside law and truth to inside. In this way, the confessional became “one of the main rituals relied on for the production of truth” (Foucault 1978, 58).
The relationship between the expert mediator, or the person to whom one confessed, and the confessor was one of domination and submission. The expert had the power to demand that the confession be made and to decide what was to follow it, thereby constituting a “discourse of truth based on its decipherment” (Foucault 1978, 67). The confessor’s status, identity, and value were all determined by the expert mediator through the process of interpreting and evaluating the confessor’s discourse. Thus the confessor was by definition dependent on the expert’s interpretation of the real truth of her actions, experiences, and thoughts. Much later, confession proliferated beyond the church principally into the domains of psychiatry and criminal psychology, and thus these spheres became organized partially by and through relations of discursive subordination.16

Given Foucault’s analysis, although confessional modes of discourse may appear to grant survivors an empowering “permission to speak,” they give the expert mediator the power to determine the legitimacy of survivor discourse. It is the expert rather than the survivor who will determine under what conditions the survivor speaks and whether the survivor’s speech is true or acceptable within the dominant discourse’s codes of normality. The confessional discursive structure produces an “institutional incitement to speak” (Foucault 1978, 18) or an imperative to speak, based on the presumption (encoded in Christian church dogma through the pastoral and the penance) that the “sinner” has something to “confess.”17 The imperative to speak comes in the form of a command or prescription from a dominant figure—priest, psychiatrist, or judge (usually a dominant male)—to a subordinate figure—sinner, “neurotic,” “pervert,” or criminal (subordinate male, or woman, or child).

At the same time that speech is incited, a “policing of statements” occurs whereby the expert sifts through the raw data of the confessor’s speech for signs of sin or pathology (Foucault 1978, 18). The expert will interpret the speech according to dominant cultural codes and, on the

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16 We do not mean to suggest that discursive subordination operates only in the spheres of psychiatry and criminal psychology, thus leaving out economic, sexual, or social subordination. Rather, discursive subordination, as we understand it, is also inseparable from, inclusive of, transformed by, and subject to these other oppressive relations.

17 Foucault traces the Western evolution of the confessional from early in the thirteenth century through to the present day. While once bound exclusively to the Christian church, the contemporary confessional structure often operates outside of Christian doctrines. Yet this confessional structure still produces similar discursive arrangements. Historically within the Christian tradition, Foucault states that the disclosure of sexual acts was the “privileged theme of confession” (Foucault 1978, 61). In this specific ritual of discourse, both within and outside Christian dogma, the one who speaks the confession is always also the subject of that speech. It is this ritual of confession that continues to unfold “within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or the virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply an interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes it, and appreciates it” (Foucault 1978, 61).
basis of his interpretation, “punish, forgive, console, or reconcile” and determine whether the confessor can have absolution (Foucault 1978, 61–62). The confessional is always implicated in (both constituting of and constituted by) an unequal, nonreciprocal relation of power. And the explicit goal of the process of confession is always the normalization of the speaking subject and thus the elimination of any transgressive potential which might exist. The sexual energy of the confessor is funneled into a process that produces anxiety, confusion, guilt, and subservience to an indisputable authority.

Foucault also argued that the confessional mapped the space in which discourses on truth and sexuality might be joined, noting its genealogy from a religious ritual designed primarily around the organization of sexual practices and imbued with the belief in an intrinsic connection between the body, sin, and truth. The confessional’s demand for a transformation of “sex into discourse” resulted in the “dissemination . . . of heterogeneous sexualities” aligned with heterogeneous subjectivities (Foucault 1978, 61). Through the confessional the parameters of normal and/or moral sexual functioning could be “discovered” or constituted and the forbidden could be articulated. 18 From the early Christian dogma of the thirteenth century through to a more contemporary manifestation of the confessional in Freud’s work, we find the argument that an individual’s sexual history represents the “deep truth” about her moral and/or psychological character.

Moreover, in Foucault’s view, the production of sex as a discourse of truth was always predicated on desire and pleasure. The confessor’s disclosure was always pleasurable to hear because it paralleled the “entire painstaking review of the sexual act in its very unfolding” (Foucault 1978, 19). The sexual act itself, understood as requiring a full disclosure of mind and body, was repeated in the confessional process that demanded everything be told, be laid bare. And the pleasure produced by the confession was enhanced by the very difficulty of extracting the disclosure. This economy of pleasure therefore had an interest in constructing the confession as a difficult and arduous extraction so as to invest it with more meaning and power and to intensify its pleasure. This required that the confession occur in a privatized space, intended to reinforce the perceived link between sexuality and the “deep, hidden truth” of subjectivity, revealed by the expert mediator as an “individual secret.” Given a

18 According to Foucault, the Christian pastoral prescribed the imperative that Christians must confess all acts and thus transform their every desire into discourse (Foucault 1978, 21). The confessional was the space in which those vocabularies censored elsewhere were demanded to be spoken. As Foucault elucidates, this “duty to confess,” prescribed earliest by the Christian church, also effectively rendered such speech “morally acceptable, and technically useful” (Foucault 1978, 21).
situation in which sexuality is said to represent the core truth of one's identity as a person but can be revealed only in a private space by a designated interpreter, the power of the expert over the confessor can indeed become enormous.

These dangerous features of the confessional are exemplified in Freudian seduction theory. Many feminists and survivors of sexual violence have argued that Freud’s attribution of sexual abuse reports to neuroses and internal fantasies effectively rendered the real events invisible and hindered attempts to deal with incest and sexual abuse. As long as women’s accounts of sexual violence and abuse could be subsumed under the category of the fantastical or as mere theatrics, they were “far less threatening to the fabric of society” (Masson 1986, 5).

But the seduction theory reveals more than the power of androcentric theories about women’s experience. Because the seduction theory originated in the confessional structure of the therapeutic situation, it also reveals the role that the confessional has in subverting women’s autonomy. In a discursive structure in which an individual woman transmits her feelings as reports of “raw data” to an expert entrusted with the task of interpreting the truth of her experience back to her and prescribing diagnosis and treatment, we see how dangerous the confessional model can be. Because of the authority granted them in the discursive arrangement of therapy, many nineteenth-century French and German psychiatrists were able to reject their patients’ reports of real sexual assaults and repackage them as internal fantasies, often traumatizing the women for the rest of their lives.19

The seduction theory also effected a shift of focus away from the perpetrator of the crime and onto the victim, a shift prefigured in the confessional itself, which is organized around locating the problem within the confessor. Influenced by Freud, many doctors began to presuppose without investigation that the victims’ accusations were false and oriented their treatment toward discovering the reasons that their patients engaged in the “simulation of sexual abuse” (Masson 1986, 106). French physician Alfred Fournier wrote that it is the “simulators’ perfidious cunning and heartrending despair of their victims [that forced him] . . . to denounce such monstrosities and expose them to public indignation” (Masson 1986, 107). The word “victim” here is being assigned to the man accused of rape. For Fournier, the accused perpetrator’s speech by itself, the fact that he “energetically denies it [the rape],” serves as proof of the man’s innocence. Here, the disclosure and speaking out by

19 For a more sustained argument on this view, see Masson 1986. In her introduction to that book, Catharine MacKinnon asserts about these German and French psychiatrists, “The doctors say that the victims imagine sexual abuse, which is fantasy, not real, and that their sexuality caused it” (xiv).
victims of sexual violence is transformed into evidence of their own pathology, while the speech of the accused perpetrator is taken as decisively authoritative and privileged.

A more contemporary version of recuperation is the current public fascination with survivors of childhood sexual abuse who develop multiple personalities. Truddi Chase, a name that represents several distinct persons sharing a single body, has appeared twice on the nationally televised “The Oprah Winfrey Show,” each time with a psychiatrist who is billed as an expert in these disorders (Chase 1990; see also Chase 1987). In the shows, Chase occupies the position of the spectacle that the media requires for viewer interest while the psychiatrist sitting next to her establishes the validity of Chase’s discourse by reference to dominant theories about incest trauma and multiple personalities. The shows are structured around the assumption that Chase’s own description of her ninety-two personalities will not (and should not) be believed by the audience until the expert validates it as true and not a lie or an act. Her autobiography, When Rabbit Howls (Chase 1987), is similarly “legitimated” and “explained” by an introduction and epilogue written by her therapist (which operates to contain her own words by literally surrounding them). The effect of such mediation and interpretation is to soften the challenge Chase presents to our society. Moreover, there are profound questions that need to be raised about the claim that multiple personality disorder is a functional response to traumatic childhood experiences. For whom and for what is the splitting of ego identities functional? By isolating their memories of sexual abuse, these survivors are able to develop alternative identities that can function better in the sense that they are not debilitated at every moment by agonizing flashbacks and fears. For the child, such acts of self-splitting are necessary survival mechanisms when the trauma is too great to bear, and some loss of memory is fairly common among many survivors of childhood sexual abuse because the memories are too difficult to maintain when one must continue to rely on and trust adults. In this sense, the loss and disruption of memory may be functional for the survivor. Another sense of “functional,” however, may be at work in psychiatric accounts of multiple personalities. The loss of memory and the ability for survivors of prolonged sexual trauma to develop multiple egos is also functional for perpetrators and for overall system stability (with the system being a society in which there is ongoing rape and assault of children within families). Multiple personalities cause the survivor rather than the society or family to bear the burden of her own survival. To call this a functional or positive response is dangerously close to valorizing a terribly unjust distribution of the burdens caused by sexual violence.
In the past decade, first-person sexual-assault accounts have made headlines and been featured prominently on TV talk shows, reaching an audience of millions. The very act of speaking out has become used as performance and spectacle. The growth of this phenomenon raises questions: has it simply replayed confessional modes which recuperate dominant patriarchal discourses without subversive effect, or has it been able to create new spaces within these discourses and to begin to develop an autonomous counterdiscourse, one capable of empowering survivors? Given that power operates not simply or primarily through exclusion and repression but through the very production and proliferation of discourses, should we not be more than a little wary of contributing to the recent proliferation of survivor discourse? The answers to these questions will involve paying close attention to the structural features of the discursive arrangements, as we will show.

III. Scenes from television

In the fall of 1990, "The Home Show" on ABC television invited two student activists from our university to discuss rape on college campuses. Our university was chosen because it had recently gained national notoriety for the high number of rapes reported by its students and because one of the recent rapes had occurred on the chancellor’s lawn. The producers contacted a student group founded for the express purpose of discussing and preventing such rapes and asked specifically for survivors who would appear on the show (to be aired September 10, 1990). They also said that they would prefer recent survivors and survivors of rapes that occurred on the campus itself. The students in the group discussed this, and one survivor volunteered to do the show, along with another member of the group.

When the segment began, the camera zoomed in to do a close-up on Tracy (the survivor) as Gary Collins and Dana Fleming, the co-hosts of the show, asked her to tell the audience "what happened." Tracy proceeded to outline her acquaintance rape, focusing on the normality of the situation prior to the assault. Her goal was to say something useful for other women who may be struggling with the aftermath of an assault and feeling as uncertain about what to do as she had felt. Fleming, however, wanted to focus on the violent act itself; she asked Tracy to explain to the audience whether she had done "anything that in any way could have provoked him [the rapist]." Fleming prefaced her question by saying, "You have to understand that we are on your side but I think the question has to be asked," implying that the audience may not comprehend Tra-

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20 Personal communication, December 1990.
cy's behavior. This, of course, made assumptions about the audience, positioning it as unfriendly or skeptical, perhaps displacing Fleming's own reaction onto the audience.

And thus it was not Collins but his female co-host who put Tracy in the position of having to defend herself. Tracy tried bravely to respond by shifting to the issue of why the assumption is usually made that the woman is responsible. And Lindy Crescitelli, the other student on the show, also made an effort to shift the focus from women's actions to men's responsibility for rape, but neither his nor Tracy's points were taken up for discussion. Collins asked instead what parents could do in preparing their daughters for college to reduce the risk of rape. An "expert on rape prevention counseling" then proceeded to discuss the ways in which women in our society have difficulty in communicating their sexual desires and how sex can be more pleasurable for men when it is done with a willing partner.

What did this show do? It produced an emotional moment of a survivor's self-disclosure to get audience attention, it focused a discussion of rape on women's behavior, and it created or re-created a scenario where older women are skeptical and judgmental of younger women and where older men are paternalistic protectors. Tracy became an object of analysis and evaluation for experts and media-appointed representatives of the masses (Collins and Fleming). The camera insistently cut away to Tracy's face even when others were speaking, as if to display the "example" being discussed. The students' attempt to focus on the institutional and cultural ways in which rape is excused or is blamed on the victim was effectively circumvented when the show's hosts put Tracy in the position of having to defend her own actions and when they directed the discussion to the ways in which women should change their behavior to prevent rape and how their (paternalistic) parents could educate them toward this end. The contribution of the "expert" was to reiterate the hosts' focus on women's behavior and parental protection. When she was asked to say something about men, she discussed the enhancement of their sexual pleasure. The entire show was characterized by an objectification of survivors, a reaction to survivor accounts that mixed pity and skepticism, and a deflection away from men's responsibility for rape. And the repeated invocation of the idea that "our daughters" leave "a protected environment" when they leave home for college reinforced the myth that rapes most often happen away from home, when the reverse is the case. The notion that the "home" signals safety and protection is a claim that is not only wrong but complicitous with sexual violence.21

21 It is complicitous because it makes it more difficult for women and children to name their fathers, brothers, uncles, and neighbors as their attackers and be believed. It
Numerous "Phil Donahue," "Geraldo," and "Sally Jessy Raphael"—and, to a lesser extent, "Oprah Winfrey"—shows have produced similar effects. These shows display the emotions of survivors for public consumption and unfailingly mediate the survivors' discourse through expert analysis and interpretation. Usually the format follows this pattern: at the start of the show survivors are shown in close-up, "telling their stories." 22 The host of the show makes sure to ask questions that are sufficiently probing to get the survivors to cry on screen (this can be accomplished by discovering their most vulnerable issues in a preshow interview and then keying in when cameras are rolling). 23 After a few minutes of this, the host usually says "wow" or something comparable and breaks to a commercial. The show resumes with a period of audience questions; then (or sometimes beforehand) the inevitable expert shows up: almost invariably a white man or woman with a middle-class and professional appearance, who, with a sympathetic but dispassionate air, explains to the audience the nature, symptoms, and possible therapies for such crimes of violence. The survivors are reduced to victims, represented as pathetic objects who can only recount their experiences as if these are transparent, and who offer pitiable instantiations of the universal truths the experts reveal. These shows especially like to get victims with "disorders," such as multiple personalities, because this can expand opportunities for sensationalism and widen the emotional distance between the audience and the survivors, making it easier to objectify them as victims. Rivera consistently heightens the drama of his shows by including participants who contradict the stories of the survivors. His shows are often organized around having survivors, rather than perpetrators, explain and defend themselves. 24 In a culture where audience sensations are dulled by

22 There are numerous examples of this. Consider Raphael's typical opening remarks from her show of January 21, 1991: "Our first guests today say they never thought they would survive the hell their lives have become. Stephanie was walking through a park near her home when a man pulled a knife. He dragged her 100 yards and then viciously raped her. To make matters worse, Stephanie was three months pregnant at the time of the rape. Stephanie, take us back to that day and, fairly briefly, tell us about this."

23 Personal communication with Kristin Eaton-Pollard, May 1990. Pollard has appeared on numerous talk shows, including "Geraldo."

24 For example, on Rivera's November 14, 1989, show on "campus rape," one of the survivors was challenged by the vice-provost for student life at her university, thus undermining the credibility of her disclosure and analysis by presenting the skeptical and contradictory views of an "authority," i.e., someone higher up on the dominant discursive hierarchy. It also diverted the discussion from its earlier focus—on the problems of security and support procedures for survivors on college campuses—to a debate over whether a rape really occurred at all. Survivors often walk onto a show unaware of who the other guests will be, and Ziegenmeyer relates how she felt "sandbagged" when she
graphic depictions of violence (both real and fictional on television) and in which mass sensibilities have atrophied under conditions of late capitalism, these shows provide a moment in which real, raw, and intense feelings can be observed and in some cases remembered. This emotional "shock value" is their use value as a media commodity. It appears, however, that the goal of producing disturbing feelings for the audience must be tempered with a dose of moderation: too few feelings will make for a boring show but too many may frighten and alienate viewers and induce them to change the channel. The mediation of a coolly disposed expert can serve as a mechanism for displacing identification with the victims to reduce the emotional power of the survivor presence.

Now, the preceding account may appear to be an excessively pessimistic reading of these programs. Certainly it is a one-sided analysis. The media moguls, producers, and show hosts do not have absolute control over audience reactions to their products. In a discursive regime in which survivor stories are excluded speech, hearing these stories can be very powerful for a survivor in the audience. This has at least the potential to help the survivor name and validate her experience and to bring the trauma out of the privacy of her psyche and into the public arena. And the visual image of the survivor, although it can be used to objectify, has the potential to explode stereotypes about who survivors are as well as counter an invisibility that in the long run serves only to hide the true nature of patriarchy, which condones and promotes sexual violence.

But recuperation occurs when the public arena does not take up the survivor's discourse except as a way to experience a sensational moment of confession. And the transgressive potential of the discourse is lost when the victim is reified purely as object, in need of expert interpretation, psychiatric help, and audience sympathy. The most transgressive moments have occurred on TV talk shows when the splits between victim and audience and between recorder of experience and interpreter of experience are obstructed. This has occurred on "The Oprah Winfrey Show" when Winfrey has referred to her own history as a survivor and thus subverted her ability to be a more objective and dispassionate observer of the victims on the stage. Because of her own identification with survivors, Winfrey rarely allows them to be put in the position of having to defend the truth of their stories or their own actions. And when the focus is on child sexual abuse, Winfrey does not always defer to an expert but presents herself as a survivor/expert, still working through and theorizing her own experience.

walked onto the Sally Jessy Raphael show because she had not been told that a guest hostile to her story had also been invited (Ziegenneyer 1992, 214).
One particularly transgressive segment of “The Oprah Winfrey Show” stands out: nearly all of the audience of about two hundred women were themselves survivors, and a wide-ranging “horizontal” group discussion took place with little deferral to the designated expert. This show had the most potential to thwart the efforts to contain and recuperate the disruptive potential of survivor discourse precisely because it could not be contained or segregated within a separate, less threatening realm: there was too much of it for any one expert to effectively handle and the victim-expert split could not be maintained. Without a segregated discursive arrangement, victims of sexual violence could speak as experts on sexual violence. For at least one brief moment on television, survivors were the subjects of their own lives.

IV. Dangers of the confessional

Survivor discourse and the tactic of speaking out may often involve a confessional mode of speech including personal disclosure, autobiographical narrative, and the expression of feelings and emotions. This mode of speech, as we have discussed, is fraught with dangers:

1. As in the television examples above, one of the dangers of the confessional discourse structure is that the survivor speech becomes a media commodity that has a use value based on its sensationalism and drama and that circulates within the relations of media competition to boost ratings and wake up viewers. In this way, a goal or effect probably not intended by the survivors is made the organizing principle for how the show gets arranged, produced, and edited. The results of this process may well have no positive effect on the production/reproduction of practices of sexual violence.

2. Another drawback of the confessional mode is that it often focuses attention onto the victim and her psychological state and deflects it away from the perpetrator. Although a rule of exclusion is broken when a

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25 This show aired April 14, 1988, on ABC.
26 This point and others are corroborated by a study that sociologist Joel Best undertook of the cultural representations of child abuse in the United States over the last thirty years. Best demonstrates that the structure of news shows is such that they tend to describe the problem rather than to explain it or to consider solutions, and that their descriptions are usually misleading, e.g., in characterizing most cases of child sexual abuse as involving strangers rather than family members and as caused by individual deviance rather than social forces. He also shows that “the press is most likely to repeat . . . claims that are constructed so that . . . there seems to be a consensus among knowledgeable, interested parties, and the explanations and solutions offered are consistent with existing institutionalized authority [emphasis ours]. Of course, radical demands for social change cannot meet the latter two criteria, and it is not then surprising that radical claims rarely surface on the network news” (Best 1990, 110).
survivor names and describes her experience, the move from privatization to a public or social arena does not occur if the survivor speech gets constructed as a transmission of her “inner” feelings and emotions, which are discussed separately from their relationship to the perpetrator’s actions and the society’s rules of discourse. The discussion of the survivor’s “inner” self and feelings replaces rather than leads to a discussion of links to the “exterior” and ways to transform it.

3. Given its historical trajectory through religious ritual to institutional therapy, the confessional mode can also invite or appear to necessitate the invocation of a dispassionate mediator. If there is someone playing the role of the confessor, historical precedence and the logic of the confessional’s discursive structure dictate that there needs to be someone who is being confessed to—who has the role of the absolver, interpreter, and/or judge. This strips the survivor of her authority and agency. Such an effect can be mitigated if the one being confessed to is also a survivor, for example, within a survivors’ support group. Disclosing to another survivor works to undermine the assumption that a mediator must be neutral and objective and must derive her authority not from “personal experience” but from “abstract knowledge.”

4. The confessional mode also reproduces the notion of “raw experience” and sets up binary structures between experience and theory, feelings and knowledge, subjective and objective, and mind and body. These binaries are instantiated in the discursive arrangement of the confessional, which splits speaking roles on the basis of these divisions. Such a split is not only possible but considered necessary for the development of a credible theory because of the internal structure of the binary, which subordinates one term to the other. The first part of the binary—experience, feelings, emotional pain—provides the raw data needed to produce theory and knowledge. But these “subjective” entities will be obstacles to the production of theory unless they are made sharply subordinate to and contained and controlled by the theory, knowledge, and “objective” assessments of the second half of the binary structure. The confessional constructs a notion of theory as necessarily other than, split from, and dominant over experience. And it creates a situation in which the survivor—because of her experience and feelings on the issue—is paradoxically the least capable person of serving as the authority or expert. The survivor’s views on sexual violence will often enjoy less credibility than anyone else’s. 27 The female witnesses who testified before

27 Valerie Heller explains this point in terms of child sexual abuse as follows: “The myth is that adults who were sexually abused see sexual abuse everywhere. . . . that they are ‘too sensitive’ because of what happened to them. . . . The result is that . . . the survivor’s reality is seen as fantasy. The truth is not that sexual abuse survivors are ‘too sensitive.’ It simply is that we know what abuse looks like, what it feels like, and what
the U.S. Senate on behalf of Anita Hill were each asked before giving testimony whether they had been victims of sexual harassment. If they had been, they would have been disqualified as incapable of providing “objective” and therefore credible testimony.28

5. There is one final danger survivors face in confessional discourse. When breaking the silence is taken up as the necessary route to recovery or as a privileged political tactic, it becomes a coercive imperative on survivors to confess, to recount our assaults, to give details, and even to do so publicly. Our refusal to comply might then be read as weakness of will or as reenacted victimization. But it may be that survival itself sometimes necessitates a refusal to recount or even a refusal to disclose and deal with the assault or abuse, given the emotional, financial, and physical difficulties that such disclosures can create. Many survivors are put in risk of physical retaliation by disclosure and may also face difficulties on their jobs, negative repercussions for their supportive relationships or the welfare of their children, and debilitating emotional trauma. Disclosures can elicit horrifying flashbacks, insomnia, eating disorders, depression, back pain, suicidal thoughts, and other assorted problems, which the survivor often has to hide from co-workers and cope with alone. Therapy is extremely expensive, and few survivors can easily afford all of the therapeutic assistance they might need to work through these problems. The coercive stance that one must tell, must join a support group, or must go into therapy is justly deserving of the critique Foucault offers of the way in which the demand to speak involves dominating power and an imperialist theoretical structure (Foucault 1978, 61). This is, of course, doubly the case when it is an expert, therapist, or “well-meaning” outsider who demands of the survivor that she speak.

effect it will have on the abused”; see her excellent discussion in Heller 1990, 157–61, esp. 159. Madigan and Gamble also discuss a case where a defense attorney tried to discredit the testimony of a rape survivor on the grounds that she was molested as a child (Madigan and Gamble 1991, 51). This notion, that survivors are less credible on issues of sexual violence than anyone else, has affected nearly every survivor we know, as well as each of us. In response to her whistle-blowing on a sexual harassment case, one of the authors of this article has been rumored to be “overly sensitive” because of her childhood experience and because she is Hispanic. Here, racist images of Latinas as “over emotional” collude conveniently with the discrediting of survivors on the same grounds.

28 It is also interesting to note that the witnesses in support of Clarence Thomas were allowed to testify even if they had histories of harassment (as some of them did), whereas the witnesses in support of Anita Hill were not. The logic here is that if women who had experienced harassment previously—and thus were certain to be overly sensitive to it now—did not see Thomas as a harasser, this provided a strong case for his innocence. In other words, a biased perspective could serve the purposes of the case for Thomas, but not the case against him. The assumption at work is that women who have experienced sexual harassment previously cannot provide an objective judgment but will err on the side of the accuser. Thanks to Lynne Arnault for pointing this out.
Although we stress here the tremendous difficulties survivors face, we
demn it equally important to avoid viewing survivors as dysfunctional or
as emotionally defective, which essentializes and reifies survivors. All
survivors face debilitating trauma, and no “cure” exists that can take the
pain away or remove all the efforts of sexual violence, but we are not
objects with attributes (“syndromes” or “disorders”). We are fluid, con-
stantly changing beings who can achieve great clarity and emotional
insight even from within the depths of pain.

Our summary of these dangers is not meant as an argument that
speaking about one’s experiences on TV or in any public arena will
inevitably be recuperative rather than transgressive. The nature of the
discursive landscape involves enough indeterminacy and instability to
resist absolute predictability or monodimensional effects. Nevertheless,
in evaluating the likely political effects of various speaking events, the
structural arrangements of the speakers and hearers will be key deter-
nnants, and the dangers listed above are significant even if not inevitable.
In this final section we turn to a more constructive question. How can we
maximize the transgressive potential of survivor discourse in such a way
that the autonomy and empowerment of the survivor who is speaking as
well as of survivors elsewhere will be enhanced rather than undermined?

V. Subversive speaking

Clearly, a primary disabling factor in the confessional structure is the
role of the expert mediator. To alter the power relations between the
discursive participants we need to reconfigure or eliminate this role. This
requires that the bifurcation between experience and analysis embodied
in the confessional’s structure be abolished. We need to transform ar-
rangements of speaking to create spaces where survivors are authorized
to be both witnesses and experts, both reporters of experience and the-
orists of experience. Such transformations will alter existing subjectivities
as well as structures of domination and relations of power. In such a
scenario, survivors might, in bell hooks’s words, “use confession and
memory as tools of intervention” rather than as instruments for recupera-
tion (hooks 1989, 110).

In her essay “Feminist Politicization: A Comment,” hooks suggests
how the production of personal narratives can effect political transfor-
mations instead of increasing the privatization and individualization of
political phenomena.29 In part, this discussion connects to the ongoing

29 For an example of the discussion over personal narratives and whether they are
political, see Armstrong 1990. In that review article, Armstrong criticizes self-help books
and “I-story” collections for channeling survivor discourse toward a nonthreatening out-
debate among feminists about the political effects of consciousness raising (CR) groups. Critics of CR have argued that it moves politics into the realm of the personal and the individual and emphasizes individual transformation at the expense of struggle in larger social spaces (Freeman 1975; Eisenstein 1983). In our view this critique correctly perceives the recuperative strategy of the therapeutic establishment at work in CR—which tends to promote a solution of private therapy geared toward social functioning rather than political action geared toward social change. But the critique errs in offering a one-sided account of CR’s political effects and once again presupposing a personal/political split. Individual empowerment through therapy or CR is itself a political action with social consequences (unless the therapy is not designed to empower but to shut the person up, which has until recently been the purpose of most therapies designed for women [Chesler 1972]).

Another, more current, critique of the production of personal narratives has been that they essentialize experience and often identity as well. This happens when individual narratives are related as if they were not narratives but simple reports, thus obscuring the way in which all experience is itself discursively mediated. In hooks’s view, the realm of the personal can become politically efficacious and transformative and need not obscure the conditions of the production of experience, if women do not merely “name” their experiences but also “place that experience within a theoretical context” (hooks 1989, 110). In this case, “storytelling becomes a process of historization. It does not remove women from history but enables us to see ourselves as part of history” (hooks 1989, 110). If the narration of experience is not bifurcated from theory, then, as hooks suggests, the act of speaking out can become a way for women to come to power (hooks 1989, 129).

One already existing example of this is self-facilitated survivor support groups in which a survivor speaks out among other survivors and in which she participates in a collective process of analysis and evaluation of experience. Such a collective process may enhance a survivor’s individual ability to act as the theorist of her own experience.

We need new ways to analyze the personal and the political as well as new ways to conceptualize these terms. Experience is not “pretheoretical” nor is theory separate or separable from experience, and both are always already political. A project of social change, therefore, does not need to “get beyond” the personal narrative or the confessional to become political but rather needs to analyze the various effects of the

let. See also the ensuing heated debate in the letters column in the following issue of the Women’s Review of Books, April 1990.
confessional in different contexts and struggle to create discursive spaces in which we can maximize its disruptive effects.

A nonbifurcating ontology of experience and theory requires us to relinquish the idea that in reporting our experiences we are merely reporting internal events without interpretation. To become the theorists of our own experience requires us to become aware of how our subjectivity will be constituted by our discourses and aware of the danger that even in our own confessional spaces within autonomous spaces we can construct ourselves as reified victims or as responsible for our own victimization.

This recognition that no experience is "pretheoretical" does not entail a complete relativizing of experience or of the effects of sexual violence. It does mean that there are multiple (not infinite) ways to experience sexual violence, for example: as deserved or not deserved, as humiliating to the victim or as humiliating to the perpetrator, or as an inevitable feature of women's lot or as a socially sanctioned but eradicable evil. And this more adequately reflects the experience most of us have had of "coming to" our anger and even our hurt only after we have adopted the political and theoretical position that we did not deserve such treatment nor bring it on ourselves.

Our analysis suggests that the formulation of the primary political tactic for survivors should not be a simple incitement to speak out, as this formulation leaves unanalyzed the conditions of speaking and thus makes us too vulnerable to recuperative discursive arrangements. Before we speak we need to look at where the incitement to speak originates, what relations of power and domination may exist between those who incite and those who are asked to speak, as well as to whom the disclosure is directed. We must also struggle to maintain autonomy over the conditions of our speaking out if we are to develop its subversive potential.

And an important aspect of this autonomy is the disenfranchisement of outside expert authority over our discourse, obstructing the ability of "experts" to "police our statements," to put us in a defensive posture, or to determine the focus and framework of our discourse.

We are not arguing that (nonsurvivor) experts cannot contribute to the empowerment and recovery of survivors. This contradicts our own experience and those of nearly every survivor we know. Our point is that, as we begin to break our silences, we must be wary of helping to create a public discursive arena that confers an a priori advantage on the expert's analysis and credibility over the survivor's. We may be able to use expert help in individual therapy and even sometimes in group therapy situations, but we do not need authoritative mediation of our experience for public consumption or for experiential validation. Nor will we submit our experience uncritically to the judgment of outsider's theories: we
ourselves will determine which theories have validity and usefulness, or we will construct our own.

Thus our argument here is not directed against theory or therapy per se but against theories and therapeutic practices that position themselves as dominant over a survivor discourse conceptualized as "nontheoretical." Our intent is to redefine theory and reconceptualize its relationship to experience and then to claim it for ourselves. Both the psychiatric theories and Foucault's theories of speech and sexuality (and anyone else's, for that matter) can then be submitted to an interrogation on our terms rather than allowed to pass judgment on us as if from a more "theoretically advanced" position.

Also important here is the issue of emotional disclosure, used to establish the hierarchy between expert and survivor and to discredit survivors in a variety of ways. Some scenarios demand that survivor discourse be intensely and explicitly emotional before it will be credible. If the survivor does not cry when she tells her story, she will not be believed; this is true in places as disparate as police stations and TV talk shows. And certainly in all media situations, some emotional content is encouraged because of its commodity use value for the anesthetized market of overly stimulated media consumers. In other scenarios, however, the emotional content of survivor discourse has to be toned down to be accepted: if a survivor is giving a speech about the issue of sexual violence, for example, she is permitted to be angry but not too angry and to be distressed but not excessively so. If we had at some point in this article disclosed our own intense emotions on this issue, even if it were done in connection with a relevant point, it is likely that some of our readers would be concerned about the appropriateness of such emotional content in the middle of a theoretical discussion. And on this basis it is possible that our arguments in other sections of the article might be called into doubt as well. "Too much" emotion is often viewed as conscious manipulation, evidence of lack of control, or as simply inappropriately personal. The emotional content of survivor discourse is policed in regard to certain rules and codes, which vary from context to context. Within a context where the figure of the female hysteric—popularly understood as imagining and thus producing her own trauma and incapable of self-control—is ever present as a background code interrogating each representation of female anger, a discursive strategy that might be viewed in another context as original and effective is here always under suspicion. The fear of being seen as "overreacting" has quelled many survivors' desires to speak out.

We must question a position that assumes that it is always a good thing for survivors to "control" our emotions in regard to our experi-
ences of sexual violence. Who benefits the most from such control? Certainly survivors benefit in the sense that with some control we can continue to keep our jobs and relationships and thus get some of our important needs met. But such control is also functional at a broader social level. Uncontainable emotional outbursts may threaten to disrupt the smooth flow of patriarchal social commerce. When survivors' emotional displays are carefully packaged into media commodities to boost ratings or sell magazines, their impact has been used to serve the needs of commodity capital. As survivors, we must develop and identify methods and forums in which emotional expression can activate the subversive potential of our rage. Too many survivors feel no such rage and experience only self-directed anger. Women's anger is generally sanctioned only when it is on behalf of others—primarily children and other family members; anger on our own behalf is a success won through political and theoretical struggle. The difficulty we face in experiencing anger on our own behalf is indicative of the threat it poses for patriarchal society. In what ways can we as survivors express this anger and unleash its disruptive potential while minimizing its adverse effects on our safety and well-being?

One recent approach has been the method of anonymous accusation. In fall 1990, students at Brown University began listing the names of rapists on the walls of women's bathrooms. By not signing such lists and by choosing a relatively secluded place in which to write, the women could minimize their own exposure to recrimination, although more than a few survivors declined to participate even in this anonymous action for fear that perpetrators would guess or surmise who had written their names. But the bathroom list represents an interesting and innovative attempt to make survivor discourse public in such a way as to minimize the dangers of speaking out for survivors yet maximize the disruptive potential of survivor outrage.

And this incident created tremendous disruption: great consternation for the named perpetrators and frantic responses by administrators unable to "contain" the discourse about sexual assault on their campus. Although custodians were instructed (in some cases against their wishes) to erase the lists as soon as they appeared, the lists kept reappearing and grew from ten names to about thirty. The "Brown Alumni Monthly" reported that the university was in the midst of a "thorough examination of its policies relating to sexual assault" when the list began to appear ("Brown Alumni Monthly," December 1990, 13–15). In other words, an officially organized and sanctioned discursive arrangement for speaking

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30 This incident is described in People magazine, December 17, 1990, 102, and in the "Brown Alumni Monthly," December 1990, 13–15. It was also the topic of the "Phil Donahue Show" on December 4, 1990.
about sexual violence on campus already existed when the students decided to create their own discursive space on the bathroom walls. Their belief that the official avenues for survivor discourse were ineffective was clearly the motivation behind the graffiti, as evidenced by what they wrote. Here is a sample:

[X] is a rapist.
Report the animal.
If you think “reporting the animal” will do any good at all, you have a lot to learn about the judiciary system.
Let’s start naming names. If we don’t take care of each other, no one will.
Who erased all the names?
Don’t let this get washed away. Fight!
[Y] is a rapist. Nothing can get him off this campus. He’s been tried, went home for a week for “psychiatric evaluation.” Rich white boys can do whatever they want on this campus.
You have erased our list, but that doesn’t erase their crimes. We, the survivors, are still here.

Administrators were so incensed by their loss of discursive control that they publicly accused the listwriters of libel, harassment, and of “striking against the heart of the American judicial system.” They also wrote to the men on the list offering to help them file a complaint. The bathroom lists ultimately resulted, however, in an increased commitment by the university to strengthen and improve their procedures for dealing with crimes of sexual violence and in the creation of two new administrative positions to deal with women’s issues.

This suggests again that Foucault is correct to argue that speech itself—words, their discursive context, and the conditions in which they are spoken—is a critical site and object of conflict. We conclude that survivor strategy must continue to develop and explore ways in which we can gain autonomy within (not over) the conditions of our discourse. The disruptive potential of this strategy must override a concern about “bringing sex into discourse”; certainly a strategy of discursive autonomy will resist the effort to inscribe this discourse into dominant codes. The applicability of Foucault’s analysis to survivor discourse thus ends here: what we need to do is not retreat—as Foucault might suggest—from bringing sexual violence into discourse but, rather, to create new discursive forms and spaces in which to gain autonomy within this process. What we need is not to confess, but to witness, which Ziegenmeyer defines as “to speak out, to name the unnameable, to turn and face it down” (Ziegenmeyer 1992, 218). A witness is not someone who con-
fesses, but someone who knows the truth and has the courage to tell it. In a poem titled “157 Ways to Tell My Incest Story,” Emily Levy encourages us to give witness to sexual violence in ways that cannot be contained, recuperated, or ignored:

31

Tell it in Spanish
In Sign Language
Tell it as a poem
As a play
As a letter to President Reagan
Tell it as if my life depended on it...

Tell it as a court case
As a congressional debate
As if the power of children were respected
Tell it as domestic terrorism
As a national sport.
Tell it as a jump-rope game...

Tell it as graffiti
As a religious service
Tell it as a classified ad...

Tell it as a TV commercial
As a science experiment
As a country western song.
Tell it as ancient history
As science fiction.
Tell it in your sleep...

Tell it as a map of the world
As if I were still forbidden to speak the words...
Tell it so it will never happen again.

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31 The complete poem can be found in Bass and Davis 1988, 101-3.


Fay, Jennifer, et al. 1979. He Told Me Not to Tell. Renton, Wash.: King County Rape Relief (305 S. 43d, Renton WA 98055).


Foucault’s The Birth of the Clinic. New York: Random House.


