

Bearing Witness

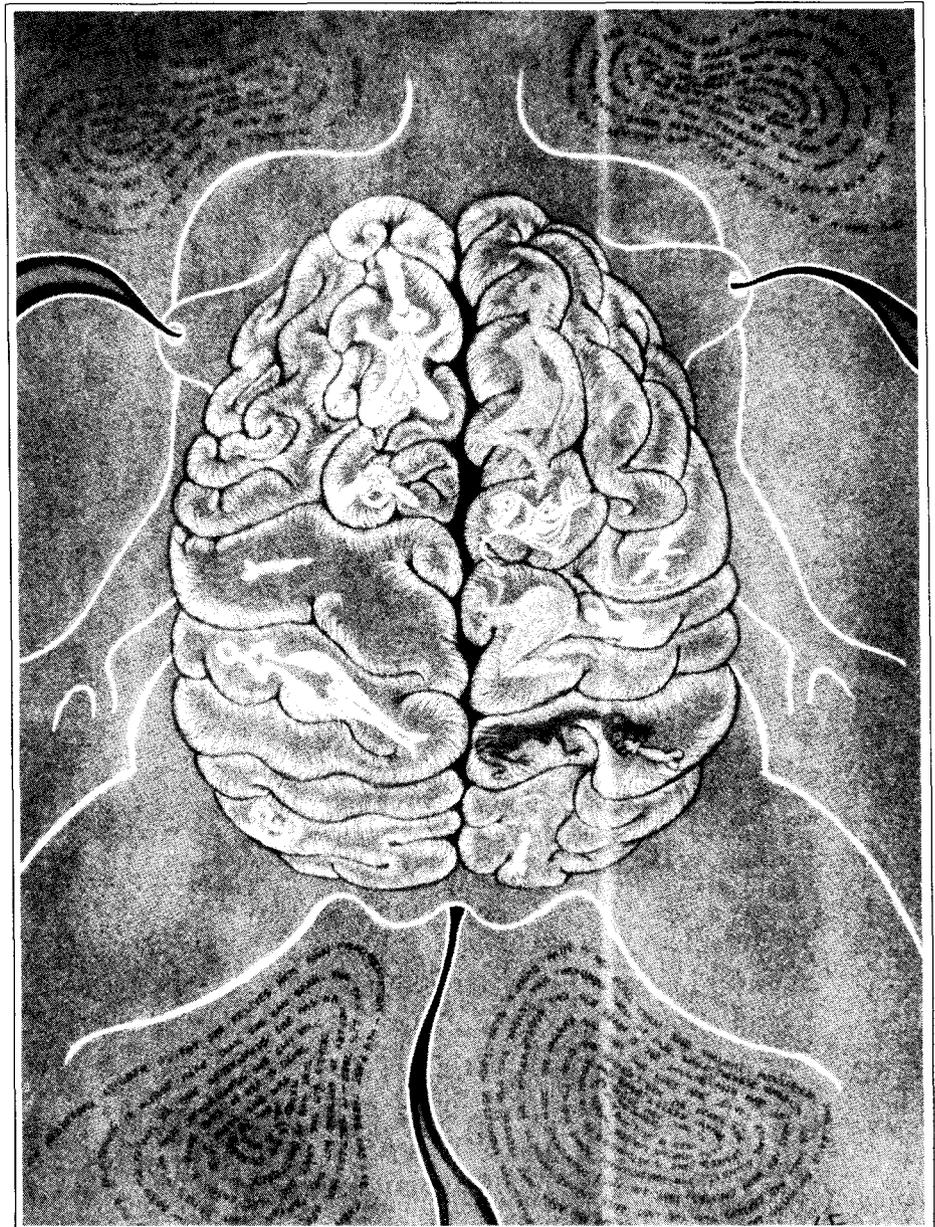
A Questioning of the Politics of Memory

By Heidi Eigenkind

"Bearing Witness" was a presentation given as part of a panel at "Sorrow and Strength: The Process," a conference for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse and for the professional helper held in Winnipeg in April, 1991. This presentation questions the politics of memory that determine the shape and value given to any individual retrieval of memory and the social uses to which this memory is put. By offering an analysis of memory that includes a retrieval and honouring of desecrated language and history, the speaker/writer invites the audience/reader to explore the responsibilities inherent in both personal and collective memory, and to actively counter past and current denials, evasions and falsifications.

As a woman who survived 14 years of sexual abuse at the hands and penis of my father/rapist, as a woman who for the last 13 years has explored the consequences of this abuse, I know in my bones, my flesh, my cells (for this is where memory lives in me) the necessity and power of

sharing knowledge and experience with others engaged in similar explorations. As a feminist, I understand that most of what we, in this white North American culture, have been taught is normal, natural and necessary is actually a social and political construction. And we never con-



Brain Map, 1989, coloured pencil and colour stiks on Canson paper, 22" x 30"

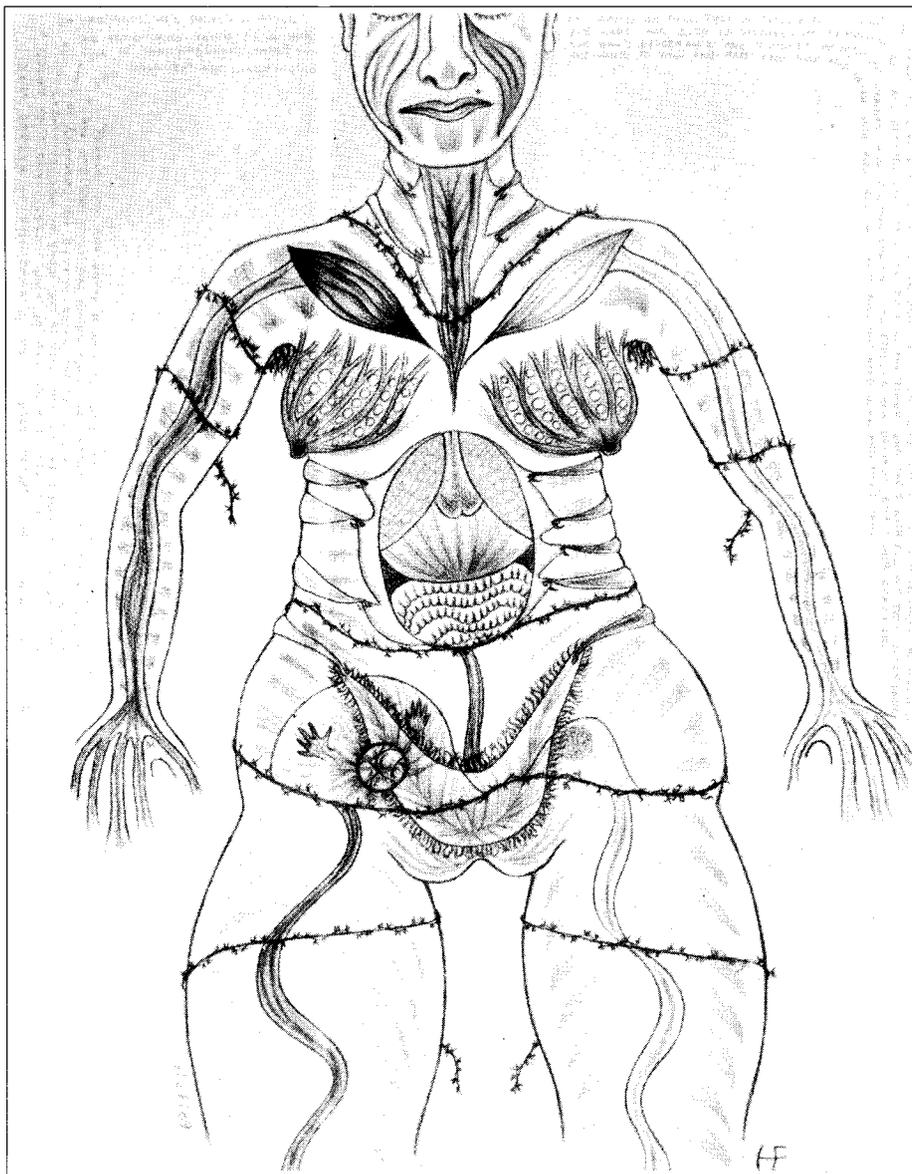
struct things without some purpose in mind. My life and study have taught me that in this particular society, the purpose is usually to maintain white male privilege. Memory, individual and collective memory, is not immune to social and political pressures. So, the process I want to explore (or begin exploring) has to do with how memory is constructed in this time and place. For, yes, each one of us can struggle and work to regain lost parts of our Selves;¹ each one of us can redefine who we are in accordance with what we find out about our Selves. But, how do the social and political definitions of what is allowed us as women and men shape the memories we gain access to? And what do we do with this potent Self-knowledge once we have it? Is there a place in society for those of us who have descended deep into our Selves and resurfaced with long

forgotten wisdoms? If there is, who allocates this place and to what purpose? If there isn't, why not? These questions define what I consider validation.

As a writer and artist, I know that symbols — visual, oral and written — are extremely powerful. They can operate to expand our understandings, connect our experiences with a rich human legacy. They can also operate to tame us, to imprison our energies by making us fearful of becoming whatever our culture declares crazy, forbidden or evil. As part of my exploration of what incest means, I have sought out information about this culture's symbols for 'woman.' The information I have found has revolutionized and radicalized my thinking and being.² In terms of language, the very words my father used to express his contempt and hatred for women are historically

words which expressed the sacred nature of the female. And my father's vocabulary is far from unique. Both in his first language and in the hated English he learned after coming to Canada, these words are commonplace: cunt, bitch, whore, lesbian. Words considered by most women to be ugly and shameful and by most men to be among the worst insults they can hurl at us. These words were successfully used to teach me what not to be: autonomous, conscious of my outrage, sure of my powers. It was a revelation, so many years later, to discover that Cunt comes from the name of a great Oriental Goddess and signifies the yoni of the universe, the gateway of all knowing and of human birth; that Bitch was one of the most sacred names of the Goddess Artemis-Diana, who throughout Indo-European cultures led the hounds of death; that Whores were once priestesses who embodied the Goddess' compassion, revered women who dispensed what Christians later called charity, women who were respected healers; that Lesbian comes from the isle of Lesbos, a sacred colony of women dedicated to the worship of the divine female principle.³ And all this has to do with memory. Cultural memory: how language became the vehicle of reversal and desecration. How it can be a means of recollection and of collective redefinition. Individual memory: how what I discovered about these charged terms enabled me to explore and learn from parts of my Self I otherwise would have kept locked up or run away from in panic. How retrieving these symbols of femaleness enabled me to accept my own complexities: past, present and potential. So language and memory are linked. And this is about process.

But language only begins to point to what we, the self-proclaimed dominant culture of North America and Europe, refuse to remember. Our culture demands forgetfulness, collectively and individually. For instance, we do not as a culture carry any memory of the Witch Burnings: a 500-year reign of terror in which hundred of thousands, possibly millions of innocent beings, the majority of whom were women and female children, were systematically tortured and murdered to secure the power of the Holy Roman Catholic Church. Where has this knowledge gone in a society that still mocks these deaths every Halloween, that still uses the term 'witch' as an insult or joke?



Sexual Self, 1989, coloured pencil on Canson paper, 22" x 30"

We are also taught to forget or ignore or deny the history of the very ground upon which we walk and live. We still teach children that Europeans 'discovered' North America and named all its important places. We still use the terms 'squaw' and 'savage' and 'heathen.' We habitually erase thousands and thousands of years of aboriginal history and culture, and the infamous history of our presence as invaders on this continent. And this has to do with memory. If we, as a society, cannot remember that others lived on this land before us, if we will not remember how we behaved towards these first peoples, how can we truly allow any individual's history? If we deny what is uncomfortable and frightening and painful about the process we have so arrogantly called western civilization, how can we truly acknowledge uncomfortable or frightening or painful evidence of the day-to-day realities of people who live in this civilization we are so proud of?

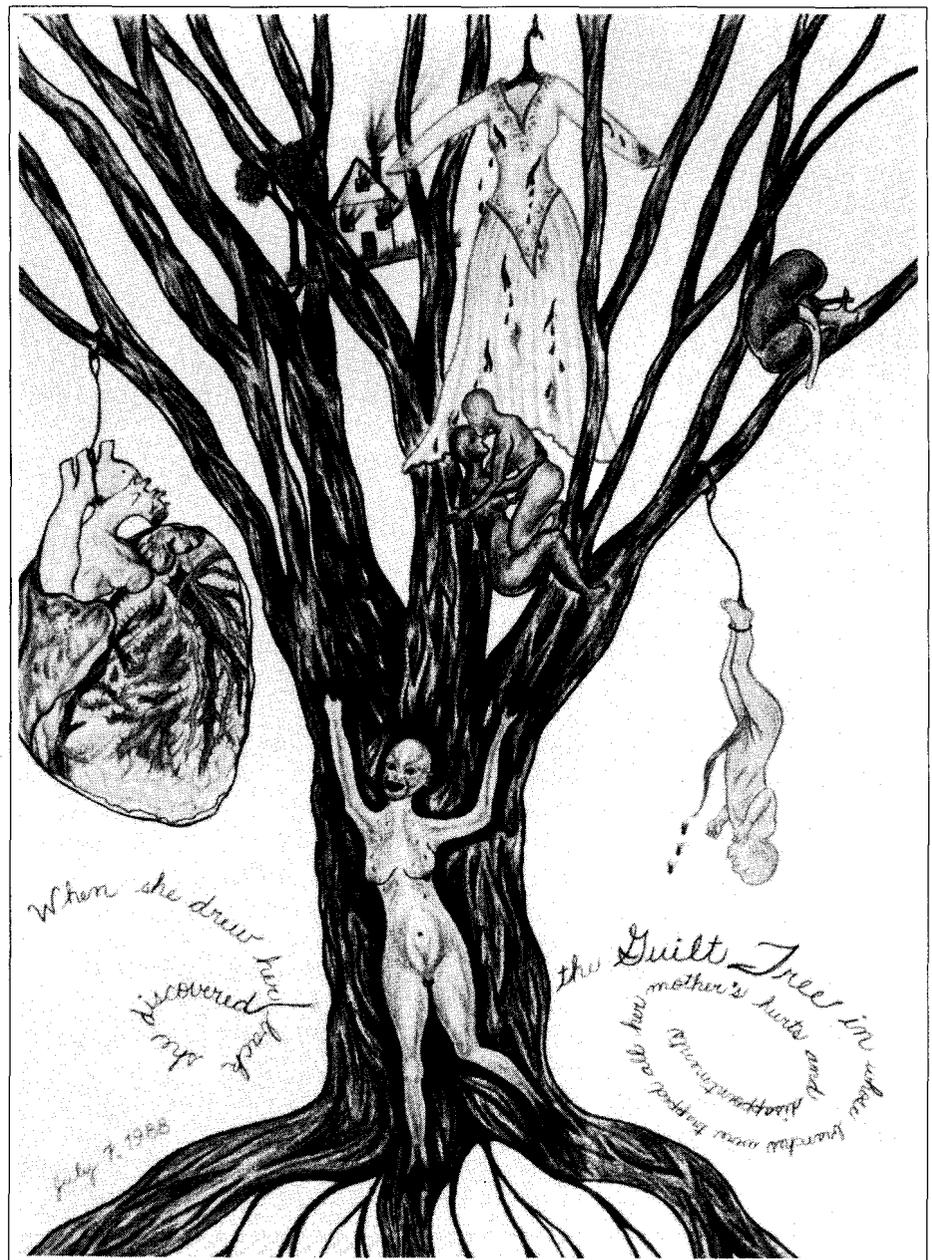
Of course we cannot, or we can in part only. As a woman with a particular history, the place assigned me in this culture is very specific. My history and the memories it involves are a continuation of thousands of years of Father Right, socially and religiously sanctioned and institutionalized.⁴ But in this time and place, my history is declared an example of modern distress brought on by current economic pressures; or racial, ethnic or class ignorance; or the 'breakdown' of the nuclear family or the isolated and unfortunate dysfunction of one man or one family. So I become propaganda for a patently false myth about society and family and history. If I give an account of my searchings and understandings, a fuss is made over me, and again, the complexities of my life and what my existence bears witness to become propaganda — this time for the power of the individual will. See, a Healed Woman, one who is ready after much grief and struggle to assume her place in society. And this too is false. It denies how widespread childhood sexual abuse is; the connections between various forms of privilege and access to help; how chronically and acutely sick the misogynist, racist and homophobic society that welcomes me into its ranks is. And there is a hidden demand, backed by a hidden threat, in the social and political pressures on me to assimilate. The demand is: keep quiet about what you know. The threat is: if you don't, we can declare you all sorts of

things — bitter, lying, crazy, manhating — so that no matter how loud you speak, no-one will listen. Only those parts of my memory that support the myth of the Healthy Happy Social Family are given space in this society.⁵ And this is about validation and the lack of it.

I believe that memory is a great gift and an essential tool. Without memory we have only a present identity haunted by unconscious patterns and conjectures based on hope and fear. I also believe that memory is a responsibility, something we are compelled by our integrity to bear witness to, once we have regained it. I invite you to consider with me what our responsibilities could be to the memories we carry inside us. I invite you to consider with me how far we are able and willing to

extend these responsibilities. For if we rightfully demand that our memories and the memories of those we work with and cherish be respected, how can we stand by and allow the memories of others to be desecrated or ignored or denied? How can we participate in this culture's need to desecrate or ignore or deny memory? I think these are important questions, ones that encompass both process and validation, and that address the politics of memory. I believe they are questions that can illuminate the pivotal function of memory: historically, presently, collectively and personally.

I am convinced that memory is something all of us struggle with. It is not an issue only for those of us abused as children. All of us, as we move towards what-



Guilt Tree, 1989, coloured pencil and colour stiks, 18" x 24"

ever we define as autonomy or self-integration, encounter painful and surprising and frightening knowledge. Often, the knowledge that most challenges us comes in some form of memory: body sensations, stories fathers tell us, words that shift meanings, forgotten facts that confront us. What we do with this knowledge is crucial, both in terms of the people we allow our Selves to become and the realities we then collectively shape. I wish for all of us, the opportunity and desire to explore and respect the complexities of memory. I wish for all of us the courage to use memory in all its aspects wisely.

¹ My use of 'Self' is informed by Mary Daly's definition of this term as "the Original core of one's be-ing that cannot be contained within the State of Possession." *Webster's First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), p. 95.

² Be-ing: "Ultimate/Intimate Reality, the constantly Unfolding Verb of Verbs which is intransitive, having no object that limits its dynamism." be-ing: "actual participation in the Ultimate Intimate Reality." Daly, *WFNIWEL*, p. 64.

³ I am indebted to Barbara Walker, *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983) for these definitions.

⁴ My understanding of the history of child sexual abuse and Father Right is rooted in the analysis of Florence Rush, *The Best Kept Secret: Sexual Abuse of Children* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980)

⁵ I first explored this concept in "What Survivors Can Tell Therapists," *HERIZONS* 4.3 (1986), pp. 24-27.

Heidi Eigenkind lives in Winnipeg with her marriage partner and co-conspirator. She currently co-manages Bold Print Inc. (a Women's bookstore) and works on the publishing and editorial collectives of Contemporary Verse 2. Her writing and art-making are informed by her personal history and by the complexities of feminist politics. Her work has appeared in various Canadian feminist journals and anthologies, most recently in Living the Changes (University of Manitoba Press, 1990). She is a contributor to She Who Was Lost is Remembered: Healing From Incest Through Creativity, forthcoming from Seal Press in the fall of 1991. Until 1989, her work was published under the name Heidi Muench.

LISA NAYLOR

The Reality of Rape

(for Adrienne)

we have arrived at this place
where hearts dance
and smiles tug
at the corners of our mouths
when we see each other
across a room

we have arrived at this place
where fingers meet
and entwine, hopefully
and our stories spill out
one over the other
as we seek to share our lives

two strong women,
brave and beautiful
we seek new ground
but our wounds stand between
us

the memories of rapes and near
rapes
and racist assaults
and misogynist terrorizing
at the hands of
an uncle
a lover
a brother
a date
a stranger

cripple our abilities to love or
trust.

our bodies fill us with revulsion
(though i like yours
and you like mine)

and while we crave intimacy
and touch
our 'little girls' — the wounded
ones
can't risk that kind of trust

so we say goodnight each time
and depart for the safety of

separate beds
and all the way home
i concentrate
on not being raped again;
i hope that you are safe in your
home
and that we both
survive the night.

in my night dreaming
you and i and all women
are walking
one by one
or side by side
under star-lit skies
and gentle rain
or we are slumbering
skin to skin
peaceful, we know no fear

and in my day, in my living
we work to eradicate
the violence — the raping
of ourselves, our lovers, our
children;
our energy burns — fiery
passion
as we create new possibilities.

some of us have been made
brave and fierce
by the violations

others have died or gone crazy
or retreated into traditional lives
we each have found our own
ways
to survive...

and you and i
have found a seed
of hope in each other

will healing blossom
or will the wounds,
the violator's poison
keep us apart?

... CBC (Montreal, Thursday, December 7, 1989

Campus massacre

Gunman slays 14 women, then

AFTER THE MONTREAL MASSACRE

14 killed in

13 wounded at Université de Montréal in hospital

Police release identification of 14 victims

'You are all feminists!' he shouts as he fires

Killing in Montreal

Canada in mourning

Anger mixes with sorrow for the slain

Madness claims women

Massacre in Montreal: misogyny gone crazed

'Blackest day' for Montreal, mayor says

Killer a joker but not crazy, gun clerk says

2,000 grieving students mourn dead

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