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**Richard Jeffrey Newman:  
On Sexual Abuse, Machismo, and Poetry as Survival  
By A.C. Hoff**

**Richard Jeffrey Newman, a poet, essayist and translator, published his first collection of poetry, *The Silence of Men* (CavanKerry Press, 2006) last year - a stunning debut. The renowned poet Yusef Kumanyakaa wrote a glowing forward to the book, and Newman has been steadily promoting and selling the book since then. He has published two books of translations from classical Persian literature, *Selections from Saadi's Gulistan* and *Selections from Saadi's Bustan* (both from Global Scholarly Publications, 2004 and 2006 respectively), and he has been publishing non-fiction essays and individual poems since 1988, when the essay "His Sexuality; Her Reproductive Rights" appeared in *Changing Men* magazine. Since then, his essays and poems have appeared in *Salon.com*, *The American Voice*, *The Pedestal*, *Circumference*, *Prairie Schooner*, *ACM*, *Birmingham Poetry Review* and other literary journals. His work has been anthologized in *Access Literature* (Thomson Wadsworth, 2005) and his poetry has been translated into Dutch. He is an Associate Professor in the English Department at Nassau Community College in Garden City, New York.**

**A.C. Hoff, an editor and writer for *The New Humanist.com*, met with Newman at the AWP Writer's Conference in Atlanta in March 2007. The two discussed poetry as survival, the relation between second-language acquisition and writing, the sexual abuse of boys, reproductive rights, and the re-making of American men.**

**Hoff:** On your website, you wrote that writing was "a matter of survival" and that it allowed you to create "the possibilities of being" that had never before occurred to you. In what way did writing poetry provide "the possibilities of being" that other avenues didn't?

**Newman:** Well, there are two things. The most immediate and easy to talk about was, when I was thirteen-years-old, I was sexually abused by a man in my building. I distinctly remember, he lived upstairs from us, and we lived downstairs. One day I was coming upstairs, and he was coming downstairs. We met in the lobby, and he sort of hustled me into a corner of the lobby, and he just started feeling me up and kind of whispering into my ear, "When will I see you? When will I see you? When will I see you?" Prior to that, I mean, I had seen him around. He lived in the apartment complex, and he had always stopped to say hello and sort of fixed me with his gaze. "Hi," I was friendly. "Hi," and he would say, and he would look at me and say, "When will I see you?"

I just sort of assumed he was a lonely old man. There had been prior to that an old woman who lived on her floor, Mrs. Schectmann—I can't believe I remember her

name, Mrs. Schectmann. She was very old and very lonely, and every so often I would just go and sit with her, and I kind of assumed that this guy was the same. So anyway, I then found out that he wasn't, and I ran. He let me go, and I just ran. This is thirty-three, almost thirty five years ago, so you have to remember at that time no one had a vocabulary for the sexual abuse of boys. They were sort of beginning to talk about the sexual abuse of girls because this was nineteen, late-sixties, early seventies, so I mean I know this now in hindsight. In feminist circles people were starting to talk about the fact that girls were being abused, but there was no vocabulary. I didn't know what had happened to me.

After that I was hanging out with my friends. Of course, I told no one what had happened. And he was coming out of the building, and he said, "I'm going shopping, and he said it to me. He said, "I'm going shopping. When I come back, I'm going to have a lot of bags. Would you help me carry them up the stairs?" Of course, I didn't want to, but I didn't know how to say no to him. Because if I said no, then, my friends would all say why, and I wouldn't know what to say. So, of course, I said yes.

I went upstairs, knowing full well, in whatever way I understood it, what it was he had in mind. He put the bags down, locked the door, and he started to undress me. And I will not give you the blow-by-blow details, but I am almost certain—. He kind of looked at me, and I was scared obviously. He looked at me, and he said, "Haven't you ever had a blow job before?" And I said no, and he said, "Well, don't you want me to love you?," and I don't remember what I said, but the next thing I remember, I'm sort of sitting on his bed, and he's standing in front of me. And his penis is right in front of me, and he's saying, "Just touch it, just love it." And, then, my next memory is leaving and going downstairs to my apartment. I am reasonably certain that he either succeeded or tried to force me to suck his dick. I am reasonably certain that he succeeded for however brief a time. This was obviously very silencing.

**Hoff:** You have a lapse in memory of that episode?

**Newman:** I have a lapse in memory. I have kind of physical responses, body memories that indicate to me that something happened, but I don't have an actual visual, conscious memory of it. So, I mean, that was one thing that was obviously very silencing, and I had all of the usual things that come from that. I felt I was dirty. I felt I was no good. I felt all of those kinds of things. In addition to that, there were these things going on in my family. My parents divorced very young. My mother remarried. My stepfather was a bit of a violent man. I know he beat my mother up once, and I might have witnessed it. I might have actually walked in on it. Again, I have very fuzzy memories about that. There was a fair amount of silence either on me or around me. And so there were a lot of ways in which I was silenced. I mean, I didn't say this. I wouldn't have articulated this at the time, but there were a lot of ways in which I was silenced. I couldn't say who I was. I couldn't really say what was going on around me and how it was affecting me.

I remember I would go to the library and take a book of poems. There was something about just the look of the poem on the page, just reading the poem, and the way the lines cut a shape into the page, but not just physically, but syntactically. I mean, they conjured these things, and it was very obvious to my mind that they were much more consciously sculpted than prose. And of course, now I know otherwise, but it was the visual, and I thought, "God, to be able to do that, to be able in just a few lines to conjure up a world," you know? And eventually I started to write, and I don't know that I wrote anything that was consciously imagining some other way of being as much as writing made me feel like I had a voice, like I had a voice that was real. "I put those words there. Those are my words," and in that sense suddenly—

**Hoff:** What you're describing is different from how the images emerge in the poetry. I remember there's a scene in one of the poems where a boy is being pulled into a bathroom by a man, a kind of father figure, at his mother's house—

**Newman:** Grandmother's house.

**Hoff:** Grandmother's house. So do you think you reconfigured the memory in the poems?

**Newman:** No, that is, that poem, it's the one I think it's called "Again," that poem is imagined. I don't want to make a list of things I suspect, because I don't want to sound like I'm just perpetually a victim, but I have a suspicion that something happened between me and my father's father. I don't know why. It's just an emotional intuition. That poem comes out of that emotion. He's dead now, but I have this very clear sense that...I never felt anything for him pretty much other than hatred, and I once asked him. I saw him for the first time in many years, and I asked him, and he gave me a sort of a bullshit answer about my being a supercilious child, and then he stopped, and he paused, and he said, "It could have been that other thing," but he wouldn't explain what that other thing was. And again, I don't want to say that it happened because I don't know what happened, but that poem grows out of that. It's an imagining of something, rather than something that actually happened.

**Hoff:** Amy Unsworth, in a review published in *Pedestal Magazine*, said that she didn't know where to place you or what kind of poetry you were writing. "Is it confessional?" "Is it Holocaust poetry?" And then it seemed she decided all your poems had an ethical slant. Do you consider the poems confessional, because I think readers read the poems and assume that they are? They say, "Ok, this is Richard writing about his life."

**Newman:** There's a strong element of the confessional in them. Of course, you say confessional, and it conjures up Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. It conjures that up, and in those terms, I don't know whether I would be grouped in that school. But there is absolutely a strong element of confession in the poem. A lot of the details that appear to be autobiographical are. Some of them aren't, but a lot

of them are, and I think that comes down to, poetry was my way of finding my voice, my way to say who I was and speak my truth, and when I was a kid, to make myself real to myself, and that's kind of what I meant when I said it was a matter of survival. This was how I understood myself to be real, not just emotionally and psychologically, but physically also, because if you speak, you have a body. If you don't have a voice, you don't have a body on some level. I think that's—I hope that the poems are not merely confessional because I do think writing is political. But I feel a responsibility to write politically engaged poetry in the largest sense of the term, not on a narrow, partisan level.

**Hoff:** Shame figures so much in the early poems of *The Silence of Men*, but less so in the second half. It comes up in “Working the Dotted Line” when Beth is having her first sexual experience, and in the poems where the narrator is sexually abused. But shame also plays a role in the non-sexual poems, for example, in the first poem, “What I Carry With Me,” when the two women are talking about the “fucking A-rabs” and the narrator doesn't speak his mind. So, I was curious about whether writing the poems allowed you to change your relationship to shame and whether you think of that also as a political act?

**Newman:** Absolutely, the thing about shame, well, shame that is imposed on you—you think about someone who has been raped or been sexually abused, there's no logical reason for them to feel shame because it's not their fault. It's not something they did. So, the shame in that sense is imposed by the act. The rapist or the abuser shames you, and then you carry that shame. That only can work if you don't talk about it, and it's almost a cliché, but the more people you tell, the easier it becomes to talk about it, and if you begin to understand that other people don't see you as shamed, the less reason there is to be ashamed.

**Hoff:** If you have good experiences when you're doing the telling—

**Newman:** Yes, that's absolutely true, and there are always going to be assholes. I remember there are people whom I told who dismissed it entirely, but if you—the thing is you have to find some way, and I think this is about healing, but it's also about my being a poet, you have to find some way, I think, of acquiring the courage to keep speaking even if you run into the assholes. And that's hard, you're right. There has to be at least one other person who hears it and who accepts you, but if you don't find that, then you will get stuck.

**Hoff:** That's true in the political sense too. I mean, you speak out about the things that are important to you, the war, Bush's policies on x, y and z, and there will always be people who say, “You don't know what you're talking about,” or “Again with the voting reform issue,” or what have you. But if you keep talking, the possibilities that you run into people who think similarly can only increase.

**Newman:** I'll give you an example of where these two things came together in my life as a writer and as a teacher. I was teaching an independent study with two

women, women of color, one who was Latina. I forget whether she was Dominican or from El Salvador. The other woman was born here, but her parents were Haitian. And each of them, in the Advanced Essay class I was teaching, decided that they wanted to write about the fact that they had been sexually abused when they were girls. And they had each also spoken to me about the fact that they wanted to be writers. This was not just catharsis for them. They wanted to figure out how to say what they wanted to say, and to speak to a public, and, specifically, to the public in their communities, where of course nobody talks about these things.

I had to make a decision. Well, whether I had to or not, I felt I had to make the decision about whether or not to reveal my own experience, and my own experience of trying to write about this material, and I decided that I would because they impressed me with their seriousness, that what they really wanted was an apprenticeship, not a classroom experience, and what they wanted was a role model. And for me this was a wonderful opportunity because here I was. There were no role models for me to write about this when I was first trying, and here I could be for these women what I didn't have for myself.

So we did this independent study, and it was this enormously intimate and erotic experience, and I say erotic in the largest sense of the term, I mean, not genitally erotic. I mean, the three of us we spent most of our time talking about sex, in various in sundry ways. I came to know more about, especially one of them, this woman's sexuality and her sex life, because that's what she was writing about, so we had to talk about it.

I'll give you an example of how comfortable we became with each other. There was one essay where she was with a boyfriend, and the thing that she was trying to write about was the way that her abuse had made sexual penetration painful for her and how she finally came to find a lover who was patient, and she had her first orgasm. She's writing about this experience of being in a car with a boy, and I guess he was fingering her. Now there was some confusion in the prose. So you have to imagine, here I am, this white male professor, talking to this black female student whose almost twenty years my junior, with another woman who's sort of in between us, and I'm saying, "Now here he has how many fingers does he have in you here, and how many fingers?"

But we were able to do this. There was no discomfort. They didn't feel that I was being salacious. They didn't feel that I was getting my jollies. I trusted them enough that they weren't going to sexualize the situation if we were talking this way, and so it was just this profoundly moving experience, for them to be trusting me as a man, as an older man, as a white man, and for me to be able to trust them in this kind of teaching and learning situation.

For the independent study, they were required to get credit to give a public presentation of their work. Now they knew this upfront, at the beginning, but I think they sort of forgot about it as we went. As it came close to the end of the semester, I re-

minded them. Then, it sort of dawned on them what we had been doing and what it might look like to the outside world, and they worried that I might get in trouble. And I had tenure, and they were not going to make a complaint against me, so I said nobody can hurt me. But then they worried what it would mean for them to get up in front of this assembly that would include the president of the college, the vice president of academic affairs and read these essays.

**Hoff:** But they would be talking about experiences that many people of the audience have had.

**Newman:** And many of the women in the audience have had the experience of abuse. So I said to them, I said, "Ok, that's legitimate, so what we're going to do is this: I will introduce you, and I will introduce you the way I would introduce you if this were a literary event. I will say to the audience this, that I was abused. This is what you chose to work on. I was abused, and for me the opportunity to work with you was a way of providing this mentoring-role-model that I didn't have. So that if anybody wants to come at you for reading something inappropriate, they will have to come to me first," which is what I did, and it was the first time in my life that I had made the fact that I had been sexually abused an explicit part of my politics, and it was a transforming experience. It was really a transforming experience.

**Hoff:** In both your poetry and your prose, you write about the deep connection between things, and you even titled your blog "It's all connected." In what you're saying about mentoring these two women, your writing and your experience clearly connects to many women. How do you think your writing and your experience connects to, say, the average American male? I think it connects to men as well, but I'm just wondering how you see that.

**Newman:** Well, on a purely practical level, one in seven boys is sexually abused. So on a practical level, there's a huge number of men who were sexually abused as boys, and that doesn't even take into account men who were physically abused, and we don't talk about it. We don't talk about it. We don't talk about how that shapes our sense of masculinity. Traditional masculinity is built on a model of abuse. How do I make a man out of you? I teach you not to cry when you're beaten. I beat you until you know better than to cry about it, and it's built on shame, because if you violate the code of manhood, you have shamed yourself.

I mean, there's a book by David Gilmour called *Manhood in the Making* where he sort of lays this out in an anthropological ways. And he shows that there's this continuum across culture and in various and sundry degrees, and it's called the code of manhood. So I think that being willing to speak out like this is important. There's a blog called "Alas." I think I actually cross-posted this, so it's on my blog as well. I did not know this, but there's a community of men who were sexually abused who are tremendously hostile to feminism, which is for me really counter-intuitive, because

for me it was feminism that gave me the vocabulary to really understand what had happened.

I wrote a post about feminism and the sexual abuse of boys. There was a guy, one of the people commenting, who it was the first time he'd spoken up. If I remember correctly, it was the first time he had ever said what had happened to him. A couple of the men who were hostile to feminism on their own blog responded by beginning to tell parts of their own stories. Those stories are important, and I think they're important for the same reason that early feminist consciousness-raising was important, because you can't do anything with it until you put it out there. So I think that's one way that it's connected.

In the literary world, too. I have this prose thing that I have been working on for a very, very long time about these issues, and I had an agent for a while, and she would send it out because she was very excited about it, and a lot of the responses she got back were, "Great writing, but men talking about their feelings doesn't sell." So, there's that silencing, and it's a business model of silencing. I know that when I started sending out the poems for *The Silence of Men* that the sexual and sexualized content of the poems made people very uncomfortable, and they didn't want to publish them. And the other thing that I think is true about men is that it's very difficult to talk about the male body as a body that's physically vulnerable, that's sexually vulnerable, and that's emotionally vulnerable. It's very, very hard to find a language to talk about that, because after all men are men.

**Hoff:** Unless you're talking about the front lines, then men are obviously vulnerable because they could get hit by an RPG or something else.

**Newman:** But look at what it takes to make that body vulnerable. It's got to be some sort of weapon, right? Masculinity is not as rigid as it was even when I was a kid. That is certainly true, but nonetheless, there's this thread running through our culture of male invulnerability, and so I hope that the poems in this book speak to that on some level.

**Hoff:** The book jacket states that *The Silence of Men* is not just about silence in the sexual realm, but also in the religious, the physical and the familial. And you say that breaking silence in these four realms is essential to men's survival. Why do you think the end of silence in those four areas is so necessary?

**Newman:** Why is it essential to survival? On the one hand, if you don't talk about those things, you end up with war. I wish I could remember where I read it, but someone once said, someone wrote somewhere, that one in seven boys has been sexually abused. Look at the Congress. How many men are there in the Congress?

**Hoff:** Maybe 85.

**Newman:** No, more than that. In the Senate and the House of Representatives? We're talking hundreds. If those one in seven men actually told the truth about what had happened to them and were willing to act on that truth, how would that change our domestic policy, our spending priorities and our foreign policy? I know that there are things—I mean, God forbid I should ever be president, but I know, I mean, how could this not shape the way that I make policy decisions and set policy priorities? So, I think, if you don't talk about those things honestly and openly, you end up with war. You end up with all of the destruction. You end up with the arms race. Not to mention what it does to women, because after all patriarchy is built on those silences. Just to open up those possibilities and to say, "Wait a minute, you can feel this. Here is another way of thinking about this." I mean, I know that my book is not going to revolutionize the world, but literature does its work very slowly and over time, one reader at a time, and who knows which poem is going to speak to which reader? The more stuff you have that says the kinds of things I'm trying to say, the more people will get it, and slowly, over time, change happens.

**Hoff:** And with silence there's so little to work with in terms of dialogue. If only one party is speaking, you only have one party's perceptions.

**Newman:** You make me think of the title poem, "The Silence of Men," which ends with this disembodied penis, right? The guy walks in with this erect penis, and the penis starts to dance, and the blood starts to run out of this disembodied erect penis, and you end up with this sort of flaccid penis in a pool of blood. And the last line of the poem is, "The silence between us is the silence of men." And that's exactly what men don't talk about: that flaccid penis, and all that it stands for, and everything that it could stand for, not just impotence and all of that, everything that it could stand for, that might not necessarily be negative. Men don't talk about that honestly.

**Hoff:** The narrator in *The Silence of Men* is often either told that he is very Jewish, not Jewish enough, or too Jewish. In what way was *The Silence of Men* a coming to terms with your faith? Did it simplify or complicate your relationship to Judaism?

**Newman:** You know, I didn't realize, I truly didn't realize until after I had put the book together how much there was in there of Jewishness. The simple answer is, it was a coming to terms—well, I don't know that it was a coming to terms of anything, because, you know, I was going to be a rabbi when I was a teenager, and I went to Yeshiva for high school. So it's part of the way I see the world. It's part of who I am. And so these things about not being Jewish enough or being too Jewish or intermarrying, honestly, I never really thought about those poems as coming to terms with, as much as a matter of expressing the Jewish reality of my life. So that's the easy answer.

The less easy answer is that, absolutely, I think it has complicated my relationship to Judaism. Somewhere on my blog is an essay called "The Rectification of Names" (<http://itsallconnected.wordpress.com/2006/04/09/the-rectification-of-names/>). There's a panel that I was asked to be on about writing as a spiritual practice. The

talk was—basically, that essay was the first time I brought together sexual abuse, religion and writing, and that essay was really where I came to terms with it. Basically, it came to this: One of the reasons I wanted to be a rabbi and to be an Orthodox Jew is that Orthodox Judaism provides a very well-defined set of laws. If you follow them, you're good, and no one can tell you otherwise. And here I was, and I thought I was bad. I was dirty, all of the stains, all of that stuff, and if I could become Orthodox, I would be good, and if God said I was good, well then, "I don't care what you say. God says I'm good."

The thing about traditional mainstream Judaism and many other religions these days is that there's this division between the body and the soul, and so the thing that you have to do is focus on your soul and perfecting your soul, and the body is dirty. The body is profane. At some point, that disjunction, that dissonance, began to feel to me like the dissonance that occurs to people who are not only sexually abused, but also physically abused. Women who have been raped talk about how they're sort of hovering above looking down, and there's this dissociation that happens. And the body/soul split in traditional Judaism began to feel like that to me. And I decided that any God who cared more about my soul than my body was not worth it, because I was not going to continue to buy into this split, and I think writing became for me the way of mending, of unifying, of bringing these things together.

In Jewish mysticism, in Kabbalah, there's this idea that when God created the world, what he did was he sort of shattered himself. And there's actually, in Gnosticism, that's actually considered original sin. In the Gnostic tradition, Adam and Eve did not create original sin. God created original sin by creating the world and disunifying the divine, right? And the concept in Judaism of tikkun olam, which means "to fix the world," in mysticism is putting these shards back together, and for me I think that's what writing is: It's naming things, and that's what the title, it has something to do with naming. It comes from Sam Hammel's essay, and it's a quote from Confucius. The point of writing, the point is to name things properly, and once you name things properly, you have achieved some truth. I think that's what writing is for me. It's naming, it's naming things, and being able to name it with honesty and integrity and not step back from the implications of that naming, to be accountable for that naming.

**Hoff:** One of the things that would be disorienting about the Orthodox worldview is that when you step outside of those laws, all of a sudden you have to negotiate what's good and what's not. There were things that you were told were going to be bad, and they turn out not to be, and vice-versa. So you find out that things are more complicated. In the poems the narrator always connected to Islam through marriage, and that's where he's stepped outside of the law. Have you reconciled the idea that one can be Jewish and intermarry?

**Newman:** I remember the moment that I understood that. It's not in any of the poems. I had a girlfriend who was Catholic. We were together for about seven years in our twenties. She lives in Poughkeepsie, which is about two hours north of New

York, and at the time, we were lovers. For a lot of reasons, we were very concerned with not being a concrete couple. It had to do with her life situation, my life situation. And we both knew. Her parents were adamant that she should marry a Catholic guy. I thought to myself, "I would never in a million years marry a non-Jewish woman," because I thought I wanted to have a Jewish household and follow the tradition and all of that.

And so we kind of knew up front that there were these barriers. We wrote letters back and forth. In many ways it was a traditional Victorian courtship because we lived so far from each other. We met at summer camp. We saw each other at summer camp, and then we went back to our respective homes. I mean, I was driving to see her, and I remember thinking, "What's more important to me, being able to love who I want to love and how I want to love them, to just be true to myself in that way, or this God, these rules and regulations?" And I decided that it was more important for me to be able to just love and act on that if I wanted to act on it. And that was sort of the moment when I said ok, you know?

**Hoff:** On your blog, you write about your personal reasons for being pro-choice, and you compared the advocates of pro-life as endorsing a kind of slavery for women. You also mention your mother's experience of her own body before you were born. How did your awareness of your mother's pregnancy and her subsequent marriage to your father shape those views?

**Newman:** If women even in potential can never escape pregnancy, that's a kind of slavery. Imagine a situation where there's a draft. If there were a draft, well, every boy when he got to the age to be drafted, that would be in his future. He's in some way enslaved to that. Well, the same thing is true if a woman cannot escape pregnancy. There are two poems in the book that deal specifically with abortion, "Melissa's Story," which is spoken by a woman who survives an illegal abortion and then "Bill's Story," which is spoken by a man. It's funny because I'm young enough to not be conscious of a time when Roe v. Wade didn't exist. I'm 45, and I'm still with the generation that can take Roe v. Wade for granted. But "Bill's Story" is spoken by a man from, let's say, the fifties whose teenage girlfriend became pregnant. Her parents shipped her off to a home for wayward girls where she gave birth, and they took the child from her.

**Hoff:** Is it based on a true story?

**Newman:** There's a book called Backrooms, and it's a history of the pre-Roe vs. Wade era. Both of those poems are sort of compiled from my reading of that. And Bill's father basically just tells him, "You just loaded the boat, son. You just be glad you got what you wanted without being shot." And her parents shipped her off, and she writes him a letter and says, "You know, I named him Bill when he was born, and then they took him." And the poem ends with his sort of saying, "I wanted to know my son, and I can't." I mean, it doesn't say that, but he's old enough to look, and I deserve to tell him who I am.

Because reproductive rights is one of those things that is so central to the way our culture is organized, and you don't even know it. The surface of the debate is only the surface of the debate. You know, ok, women are the center of reproductive rights, and if women cannot choose whether or not to be pregnant, by definition that gives men power because a pregnant woman is dependent. But it is also true that for men the question of reproductive rights becomes an issue because, like, with this guy Bill, ok, he was a kid. They were teenagers. But he wasn't trying to avoid his responsibility. He wasn't trying to avoid the fact that he made this girl pregnant. He loved her. He wanted to be with her, but they took her away. And so, when the government has that kind of power over women's bodies, alright, it's not a power over men's body, and it gives men privilege on some level, but it also gives the government control over men's emotional lives, potentially anyway.

**Hoff:** When we discussed abortion at the community college where I taught, it was the men who would become most livid about the idea of women going off and having abortions without telling them.

**Newman:** And, emotionally, I can understand that. If I have a girlfriend, and I really care about her, and she becomes pregnant and chooses to have an abortion without telling me, of course, I would be emotionally upset. I don't think I should have the right to tell her not to do it, and that's the distinction that a lot of men don't make. Of course, you have an investment in that potential child. I mean, why wouldn't you? But that's not the same thing as telling the woman what to do with her body.

I remember watching a special, it was Peter Jennings, and he got together a pro-choice group and an anti-abortion group. I don't like to use the term pro-life. I really don't, because it's not that pro-choice people are anti-life. It's a false dichotomy. One is pro-choice, and the other is against abortion, period. And I remember listening to the exchange between the women. I don't remember the details now, but I remember the women on the anti-abortion side talking about this excruciating emotional agony they went through having the abortion and how they suffered afterwards. And that's a real emotional experience...that is not political. And I remember the women who were on the pro-choice side saying, "Well, of course, the fetus is a living thing. Of course, you kill something when you have an abortion. It's a living thing. You know, you can't deny that, but it is not the same as a human being."

**Hoff:** The pro-choice women?

**Newman:** The pro-choice women, and as I remember they all had children. So here were women talking about their own experience, and it is a lived experience for them. It is not an abstraction. And it was the anti-abortion men who polarized the discussion. And I thought to myself, "Gosh, I wonder what would happen if there were no men in the room." And those women would just get together and talk about what is it like to be pregnant, to have this emotional response to this thing that's

growing in you, and then have it be gone, and to allow the women to have an honest discussion. What would happen without the interference of the men?

**Hoff:** I love that line in your poem about “the reservoir tip.” It’s such an inappropriate moment. He’s about to have sex with this woman. He’s got the condom in his hand. He sees the packaging and the words “reservoir tip” and starts thinking of water and dams.

**Newman:** That’s a poem that is largely autobiographical.

**Hoff:** And that’s a poem that is also very political. I mean, it becomes political because it asks the question if you can penetrate without hurting the other person, or whether a man’s “maleness” is in and of itself harmful.

**Newman:** I remember having a friend when I was in graduate school who had lived for many, many years as a lesbian separatist. She then decided to leave the community, and she started to sleep with men again because she said separatism was boring. And she and I, we were briefly lovers, and I remember telling her this story. I remember telling her this story, that I was not a virgin and this girl was. It shattered me that there was no way I could do this without hurting her. In the poem you don’t know this. In the poem I was 21, and she was 20.

It was a really hard thing. You’re doing this thing that you want to be pleasurable, that is supposed to be loving, and I’m not talking violins playing, rose petals, smooth, however you like to have sex, and yet here I was on top of this woman, and every move that I made sent this grimace of pain to her face. It was a very hard thing to do. And the poem actually makes the “deflowering”—in quotes—more violent than it actually was. But it really was, it was really disturbing.

So I remember telling this story to this woman who had been a separatist. And she said, “You know, if you had done it when she was having her period, it would have been much easier.” Physiologically, it just makes it easier, and of course, I did not know that. The idea of having sex with a woman when she’s having her period doesn’t bother me, but can you imagine that being in the advice magazines? You’re right, it is political, and maybe that’s not the only way. I remember reading about some culture somewhere in South America, and when it’s time for a girl to lose her virginity, they make this whole huge production of it, and they prepare her—whether it’s a physiological preparation or just a physical preparation, I don’t know—but they prepare her to have sex for the first time. There’s value in that. I mean, there’s real value in that.

So what does it mean that we live in a culture where—I mean, here I am an inexperienced guy sexually. She was even less experienced than I was. We wanted to do it. I had no information available to me, nor did she have any available to her. But let’s even say that it’s my responsibility since I am the penetrator. Let’s even say that it’s my responsibility to know. I don’t have that information available, so by definition

the act becomes a violent one. By definition there's this small violence that has to be done. That's political. That is political.

**Hoff:** You taught ESL for many years and lived for many years abroad. Your poems "Dear Yoon" and "Dear Ji-in" deal specifically with those experiences. What kind of an influence do you think your experience of speaking a second language and experiencing another culture as a foreigner have had on your work?

**Newman:** You know, I gave a reading at the campus where I teach, and one of my colleagues, she said to me, and it was actually sort of—embarrassing is the wrong word. You know those moments where you feel that someone has sort of seen you, really honestly. She said in front of the audience, which included my students, she said, "I've always wondered how it is that you're comfortable with so many different cultures," because I've had various experiences. My wife is from another culture. And she said, "Now that I've heard you read, I realize you do it through sex," and she proceeded to talk about, and she was talking about those two poems, and she talked about penetrating other cultures, and you enter the culture, and what does it mean to enter the culture and enter a woman. It was very strange to have her talking about me, to me, in front of my colleagues and my students. But I think she's right. You know, I think she's right. I mean, not that I go around sleeping with women in countries all over the world, but there is an erotics to living in another culture, to teaching English as a second languages, to having a lover. They are all of them a reach across a gap of difference. Because when you learn a second language—do you speak a second language?

**Hoff:** Yeah, I do.

**Newman:** Ok, so then you know this...the process of learning a second language, especially learning a second language in the country where it's spoken is a profoundly physical experience.

**Hoff:** Yes, uncomfortable.

**Newman:** Very uncomfortable, because you don't realize how well-trained the muscles of your mouth and your throat are to make the sounds of your native language. And so suddenly you're confronted with these sounds that don't exist in your native language. The cliché thing is Americans, people from the States trying to make the "ch" sound. And the students in my classes, because I teach literature of the Middle East in this class, and if there's a name that has the "ch" sound, of course, they go "chi" "ka" "cha," and then, they go, "Gosh, it feels like I'm spitting." So at just that simple level, you have to acquire the body language that is appropriate to the culture of the language. We sit differently. We talk differently. If you talk to someone who is natively bilingual, you know, they have native fluency in both language and they are bicultural, their voice will be different. They'll speak in one register in English, and in another register in whatever the other language is.

So it is this really physical experience, and then on top of that, there is—I have this a little bit, because I used to be almost natively fluent in Hebrew, but I'm not anymore, because I haven't used it in many, many years. But, um, in order to become fluent, you almost have to develop a second self, and there is this gap. And it's one reason why adults often have a very difficult time learning a second language because they can feel the loss, whereas kids experience it as a game. Little kids experience it as a game. An adult experiences it as a loss of whatever the native self is, and so I've never actually thought about this, what I'm mentioning now in my poetry, but as I'm saying it, I'm realizing that there is this connection.

**Hoff:** A connection of retroactively looking to your past self through a newer self?

**Newman:** Oh gosh, I wasn't even thinking that way, but that's really good. Can I steal that? On one level I think that's true. There is this sense that I create myself in my poems, and going back to what I said about survival, poem writing made me real to myself, so in a way it was a second language, metaphorically speaking. That was not what I was going to say, but I do, I think you're right.

**Hoff:** Or did it also have to do with being outside of your body enough to see yourself from another vantage point?

**Newman:** I don't know. I'd have to think about that. I did not have that dislocated experience. The connection that's forming in my head is that to live in another culture, you have to re-create yourself, and in another way, my becoming a poet was how I made myself real to myself, and that's a parallel that I can see. I don't see it so much in terms of the actual teaching of ESL, but I'm going to have to think about that.

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