

INTRODUCTION

The What and the Why

I have set myself three equally important, and in some ways conflicting, tasks in this book. My first goal is for *The Wars We Inherit* to illuminate the relationship between the violence that we experience in our homes and the ways that we organize our culture. Why is it that one-third of felony assault charges in America are for crimes committed against family members? And why is it that an analysis of inmates convicted of family violence crimes in 1997 reveals that half the convictions were for sex offenses? And how do we explain the fact that, of these sex-offense convictions, 78 percent were committed against females, half were committed against a child under age eighteen, and one-third were committed against a child under age thirteen? Given these statistics, is it a surprise to find that almost half of all women who are murdered are killed by family members? These numbers confront us with the fact that violence in our homes is a pervasive condition of life in the United States. But these violences do not exist in isolation; the violence that we live in our homes is part of the violence in our larger culture, and one of the most important objectives of this book is to illuminate this continuum of violence.¹

1 For sources for these data, see Bureau of Justice Statistics 2005; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2009; National Coalition against Domestic Violence 2007.

As a pervasive condition of life in America, violence shapes us. Although some of the violence that shapes us is easily recognizable, such as war and violent crime, the most pervasive violences that impact every aspect of our lives are frequently invisible to us. Researchers and analysts call this violence that is part of the cultural fabric *structural violence*. Structural violences, such as racism, sexism, poverty, and homophobia, commit psychological and physical violence to people by denying them rights in a society and equal access to society's resources. When children in inner cities are denied the quality of education that children in wealthy suburbs receive, when the poor and uninsured are denied the quality of health care that the wealthy and the insured receive, or when poor communities become dumping grounds for toxic wastes, this is structural violence. We fail to understand the nature of this violence, in part because the structures precede us and thus seem "normal" to us and in part because the problem is so big that we do not know what to do about it. A second objective of this book, then, is to help us—college professors, students, the general public—develop the language and the resources for looking at the ways that violence has shaped and continues to shape all of us.

One of the institutions of public cultural violence with which I am most concerned is the military. My father spent twenty-eight years enlisted in the U.S. Army. His life as a military police officer, his tours of duty in Korea and Vietnam, his identity as a "soldier" shaped him. Military identities are defined by a hypermasculinity in which "man" equals the "strong" sex charged with "protecting" (and hence taking charge of) home, nation, women, and children. Another aim of this book is to examine the relationship between the kinds of violences my father brought home—physical, verbal, emotional, sexual—and the militarized hypermasculinity that my father idealized. This militarized hypermasculinity was not just my father's ideal. It pervades our society and functions as an ego-ideal for ordinary boys. *The Wars We Inherit* links our culture's reverence for the soldier, the hero, and the warrior to the violences so commonplace in our homes—the women murdered by their family members and the physical and sexual violence directed against women and children.

The fact that domestic violence in military families is nearly three times higher than in civilian populations allows us to shine a light on

one of the structures of violence that is otherwise invisible to us—our gender system. With the understanding that extreme hypermasculinity increases violence against women and children, we can reflect on the less visible, more mundane structural violences that characterize “normal” gender relations in our homes; from this vantage point, it is not surprising that our homes are so frequently the site of private violences inflicted by those people with whom we are most intimate. To do something about the degree of violence we suffer in our homes, at the hands of people with whom we are closest, we must understand and rescript the structural violences of our gender system.

My understanding of the structures and relationships that script the violences we live comes from my study of feminist psychoanalytic theory, cultural and trauma studies, and narrative theory. Since, in American culture, theory tends to be sequestered in the university, my primary audience is college students and the faculty members who teach classes for which *The Wars We Inherit* is relevant. But I believe that these ideas are important to everybody. Hence, my third goal is for this book to be accessible and useful to any person who is working through violence in his or her own life or who is trying to understand violence in our culture.

To make *The Wars We Inherit* accessible to any motivated reader, I use a literary form to tell the story of violence in my own family. I offer this story as a way of illuminating the relationship between the violence that we live in our homes and the violences that structure our culture. But it is important for the book to contribute to the project of helping us imagine futures beyond the violences scripting us. And *imagining beyond* violence requires *analyzing the structures* that evolve violence and the *processes for working through* histories of violence. I have thus included five theoretical interludes that analyze how violence is experienced and remembered, the relationship between military structures and domestic violence, and possibilities for imagining new forms for our individual and social relationships. The interludes are not meant to be exhaustive explanations of the theories from which I have drawn. Rather, they are touchstones to help readers understand why I see what I see and think what I think. Those who are interested in further reading may refer to the References section at the back of the book, which lists the bibliographical citations that correspond to this

chapter and each of the interludes. A list of Web sites can also be found at the back of the book.

Fundamentally, this book offers a critical reinterpretation of my own life as a means of encountering and bearing witness to some of the conditions that structure violence in our families and culture. This method poses several challenges, though. First, although I tell stories about my life and family, the stories I tell set up and imply an *analysis* of violence. Hence, this book mimics the genres of autobiography and memoir but has fundamentally different aims. The point of this work is not the *story* but the analysis made possible through the consideration of the stories I tell. Analysis requires thinking about events from multiple points of view and gaining critical distance on emotion and experience. That is, analysis is self-reflexive—it asks us to call ourselves into question. Consequently, this book does not present a unified “story” of my life. Instead, it uses the story form as a way of critically reflecting on emotional experience. Critical reflection insists on evoking—not repressing—ambiguity, contradiction, and uncertainty.

Although I use the story form in a critical way, it is impossible to achieve absolute critical distance on ourselves. I am acutely aware that my own blind spots will reveal themselves to my readers and that, in years to come, I too will be able to see things that are now still invisible to me. This is inevitable, and this inevitability is part of the point this book makes. *The Wars We Inherit* thus uses story not as a way of establishing the “truth” of the past but as a way of tracing emotion backward and of undoing the ego/identity constructions in which we can be trapped. This undoing is the first step toward transformation: We cannot imagine a culture of equality, compassion, peace, justice, and nurturing as long as we are inhabiting identities shaped by the structural violences of patriarchy, racism, nationalism, and global militarism. And we cannot work our way out of these identities and imagine a new social order unless we call the very grounds of our identity formation into question.

Finally, the fact that I write about sexual violence in my family places this book in the midst of highly contentious debates about the nature of trauma and memory. Central to these debates is this question: How much of what we remember is actually “true”? Because much of what has been published in this area relies on reductive argu-

ments and is peripheral to my project, I do not specifically address the memory wars in this book. Instead, I concentrate on illuminating the complex relationship between experience, memory, narrative, identity, and subjectivity. Nevertheless, I am mindful of the battles fought over women's narratives of childhood sexual abuse. Thus, to achieve as much accuracy as possible in my representations, I have relied heavily on my extensive collection of journals and letters to and from my sisters and my father in writing the narrative sections that are first-person, present-tense reconstructions of past events.

The How

The first part of the book reconstructs the family history that the remainder of the book analyzes and works through. Chapter 2, "Frank and Sally," tells the story of my father, Frank, beginning an affair with his niece Sally while his brother (Sally's father) was dying. The crisis of their affair ruptured the lives my family had been leading. During the summer of their affair, Frank brought Sally to Florida to live with us; that fall, he and Sally ran off together, leaving my two brothers and four sisters to take care of my sixty-year-old mother.

I was eighteen, finishing my second year at a community college, when Frank and Sally fell in love. The night Frank brought Sally to live with us, I met a nineteen-year-old boy who said to me, "What happens when all of this blows? You can come to New York with me. You could go to school." I left my older brothers and sisters and the work of taking care of my mother because I wanted to finish college. Chapter 3, "The Hole Things Fall Into," tells the story of my running, for six years, away from the life I had been living. The man I left with, and eventually married, was in the navy, and my life with him recreated the army base life that my mother had lived. After six years of navy life, he received a medical discharge, and we returned to Florida—back to the scene of Frank and Sally's affair, back to everything from which I had been running. Within a few months of returning, I began to have panic attacks. Chapter 4, "Forgetting and Re-membering," tells the story of these panic attacks and the out-of-body experience through which an unwitnessed past emerged into the present. Interlude I, "On the Event without a Witness," explains how traumatic pasts can remain unwitting

nessed. Drawing on psychoanalysis and recent work in the neuroscience of memory, this interlude uses memory and trauma studies to interpret the experience of violence in my family.

The years I spent running away from my life with Frank only served to re-create, without my realizing it, the structures of violence from which I had fled. The panic attacks forced me into therapy, where I learned to see the patterns I was re-creating. Chapter 5, “Re-membering II,” introduces Kathrin, my therapist, and tells the story of returning to my mother and sisters to take up the work of understanding how violence had shaped my family’s life and our identities. The process by which my family and I reencountered our pasts is called, in psychoanalytic terms, the work of establishing a community of witness. Interlude II, “On Bearing Witness,” traces this process and the theories that explain it. Eric Kandel, winner of the 2000 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for his research on memory storage in neurons, explains that “most of our mental life is unconscious; it becomes conscious only as words and images” (Kandel 2007, 424). This work of understanding my family’s legacy was the work of finding the words and images to bring into consciousness what had remained unconscious in us.

Nightmares have been one of the most painful and difficult routes by which the unconscious exploded into my consciousness. Insomnia, bulimia, anxiety attacks, depression—these were all manageable in comparison. Chapter 6, “If I Should Die before I Wake,” explains how my evolving community of witnesses—therapist, friends, family—helped me learn to treat my nightmares as narratives with plots that could, in my dreaming, be rescripted. As messages about the conflicts splitting me, my nightmares have been part of the life-long work of liberating new possibilities for a future that I am still imagining. My past is there, rupturing its way into the present, but the rupture offers a possibility for moving differently into a future that I am in the process of making. I owe a special debt to those who came with me through my nightmare days. Interlude III, “On Bearing Witness to the Process of Witnessing,” explains the difficult labor of accompanying somebody in this work. The witness who enters this process walks to the lip of an abyss, to the threshold between past and present. S/he has to remain, steady, holding open the door for the *journey to* and the *return from* the past that must be brought into language. This process of witnessing

is the process by which we come to know our buried truths in order to imagine futures with meaning and hope—and it is far from easy for anyone who takes the journey (Laub 1992, 78).

This journey, while not easy, has been my route to repossessing the past that had been possessing me. Chapter 7, “The Past We Repeat I: Margaret,” and Chapter 8, “The Past We Repeat II: Jenny,” trace a particularly destructive repetition of trauma that has possessed my family: the trauma of abandonment. My father, who was born in the middle group of thirteen children to a poor family in Massachusetts, was sent to live with an older sister when he was a child. The bad-mother-who-can’t-take-care-of-her-children script repeated with my two oldest sisters. Frank sent their children to live with their fathers; my sisters have lived lives bereaved by the loss of their children, and my nieces and nephews have lived lives without their mothers. Interlude IV, “The Uncanny Return,” explains this transgenerational transmission of trauma.

If it were easy to see what is unconscious in us, we would not live so much of our lives repeating self-destructive patterns. Chapter 9, “If Our First Language Is the Silence of Complicity, How Do We Learn to Speak?” looks at how we become conscious of the patterns we are repeating and begin the work of imagining new possibilities for living. Weaving together excerpts from journal entries and letters that my father and I wrote to each other, Chapter 9 explores moments of rupture that created the possibility for confronting the fears that kept me and my family silent and complicit. In particular, this chapter emphasizes the crucial role that education played in this process. As a student, I had compassionate teachers who reflected me back to myself in ways that allowed me to see and begin to confront my internal contradictions. As a teacher, I had students who compelled me to find the language to make sense of my experience and the voice to speak up against the cultural conditions that script family violence.

Chapter 10, “The Work of War,” looks at my father’s violence as the mark of what wounded him and at my family’s drama as a microcosm of the culture in which we live. In this chapter, I connect our private family life to some of the most troubling aspects of military life, from military training and service to torture. Interviews with men in the U.S. Navy stationed in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, address such issues as

the sexual practices of naval personnel on leave in the Philippines and Japan, initiation rites for crossing the equator and making a “West Pac” (a six-month deployment in the Pacific Ocean), and the hazing ritual of “oiling” (a practice of anal rape used on nuclear submarines on personnel who have alienated members of a ship’s crew). “The Work of War” connects the banal, everyday dehumanizations in our culture—from practices of domination and subordination in our gender and class hierarchies to xenophobia and nationalism—to the militarization of daily life in a war economy.

Extending this analysis, Interlude V, “On the Violence of Nations in the Violence of Homes,” analyzes the social contract as a sexual contract that “places the reproductive capacities of women within male-dominated family” structures; the potential for violence—from the family violences that this book traces to the collective violence of war and torture—is written into this construction (Das 2007, 25–26, 45). It is from this critical perspective that *The Wars We Inherit* wants to illuminate the relationship between our individual, interpersonal violences and our public, collective violences: Violence in our homes is a logical continuation of the social order that shapes notions of “home,” “family,” and “nation.”

This violence, however pervasive, is not inevitable. This book maps my personal journey of psychic, emotional, and intellectual growth in order to open dialogue about and suggest directions for social transformation. If we can begin, in our own lives, to transform the destructive ways that we have been shaped by violence, then we might begin to transform the cultural conditions that breed violence. Chapter 11, “Toward Re-membering a Future,” explores this relationship between the individual and society—between personal identity, experience, and memory and public institutions, ideologies, and narratives. Following cultural memory theorists, Chapter 11 calls for practices of remembering that cultivate what Tzvetan Todorov calls “exemplary” memory. For Todorov, exemplary memory allows us to transform personal feelings, which are unique and untransferable, into collective and public meanings. Unlike literal memory, which reentrenches pain, anger, and hatred through a static rehearsal of the wrongs we have suffered, exemplary memory connects us to the suffering of others and to the world around us (Todorov 1997, 20). When we can see that all events have a

history, a context, a trajectory into the future, we can see that what we suffer is not unique—it is part of a pattern in a social fabric that needs to be remade. Exemplary memory looks for and works at the knots of the social fabric as it loosens the knots of our own pain. It is thus a way of engaging in social action.

Chapter 11 calls for a memory project that brings the past into the present to affirm life over death, love over hate, hope over despair, and compassion over violence. This memory project is founded on the work of mourning. Through mourning, we acknowledge pain and grief and the presence of violence; *by acknowledging* it, we create “a home for the mutilated and violated self of the other” (Das 2007, 47–48). To make *through our mourning* a home for the other bears witness not just to violence but also to the forces of love and life in our relationships: the kind word; the look of understanding; the one who bears our tears without flinching; the one who feels our pain and returns it with a gesture of compassion. Mourning can thus lead us through our pain and to compassion, love, hope. It reestablishes our connections to others and the world. Chapter 12, “The Work of Love,” shows how my mother, sisters, and I engaged in the mourning through which it is possible to re-member a future. Here, I return to my sisters and the experience of asking them to talk with me about our lives on army bases with a man who brought Korea and Vietnam home with him. Together, we had to learn how to follow our fear, pain, rage, and shame back to the grieving that we had been deferring.

In Chapter 13, “Conclusion,” I bring the work of re-membering Frank and re-membering a future back to the pressing problems of war and violence in our homes. Since I began teaching in 1988, I have worked with at least five students a semester who bring to my classes and to their work histories of rape, murder, incest, war, battery, self-inflicted injury, and multiple other forms of individual and cultural violence. In the past few years, I have been particularly affected by my students returning from Iraq—returning to a vacuum of silence that cannot bear witness to or help them encounter the truth of their experiences. In the upcoming years, we shall have to confront the consequences to ourselves and to the rest of the world of the U.S. “war on terror”—a war that has unleashed massive violence that will affect us for decades to come. If we do not want to watch the continued destruc-

tion of our lives and worlds, we have to find ways to understand and work through the violences that we inflict.

I do not know whether, as a species, we will be able to do this. But I *do* know that we have as much capacity for connection, compassion, and loving relation as we do for killing, hatred, and violence. Our machinery of death and destruction did not come easily or “naturally” to us—we have had to work long and hard for it. We have spent centuries inventing, training, practicing, preparing, and sacrificing to make war. In contrast, we have devoted little of our energy and few of our resources to cultivating the practices and tools for living in peace. We have to work as hard to forge nonviolent ways of inhabiting this world as we have worked to make war. To make peace, we have to train our hearts and minds, and we have to practice self-reflection, analysis, and compromise in our day-to-day lives. *The Wars We Inherit* is my contribution to this project.