

**A Strange Connectedness:  
On the Poetics and Uses of Shame  
In Contemporary Autobiography**

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## Abstract

This dissertation studies the way that shame can be a *pharmakon*—a toxic affect or an intoxicating form—with as much potential to heal as it has to harm. I argue that shame informs, inspires, and limits contemporary forms of autobiography. I begin and end the dissertation with works of literary criticism that are loosely autobiographical autobiographical. Ann Cvetkovich's *Depression: A Public Feeling* and Kate Zambreno's *Heroines* both aim to rebut traditional forms of literary criticism by writing in the form of memoir, thus generating a protective enclave for identities they call 'minor' (queer in the case of Cvetkovich, female in the case of Zambreno). Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be?* and Ben Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station* fictionalize their autobiographies thus questioning on both a fictional and a metafictional level whether or not anything—art, in particular—can have meaning. Maggie Nelson's *Bluets* traces the shame of heartbreak, depression and longing across two hundred and forty propositions, all of which are in hot pursuit of something blue. Anne Carson's *Nox* articulates the various shames of personality, subjectivity and identification, but also how writing itself can gesture to a less domesticated kind of shame: to the physiology of a book that blushes, averts its gaze, hunches its shoulders. In the end, we return to literary criticism, and find shame at the very farthest reaches of subjectivity, where the subject, literary critic Timothy Bewes, writes about shame as an event in the context of the postcolonial. Taken together, these works start to paint a portrait of a self (and of a critic) that is better described in terms such as 'becoming' where subjectivity has about it something contingent or temporary, a kind of self, in other words, that has relinquished much of its authority and therefore its capacity to dominate. The effect of these works is a collective overturning of the subject as a starting point for ethics primarily because such a move seems necessary if we ever want to escape the subject-object structure that has supported centuries of systemic inequality.

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## Introduction

This most personal and solitary of emotions cements us into a social world, even as its experience is intensely isolating.  
Timothy Bewes, *The Event of Postcolonial Shame*

...a text cannot belong to no genre, it cannot be without or less a genre. Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging.  
Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre"

No matter where it comes from, nor how long it lasts, nor even if one thinks of it as a feeling—like sadness— or a form—like the novel—shame is a figure of inadequacy and isolation in the midst of what matters most. American literary theorist Eve K. Sedgwick describes shame's paradoxical movement as one that pulls us in opposing directions: "toward painful individuation, toward uncontrollable relationality" (*Touching Feeling* 36). Shame's oppositional forces pull us apart, rendering us open, exposed, and vulnerable. It is typical to think of shame in association with social failures such as weakness or deviance, but this dissertation looks at the way shame expands far beyond such categories. There are individual shames which reflect society's imprint and those which are utterly idiosyncratic, reflecting the special hopes and dreams we have for ourselves and the way we, perhaps too often, betray them. Sedgwick beautifully describes shame's flexibility:

Shame...is not a discrete intrapsychic structure, but a kind of free radical that (in different people and also in different cultures) attaches to and permanently intensifies or alters the meaning of—of almost anything: a zone of the body, a sensory system, a prohibited or indeed a permitted behavior, another affect such as anger or arousal, a named identity, a script for interpreting other people's behavior toward oneself. (*Touching Feeling* 62)

Sedgwick captures shame's radical flexibility here, but slips up, it seems, on the question of permanence. While it is absolutely true that there are shames that endure for our whole lives, at other times the blush has barely reddened before the matter has come to a close. Indeed, sometimes a shame that has threatened to mark us forever can imperceptibly transform, dissipating, perhaps, or becoming later, a point of pride.

There are shames we adopt as we age, and shames that we grow out of. We can as easily feel shame for standing out as for blending in, for speaking up as for staying quiet. We can feel ashamed of not being our authentic selves or ashamed of believing that there is such a thing. We can feel ashamed of being an oppressed class or of knowing we are among the oppressors; sometimes we are both at once. Sometimes shame hides in the shadows. Sometimes shame gives shape to writing by insisting on what cannot be said; in such cases, we can call shame a form. At other times it is absolutely a feeling and that feeling says ‘withdraw,’ or ‘look away,’ or ‘run.’ Whenever it emerges—and it can emerge anywhere at anytime—shame reveals our deepest attachments and how we forsake them.

Fundamental to this dissertation are four interrelated propositions. First, that contemporary understandings of selfhood are moving away from the idea that who we are relates to a fundamental, unchanging core self. Second, that shame emerges in our most intimate relations. Third, that shame feels the injustice of structural inequalities, such as between races, classes, genders, nations, or even between the so-called ‘First’ and ‘Third’ Worlds. Fourth, that shame is as much a figure of writing as it is a feeling that one writes about. What these propositions share is an essential binary structure. At its simplest, we could describe the binary as a division between the self and the other. Self and Other are notoriously flexible, but within the binary structure, one thing is constant: Self and Other are adversaries, not allies. As this relates to the four propositions undergirding this dissertation, we can say that shame emerges as a discord between myself and my ideal self or myself and my lover; or between men and women, or the colonizer and the colonized; or between the writer and what is written. This last example is most apparent in the case of autobiography where writing instigates a separation between the self-that-writes and the self-that-emerges-in-the-writing, but we see the same in literary criticism, where the self-other divide is manifest between the critic and the author. Shame is the figure that cleaves these binaries: just as it insists on a chasm between them, it also holds out for a bridge.

This dissertation explores the way shame emerges in a variety of loosely autobiographical works, all of which are concerned with the state of the world and the crisis of inequity captured by terms like racism, capitalism, and the postcolonial. The self-other binary undergirds all such inequities. The works here are concerned with overcoming that binary and one of the formal ways they seek to do this is by deftly mixing autobiography with other genres. We will see autobiography blended with literary criticism, fiction, poetry and the lyric essay. In some of these works the mixed genre approach speaks to a hope that is invested in autobiographical work—the hope that it might be more authentic, ethical, or

political by virtue of the personal voice. In others, the mixed genre approach speaks to suspicions about such beliefs. Because autobiography as a form is unavoidably self-reflective, it is the ideal form for tracking the way shame works in writing. This is especially true when looking at how writers seek to overcome the shame of living in an unjust world. I will describe these works in detail at the end of the introduction.

That shame is implied in all writing, but particularly writing about the self, may not be entirely self-evident. Perhaps the most powerful example is that of Primo Levi, one of the most eloquent narrators of the Holocaust. Levi was an Italian Jew, a chemist, and a writer. His 1947 *If This is a Man* describes the year he spent as a prisoner in Auschwitz. Giorgio Agamben describes Levi as the “perfect example of a witness,”(16) but Levi’s own thoughts on the matter prove more complicated. In a memoir, Levi described himself as having “acquired the vice of writing,” and in Timothy Bewes’ account of Levi’s relationship to writing, writing about the Holocaust did not free him of his shame of survival but rather *manifest* it. Witnessing was not an ethical *act* but rather the inevitable fallout for a figure (a writer) who had survived because of an ethical *lack*. Every eloquent passage was a manifestation of the unfair fact of his survival. This may be the most poignant example of the way shame can manifest in writing, but there are other ways as well.

To the extent that a writer upholds truthfulness as a value, *any* attempt to write about the self will manifest shame. A true account of a whole life would require many lifetimes of writing, as exemplified by American poet-laureate Kenneth Goldsmith’s *Fidget*—which records his every physical action for a 24 hour period—an example that illustrates not only the futility of attempts at a true representation of life, but also how boring such unstructured representations can be. French ethnographer, Michel Leiris, also made valiant attempts at an autobiography which would expose everything, yet as with Goldsmith, the attempt is so thorough, so unrelenting (four volumes worth) that the work reads more as an interrogation of the form of autobiography than an example of it (Bewes). One of the oft-quoted theorists of autobiography—Philip LeJeune—formulated a definition of the genre, saying it should be: “a retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality” (Lejeune qtd. in Anderson 2), yet he provided the caveat that: “a certain ‘latitude’ in classifying particular cases might be admitted but one condition for autobiography was absolute: there must be ‘identity between the *author*, the *narrator*, and the *protagonist*” (Lejeune qtd. in Anderson 2). All of the works this dissertation considers demand more than a “certain



latitude,” as all take issue with the limitations of genre, and not only those of autobiography, but of fiction, poetry, and criticism as well.

### **Genre as a source of Shame**

One interesting indicator of how genre itself can be a source of shame is the legalistic language in which descriptions of it have been cast. Lejeune’s book is called *Le Pacte autobiographique*, suggesting that a writer of autobiography has a sort of contractual obligation towards the reader. Similarly, in his “The Law of Genre,” Derrida writes, “I have let myself be commanded by the law of our encounter, by the convention of our subject, notably the genre, the law of genre. This law...assigned us places and limits. Even though I have launched an appeal against this law, it was she who turned my appeal into a confirmation of her own glory” (80). Earlier in that article, Derrida describes genre in terms that would be familiar to any theorist of shame: “Thus as soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly, or monstrosity” (57). A failure to conform to the law of genre leads to a monstrous thing, an anomaly that might be a source of shame. Yet, for another writer, such monstrosities could as easily be a point of pride.

In autobiography, shame can emerge in at least three ways. It can emerge through the shame of the events narrated, through the inherent discrepancy between the self that writes and the self that emerges on the page; or even in the way ones autobiography might fail to uphold the demands of the genre. Shame also emerges as an important theme in literary criticism and academic writing. Literary critics can shame each other, literary critics can shame the writers they discuss, and writers can shame literary critics. Yet, words alone cannot shame.

The words only sting when they come from an individual that one respects. Let us consider several manifestations of this dynamic. Sedgwick wrote about the way that literary critics often wrote in a tone of “Shame on You!” when evaluating earlier criticism:

The moralistic hygiene by which any reader of today is unchallengeably entitled to condescend to the thought of any moment in the past (maybe especially the recent past) is globally available to anyone who masters the application of two or three discrediting questions. (*Touching Feeling* 117)

This implicit “Shame on You!” could castigate an earlier generation of critics who had, perhaps, written from an implicitly colonial or sexist perspective. They might also shame

writers if they thought their depictions of race or class were derogatory or malignant. But shame appears in much more subtle ways, too. Mari Ruti writes from the perspective of an academic who is sometimes shamed by the overly difficult writing typical to her profession, where “convoluted rhetoric hides the fact that the concepts being presented are not, in the final analysis, very difficult at all” (xi). Perhaps to soften the potentially shaming tone of her words, she writes,

Thinkers in my field—contemporary theory—tend to be proud of the impenetrability of its rhetoric, and with good reason, for they see this impenetrability as a theoretical intervention in its own right; exasperated by the notion that meaning should be transparent and easy to process, they often intentionally create an opaque textual surface in order to force the reader to grapple with the ways in which meaning is never obvious but open to a variety of interpretations. (*The Call of Character* x-xi)

The writer Geoff Dyer, with characteristic hubris, hyperbole, and humor, has complained that academic writing “Kills everything it touches!” (Janes). We laugh because somewhere in there, something about Dyer’s claims ring true, though the opposite can also be true: academic writing can often enliven, inspire, and enlighten.

In Canada, a debate about positive versus negative reviewing emerged in 2013, with poet and philosopher Jan Zwicky writing a robust defense of her policy of writing only positive reviews:

The discipline of the appreciative review is, I believe, among the great unsung arts of our culture. I suspect it remains unsung because, appearances to the contrary, it is not actually a species of speaking, but a species of listening; and our culture tends to regard listening as a passive activity....[But] we are a culture, perhaps a species, drunk on a narrow notion of assertiveness and virility. We are also a culture, perhaps a species, many of whose individuals are obsessed with rank... These twin addictions, as visible in the contemporary university as in the military, lead us to suspect those with a gift for listening as ‘soft,’ and to celebrate those with a taste for volubly dispensing judgement as ‘tough.’ (“The Ethics” n.pag)

In all of these cases, the potential for shame is highly contingent upon a feeling of respect, interest, or admiration between the one who shames and the one being ‘shamed.’ Not all criticism is shaming, of course. Some critical attention—even of the negative sort—is, itself, an indication of respect. To the degree that someone we respect has noted our failings in a

domain that matters to us, we will feel shame, but we might also feel pride at having garnered their attention at all. An academic who doesn't care about beautiful writing will pay little heed to Dyer and Ruti, and a critic of the colonial era, such as Matthew Arnold, wouldn't turn over in his grave at the thought of later generation's accusations of colonial pieties. There is nothing in this world that is inherently shameful. Yet shame does have a fairly predictable structure.

### **A Philosophical Shame: Shame as Structure in *Being and Nothingness***

In *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre described shame within a tripartite structure that we will return to throughout the dissertation. There, Sartre summarizes the structure in a manner that could be paraphrased as: *I am ashamed of myself* before the *Other* (351). In a section entitled "The Look," shame is dependent on self, other, and perception. Perception is an important addition to the binary structure I described above. While within the specialized world of high theory, it is practically a truism that systems of inequality are based upon a binary structure of self-other, such a structure only exists with the added element of perception. One must *perceive* the other. Perception doesn't automatically lead to shame, of course; it can also lead to love, appreciation, and recognition. Without perception, however, shame doesn't exist. Perception makes the self-other binary possible. Shame is not, in Sartre's account, a register of wrong-doing nor of weakness. It is simply a register of being a subject in the world, of existing in what Sartre calls a state of fallenness. Sartre's account of shame is one that theorists repeatedly return to, perhaps because of the way it does not impose a value system: "Shame, according to Sartre, does not hang on the nature of the self, but simply on its production *as* a self; the relation of shame to guilt is purely incidental, an association produced by the newly individuated subject out of the structures of social, psychological, and ethical interpretation" (Bewes, *The Event* 164). This structural way of understanding shame frees it from much of its social, psychological, moral, and theological attachments. It illustrates the way these attachments are contingent rather than universal.

Throughout *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre elaborates his philosophy through evocative scenes involving named characters and familiar locations such as cafes and parks. In "The Look," Sartre defines the other as "the one who looks at me" (345) and the look as that which is manifest in the other's eyes, "the convergence of two ocular globes in my direction" (346). Yet we can notice ourselves being the subject of a look in other moments too, such as

when there is a rustling of branches, or the sound of a footstep followed by silence, or the slight opening of a shutter, or a light movement of a curtain. During an attack men who are crawling through the brush apprehend as a look to be avoided, not two eyes, but a white farmhouse which is outlined against the sky at the top of a little hill. (Sartre 346)

The slight tremor in a bush behind us indicates the probability that we are being watched. I mention these because they exemplify the *potential* for shame, if not shame itself. These moments capture vulnerability:

What I apprehend immediately when I hear the branches crackling behind me is not that there is someone there; it is that I am vulnerable, that I have a body which can be hurt, that I occupy a place and that I can not in any case escape from the space in which I am without defense—in short, that I am seen. (Sartre 347)

The look, in Sartre's description, is what first makes me aware of myself. Sartre asks: "What does *being seen* mean for me?" (347) What we want to know is at what point does the awareness of being seen constitute shame?

In order to explore the answers to this question, Sartre gives an account of himself watching a scene through a keyhole. He is alone in a hallway, in a state of pure observation: "a pure mode of losing myself in the world, of causing myself to be drunk in by things as ink is by a blotter" (348). This is a moment of pure freedom because he is not conscious of himself: "I am my own nothingness" (348). The spectacle on the other side of the door absorbs him completely, though he tells us nothing about it. When the sound of someone's footsteps are suddenly heard behind him, he loses this freedom: "Someone is looking at me!" (349). What does it mean?

It means that I am suddenly affected in my being and that essential modifications appear in my structure—modifications which I can apprehend and fix conceptually by means of the reflective *cogito*...It is this irruption of the self which has been most often described: I see myself because somebody sees me. (Sartre 349)

The foundation of the self becomes external—"I am for myself only as a pure reference to the Other" (349). And there, "It is shame or pride which reveals to me the Other's look and myself at the end of that look" (350). It is important to note just how neutral Sartre is in this moment: he has been caught, but both shame *and* pride are possible.

When he does define shame, it is when we agree with the judgements of the Other: "shame of *self*; it is the *recognition* of the fact that I *am* indeed that object which the Other is

looking at and judging. I can be ashamed only as my freedom escapes me in order to become a *given* object" (350). Sartre describes this as a moment where our selfhood escapes us entirely—it is a flight without limit towards the Other—but also as a moment where the look of the Other situates us in the world, and I agree to be so situated. "Shame reveals to me that I *am* this being" (351), I "apprehend myself as seen *in the world* and from the standpoint of the world" (353) such that "behold now I *am* somebody!" (353). Prior to having been observed by the person whose footsteps he heard, he was nothingness; being perceived made him somebody. Being perceived is what drops us into the world, into community, and into a situation where we become somebody. We might even say that being observed is a kind of gift—being observed gives us a position in the world. In writing, we become two figures at once: the self crouched at the keyhole and the self responsible for the footsteps in the hall. In writing, therefore, we give that gift to ourselves, as does anyone who reads us. Pride, recognition, fear, and shame: all of these are possible, and more.

When does being observed by another become shame as it is colloquially used? When, that is, does shame start to resemble the negative feelings of embarrassment, ostracization, and isolation? Shame has been called the most paradoxical of emotions because even though it feels intensely isolating, we only feel isolated in the midst of community. We only *feel* shame as a negative emotion when we are alienated from a community with which we would like to belong. To return to the earlier examples I gave, writers may experience shame as a failure to express oneself: we feel that language is failing us when we have a sense of what language *could* do, if only it would. As a subject in a world characterized by racism or capitalism, we can feel shame if we see these systems as unfair, if we believe that the world's advantaged and disadvantaged are arbitrarily so: that we could as easily have been them, that they could have been us. Shame is the feeling that tells us how isolated we are, and how deeply we want not to be. Shame believes that isolation can be overcome. For shame to be shame, it must also be hope.

While Sartre's account provides a fascinating and seemingly incontrovertible description of the structure of shame, this thesis will gradually pursue an undoing of the self-other structure. One way of thinking of this is as a gradual move away from binary structures in general. Another way of thinking about this is as a move away from the digital on-off understanding of feelings towards something more analogue.<sup>1</sup> We can trace the beginnings of

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<sup>1</sup> For a fascinating discussion of the way Silvan Tomkins affect systems works analogously to both the digital on/off and the analogue gradations of the pre-digital era, please see Eve Sedgwick and

this movement in the work of psychologist Silvan Tomkins and in his two most important proponents, the literary theorists Eve K. Sedgwick and Adam Frank. Their study of Tomkins' work led to the 1995 publication of *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, and it is in that year that we might say that the turn to affect in literary studies, as well as elsewhere, began. Tomkins' three-volume work, *Affect Imagery Consciousness*, laid the theoretical groundwork for the study of affect (a term which I will distinguish from emotion shortly). In Tomkins' schema, there are eight affects, all of which can be felt in a range of intensities. Those affects, listed from low-to-high intensity are: enjoyment-joy, interest-excitement, surprise-startle, anger-rage, distress-anguish, fear-terror, shame-humiliation, and contempt-disgust. Tomkins described shame as an affect that partially diminishes the positive affects of enjoyment-joy or interest-excitement. Nevertheless, as we move forward in the present work, shame will be less and less something we would describe in terms of emotion or feeling, and more something we would describe in terms of literary form.

### **Affect, Emotion, Intensity**

In conjunction with the move away from emotion towards form, we will also see a move away from narration and into forms that provide less connective tissue between their constituent parts. A fundamental distinction within the language of feelings is that which theorists make between affect and emotion. The body of work whose genealogy traces back to Silvan Tomkins' *Affect Imagery Consciousness*, tends to maintain a stronger link between subjectivity and affect. The body of work whose genealogy includes Spinoza, Henri Bergson, Deleuze and Guattari, is exemplified by Brian Massumi's work in *Parables of the Virtual*, where it is possible to think of Affect as something entirely separate from the human body that feels, or the human consciousness that is able to describe it. In *Parables for the Virtual*, Massumi gives us a useful distinction between what is generally referred to as emotion and affect. In his language, both are affect, but the latter is "intensity," and the former is "emotion,"

Intensity is... a nonconscious, never-to-be-conscious autonomic remainder. It is outside expectation and adaptation, as disconnected from meaningful sequencing, from narration, as it is from vital function. It is narratively delocalized, spreading over

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Adam Frank's "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins" in *Touching Feeling* 93-121.

the generalized body surface like a lateral backwash from the function-meaning interloops that travel the vertical path between head and heart. (Massumi 25)

Affect, in Massumi, is nonconscious, rather than say, pre-conscious, something which signals not only his break from the Freudian psyche, but also his kinship with Deleuze and Guatarri, and furthermore, to Henri Bergson. Affect is, in this description, the supersaturated experience of being in the world that registers without naming, perceives without declaring. It is the hum, crackle, sparkle, glow, heat, fizz, scent, ache, buzz, tension, fullness, brilliance, connection, in short, the intensity, of swallowing the world whole. This affect is not explained, elicited, or experienced within the cause and effect sequencing of narration.

In contrast, Massumi defines Affect-as-Emotion as a kind of domestication. With Affect-as-Emotion, the intensity of the supersaturated experience is tamed through classifications such as happy, sad, ashamed, frightened and is tied to the time-bound experiences of a self who feels. Such emotional states are often understood as feelings that develop in the context of narrative. They anticipate, respond to, predict, expect, and cause across a temporal plane. Cognitive psychologist Keith Oatley, author of *Emotions: A Brief History*, agrees:

emotions are most typically caused by evaluations—psychologists also call them appraisals—of events in relation to what is important to us: our goals, our concerns, our aspirations. (Oatley 3)

One possible way of understanding emotion is that it enlists narration to make meaning of the mess of sensations encompassed in Affect. Meaning is created by narration, and narration, as every storyteller knows, is selective. A story begins or ends according to the emotional arc the story-teller wants to create. (It is for this reason that emotion and story-telling are often held to exist in a world distinct from “truth.”) One reason emotion wants to make meaning is because it wants to communicate and it wants to limit the range of meanings that story can have. Emotion is social, then, in a way that Affect is not. Emotion relies on conventions of narrative and language because of that desire to effectively communicate. Massumi describes emotion as:

subjective content, the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal. Emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning. It is intensity owned and recognized. (Massumi 28)

We must recognize two aspects of this description. First, emotion is a kind of fixative. Consider the way early photography worked: a silver plate was exposed to a scene. The scene was abuzz with things that made noise, smelled, were wet or dry, salty or sweet, and radiated with light and color. Yet the silver plate registered only the gray-scales of light and dark. The electricity and texture, the roar of the traffic or the humidity of the summer morning made no impact upon the plate, and once the chemicals had washed over it and the silver ions had settled into silver metal, all that remained of the multi-sensory experience was an image from which one would take meaning. Narration is that chemical wash; emotion is the resulting fixed image. Emotion interprets intensity.

Emotion not only speaks the language of narration, but is its result: first we have affect, of which we cannot speak, and then there is emotion of which we can. Emotion is personal, subjective content. Its intensity is qualified, narrated, and means something. Affect is non-conscious, atemporal, belonging not to the meaning-making functions of consciousness but to the observant, absorbing capacity of a sensing body in a sensual world. This manner of distinguishing affect from emotion is the one most commonly used by theorists of feeling (Altieri, Ngai, Oatley, Terada, Tomkins, among others). Thinking of this in terms of Sartre at the keyhole, we might say that when he is alone, in a moment of pure observation, what he is experiencing is affect; with the footsteps, he is inaugurated into the social and into the possibility of emotion. I linger over the nuances of these theoretical approaches because I think they suggest ways that shame—as form and as affect—might bridge the traditional gaps between self and other.

Where theorists differ is in the relative importance they give to subjectivity, to the self that feels. One of the perils of considering Affect as centrifugal to human subjectivity, is that it can lead to problematic modes of reading (or interpretation) that consider every affective element of a text only within the narrative, temporal, subjectivity-grounded modes of Affect-as-Emotion. We run the risk, as Charles Altieri argues, of “overread[ing] for ‘meaning’ while underreading the specific modes of affective engagement presented by works of art” (2). We practice what has elsewhere been called “symptomatic reading” and, in the process, mistake the clap of thunder and lightening for light only, and the smell of tar for nothing more than darkness. Alternatively, a peril associated with the Massumi version of Affect is that it erases the particularity of human experience in favor of something supposedly universal, a “something” which too often, and too quickly, can look a lot like the objective, universal truthfulness of what is ultimately a white, heterosexual, male perspective. What we are after here, then, is something that sits, uncomfortably, between the two. The subtlety of the



position I am pursuing here is one Sedgwick struggled with, here summarized by Art historian Jason Edwards:

Following *Fat Art, Thin Art*, Sedgwick grew only more interested in challenging both the damagingly static and conservative essentialism of conceptions of the core self and the fatuous postmodern suggestion that there are millions of random or endlessly proliferative, different ways a person could wear his or her body and selfhood (128).

While it may seem counterintuitive to explore the concept of shame while flouting both the notion of the core self and of endlessly proliferative selfhoods, we will find that several of the works this dissertation studies do just that.

### **Kinds of Shame: Shame as Emotion, Shame as Intensity**

Considering shame according to these two models, we will find that, as above, there are (loosely) two modes of thinking about shame, one more attached to subjectivity than the other. In the first—the path pursued by philosophers Giorgio Agamben, Emanuel Levinas, and, with more nuance, by Silvan Tomkins—shame is the affect that is most closely aligned with the ideals, aspirations, and values of the self as it exists within society. Tomkins says, “In contrast to all other affects, shame is an experience of the self by the self. Shame is the most reflexive of affects in that the phenomenological distinction between the subject and object of shame is lost” (qtd. in Sedgwick 136). Shame, in this view, signals a discord between the experienced self and the values upheld by that self. In more conservative societies (or individuals), the values of the self may be more normative and in such cases, the expectations of society and the times when one falls short of such expectations are also moments where the shamed personality emerges. In this sense, shame always appears in the margins, in darkness. The corollary of this subjective understanding of shame is the notion—best articulated by Psychologist Leon Wurmser—that shame has a protective function. Shame’s tendency to withdraw is shame’s way of protecting deviation or, put in more positive terms, the idiosyncrasies, status-quo-overturning, creative aspects of an individual personality. Withdrawal permits a creative distance in which such idiosyncrasies can flourish undisturbed before emerging—again, as Wurmser would say—heroically, in defiance of society’s restrictive norms. Shame’s anti-social nature makes it an incubator for individuals who can then become society’s most challenging provocateurs—be they within scientific, spiritual, social or artistic realms.

Shame considered along the lines of Affect-as-Intensity is a more challenging proposition. Timothy Bewes, in *The Event of Postcolonial Shame* argues that shame is peculiarly resistant to the logic of symptomatology: of cause and effect. If we translate this resistance to the register of literary interpretation, [we find that].... A work that affects us with shame is a work that cannot be contained in a mere reading; something else, some event, is taking place that is not reducible to the personality writing, nor to the personality reading, nor to the historical circumstances in which the text was composed, nor to the events it depicts, nor to any combination of these.

(Bewes 22)

Even as the thesis that shame is identical to the self that feels is a compelling one, Bewes argumentation here demands that we think of shame not only within the constraints of Affect-as-Emotion but also as Massumi described it, as Affect-as-Intensity.

Shame is a figure not of the intimacy of the self to itself—or at least, if that is so, it is the very discontinuity of the self, its otherness to itself, that is emblemized in that relation. Shame, far from being a figure of self-identity, is a figure of incommensurability. It is experienced when we are treated as something or someone—a foreigner, a personality type, an ethical person, a generous spirit, a human being, an animal, an alien—that is incommensurable with our own experience. (Bewes 23)

Shame as emotion is tied to selfhood, but Shame as Affect is not. As this relates to literary interpretation, then, an attention to shame requires not only an attention to the personality that writes, the personality that reads, and the personalities depicted in the work, but also to that which cannot be summarized by the bounds of subjectivity and emotion, that which can only be noted in the sounds, sentences, and structural choices we call form.

### **Key ideas in Silvan Tomkins and Leon Wurmser**

While a variety of theorists have nourished my understanding of shame, Tomkins and Wurmser have been extraordinarily important. As is likely already evident, Eve K. Sedgwick's insightful observations and use of Tomkins' work, not to mention her own original contributions to the study of shame, have also been of utmost importance. Several key aspects of their thought will recur in this thesis, including the relationship of shame to positive affects, the role of shame theories, and the way shame safeguards our dignity. In her characteristically sharp summary of Tomkins, Sedgwick writes, "Without positive affect, there can be no shame: only a scene that offers you enjoyment or engages your interest can make you blush. Similarly, only something you thought might delight or satisfy can disgust"

(*Touching Feeling* 116). Shame only emerges as a feeling in the places we want to belong—places that have interested us, places that have provided or promised enjoyment. What makes shame feel so horrid is partly the mistake we made in hoping for interest or joy and partly the ongoingness of that hope. In Tomkins words, shame is

an affect of relatively high toxicity, that...strikes deepest into the heart of man, that... is felt as a sickness of the soul which leaves man naked, defeated, alienated, and lacking in dignity....Man is not only an anxious and a suffering animal, but is above all a shy animal, easily caught and impaled between longing and despair. (387)

Shame describes how it feels to be caught in the purgatory between isolation and communion. When we are in the hallway with Sartre hunched in an inelegant posture at the keyhole, we are absolutely alone; with the footsteps behind us, we have the possibility of communion. We are dependent on the other for the possibility of belonging, but that wonderful possibility comes with the risk of shame. When we think of this in terms of writing, a self-other binary is created between the writer and what is written, but also between writing and the reader or critic. Using Tomkins' language, we can think about reading and writing in terms he described as a shame theory.

Because this dissertation is interested in shame, it enacts what Tomkins would have called a high shame theory: I have been on the lookout for shame, have read for it and presumed its presence even when it didn't want to be found. Tomkins idea of affect theories can apply to any affect—joy-interest, distress-despair, shame-humiliation. These theories work as interpretive filters. An affect theory filters sensory and affective circumstances in such a way that one or another affect is heightened. A strong or weak shame theory can develop throughout an individual's life and its purpose is to reduce the toxic affect (shame) and increase the positive affects (interest or joy). Sedgwick summarizes:

...an affect theory has two components: 'First, it includes an examination of all incoming information for its relevance to a particular affect, in this case, shame and contempt. This is the cognitive antenna of shame. Second, it includes a set of strategies for coping with a variety of shame and contempt contingencies, to avoid shame if possible or to attenuate its impact if it cannot be avoided' (2: 319-20). The stronger the shame theory, the more expensive it is for the person who holds it...and the more its antennae make 'the shame-relevant aspects of any situation...become figural in competition with other affect-relevant aspects of the

same situation' (2:231); that is, the more often the theorist misrecognizes, imagines, sees, or seizes upon—shame. (*Touching Feeling* 115)

A high shame theory will put an individual on a constant state of alert. When Sedgwick says that the stronger the shame theory, the more expensive it is for the person who holds it, she means that a stronger shame theory demands much more attention than a weak shame theory. The *faux pas*, for someone with a strong shame theory, will be revisited a thousand times afterwards as the individual tries to understand its cause and how such a mistake might be avoided in the future. One indication of a strong shame theory, then, is constant self-monitoring: an awareness that the self and its desires, dirtinesses, digressions, deviancies and so on, are potential sources of debilitating shame and worth any amount of effort to prevent them from taking place. Someone with a weak shame theory will commit a *faux pas* in the morning and forget about it by lunch.

In terms of identity, Tomkins' articulation of shame theory illustrates convincingly why the concept of the core self impoverishes the complexity of what it means to be human. Very often, shame emerges when the values of one aspect of the self conflict with those of another:

... every individual is ordinarily vulnerable to shame experience whenever he violates the social norms which he inherits by virtue of his membership in society or whenever he violates the norms of a particular ideology to which he may be committed. The Catholic, the Communist Party member, the Christian Scientist are each vulnerable to shame not only should they violate general social norms, but also if they transgress the dictates of their religious or political ideologies. (Tomkins 412)

What matters most depends on the individual and the particular socio-cultural norms to which one is committed (by choice or by socio-cultural inheritance). Regardless of their particular formulation—something which will always be largely individual—it is universally true that shame emerges as the partial diminishment of the joy, excitement, or interest that the connection—to the Communist Party or even to one's partner—originally engendered. As we will see throughout this dissertation, reading for shame means reading with a high shame theory, something inherent to some practices of literary criticism. On this point I want to be absolutely clear: being on the lookout for shame does not need to mean that we increase the toxicity of its affects. On the contrary, being on the lookout for shame can simply be a form of listening.

When shame is experienced in the subjective sense, it is an affect or feeling that is felt by a human subject in the context of a story, or of multiple stories. The stories are not just the narratives of events outside of the self, however: they are stories we tell about ourselves, about our own personal ideals and the quests we undertake in an effort to fulfill them. Now I'd like to draw on psychologist Leon Wurmser's book *The Mask of Shame* because he describes shame within thoroughly subjective terms. Here his description echoes the way shame theory works to manage the potential of shame and its after effects as well as the way shame can pervade our everyday lives. There are, he says,

three major phenomenological types of shame. There is anxiety about something impending—shame anxiety; a reaction about something that has already occurred—shame affect in the narrower sense; and a character attitude that should prevent the other two—a shame attitude, shame as reaction formation, *Schamhaftigkeit* in German, *pudeur* in French. (Wurmser 49)

Wurmser goes on to describe the main sources of shame. I mention them here because they will provide a familiar touchpoint from which we may depart:

The content of the affect of shame—what one is ashamed for or about—clusters around several issues: (1) I am weak, I am failing in competition; (2) I am dirty, messy, the content of my self is looked at with disdain and disgust; (3) I am defective, I have shortcomings in physical and mental makeup; (4) I have lost control over my body functions and my feelings; (5) I am sexually excited about suffering, degradation, and distress; (6) watching and exposing are dangerous activities and may be punished. (Wurmser 27-28)

Much of this will read as very familiar; we all feel inadequacies such as these from time to time. Implicit in Wurmser's list is an underlying societal belief that individuals ought to demonstrate self-determination and self-control. Yet, this dissertation will illustrate that shame's range extends far beyond those values, perhaps indicating also, that the social cohesion of Wurmser's time is no longer characteristic of today. This is what might even be come to be seen as shame's gift: experiencing shame is one way we can learn about ourselves and about what is most important to us and to our society. Not everyone feels shame at being physically weak nor at being dirty, for example.

Though Wurmser's *The Mask of Shame*, published in 1980, was written later than the first volumes of Tomkins' *Affect Imagery Consciousness*, his approach to selfhood reads as less contemporary than Tomkins'. Wurmser retains the ideal of a core self, saying "[in] the core of oneself, the deepest feelings for someone else or for a supreme value need to be

protected and veiled against all eyes. Shame, then, is a guardian protecting the core of integrity" (47-48). If one of shame's gifts is the way it provides us with a mirror, another is that its constant desire to reconnect with society means that it can conjure up our most heroic capacities—capacities that allow us to transcend the way society can shame our deepest self. On the other hand, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick summarizes, Tomkins' work remains

[supremely alien] to any project of narrating the emergence of a core self. A reader who undergoes the four volumes of Tomkin's *Affect Imagery Consciousness* feels the alchemy of the contingent involve itself so intimately with identity that Tomkins comes to seem the psychologist one would most like to read face-à-face with Proust. (*Touching Feeling* 98)

Tomkins' description of the self as something categorizable according to various emotional (affective) attachments and as something in an ongoing state of transformation means that if there is a redemptive aspect to shame, it is that it monitors an aspect of the self that another aspect of the self deems in need of monitoring. Whether this monitoring is good or bad is not a question Tomkins sees fit to ask, and the power that shame asserts internally—of one part of the self over the other—is ever-changing. Whether or not a momentary soft-spot will become a lifetime soft-spot is a complicated question and not something about which Tomkins is prescriptive. The flexibility of contemporary understandings of shame dovetail with the flexibility of today's concepts of selfhood.

### **Kinds of Autobiography and Theories of Selfhood**

It goes without saying that implicit in every autobiography is a theory of selfhood. Traditionally, that theory posited a model of selfhood that was thoroughly Romantic: "each individual possesses a unified, unique selfhood which is also the expression of a universal human nature" (Anderson 5). Autobiography gathered together the disparate parts of the self and made of them a whole: a coherent self emerged in the process of writing. Not surprising that another tenet of that model was that the self was male:

the genre of autobiography has been implicitly bound up with gender. Insofar as autobiography has been seen as promoting a view of the subject as universal, it has also underpinned the centrality of masculine – and, we may add, Western and middle-class – modes of subjectivity. (Anderson 3)

Autobiography, up until recently, tended to participate in upholding "ideals of autonomy, self-realization, authenticity and transcendence" (Anderson 4) and exemplified "the vital

impulse to order' which has always underlain creativity" (Olney qtd. in Anderson 5). Read from our postmodern perspective, these constraints on selfhood make autobiography a form that is inherently shameful—not as shameful as another form of performance—like blackface whose performance of racial identity is inextricable from the shame of racism—but perhaps in that order.

Starting in the 1970s, feminist scholars began work undermining the patriarchal implications of this genre. One barrier they had to overcome, according to Carolyn G. Heilbrun, author of *Writing a Woman's Life*, was the idea that writing about one's life presumed that one had taken control over their life; the obstacle for woman was that taking power was "unwomanly... woman have been deprived of the narratives, or the texts, plots, or examples, by which they might assume power over—take control of—their own lives." (17). That woman ought not only write their autobiographies but rescue those of writers in the past became an important project for many feminist scholars in the 1980s and 90s. Yet, a concurrent theoretical development was the increasingly widespread adoption of the Derridian/Foucauldian perspective that declared "there is only text," or "the author is dead." To this, literary scholar Nancy Miller declared:

The postmodernist decision that the Author is Dead and the subject along with him does not, I will argue, necessarily hold for women, and prematurely forecloses the question of agency for them. Because women have not had the same historical relation of identity to origin, institution, production that men have had, they have not, I think, (collectively) felt burdened by too much Self, Ego, Cogito, etc. (Miller qtd. in Anderson 88)

According to this logic, women's autobiographies (and by extension those of other marginalized groups) needed to be written as a counterweight to the centuries during which the autobiographies of white middle-class men defined the genre. An obvious drawback of this project, and any other project that begins with identity, is that it proposes the stability of the identity that is "woman," and, as we see in this dissertation, with the dominance of the subject and the core self as the starting point for autobiographical writing. Admirable as such projects may have been, they present, to my mind, a significant problem whose political consequences are undeniably evident in the ways they undermine a much-needed solidarity, especially on the left. Identity politics can tend to create alliances which fracture society, something which only benefits those who *can* consolidate—such as the Republicans, such as the Conservative Party in Canada or the *Front national* in France.

A later generation of theorists have similarly defended the importance of the personal, not, however, along the lines of protecting the importance of women's agency *per se*, but because of the way the personal can emphasize partiality and a limited perspective as opposed to the universal impersonal voice. The personal story is now emblematic of contemporary culture in North America, where radio shows such as *The Moth*, *This American Life*, and diaristic blogs all uphold the sentiment that connects the autobiographical with the authentic, the true. Even if today's use of the autobiographical speaks of the opacity of self—we may never fully know ourselves—it nevertheless maintains an authenticity in its unknowingness. In this line of thinking the purpose of the personal story is to enable identification, empathy and love in a fractured society. When it can't create feelings of identification across society, it can, at least, create protective enclaves as we will see with some of the works discussed here. Autobiography is no longer confined to its traditional mode of recounting the exceptional life of a usually white, usually male, individual.

In contrast to the authentic core self that underpinned the traditional autobiography, the works I consider here embrace a much more flexible notion of selfhood. Concepts such as "integrity" no longer refer to one's incontrovertible values, but rather to the way many aspects of the self work together dialectically, making a whole. We may never fully understand all the parts of the self, and this might be especially true in relation to what we love, desire, or find beautiful. In her book *Cruel Optimism* Lauren Berlant writes that "being coherent in relation to desire does not impede the subject's capacity to live on, but might actually...protect [that capacity]" (16). The desire to protect a place of incoherence or undecidability or opaqueness is central to how contemporary thinkers conceive of both selfhood and of the self in writing. Again, Mari Ruti describes something similar:

I do not believe that our character is a fixed core of being that once and for all dictates who we are. 'Authenticity,' in my opinion, is not a function of specific personality traits or attributes, but rather a mode of living and relating to the world; it is not some sort of a permanent truth of our being, but rather a matter of how we enter into the continuous process of transformation that characterizes human life. (9)

While the position of author remains a coveted one, I think there are ways of writing and reading that disrupt any sense that the author replicates the power of the colonizer, say, or of the universal male subject. Even in books that are predominantly discursive or argumentative, the power of the speaking voice can be undermined by a reading that reads for affect:



The sense that power is a form of relationality that deals in, for example, negotiations (including win-win negotiations), the exchange of affect, and other small differentials, the middle ranges of agency—the notion that you can be relatively empowered or disempowered without annihilating someone else or being annihilated, or even castrating or being castrated—is a great mitigation of that endogenous anxiety, although it is also a fragile achievement that requires discovering over and over. (Sedgwick, "Melanie Klein" 631-32)

Autobiographies that permit such relative empowerment are, indeed, fragile achievements. The works I treat here all achieve this to some extent.

The purpose of this dissertation is to study the way that shame informs, inspires, and limits academic and literary autobiography. I begin and end the dissertation with literary criticism inflected with autobiographical writing, beginning, therefore, with a study of Ann Cvetkovich's *Depression: A Public Feeling* and Kate Zambreno's *Heroines*, both of which aim to establish a collective identity (queer in the first, female in the second) as a rebuttal to the traditional male authoring of autobiography. The sense of outrage that pervades especially the latter book (and the outrage it inspires) bleeds into the second chapter which treats two semi-fictional autobiographies, Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be?* and Ben Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station*. For both Heti and Lerner, a key question in an age where authenticity and sincerity are constantly interrogated is whether or not anything—art, in particular—can have meaning. In the third chapter, an unnamed narrator traces the shame of heartbreak, depression and longing in Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*. In the fourth, Anne Carson's *Nox* articulates the various shames of personality, subjectivity and identification, but also how writing itself can gesture to a less domesticated kind of shame: to the physiology of a book that blushes, averts its gaze, hunches its shoulders. In the final chapter, I explore shame at the very farthest reaches of subjectivity, where the subject, literary critic Timothy Bewes, writes about shame as an event in the context of the postcolonial. Taken together, these works start to paint a portrait of a self that is better described in terms such as 'becoming' where subjectivity has about it something contingent or temporary, a kind of self, in other words, that has relinquished much of its authority and therefore its capacity to dominate. The effect of these works is a collective overturning of the subject as a starting point for ethics primarily because such a move seems necessary if we ever want to escape the subject-object structure that has been at the heart of centuries of systemic inequality.

## Shame as *Pharmakon*

It is with this kind of flexibility in mind that I propose that shame be thought of as a *pharmakon*, a term whose range of significance includes a remedy, a poison, and something that intoxicates. Hemlock was a *pharmakon*. It killed Socrates, but the clay pots that delivered the stuff were also found in the ruins of Athen's hospital: it was also a cure. We might even imagine shame as that clay pot: a container that can deliver, by dint of dosage, a substance that will either heal us or kill us. There is no doubt that a life defined by shame, especially a shame that is unexamined, will be a cruel kind of existence. Yet shame is one of the mechanisms that teaches us how to belong where we most want to: ignoring it all together might mean ignoring its lessons which include not only how to behave "appropriately" but what (and who) matters to us most. While there is a kind of bliss to being alone the way Sartre was as he crouched before the keyhole, we cannot control when the footsteps behind us will appear. Shame may allow us to withdraw temporarily but also might teach us to better negotiate, "the vagaries of social life, where others are both necessary and unreliable supports for the self. As such, shame is not to be avoided, but rather explored as part of the process of becoming a subject in relation to others, a process which involves both the pleasures and the risks of social life" (Geunther n.pag).

This dissertation examines the risks and gifts of shame, but it will also examine the risks and gifts of writing. The term *pharmakon* comes from Plato's works, and in the *Phaedrus*, Plato describes writing as a *pharmakon*. Derrida's essay, "Plato's Pharmacy," rehearses the debate about writing's value as it occurred between Socrates and Phaedrus on a path that led them far beyond Athen's walls. It is the first time that Socrates has left Athens. Phaedrus has convinced him to leave the urban world of men and enter the country world of daemons and nymphs by promising to read to him. Socrates can neither read nor write; during their discussion he calls writing a *pharmakon*, by which he means a drug—something enticing enough to have convinced him to leave the city. Derrida recounts how the discussion about writing takes shape in a myth, where the Egyptian demigod Theuth is presenting writing as a finished work of art or a gift to King Thamus. But Theuth is seeking Thamus' approval. Will King Thamus agree that writing *is* a gift? "The value of writing will not be itself, writing will have no value, unless and to the extent that god-the-king approves of it" (Derrida, "Pharmacy" 432). The King rejects it. Writing, the *pharmakon*, is dangerous because it will be used by men who want to appear learned and wise without them actually

being so; they will no longer need to remember what they learn. Furthermore, writing will be like death:

another thing held against the invention of the *pharmakon* is that it substitutes the breathless sign for the living voice, claims to do without the father (who is both living and life-giving) of *logos*, and can no more answer for itself than a sculpture or inanimate painting...The master of writing, numbers, and calculation does not merely write down the weight of dead souls; he first counts out the days of life, *enumerates* history. (Derrida, "Pharmacy" 435).

This is the *pharmakon* as autobiography where the form is, in Paul de Man's thinking, a kind of literary death mask. Through the *pharmakon* another set of opposites are introduced—life/death, speech/ writing, philosophy/sophistry, day/night—opposites that the concept will immediately work to overcome: "And if one got to thinking that something like the *pharmakon*—or writing—far from being governed by these oppositions, opens up their very possibility without letting itself be comprehended by them; if one got to thinking that it can only be out of something like writing—or the *pharmakon*—that the strange difference between inside and outside can spring," then one would recognize something in it that no longer even resembles mere logic or discourse, (Derrida, "Pharmacy" 437). All of this could be said of shame as well. Shame is the most flexible of emotions:

We may feel shame for many things for which no one has shamed us. We may not feel shame though another tries to make one feel ashamed. We may be shamed by another, though the other does not intend that we should feel ashamed. We may be shamed because the other expresses negative affect toward us, though he does not wish to shame us as such. Finally, we may be shamed only because another tries to shame us. (Tomkins 370).

The *pharmakon* is a figure of reversibility and one that has been important to several of the thinkers in this dissertation.

I posit that we can also find the *pharmakon* not only *in* writing, but as a figure of writing. This is most obvious in the proliferation of the figure of the paradox which has become one of the most compelling manifestations of a widespread awareness of the inadequacy of language. The paradox is a hallmark of poetic intelligence: it gestures to seemingly contradictory extremes and then argues for a truth that transcends the differences—both sides are true. The *pharmakon* is a conceptual paradox:

Spivak's use of *pharmakon* alludes to Derrida's essay 'Plato's Pharmacy'; the word - taken from Plato's *Phaedrus*, and usually translated as 'remedy' - denotes, she

says, 'poison that is medicinal when knowingly administered.' In other words, the *pharmakon* ... signifies an entity that has no truth in and itself. (Bewes, *Reification* 13)

The paradox is also the figure of speech that most closely resembles shame's dialectic, shame's distances, and shame's unrelenting awareness of inadequacy.

In Tomkins' writing about shame in particular and the negative affects in general, he makes use of a term that corresponds nicely with the concept of the *pharmakon*. The term is "toxic," or "toxicity." Like the *pharmakon*, something that is toxic can potentially heal as well as harm. Tomkins links the toxic effects of the negative affects to drugs, saying that every year many drugs are discovered which can tackle disease but which are useless "because their toxicity for the host is as great as it is for the bacteria or virus against which it is effective" (Tomkins 292). Similarly, "if negative affect is too punishing, biologically or psychologically, it may be worse than the alarming situation itself, and it may hinder rather than expedite dealing with it" (Tomkins 292). In the world of animals, we find that, "occasionally the overly anxious animal is so frozen in fear that he is eaten before he can flee the predator" (Tomkins 293). Fear is toxic: a too-high dosage can be paralyzing rather than catalyzing.

I want to emphasize that the *pharmakon*—be it shame, or writing, or a poison or a drug—is not a meaningless figure. It is simply a term that always requires qualification. Its usage is context dependent, contingent. Inconsiderate use of it, therefore, poses great risk. The toxicity of shame has been well documented and is undeniable. Shame registers our weakness, deficiencies, and vulnerabilities like nothing else; it also registers our hopes, ambitions, and most profound connections. What if there were a way to register such weaknesses and attachments without falling into an egoistic obsession about them? What if they could be as potentially educational as advice from a wise parent or a good book? What if it were possible to learn to read shame without the ego? What if this 'most subjective of emotions' could become just a little bit less subjective? Less about us and more about attention to the world around us? Earlier I suggested that listening might be an appropriate reaction to shame as it appears in literary criticism, autobiography, and even in ourselves. Listening to shame need not mean loving it, but it might be a way to think about shame without the judgments that normally attend awareness of the affect.

I hope it is as true for every writer in the humanities—if not elsewhere—as it has been for me, that a personal commitment or passion lies as the starting point of their research. In

my own personal constellation of shame I can say that the family grief of Anne Carson's *Nox*, the heartbreak of Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*, and the often thwarted desire to create something meaningful in this life—be it a work of art or an academic study—have all been, for me, situations imbued with shame in its best and worst iterations. That I occupy a privileged place in the world is only more obvious as I reflect on the numerous privileges that have allowed me to pursue this topic so earnestly. I can only hope that Sedgwick is right that such psychological and affective motivations have contributed to, and not diminished, the academic quality of this work ("Melanie Klein" 629). My commitment to sharing the lessons of these years of close reading has propelled my decision to write in the form I have. I believe very much in the project of academic work being accessible to anyone with an interest and the time to read; at the same time there is no reason—especially in a subject that touches every single person, as this one does—for the full complexity of the topic to be simplified to the point of reduction. I personally despair at the demands contemporary culture places on us to be happy, fulfilled, and ecstatic at all times and hope that in some small way these reflections on shame as an affect and shame as a form of writing permits a degree of relaxing into the discomfiting lessons the affect has for all of us.

If at the end of this work, I have shown that shame is inextricable from the parts of our lives that matter most and that in such places, shame can be a *pharmakon* that heals, I will be content. If at the end, I have illustrated how in the places where shame is toxic that it can, *sometimes*, through persistence and a bit of grace, be overcome, I will have succeeded. On these two fronts, discernment might allow us to see which shames we might want to keep and which ones we might want to abandon. In the first case, where shame amounts to a recognition of systemic injustice, perhaps our shame will inspire us to political commitments, to efforts that could, over time, dismantle the framework upon which such injustice is based: most notably the binary distinction of self and other.

Yet, for all my optimism, it is true that there are some shames that have woven themselves into the very heart of our beings, lives, and societies. In such cases, the notion of anything so detached or rational as "discernment" will be laughable: the idea that we could discern an effective approach would be an idea that fails to appreciate the ways that some shame—usually our deepest ones—practically constitute us. They have been with us from our very beginning and without them we might even cease to exist. Or so it seems. In such cases, perhaps the best approach is to abandon the story of rationality, of emotion, and return to the noisy, demanding, electrified scene where Affect reigns. There, stories surrender their

power and give way to something bigger: to the wash of Affect that always resists, resists, resists our efforts to comprehend and conquer.

## The Disappointments of Empathy: On Subjectivized Criticism

Wounds promise authenticity and profundity; beauty and singularity; desirability. They summon sympathy. They bleed enough light to write by. They yield scars full of stories and slights that become rallying cries....And yet—beyond and beneath their fruits—they still hurt.

Leslie Jameson, *The Empathy Exams*

...to say that the traumatized self is the true self is to say that a particular facet of subjective experience is where the truth of history lies: it is to suggest that the clarity of pain marks a political map for achieving the good life, if only we would read it. It is also imply that in the good life there will be no pain.

Lauren Berlant, "The Subject of True Feeling," in *Cultural Pluralism, Identity Politics and the Law*

One of the implicit indicators that negative feelings—and shame in particular—are considered pathological is the popularity of books that advertise its antidote. Not that we ever thought it was grand to feel bad, but these days, feeling bad isn't merely rotten, it's worthy of diagnosis. Shame's longstanding association with deviance, defectiveness and weakness is also its link to pathology and the attendant assumption that a cure must be found. This is why more recent claims that shame is "all too human," sound such a redemptive chord. When shame becomes universally human as opposed to a sign of the pathological, it makes empathy possible. Empathy tops the list of antidotes to shame, and one of its most popular spokespersons is American sociologist Brené Brown, whose books have been *New York Times* bestsellers; her books, such as *Daring Greatly* and *The Gifts of Imperfection*, are self-help books with a database. Brown cites shame as the root cause of depression, drug use, and suicide and argues that

empathy is the antidote to shame. If you put shame in a petri dish, it needs three things in order to grow exponentially: secrecy, silence, and judgment. If you put the same amount in a petri dish and douse it with empathy, it can't survive. The

two most powerful words when we're in struggle: 'me too.' ("The Power of Vulnerability")

Beyond the sphere of our most intimate relations, if empathy is shame's antidote, one of its most reliable modes of delivery is the memoir. In this, our "confessional age," writers and readers of memoir seek empathy and authenticity: for every kind of failing, there's a memoir written about it to make you feel 'less alone.' Today's memoirists often trot out their deepest traumas sparking one reviewer to describe the genre as a competition in atrocity (Mendelsohn n.pag). Articles proclaiming the rise of the memoir are now so ubiquitous that their titles make fun not only of the genre but of the articles that ritually track its rise, such as *The Guardian's* "The rise and rise of the memoir," or *The New Yorker's* "Cry me a River," or "But Enough about Me" (Armitstead, Harvey, Mendelsohn). As such titles suggest, the most common critique of memoir is its implicit self-indulgence. Memoirists that take such critique seriously often to try to head off charges of solipsism by blending their self-reflections with another genre—academic study, essays, or fiction—or another medium—such as photography. Memoirists that dismiss the critique of self-indulgence often pursue an aesthetics of excess: excess feelings, excess identification, excess shame. And the academy has not quelled the tide.

To the contrary, academics have added their own slew of sub-genres including the academic memoir, the critical memoir, and others (Watson). The books I study in this chapter both take a mixed-genre approach to memoir with the goal of offering solace to those who would identify with them and critique to those who would reject them. The first, Kate Zambreno's 2012 *Heroines* is a study of the mad wives of the modernists and of the ongoing gendering of literature. The second, Ann Cvetkovich's *Depression: A Public Feeling* uses memoir and "speculative essay" to argue that depression ought to be considered less a pathology than a symptom of capitalism or as a register of the ongoing impact of racism and colonialism. Both Zambreno and Cvetkovich aim to depathologize mental illness, claiming that it is either a near-phantom ailment, dreamt up by men in an effort to justify oppressing women, or that it is a symptom of a sick society more generally. Both of these projects could be considered examples of the affect turn in scholarship, even if only one of them, Ann Cvetkovich, is an academic. By 'turn to affect,' I mean that their work suggests the influence of Eve K. Sedgwick, where affect is subjective and is narrated by a subject who feels. This, in contrast to affect as defined by Massumi, where affect is not necessarily tied to human subjectivity. Zambreno calls *Heroines* an example of subjective criticism, or criticism with the self left in (281).



My purpose in this chapter is to take seriously the political goals behind Zambreno and Cvetkovich's work. I conclude, however, that despite their promising aims, where these books fail, it is memoir that fails them. Both writers place enormous stock in the value of their feelings, presuming that their raw presentation will create an intimate space with readers, and that this intimate space will be politically generative. Empathy, they hope, will lead to a politics. In the first half of the chapter, I want to show how Zambreno and Cvetkovich tie their personal accounts of mental illness to a larger politics—in Zambreno to a long-standing sexism in literary culture and the accusations of mental illness that has served it, and in Cvetkovich to similar systemic causes of depression. In the second half, building on two of Lauren Berlant's concepts—the intimate public and cruel optimism—I want to show how empathy cannot be politically generative. Empathy's efforts to dismantle the structures of shame are effective only at a very local level. Beyond such localities, I argue that these efforts run the risk of expanding shame's domain rather than limiting it.

For some, memoirs are a way of providing solace to the similarly afflicted. In such cases, the memoir allows the individual who has suffered the opportunity to share their personal journey with an audience who seeks to understand it or already does, having been through something similar themselves. It can alleviate the shame of the writer and of the reader, but only if they identify and empathize with each other. Such works can shore people up, providing them with the much needed community and potential tools for overcoming shame. In such cases, such books work as a nurturing parent might, where

the child is offered sympathy and help to overcome his discouragement and shame.... As this is done again and again the child grows in self-confidence, learns how to tolerate his own shame responses whenever he meets failure and learns how to cope both with the sources of defeat and with shame and discouragement.... Since the experience of shame is all but inevitable in the development of human beings, a critical part of the rewarding socialization of shame and self-contempt must consist in teaching the child the double skills of tolerating his own shame and in overcoming the source of it. (Tomkins 454)

This describes much of the impetus behind the depression memoir. Destigmatizing or depathologizing depression is almost always its goal. Such works may create a temporary asylum for those struggling to deal with traumatic situations and can strengthen the empathic muscles for those for whom the struggle isn't personal, allowing them insight into what would normally be a very private affair. In the hands of Cvetkovich and Zambreno, however,

the depression memoir aims to transcend the personal, becoming instead, works that seek to address depression as a historical or social ail as opposed to a personal struggle.

### **Kate Zambreno's *Heroines***

*Heroines* began as a blog called *Frances Farmer is My Sister*. It was, and is, an invitation-only blog. When she began to write it, she was living in Akron, Ohio, reading about the mad wives of the modernists, and experiencing herself as a reduced identity—no longer a writer (no one was interested), but a wife. The blog was a way for her to re-establish herself as a writer. She describes the community she created there as,

A small community of mostly women, all writers, each [in] their own cages, in different corners of the world...speak[ing] of writing...confess[ing] and hear[ing] confessions of the pauses and gaps and scratches that were not writing. (93)

The blog created a space where the shame of being a writer-who-does-not-write could be expressed. Shame emerges where we fail our own aspirations. The empathetic community assuaged that shame because it said 'me too.' When Zambreno's first book, *Green Girl*, was published by a small independent press, she writes that she

had to exit the private bubble of my dinner party with the mad wives, and begin to negotiate becoming a public writer-self in the world. Because of this, the blog began to be overtaken by doubt, or rather become a performance of this doubt. The posts began to be about what it was like to be a minor writer in the world, these moments of humiliation, of abjection, of shame. (285)

The online community shored her up, especially regarding her feeling that the small press was inherently minor, that her readership would be necessarily limited. One of her blog's readers was the radical feminist Chris Kraus who would become the editor of *Heroines*. Kraus is the author of *I Love Dick*, and one of the first feminist writers to explore humiliation as feminist freedom.<sup>2</sup> Kraus saw the blog as the beginning of a book. In her acknowledgements, Zambreno writes "I feel lucky to have as an editor such a radical writer who has revolutionized my own conceptions of the urgency of not erasing the self in our criticism" (309). For Zambreno, writing the self into criticism defies a gendered literary culture whose injunctions against women's writing date at least as far back as the modernists.

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<sup>2</sup> *I Love Dick* is also fictional autobiography. "Dick," is Dick Hebdige, British media theorist and author of the 1979 *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*.

There are several parts in her project, and I'd like to disentangle them first before evaluating how they work together. The tangled parts are: the claim that what she is doing here constitutes literary criticism; that writing the self 'into' criticism constitutes a politics; that the political nature of the project is feminist one; that feminist writing and women's writing can be defined, and that she is equipped to do the defining.

*Heroines* is part memoir, part literary criticism and all manifesto. The overall aim of the project is to oust the sexism of contemporary literary culture, in particular the way it ignores what she calls "women's writing," writing she defines as fragmented, menstrual, highly personal, and ecstatically irrational. She argues that, "Inherent in any dismissal of women writers who draw from memoir is a bias against autobiography that comes out of modernism. The self-portrait, as written by a woman, is read as somehow dangerous and indulgent" (235). This sounds like an outcry, but I think it's a point of pride.

As a work of literary criticism, the supposed subject of study is the mad wives of the modernists and the invalidating rhetorics that made them so. These rhetorics were crafted by their husbands, mainly, but also by modernist literary culture and *fin-de-siècle* society at large. Her main focus is Vivien Eliot and Zelda Fitzgerald, but she also writes about Jane Bowles, Jean Rhys, and Virginia Woolf. Her inclusion of Woolf among the silenced ladies already illustrates something of Zambreno's methodology. Woolf is sometimes the husband, but mostly the mad wife: she is invalidating husband when she declares that art must transcend the self; she is mad wife when she submits to writing only an hour a day in abeyance with doctor's orders and her husband's observation that writing seemed to make her "nervous."

*Heroines* begins with an invocation to the prophetess Sibyl, a figure associated with writing and prophecy, but also to the withering of the body, a body reduced to a mere voice, "And then not really her voice at all" (Zambreno 8). Zambreno casts the modern wives as Sibyl-figures, and then models herself after them: "Sitting at the mouth of my cave, I string together fragments on paper. My scraps scattering to the wind if unread./ Out of this narrative will emerge a chalk outline. It is the body of a woman" (9). *Heroines* is constructed out of a series of fragments, most of them about a paragraph long, some of which connect to the others in longer narratives or longer arguments and others which stand alone, a structure due in part to its origin as a blog.

Zambreno interweaves highly personal accounts of her life with her husband John with the lives of the modernists, describing the various houses she and her husband have lived in—in London, in Chicago, and then in Akron, Ohio. She compares their homes to

those of the modernists and their lives to theirs: “We echoed the Eliots. Marrying fast out of a sense of noble adventure (they had known each other three months, we had known each other nine)” (27). Thus ensues her undoing: she becomes a wife, begins to “tell the mutual lie of marriage” (16), joins in the “union of forgotten or erased wives. I pay my dues daily” (18). That she loves her husband doesn’t preclude her from hating him: he drags her from bed in the mornings, tells her to be more disciplined, uses an “invalidating rhetoric” (69) and eventually, withdraws. Later, she will get her period and he will bring her tea (72). Meanwhile, she is Virginia Woolf, she is Zelda Fitzgerald, or worse: “I am Madame Bovary as I read *Madame Bovary*. Ennui, excess of emotions. *C’est moi*. I am Zelda, I am Vivien(ne)” (19).

Zambreno seems to think of identification as a research method. Identification defines who does and does not get to read *Frances Farmer is my Sister*, and identification is her method of studying the mad wives. Identification is also an important element in the affect of shame, where identification is the bond—chosen or otherwise—that makes us most interested in (and empathetic with) the lives of others who *are like us*. Zambreno tells us that she and the mad wives share physical and mental ills, that they all struggle to write, that they are all married to men who invalidate them. This identification is timeless: the past century is one long present tense. Vivien Eliot behaves badly; Kate Zambreno throws a book at her husband, tells him “FUCK OFF” (60). She declares it true for them and true for her that “the patriarch decides on the form of communication. Decides on the language”(60). Vivien’s husband, T.S. Eliot, abandoned her (102). Zambreno describes her own abandonment. It happens daily when her husband goes to work. If he calls at lunch, she says, “[he] plays Savior” (50). She describes these women who, by dint of marriage, have been prevented from writing (79). Zambreno and the mad wives have stomach problems and arguments with medics and psychologists. When she and the mad wives do not mirror each other so perfectly, Zambreno tries to “channel” them, mostly by copying their outfits: “I already wear the weird costumes and cloche hats and spit curls”(114). “In channeling [Vivien],” says Zambreno, “I can sense her early inner spirit and see it squelched and doomed into sickness and submission. Under different circumstances...she could have been an author”(107). Zambreno buys their hats and their make-up—“a NARS blush called Madly,” “a NARS lipgloss called Orgasm”(179); she buys their nailpolish—the sparkly silver glitter that Zelda wore in her last days at the asylum.

While Zambreno paints a compelling portrait of the various ways early twentieth century culture oppressed women and the mad wives in particular, her argument that today’s

culture is unchanged is unconvincing. She argues that the sexism of the early twentieth century continues today is visible in a bias against autobiography and memoir, yet it would be hard to find a more popular form. These complaints show that she seeks a literary audience while writing in a popular form: contemporary literary cultural criminalizes the confessional mode (266). She says

The idea that one must control oneself and stop being so FULL of self remains a dominating theory around mental illness, and, perhaps tellingly, around other patriarchal laws and narratives, including the ones governing and disciplining literature. (55)

According to Zambreno, the confessional mode is considered feminine. *Heroines* wants to salvage women's writing: "We live in a culture that punishes and tries to discipline the messy woman and her body and a literary culture that punishes and disciplines the overtly autobiographical (for being too feminine, too girl, too emotional)" (252).

*Heroines* wants to define women's writing as excessive, consumeristic, menstrual, fragmentary, anxious, unpolished, diaristic, autobiographical, unplotted; at the very least we can say that *Heroines* is all of those things. She says,

I am beginning to realize that taking the self out of our essays is a form of repression. Taking the self out feels like obeying a gag order—pretending an objectivity where there is nothing objective about the experience of confronting and engaging with and swooning over literature. (281)

Taking the self out would not only take away the "swooning over literature," but also the stories of marginalization—of the way she and other women are subjected to an invalidating rhetoric.

Yet, if *Heroines* were literary criticism or literary history (as it has been described by many critics), it ought to have cited Zelda Fitzgerald and Vivien Eliot's writing rather than their nail polish. One of the negative reviews of *Heroines* asked:

What does it mean to reject the psychopathology offered by Zambreno — as a reader, as a writer, as a woman? To disinvest myself of disorder in my response to this text? To reject hysteria and mania, to refuse the glamor of the broken woman writer? (Keeler, *LA Review of Books* n.pag)

What it means is to refuse to revel in the glamor of the wounded woman. In her essay "Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain," Leslie Jameson writes:

We may have turned the wounded woman into a kind of goddess, romanticized her illness and idealized her suffering, but that doesn't mean she doesn't happen.

Women still have wounds: broken hearts and broken bones and broken lungs.

How do we talk about these wounds without glamorizing them? (187)

It's a difficult question, but not one that Zambreno is interested in answering. She wants to do the opposite: "I am trying to conjure up an atmosphere of oppression" (53). This is perhaps the most problematic aspect of Zambreno's memoir, whose politics are firmly situated in a discourse of female oppression and in heralding a kind of writing that "leaves the self in," but whose real experience speaks not to a history of sexism but of quite the opposite.

What happens if the self that Zambreno has supposedly "left in" is as fictionalized as her kinships with the mad wives? In her acknowledgements she thanks her husband, John, for being her "collaborator and co-conspirator, always my first reader and indefatigable editor on all my books, especially this one. Thank you for...encouraging me never to censor myself, if it served the project, even if it involved making you a character" (309). If her husband of the 'invalidating rhetoric' was a character and if her status as a marginalized writer was not the result of systemic oppression but rather emblematic of the slow accumulating recognition most writers would be lucky to experience, what are we to make of Zambreno's political claims?

Yet, in writing so explicitly of what she is doing, perhaps this is Zambreno's saving grace: she is doing this consciously, she says several times. One would imagine that there is a logic behind this effort. What is that logic? What does she hope it will do? If the atmosphere of oppression needs to be conjured so explicitly, is she not, then, taking some responsibility for it—it having been her creation as much as his? Or, even, more her creation than his? Certainly this is what makes Kraus' *I Love Dick* so humiliating: Dick may not come off as the most sympathetic character but he is no monster. If there is a monster in that book, it is Chris. Looked at from this perspective, these books enact nothing less than Gramsci's notion of Hegemony—the notion both the subjugated and the oppressor actively or passively agree that the power distribution should be thus. Neither military force nor domestic violence are needed to perpetuate this imbalance. Whatever we make of it, we cannot make of it a politics. It may be hard to define reality, but we can at least say that anything that is so self-consciously conjured is not it. Politics wants to deal with reality as much as it can.

Zambreno's "literary criticism" is really a rescue campaign, and, as should be clear from her incessant identification with the mad wives, the rescue campaign is not one conducted for their benefit, but for hers. The unflattering portraits that she paints of Tom Eliot and Scott Fitzgerald are convincing, but if the aim of this work was to rescue the literary output of Vivien and Zelda from the silencing mechanisms of a literary establishment

that would reduce them to their hysterias, she fails. Worse: she sees them that way too. Vivien, Zelda, Virginia, Jane, Jean, Sylvia: those women are all foils for Kate Zambreno, character roles that she plays. Zambreno didn't really pay attention to her subjects:

Zambreno has a tendency, throughout *Heroines*, to erase the specificity of each of her mad wives, even as she is fiercely possessive of them. She calls up their situations as if from a catalogue of gendered slights, generic female oppressions.... That Zambreno aligns herself with the feminine, with all of these women writers who've been suppressed, is one thing. That she makes them all into one entity (her) is quite another. Why should we clump Vivien(ne) Eliot together with Virginia Woolf, why Jane Bowles with Sylvia Plath? Placing these histories, these women, beside each other under the guise of their shared womanhood threatens to hollow out their work and, perhaps more crucially, their lives.

(Keeler, *LA Review of Books* n.pag)

In other words, Zambreno, rather than illustrating the saving power of confessional literature, illustrates the danger of generality. Note the outraged tone of Keeler's review. Keeler knows—*Emily* Keeler knows—that Zambreno is making claims on behalf of womanhood that Keeler doesn't buy. Plenty of books write about experiences that are not our own; this is often their virtue. Keeler's outrage stems from the fact that Zambreno is saying that her claims are true for *all* women writers. But what kind of recognition can a fictionalized self rightly demand? What happens when self-righteousness becomes an aesthetic rather than an ethics?

Following the publication of *Heroines*, Zambreno wrote about the critical response on her blog. Conflating her self with her book, she writes:

I have been criticized lately of writing a bad book, a flawed book, a book that needs to be more disciplined, a book that needs to behave better, a book that needs to be a better scholar, a book that needs to be less obsessive and emotional and mad, a book that needs to be less vain, less circling around vanity. Did I say book? I meant self. (Zambreno qtd. by Heti, *LRB* 22)

This is a fascinating conflation, and perhaps the most revelatory confession of them all. Zambreno wants to write a flawed self, an undisciplined self, an emotional and mad self because she considers it a kind of daring. The self she writes is not a political being. It is an aesthetic, an aesthetic of excess. If there is something political about it it is that this aesthetic would find its community among her fellow bloggers, writers who, like her, identify as outsiders. They are

outside the institutions of writing, whether the major publishing houses or the universities and their creative writing programs. Outside the poetics coteries of academia. We are writers because we say we are. We reassure each other of our potential genius. (Zambreno 293)

What kind of outsider-ship is this really? If this is a politics, it is a politics based upon identification and recognition. But it is a politics that puts aesthetics first, so not really a politics at all. I see an interesting parallel in an extended review written about Tao Lin, a Brooklyn-based writer who, like Zambreno, began his writing career online and whose dry, flat aesthetic has made him a polarizing figure in contemporary letters in North America. In a review written about Tai Lin's *Taipei*, but which could equally have been about *Heroines*, Frank Guan writes,

So art, since it reduced the net amount of universal pain, was fundamentally ethical—as with “politics,” “aesthetics” were entirely replaced, or nullified, or superseded, by ethics. Just as questions of political validity depended entirely on the individual actor, questions of aesthetic quality depended entirely on the individual reader: if some communication sympathetically consoled a person, that communication was art—to that person. It was entirely possible that that thing would not be art to another person. There was no abstract standard of “good” or “bad” art that could reconcile disparate opinions. (Guan n.pag)

Zambreno's version of politics seems to be similarly unambitious. What she seems to want is recognition from those who she know will recognize her. She wants to write about the glamor of female pain for those who find it glamorous. For those who do not, she will call them patriarchs. She will call them invalidating.

In this context, perhaps the most revealing outcome of Zambreno's work is the way it essentializes women's writing, and how little criticism she has gotten for doing so. This may be because of recent outcry about the practice of negative reviewing, something many critics have foresworn in light of revelations of the ongoing gender disparity in books that get reviewed (written by mostly male authors) by reviewers, who are also mostly male.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, as a result of *Heroines*, respected literary publications such as *The Paris Review* and the *LA Review of Books* consider Zambreno an important figure in “contemporary

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<sup>3</sup> For more information on this point see the research findings at CWILA (Canadian Women in the Literary Arts) and VIDA (Women in Literary Arts), both of which track the gender gap in book reviewing culture.



literary culture and feminist discourse" (Milks) both in English-speaking North America and across the pond, where *The London Review of Books* ran a nearly 4,000 word review of the work (Heti, "I dive under the covers," *LRB* 21-22). Columbia University has engaged her as a professor (albeit adjunct); Harper Perennial re-released her first novel, *Green Girl*, this past Spring.

In terms of the fellow-feeling that might theoretically be evoked by confessional writing such as Kate Zambreno's, it seems clear that whatever benefit may arise through its creation—in *Heroines* as well as on her blog *Fannie Farmer is my Sister*—the intimacy it creates also has the potential to exclude, offend, or disgust a larger public. In terms of shame, then, Zambreno puts a lot of faith in the idea that her shame is shared (by other women, across centuries) and that expressing that shame will be political because it creates fellow-feelings such as solidarity. Identification is, indeed, one of the ways that shame spreads. We can feel ashamed of, for, and by our loved ones only because our connection to them is so close that they seem a part of us. Yet when someone demands that we identify with them (along familial, racial, or gender lines, to give a few examples), and we don't, the affect that is generated is not shame, but contempt, an affect I will discuss at length in the following chapter.

### ***Depression: A Public Feeling***

Like Kate Zambreno's *Heroines*, Ann Cvetkovich's *Depression: A Public Feeling* uses memoir and scholarly research to argue that depression ought to be considered symptomatic of the systems we live under: capitalism, racism, and colonialism to name a few. Unlike Zambreno, Cvetkovich is an established academic; before delving into the book itself, I want to situate Cvetkovich's work within its intellectual milieu of the Public Feelings projects in the United States. I will then analyze Cvetkovich's contribution to these projects according to the terms they, and she, set. In analyzing *Depression*, I begin with the latter half of her book called "A Public Feelings Project: (A Speculative Essay)" because it is there that her argument is most original and lucid. Then I'll turn to the depression memoir. About both sections, I will argue that Cvetkovich's work highlights the flexibility of shame and the way that the memoir form can sometimes mistake empathy for politics, much the way that aesthetics are (mis)taken for politics in Kate Zambreno's work.

In her introduction, Cvetkovich describes *Depression: A Public Feeling* as a project whose spirit is indebted to the group of U.S. based activists, artists, and academics who work

under the rubric of Public Feelings. Cvetkovich has been a principle actor in the group since they gathered first in 2001. She describes their work as an

investigation [that] has coincided with and operated in the shadow of September 11 and its ongoing consequences—a sentimental takeover of 9/11 to underwrite militarism, war in Iraq and Afghanistan, Bush’s reelection, and the list goes on. Rather than analyzing the geopolitical underpinnings of these developments, we’ve been more interested in their emotional dynamics. (1)

Public Feelings projects are identifiably left, queer, feminist, and activist. They meet nationally and locally; the most prominent of the local “cells” is the Feel Tank Chicago, and its most prominent scholar is Lauren Berlant, whose work we will turn to at the conclusion of this chapter. Cvetkovich describes *Depression* as a Public Feelings project not only because it aims to chart the emotional impact of the systems we live under but also because of its form, a combination of memoir and speculative essays. As we saw in the introduction, “going public as a private subject [had its roots] in earlier feminist critique of universal values [such that] personal criticism and other autobiographical acts...flourished in the 1990s” (Miller qtd. in Anderson 1-2). Under the rubric of Public Feelings, academics continue to challenge the dominance of the discursive form and of the authoritative subject who writes in such forms. What distinguishes Public Feelings projects from the earlier feminist critique is that rather than adopting a mode of writing that instantiates women as subjects equal to men, these forms often aim to dismantle the authoritative subject altogether. Kathleen Stewart, for example, begins her book, *Ordinary Affects*, by saying:

I write not as a trusted guide carefully laying out the links between theoretical categories and the real world, but as a point of impact, curiosity, and encounter. I call myself ‘she’ to mark the difference between this writerly identity and the kind of subject that arises as a daydream of simple presence. ‘She’ is not so much a subject position or an agent in hot pursuit of something definitive as a point of contact; instead, she gazes, imagines, senses, takes on, performs, and asserts not a flat and finished truth but some possibilities (and threats) that have come into view in the effort to become attuned to what a particular scene might offer. (5)

Many Public Feelings scholars continue to produce more traditional discursive texts, but it is in this unconventional spirit that Cvetkovich describes the second half of her book as a collection of “speculative essays.” Nevertheless, reading *Depression* alongside work by Kathleen Stewart or Eve Sedgwick (whose work has inspired many Public Feelings projects), Cvetkovich’s insistence on the truth of her subjective experience dates her work, making it

read much more in the spirit of 1990s feminists and queer theorists than in those that came after.

The second half of *Depression: A Public Feeling* is composed of three essays. The first, "Writing Depression: Acedia, History, and Medical Models," aims to challenge the dominance of medical and psychological explanations of depression as an illness that can be "detected, diagnosed, and treated" (90). She wants to expand the range of depression's public intellectuals to include not just doctors and psychologists, but also cultural theorists, historians, artists, monks, and ordinary people. Because she views depression as a product of a "sick culture," medical diagnosis can only ever treat an individual's symptoms, not provide a cure. In the second chapter, "From Dispossession to Radical Self-Possession: Racism and Depression," Cvetkovich asks, "What if depression, in the Americas at least, could be traced to histories of colonialism, genocide, slavery, legal exclusion, and everyday segregation and isolation that haunt all of our lives, rather than to biochemical imbalances?" (114) In the final chapter, "The Utopia of Everyday Habit: Crafting, Creativity and Spiritual Practice," Cvetkovich returns to a more personal register, describing her own "collection of cultural texts," that have accompanied her as she has battled with depression. They "reflect the sensibility and cultural taste of the specific demographic that I inhabit," she writes: "a small and frequently ephemeral niche of queer and feminist bohemian intellectuals [from] New York and other cosmopolitan cities such as Toronto and Chicago" (Cvetkovich 159). She says that she "wanted to see how the arty queer culture that sustains me brings a queer perspective to depression, one with a taste for the nonnormative and perverse" (Cvetkovich 160). As other reviewers have also commented, the strongest part of the book is this second half, and of the second half, it is the second chapter that makes the most original and substantive contribution to the notion of depression as a public feeling (Lockwood).

It is with real sensitivity that Cvetkovich articulates the problems with medical and psychological models that "presume a white and middle-class subject for whom feeling bad is frequently a mystery because it doesn't fit a life in which privilege and comfort make things seem fine on the surface" (115). The presumption that depression looks the same for everyone regardless of race or class neglects the way the medical system fails poor, non-white Americans, who don't have access to the medical system and, even if they did, wouldn't go due to historic suspicions of the medical industry and/or cultural impediments to admitting mental illness; it is also damaging to the privileged white middle-class subject (for whom life "should" feel good). Cvetkovich provides what is essentially a literature review of

scholarship dealing with race and depression before going onto a close reading of four books, two written by scholars of the African diaspora and two written by white writers for whom class mobility and immigration are pivotal backdrops to their more straightforward depression memoirs. The first two books are Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* and Jacquie Alexander's *Pedagogies of Crossing*, both of which chart the emotional impact of "an absent archive of slavery." The second two are Sharon O'Brien's *The Family Silver* and Jeffery Smith's *Where the Roots Reach for Water*.

In reading Hartman and Alexander, Cvetkovich aims to illustrate the ordinariness of depression within the everydayness of racism. One particularly powerful incident in Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* is both utterly personal and illustrative of the effects of everyday racism. When Hartman was twelve-years old, an icy patch of road led her mother to slide through a red light. When the police pulled them over, Hartman, out of an inbred terror, yelled ferociously at the policeman, reflecting what Cvetkovich summarizes as a something inherited: "alongside hopes for political change, [there was] a dread of white policemen," part of a "legacy of fear and suspicion even in a respectable black family—an inability to trust white people or a tendency to assume the worst in any encounter with authority" (131). Cvetkovich remarks upon key moments like these in order to illustrate how the broader story of depression and race is not the one that reports the depression statistics in black communities but is rather one that recounts the way it goes unnoticed. She describes her approach here as speculative or unconventional because it, "captures affective experiences that aren't always publicly visible, especially to white observers" (122).

Her treatment of Sharon O'Brien's *The Family Silver* and Jeffery Smith's *Where the Roots Reach for Water* is similarly sensitive to the way academia-fueled class ambition can be a cause of depression yet an interesting dynamic emerges out of the way that Cvetkovich identifies with both of these writers: identification leads Cvetkovich to empathy with both, but sometimes, with Smith, that identification turns to shame. O'Brien had had a successful academic career at Harvard but nevertheless, at the age of 40, became depressed:

Seeking to turn from scholarship to more creative kinds of writing (including *The Family Silver* itself), she finds a way out of depression by detaching herself from this capitalist emphasis on the pressure to make one's identity around dissertations, books, and other markers of productivity (and in this respect, among others, her story resonates with my own). (143)

Cvetkovich, O'Brien and Smith all share the pressures to be productive and the depression that prevents it. However, when Cvetkovich turns to Smith's work, she has a tendency to

discipline him. The subtext seems to be that because Smith is also an academic he ought to know better that to write about his depression in the ways he does. Reading one passage, for example, she points out how Smith fails to recognize the way his nostalgic sense of ties to the land (carried in the blood) are “naturalizing, especially to a reader attuned to notions of queer kinship,” (149) and later, she notes his insensitivity to indigenous land rights:

But when he writes of the ‘parched and unpeopled prairie’ (272) of Wyoming, where coal mines have replaced the grazing lands of the bison, he doesn’t mention that it would have been occupied (and still is) by indigenous peoples who have made the High Plains landscape their own. (Cvetkovich 150)

These are failures in his memoir because they are political failures, failures along progressive, liberal lines, failures she tries to avoid in her own memoir.

Cvetkovich’s “The Depression Journals: A Memoir” is divided into three parts: “Going Down,” “Swimming,” and “The Return.” It charts her first decent into depression, a Springtime mania, a second decent, and her slow recovery. It spans the years when Cvetkovich was struggling to finish her dissertation, deal with the academic job market, and begin the tenure-track position she holds today. Geographically, these were years of constant displacement between the unstated West coast university where she did her doctorate, the professorship at University of Texas, and a postdoc in Connecticut. In addition to these career-related displacements, Cvetkovich returned to the small community of Campbell River in British Columbia, Canada, where she grew up. These were years of negotiating with several identities—that of being queer just as Gay and Lesbian studies were taking off, that of being a young academic, and that of being the daughter to a man with manic-depression.

The journals are notable for their quotidian tone. We see Cvetkovich struggle with the everyday demands of an alarm clock, the grocery store, the Thank you Note, never mind finishing the dissertation and writing up the job proposals. We see her overcome apathy and disconnectedness in manic bursts of creative energy and spiritual connectedness. We see her mourn a friend who dies of AIDS. We see her dance at New York’s Girl Bar. We see her return to Campbell River and think seriously about her family home and the fact that it was (and probably is) indigenous land. We see her publish and flourish and fall back into depression. Shame is there at every instance, revealing itself as it always does for all of us, as a function of ones idiosyncratic attachments and aspirations. Cvetkovich’s attachments—to productivity, to boldness, to being a friend, to being political, to being a writer—are what she aspires to when she is up, but are also what shame her when she is down.

One of the weaknesses of *Depression: A Public Feeling* is Cvetkovich's equivocal relationship to privilege. In recent years, recognition of one's privilege has virtually become a mandatory first step for anyone wanting to participate in Left political activism.<sup>4</sup> Privilege comes in many forms, of course, some of which we are born into—class, race, gender—and some of which emerge over the course of a lifetime—professional status is but one example. Yet when Cvetkovich claims that she is writing about political depression and how capitalism feels, her writing has the whiff of hypocrisy when we read of her privileged experience of them. When she speaks about everyday racism, for example, she says that “racism is present, but differently so, for both white people and people of color—we are affected by a system of differential access” (120). While it is certainly true that systemic inequality affects everyone in the system, an important qualification must be made: the impact differs greatly depending on which side of inequality one finds oneself. This isn't to say that she has not suffered from depression, nor is it to say that she doesn't recognize the kind of ills that racism and capitalism causes, but simply that the shame of privilege is not a parallel to the shame of racism. Here is Cvetkovich acknowledging the way privilege appears in her everyday life: “Health maintenance has become for me a sign of self-love, although it also gives rise to some nagging questions about class. Regular dental care seems to be part of the secret life of middle-class domesticity that passes for normal” (48) or how, on moving to Connecticut, she missed the supermarket chain Whole Foods, “which, for those who can afford it, aims to transform grocery shopping from the invisible drudgery that can induce depression into an aesthetic experience” (45). What she seems to be doing is illustrating the way privilege can be an ongoing ‘nagging’ concern in the same way that racism has an ordinariness about it that structures the lives of every African-American living in the US. She doesn't make this parallel explicit, but her use of words like everydayness and ordinary in both cases makes the parallel implicit. These confessions of privilege are part of a larger trope whereby contemporary consciousness-raising often involves rituals of the confession of privilege that are meant to be working towards a more equal society. Yet, they do the opposite.

Much of Cvetkovich's discussion about her depression memoir indicates that, for her, the form itself is imbued with shame, and not simply because of its potential solipsism, but because of its use within the sphere of therapeutic culture and the skepticism it evokes within the academy where its scholarly value is doubted, (*Depression* 16). She writes about, “how

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<sup>4</sup> Please see Andrea Smith's, “Unsettling the Privilege of Self-Reflexivity.” *Geographies of Privilege*. New York: Routledge, 2013. 263–280. Print.

academia seemed to be killing me, a statement that seems very melodramatic given the privileged nature of my professional status" (18). Academia, she says, "breeds particular forms of panic and anxiety leading to what gets called depression—the fear that you have nothing to say, or that you can't say what you want to say, or that you have something to say but it's not important enough or smart enough" (18), and she asks: "Why is a position of relative privilege, the pursuit of creative thinking and teaching, lived as though it were impossible? What would make it easier to live with these sometimes impossible conditions?" (18) But what good does this do? Cvetkovich knows that she is able to see the dentist, think about indigenous land rights, and have her thoughts on such things published by one of the most prestigious academic publishing houses because of her privilege. Her confessions of privilege do not undo it; they manifest it.

I want to look more closely at the way Cvetkovich describes the writing that became this book. It illustrates an equivocation that Cvetkovich seems not to have noticed. By using the word 'equivocation' I mean to draw our attention to the way that meaning seems to slip out from under Cvetkovich. That she is not in control of these meanings is perhaps the most revealing part of the memoir: we learn most about Cvetkovich not by reading her discursively, but by reading her for what she says without quite meaning to. In a 2007 article about *Public Feelings*, she described the project that would become *Depression: A Public Feeling* as follows:

I have been combining memoir and critical essay to critique medicalized notions of depression and to document the pressures of surviving academia. This is the riskiest project I've yet undertaken, even as I am inspired by other academic and specifically queer experiments in writing and take heart from the claim that the queer memoir operates as a form of collective witness. (463)

I will read this passage twice, first for the way it uses the word queer and secondly for the way it adopts a rhetoric of risk, an important convention among memoirists.

In the passage, Cvetkovich is using the term queer in two ways. In the first, where she speaks of "queer experiments in writing," she is using the term queer to mean nonnormative. Normative writing in academia is the discursive mode of academic articles and monographs. Queer experiments in writing defy such norms. Queer in this sense resists the kind of essentialism suggested by Cvetkovich's second iteration of the word, where she says "the queer memoir operates as a form of collective witness." This second iteration suggests that what makes *Depression* a queer project is the fact that its author is a lesbian. We see this again in her justifications for including the memoir part of the book where she writes:

Although up until the last drafts of the book, I was not sure if “The Depression Journals” would remain, the vitality of memoir within minoritarian cultures (which constitute a very different point of reference than the memoirs debated in the mainstream public sphere) remained a significant counterweight to my fear of exposure. (74)

Again we see Cvetkovich claiming the position of writer-as-witness for “minoritarian cultures.” One way of understanding Cvetkovich’s ambivalent use of the word queer is through shame.

Cvetkovich’s ambivalent use of the word queer suggests that she is writing for two audiences. As Silvan Tomkins reminds us repeatedly in his work *Affect Imagery Consciousness*, shame, like all the affects, is incredibly idiosyncratic. For writers or artists, or anyone who performs their special talents for an audience, shame is particularly prevalent. Tomkins writes, “If I wish my work to be in the mainstream of contemporary efforts, I may be ashamed if my work is judged to be somewhat deviant. If, however, I wish to be creative, I may be ashamed if my work is judged to be in the mainstream of contemporary opinion,” (390). Shame relates to our aspirations; if we aspire to mainstream acceptance, accusations of deviancy shame us. Consider this modification of the Tomkins’ from what might be Cvetkovich’s perspective: ‘If I wish my work to be lauded by the mainstream, I will be ashamed if it is judged queer in the non normative sense; If, however, I wish to be recognized by my Public Feelings colleagues, I will be ashamed if my work is judged queer, in the reductive, essentialist sense.’ Since Cvetkovich hopes her work will make an impact on the wider culture where medical and psychological explanations for depression dominate, she adopts the reductive use of the word queer at the risk of alienating her allies in Public Feelings. This point may seem minor, but I think the kind of equivocating we see with her use of the word queer is repeated in other ways as well.

In particular, I was struck by the way Cvetkovich describes her project in terms of risk. *Depression* was her “riskiest project,” to date, she writes. Yet, the rhetoric of risk is actually one of the most mainstream elements of its writing. I find it difficult to read her “fears of exposure,” and claims of participation in “minoritarian culture,” as more than rhetoric. Undoubtedly, Texas at large is hard place to be a lesbian, but if there is one well-protected, privileged enclave for a queer intellectual, Ann Cvetkovich has found it in her professional position in Austin. Consider the riskiness of this project from the point of view of Cvetkovich’s two audiences: her Public Feelings colleagues and the mainstream. On the first front, for all the ways she imagines her memoir to exemplify a creative escape from the



confines of academic writing, the critical memoir was already a thoroughly sanctioned form within the community that matters to her most—queer and feminist academics and the Public Feelings community. Examples of such work would include Kathleen Stewart’s *Ordinary Affects*, which I quoted above, or Sedgwick’s *A Dialogue on Love* or *The Weather in Proust*. From a mainstream perspective, Cvetkovich’s justifications for writing in the personal draw also from the confessional, risk-taking rhetoric of American culture, where personal exposure is a necessary element in memoirs, day-time talk shows, and reality TV. The implied heroism of risk-taking and witnessing are merely examples of the everyday individuating rhetoric that pervades American society. Rhetorics of exposure are as seductive and as marketable as the word "sale." What might have been more risky, for Cvetkovich, would have been to proclaim no risk at all. Indeed, thinking about the very everyday nature of her memoir, we might applaud her on that front because Cvetkovich has sought and succeeded in capturing the very dull way that depression can deaden the day.

I began this chapter with a discussion of empathy and its relation to shame. Both emotions rely upon identification. In Kate Zambreno’s *Heroines*, we saw identification in three ways. First, we saw how Zambreno “channelled” the mad wives, creating alliances with them along various lines: they all struggled with depression, with writerly ambition, with invalidating husbands. They all wore cloche hats and sparkly nail polish. Secondly, in her blog *Frances Farmer is my Sister*, this invitation-only community was and is a place of encouragement, solidarity and consolation for mostly women writers, who read and write “like girls” (Zambreno 279). Thirdly, with her publication of *Heroines*, Zambreno sought a wider audience and at some point began to describe this work as a politics. Shared identities and shared feeling, were, on their own, political. In Ann Cvetkovich’s *Depression: A Public Feeling*, though her language is more subtle and her claims to the political more restrained, we find a similar method of writing through identification. Cvetkovich sees her struggle as typical to life in academia, and hopes that depressed “graduate students and untenured and adjunct faculty, especially those in the humanities,” will find solace in her memoir (32). She also hopes that her work will provide comfort to minoritarian cultures, by which she means those labeled by the term queer, in any sense of the term. For both, these books were political because they were personal; their willingness to expose themselves was due to their commitment to their communities, and to change.

### **Intimate Publics and the Memoir as an Instance of Cruel Optimism**

With these two books in mind, I'd now like to turn to two concepts that will elucidate why the kinds of alliances these books try to create foreclose rather than generate a politics. Both concepts come from Lauren Berlant: the first is the intimate public; the second is her notion of cruel optimism. In her book *The Female Complaint*, Berlant describes an intimate public as one that is defined by the shared painful experience of being a member of a subordinated class. She argues that an intimate public shares the perception of a commonly lived history and, consequently, of "narratives and things...deemed expressive of that history" (viii).

Whether linked to women or other nondominant people, it flourishes as a porous, affective scene of identification among strangers that promises a certain experience of belonging and provides a complex of consolation, confirmation, discipline, and discussion about how to live as an *x*. One may have chosen freely to identify as an *x*; one may be marked by traditional taxonomies—those details matter, but not to the general operation of the public sense that some qualities or experience are held in common. The intimate public provides anchors for realistic, critical assessment of the way things are and provides material that foments enduring, resisting, overcoming, and enjoying being an *x*. (Berlant viii)

Note Berlant's choice of words to describe this affective scene of belonging. What is promised to these strangers is "consolation, confirmation, *discipline* and discussion about how to live as an *x*" (viii, emphasis mine). While the scene of identification may be porous, it is not too porous: the word *discipline* says as much. The *x* tells us that an intimate public can coalesce around almost anything, but it must believe in itself as nondominant. In Cvetkovich's work, the nondominant were people who identified as queer, though they could conceivably also include academics caught in precarious financial situations or the depressed more generally. In Zambreno's work, the nondominant were women writers. Their books were written for such intimate publics; they were "laboratories for imagining and cobbling together alternative construals about how life has appeared and how legitimately it could be better shaped" (Berlant and Prosser 182).

An intimate public creates a community but often it is one that is carefully sealed off from mainstream culture. Life writing and blogging both exemplify intimate publics at work: "all the focused Internet worlds in which people are hammering out how to live as anomalous to a projected-out norm" (Berlant and Prosser 181). One scholar working with this paradigm describes personal mommy blogging as an example because it creates an intimate public distinct from the mainstream through the use of pseudonyms and "the general emphasis on

securing an audience of sympathetic, like-minded strangers to these writings, while minimizing their visibility to a broader, outsider audience, as well as by keeping these writings secret from their 'real-life' employment, social, and familial networks" (Morrison 38). An obvious parallel in this chapter is the community created by Kate Zambreno's blog, *Frances Farmer is My Sister*. Berlant says that these kinds of communities are those that Foucault might have called heterotopias, "where one can encounter the positivity of being otherwise" (Berlant and Prosser 181). All of this sounds quite promising: it is, and it isn't.

While an intimate public certainly serves the affective interests of those in its midst, one of the disturbing aspects of such cultures is that they are effectively juxtapolitical, flourishing, says Berlant, "to one side of politics, referring to historical subordinations without mobilizing a fundamental activism with respect to them" (184). The political is, "deemed an elsewhere managed by elites who are interested in reproducing the conditions of their objective superiority" (Berlant, *Female Complaint* 3) and intimate publics implicitly accept that the political does not involve them. At the end of her introductory chapter, Berlant says,

This was a depressing book to write because it is a case study in what happens when a capitalist culture effectively markets conventionality as the source and solution to the problem of living in worlds that are economically, legally, and normatively not on the side of almost anyone's survival, let alone flourishing. Nonetheless, flourishing happens. (Berlant 31)

Flourishing is what happens when the mommy bloggers and women-writers find company in protective online enclaves. Berlant describes intimate publics as having a "love affair with conventionality" (*Female Complaint* 3). She doesn't mean that they have a love affair with normativity:

Conventionalizing and normativizing are not the same thing. Sometimes they are....only sometimes is the taking up of generic form the taking up of a normative norm (a norm to which valorization is attached). Sometimes conventionality is a defense against norms too, a way to induce proximity without assimilation... and sometimes it's a way of creating another, counterconventional, space. (181)

This is precisely how Zambreno conceives of the space she has created:

So the decision to write the private in public, it is a political one. It is a counterattack against this [historically sexist] censorship. To tell our narratives, the truth of our experiences [...] Why write one's diary in public? To counter this

shaming and guilt project. To refuse to swallow. To refuse to scratch ourselves out. To refuse to be censored, to be silent. (Zambreno 291)

The problem with the works we've read here is that they are so subjective they can never be anything more than juxtapolitical—sitting on the sidelines, minor, with a minor range, creating an intimate public that is more “gendering machine” (*Female Complaint* 36) than anything else. The paradox of Zambreno's writing is that it maintains the gender inequality she supposedly wants to overthrow. By belying any historical discontinuity between the mad wives of the modernists and her as the mad wife of Akron, Ohio, she casts female hysteria as universal, or at least universally female. By casting her husband in the role of the invalidating partner, she chooses an oppressive atmosphere rather than working to overcome it. In Cvetkovich's case, the solutions to the problems she cites are similarly narrow: queer knitting groups provide solidarity for a very few.

Intimate publics are, in Berlant's view, a mode of coping with the pain of being in a marginalized position. They are depressing because they console and discipline the marginalized without providing them with a way out. We saw the way that Cvetkovich disciplined Smith for his “naturalizing” rhetoric and his failure to recognize indigenous populations and Zambreno concludes *Heroines* by encouraging young women writers to “cry Woolf,” like she has. What Berlant would prefer would be for the marginalized to find an active way out of such enclaves.

In her book *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant argues that we must find a way to detach ourselves from such modes of coping. When the memoir is envisioned as political because it has been written in the highly subjective forms we have seen in *Heroines* and *Depression: A Public Feeling*, it starts to look a lot like a site of cruel optimism. Berlant explains that

a relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project. It might rest on something simpler, too, like a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being. These kinds of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially. (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 1)

As we have seen in both Cvetkovich and Zambreno, the aim of the memoir has been to generate a politics. What they mean by the term ‘politics,’ is something like an ethics—a mode of participation that would be good for society as well as for them. They hope that identification with others *like them* will produce solidarity and that from such feelings of

solidarity, social change would emerge. In the meantime, identification would shore them up, allow them to remain hopeful and optimistic.

For many years, Berlant has been writing books that trace what she calls a “national sentimentality,” or the way in which affect is mobilized in all sorts of political and juxtapolitical realms. Her national sentimentality trilogy—*The Anatomy of National Fantasy*, *The Female Complaint*, and *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, all examine “the affective components of citizenship and the public sphere,” “the state’s withdrawal from the uneven expansion of economic opportunity, social norms, and legal rights,” and the way fantasies are fraying in the realms of “upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy” (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 3). *Cruel Optimism*’s final chapter is titled “On the Desire for the Political.” There, she traces the way desire for the political has lead, in recent years, to a proliferation of *affectively* political performances—by artists but also by politicians. She begins by quoting President George W. Bush who wanted to “speak directly to the people” (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 223) because he believed, in her assessment, that “a public’s binding to the political is best achieved neither by policy nor ideology but *the affect of feeling political together*” (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 224). Feeling political together can happen anywhere. It can happen at rallies and vigils, or in a knitting group, or any place that one is called upon to offer a “personal story about not being defeated by what is overwhelming” (227). It happens at “political meetings in town halls, caucuses, demonstrations, and other intimate assemblies [where the preference for immediacy is preferred to] the pleasure of disembodied migratory identification that constitutes mass politics” (226).

Berlant describes affective attachments like these as sites of cruel optimism because they maintain an attachment “to the system and thereby confirm [it] and the legitimacy of the affects that make one feel bound to it, even if the manifest content of the binding has the negative force of cynicism or the dark attenuation of political depression” (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 227). Yet, Berlant also suggests that cruel optimism may be the only kind of optimism presently available to us. That we no longer live in a society where uniformity and normatively are prized the way they once were is a good thing, but the enclaves of nonnormativity and the ongoing valorization of writing for minoritarian cultures suggests that active participation in the body politic continues to be the domain of elite, or at least more mainstream, cultures.

We are back where we started where I argued that empathy was an effective antidote to shame only on the most intimate levels and that, beyond that, it could tend to expand

shame's domain rather than limiting it. There is no doubt that empathy is what we seek from our friends, family and lovers. Intimate publics aim to expand the realm of empathy to include people we don't know, but might like to. They are strangers who are like us. In all of these situations, shame's toxicity can be quelled by the simple utterance Brené Brown suggested: me too. Yet in a world as fractured by systemic inequality as ours, some shames will not find their antidote in such a phrase; indeed, some shouldn't.

Both Zambreno and Cvetkovich see their minoritarian status as a source of shame. Cvetkovich adds to this a recognition of her own privileged status within a society defined by systemic inequality. Both hope that their personal stories and the form of the memoir will be a starting point for something political. Considering these hopes from the perspective of Lauren Berlant, however, these hopes read as illustrations of cruel optimism. Their attachments to the personal *do* create intimate publics, but they also inherently accept and maintain their sidelined status, thereby leaving mainstream politics as they are. By relying on identification and fellow-feelings such as empathy as a basis of politics, the mistake they seem to make is best summarized by Leslie Jamison, author of *The Empathy Exams*: “empathy can fuel an ironic kind of self-absorption: the encounter with another person's experience becomes another way of experiencing oneself,” and worse: “It can also offer a dangerous sense of completion: that something has been done because something has been felt” (Jamison, “Response” n.pag). Perhaps it is for this reason that the authors I treat in the next chapter—Sheila Heti and Ben Lerner—are so ambivalent about feeling, selfhood, and meaning. They are ambivalent about autobiography, too. In the final chapter of this dissertation we will find a formal counterpoint to the critical memoir in Timothy Bewes' *The Event of Postcolonial Shame*. There we will revisit the shame of privilege, the role of autobiography in literary criticism and a different perspective on how subjectivity can and cannot deepen the political significance of such work.

## The Unexpected Gifts of Shame and Contempt

A history of learned contempt as it appears in philosophy and science, in manners and morals, and in esthetics would be nothing less than the story of civilization.

Silvan Tomkins, *Affect Imagery Consciousness*

What happens to autobiography and shame when both are fictionalized? This chapter discusses Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be?*, published first in Canada in 2009 and then republished (in a slightly different version) in the US and the UK in 2012 and Ben Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station*, published in the US in 2011. The books parallel each other in many ways, yet their differences—in tone, particularly, but also in terms of their engagement with the world—make them projects of entirely different orders and, I suspect, longevity. What they share is a contemporary suspicion about what it means to be a self, a lover, a friend, a writer, an artist, a genius. They wonder whether or not art means anything, and whether or not the word 'beautiful' has any relation to what art might mean, if it does. Both books are loosely autobiographical; both involve narrators who set out to write something (Sheila, a play about women; Adam, a long, research-driven poem); and both narrators abandon the initial art works in favor of a narration of the failure to write (a shame-fueled trope we saw also in Cvetkovich and Zambreno in the previous chapter). Both books begin in a place strongly inflected with shame, move in and out of periods of contempt, and conclude as a traditional *bildungsroman* might, though in both cases the concluding tone of sincerity and optimism comes as a surprise. Similar as they may be in the questions they ask about art, selfhood, meaning, and genius, reading the books couldn't feel more different. Ben Lerner is a poet and *Leaving the Atocha Station* is a poet's novel: every sentence sounds beautiful. On the other hand, about half way through Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be?*, I wrote in its margin, "This book makes me want to start a fight."

Though shame is a central theme in both books, in this chapter, I take a new approach to shame by expanding the boundaries of my inquiry to include a closely related affect, disgust-contempt. I include disgust-contempt because it seems to offer both authors a way out of the shame spiral, where shame begets shame *ad infinitum*. Unlike shame-humiliation, which is self-reflective and sometimes endlessly so, disgust-contempt interests itself only in

the rejected object with the purpose of severing any connection to it. If shame-humiliation's typical physiological manifestation is the blush, disgust-contempt's is the action of vomiting. At their worst, shame-humiliation can spiral into narcissism; disgust-contempt into the dehumanization of the other. Politically, shame-humiliation maintains uncomfortable ties to corrupted or corroded institutions in the hopes that they would improve; disgust, on the other hand, writes manifestos, divides cities, creates concentration camps. At their best, shame accepts one's place in the world and hopes for the possibility of being able to contribute to it or change it; disgust-contempt actively rejects what it hates. A positive manifestation of disgust might, then, be a disgust with shame's inaction or a disgust with disgust's historic tendency to dehumanize the other.<sup>5</sup> In *How Should a Person Be?* shame is no longer an interruption of interest or excitement, shame *is* what is interesting and exciting. Similarly, in *Leaving the Atocha Station*, the protagonist, Adam Gordon, seems to pursue shame, at times even recklessly. At key moments in both texts, shame is no longer the negative afterglow of a behavior one regrets but is actually the sought after affect. In both texts, shame is what keeps the protagonists tied to community; where such ties are severed, disgust is what does the severing.

This chapter has five sections. In the first, I explore the autobiographical nature of these books as they relate to notions of the self-as-performance and to postmodernity. In the second, I illustrate how both books articulate a deep suspicion about what art means and whether or not the word "beautiful" might have anything to do with it. In the third and fourth sections I treat the books separately: illustrating, in the third section, how contempt leads to freedom in *How Should a Person Be?* and demonstrating, in the fourth, how shame keeps Adam in *Leaving the Atocha Station* attached to an identity he did not choose (that of being an American citizen) and one he did (that of being a poet). In the fifth and final section, I bring the two books back into dialogue, showing how both narrators are finally able to abandon their performed selves, at least momentarily, and how this permits intimate friendships to flourish.

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<sup>5</sup> Seen this way, disgust could reject right-wing efforts to dehumanize the other, and therefore rouse the left to action rather than the spiral of self-abasement in which it is too often caught. There is a power to disgust that the left has too often been unwilling to use. For a lengthier discussion of the political uses of disgust, please see Daniel R. Kelly's *Yuck!: The Nature and Moral Significance of Disgust*.



## On the Question of Autobiography and the Performed Self

Neither *How Should a Person Be?* nor *Leaving the Atocha Station* are strictly autobiographical yet both narrators—Sheila Heti and Adam Gordon—are clearly echoes of the writers who created them. Sheila Heti and Ben Lerner know that part of what will make their work intriguing is the suggestion that some of what happened to the fictionalized characters actually happened to them. In his extended review for *The New Yorker*, literary critic James Wood misses the point of this tantalizing indeterminacy when he writes that, "Since most readers do not know who Heti's friends are or how Heti herself lives, the characters will effectively appear invented--as Heti doubtless understands" (68). Heti may know that her characters will feel invented, but she knows that what will make them so compelling is the suggestion that they aren't. Heti, writing about this topic in a review of Lerner's book, notes the same kind of thrill in his *Leaving*:

It's hard not to take Adam's life as a version of Lerner's: both are young poets raised in Topeka, Kansas; both spent time in New York among 'the dim kids of the stars'; both spent a year in Madrid on a poetry fellowship (Adam's unnamed; Lerner's a Fulbright). If you were to see, at a fancy-dress party, a man dressed up in the clothes he wears every day, you would not know whether he was dressing up as himself, or not dressing up at all. That's part of the frisson of this book.

(Heti, "I hadn't even seen the Alambra" LRB 32)

Lerner and his fictional counterpart, Adam, share a fellowship, a constellation of cities (Topeka, Providence, Madrid), and, among other things, the fact of being a poet (Lerner, *Leaving* has published three collections of poetry and one of those poems appears in *Leaving* as the 'work' of Adam Gordon). Heti and her fictional counterpart, Sheila, share a circle of friends—Margaux Williamson, Misha Glouberman, Sholem Krishtalka—a home city—Toronto, and both are writers in their mid-thirties, recently divorced.

At the outset of *How Should a Person Be?*, the character Sheila Heti is writing a play that had been commissioned by a feminist theater company, and, overwhelmed by the experience of having just left her marriage, is finding this impossible to do. In a last ditch effort, Sheila asks her best friend Margaux if she can record their conversations in the hopes that it will jumpstart the play. Margaux doesn't want to be recorded: "I don't know! I don't know where things will end up! Then whatever I happen to say, someone will believe I really said it and meant it? No. No. You there with that tape recorder just looks like my own death" (Heti 60). Margaux's fears here are an interesting echo of both Barthes conceptions of

photography and Paul de Man's of autobiography who argued that all autobiography was a kind of disfigurement or defacement and always, to an extent, speaks to the reader as if the writer were already dead (Anderson 13). Margaux eventually concedes. Attentive readers knew she would because the form of the book had already shifted from the layout typical of prose to that of playwriting, as below. Sheila summarizes her play for Margaux concluding with "It's stupid!" to which Margaux replies:

MARGAUX

*(laughing)* It's just an autobiography.

*Sheila puts her head in her hands.*

SHEILA

I know, I *know!* But my life keeps changing. My life keeps changing! (65-66)  
That Sheila agrees with Margaux's assessment of the play—that it is just an autobiography—is important because the play Sheila was writing turns into the book we will read. This point is made clear later in the book when Margaux tells Sheila she must do something with the recordings she has made:

Then finally she [Margaux] looked at me and said, 'I want you to finish your play.'

'What! My embarrassing, impossible play!'

'Yes! And I want it to answer your question—about how a person should be—so that you never have to think about it anymore....'

'Does it have to be a play?'

She thought about it for a moment, then grinned. 'No.' (262)

This scene is the genesis of the book. The play that Sheila has spent most of the book failing to write (I will elaborate upon this later), becomes the novel we are reading, but it isn't just a novel. As Margaux said of the play, and as we can say of the book, to a certain degree, "It's just an autobiography!"

Yet, in interviews, Heti was contradictory about the significance of having created a character whose name she shared. In some interviews she claims an absolute separation from the fictional character and other times she seems unconcerned about them being read as one and the same. In an interview for *The Awl*, Heti declares them utterly distinct:

JESSICA: Among so many strands of this book, one that really appealed to me was the one about your friendship with Margaux. In the beginning of the book you write that you didn't really have any friends until you were 25.

SHEILA: My character didn't! (n.pag)

Similarly, in an interview for *Joyland*, she says: "I should say that this book is not autobiographical, any more than my last book, *Ticknor*, was autobiographical. Both are emotional autobiographies, but neither are faithful to the facts of my life or its progress through time." But elsewhere, Heti seemed unconcerned about whether or not the character in her book was understood to be a faithful representation of her personality. Indeed, much criticism of her work has spoken about Sheila Heti, the writer, and Sheila Heti, the character, as if they were interchangeable:

This error of criticism suggests the book is being treated less as literature and more as a picture of Sheila's persona. Heti has indicated a similar lack of interest in her own aesthetic choices. When asked by an interviewer if he could refer to her and Sheila as the same person, Heti said, "Sure. I don't care. They're not the same thing, but I don't care." (Tennant-Moore n.pag)

This flippancy over the slippery nature of autobiography suggests that the performativity of selfhood that we see acted out on the level of the books extends beyond their pages into the discussions of the performed self in the world.

When Ben Lerner was asked similar questions, his responses were more thoughtful. In discussion with Tao Lin, the author his own semi-autobiographical novel entitled *Taipei*, Lerner remarked that, "Part of what impoverishes discussions about fact and fiction is that they tend to forget the degree to which what *doesn't* happen is also caught up in our experience—is the negative element of experience. I think you can write autobiographically from experiences you didn't have, because the experiences you don't have are experienced negatively in the experiences you do" (Lerner qtd. in interview with Tao Lin in *The Believer*). In his most recent book, *10:04* Lerner writes again about the conflation of the imaginary with the real. *10:04* is again fictionalized autobiography, sitting "on the very edge of fiction," (237), and it describes the impact of the unexpected success of the narrator's first novel. One of the narrative strands in *Leaving the Atocha Station* is a lie that Adam tells his two love interests—Isabel and Teresa—about his mother. He says that she has died, then, out of guilt, he says that she hasn't died but was dying. He explains that he said she was dead because he was trying it out, testing himself to see how it would feel. In *10:04*, he writes about the impact of what he'd written in *Leaving*:

In my novel the protagonist tells people his mother is dead, when in fact she's alive and well. Halfway through writing the book, my mom was diagnosed with breast cancer and I felt, however insanely, that the novel was in part responsible, that having even a fictionalized version of myself producing bad karma around parental health was in some unspecifiable way to blame for the diagnosis. I stopped work on the novel and was resolved to trash it until my mom—who was doing perfectly well after a mastectomy and who, thankfully, hadn't had to do chemo—convinced me over the course of a couple of months to finish the book. (Lerner, *10:04* 138).

Listening to the authors speak about the nature of their fictional autobiographical writing suggests that, for them, the stability of selfhood or of the self that is performed extends beyond the boundaries of their books. This is important because it gives Sheila and Adam's questions about authenticity, selfhood, and art-making a double meaning. On the level of the books, these questions propel plot lines. Beyond that level, these questions look more like philosophical interrogations about the links between authenticity and art-making. One of the ways these questions are explored is through the performed self.

One of the blurbs on the back of the UK edition of *How Should a Person Be?* is taken from the review Wood gave of the book in *The New Yorker*. It wasn't a glowing review. Yet the pull-quote swings to the positive and is read that way all the more as a presumably laudatory blurb: "a vital and funny picture of the excitements and longueurs of trying to be a creator in a free, late-capitalist, Western city" (Wood 68). As anyone with a background in theory knows, late-capitalist is a term that rouses its own connotative entourage: with it, Wood is claiming that this book is about simulation, posing, and fakery. In Frederic Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late-Capitalism*, postmodernism is characterized as "an aesthetic situation engendered by the absence of the historical referent" (25). Elsewhere, Jameson describes the postmodern as an era characterized by the waning of affect:

As for expression and feelings or emotions, the liberation, in contemporary society, from the older anomie of the centered subject may also mean not merely a liberation from anxiety but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling. (Jameson qtd. in Terada 2)

If there is no longer a self present to do the feeling, what entity is it, exactly, who is present enough to do the writing? One answer, these books suggest, is that in the place of selfhood, we have only performance. The real has been utterly replaced, says Jean Baudrillard:

By crossing into a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor that of truth, the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials... It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes. (2)

Both Baudrillard and Jameson have abandoned the idea that the self and the self that thinks (or feels) is our last defense against skepticism. Descartes', "Je pense donc je suis," no longer proves anything except that at one time, a person performed selfhood so convincingly for himself that he believed it. In Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, "subjectivity has become so invaded by the image that modern identity itself is a 'pretence' with no real--a mask which is no longer separable from what might once have been underneath. People, reflects the protagonist, have started pretending to be exactly who they are" (qtd. in Bewes, *Reification* xii).

Certainly this is how *How Should a Person Be?* and *Leaving the Atocha Station* initially portray selfhood, both in what the protagonists say about selfhood but also on the meta-fictional level where the self of the author is just barely distinguishable from the protagonist of the book. We have seen this before: an author's self-referentiality is often a kind of metafictional-joke or a tool for extra-fictional commentary. In Borges' *The Aleph*, for example, a character named Borges rants about the writings of a poet who couldn't be anyone other than Pablo Neruda; in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*, a character named Foer is writing a highly magical novel about a town named Trachimbrod and a massacre that took place there. What distinguishes the use of the author-as-character in Heti's and Lerner's works from, say, DeLillo's observations on the performed self or Foer's use of himself as a character in his own novel, is that in these works there is no sense that a performed self is a fallen state, nor is it merely a joke. In Lerner's and Heti's work, the fictionalized self cannot be fully distinguished from the self that writes. As we saw above, when asked if she minded when interviewers confused the Sheila of the book with her Heti answered, simplistically, "They're not the same thing, but I don't really care" (qtd. in Tennent-Moore n.pag).

The question of selfhood, traditionally a serious, ethical, character-building question, is now pure performance, something we see in both books. The opening to Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be?* captures this perfectly:

For years and years I asked it [How Should a Person Be?] of everyone I met. I was always watching to see what they were going to do in any situation, so I could do it too. I was always listening to their answers, so if I liked them, I could make them my answers too. I noticed the way people dressed, the way they treated their lovers—in everyone, there was something to envy. You can admire anyone for being themselves. It's hard not to, when everyone's so good at it. But when you think of them all together like that, how can you choose? How can you say, I'd rather be responsible like Misha than irresponsible like Margaux? Responsibility looks so good on Misha, and irresponsibility looks so good on Margaux. How could I know which would look best on me? (Heti 1)

If “oneself” is the traditional answer to *How Should a Person Be?* Heti, here, dismantles that expectation entirely, making fun of it in a contemporary way. Selfhood is like a dress: totally disposable. A recent cartoon in *The New Yorker* features a couple standing before a door: the woman is about to ring the doorbell, her partner, a man, is holding a bottle of wine. As a kind of united front, or setting out of a battle plan for the evening, he says to her, “Just don't be yourself.” “Being” is nothing more than performance. What a person is is nothing more than what one can see—how people behave at parties, dress, treat their lovers, answer questions and so on. These performances are choices that other people have made, just as they chose which beer to drink and which outfit to wear: they are not choices that are outer manifestations of a complex inner self, no. They are simply scripts people have adopted. Heti goes on: “I know that personality is just an invention of the news media. I know that character exists from the outside alone. I know that inside the body there's just temperature.” (2)

Similarly, Ben Lerner's book describes selfhood in terms of performance though here we start to see the way even performances reflect a value system at work. For Adam, admirable people are politically engaged and their art reflects that engagement in a serious yet unpretentious manner. Artists should be aesthetically and philosophically honest. They should be aware of the limitations of art, but should always push to the very edge of those limitations. And they must care about the world. All of these values are legible in the masks that Adam adopts. Unsurprisingly, in addition to these more serious values, there is the hope that he might be attractive, but even there, his aesthetic and political ideals are on display:

...I was acutely aware of not being attractive enough for my surroundings; luckily I had a strategy for such situations... I opened my eyes a little more widely than normal, opened them to a very specific point, raising my eyebrows and also

allowing my mouth to curl up into the implication of a smile.... The goal of this look was to make my insufficiencies appear chosen, to give my unstylish hair and clothes the force of protest; I was a figure for the outside to this life, I had known it and rejected it and now was back as an ambassador from a reality more immediate and just. (Lerner 26-7)

This performance, and others like it, is repeated throughout *Leaving*, usually in an effort to seduce a woman. Even if Adam doubts the sincerity of the roles he adopts, the consistency with which he chooses them illustrates how the masks we choose reflect a self that does the choosing. His performances are sometimes of a figure he would admire—one who could be authentically political—and sometimes they are of someone he thinks he appears to be anyway—the melancholy poet. Adam spends much of his time in a drug-induced haze, the result of the cocktail of caffeine, hash and the white pills (tranquilizers or anti-depressants) he takes every morning. His performances, then, capture both Adam's stoned detachment but also his wish to belong.

One of the most evocative aspects about *Leaving the Atocha Station* is the way Lerner manages to work such longing into the level of language, by which I mean not only his use of English but also his reflections on what it means to be learning his second language, Spanish. His descriptions are intellectually playful without the cheekiness such linguistic pyrotechnics usually perform. He considers his failure to speak Spanish properly to be his only real asset, particularly in relation to his romantic pursuits. We see an example here, where Adam describes his relationship with Isabel:

our most intense and ostensibly intimate interactions were the effect of her imbuing my silences, the gaps out of which my Spanish was primarily composed, with tremendous intellectual and aesthetic force. And I believe she imbued my body thus, finding every touch enhanced by ambiguity of intention, as if it too required translation, and so each touch branched out, became a variety of touches. Her experience of my body, I thought, was more her experience of her experience of her body, of its symphonic receptivity, ridiculous phrase, and my experience of my body was her experience once removed, which meant my body was dissolved, and that's all I'd ever really wanted from my body, such as it was. (46-7)

Adam is grateful for the way language can cleave them in both senses of the word. Without the barrier that Spanish provides, Adam's words would be simply Adam's words and his body merely his body. Adam truly does desire Isabel and wants her to desire him. Yet, in Lerner's formulation, it is antiquated or at least irrelevant whether or not Adam is desired for

who he truly is. Adam performs the melancholy artist whenever Isabel or Teresa (his other love interest) is around to see him, and although he knows that he is performing, he is still disappointed and angry when he realizes that neither of them have been taken in by his performances: Teresa saw them as evidence of his homesickness and Isabel saw them as a manifestation of jealousy.

Heti's Sheila is similarly distressed that her friends see past her performances: "They like me for who I am," she laments, "and I would rather be liked for who I *appear* to be, and for who I appear to be, to be who I am" (3). In an interview, Heti commented on this aspect of her character, Sheila, saying: "this is a culture of performance, right? There are personas everywhere. For a fiction writer, you can choose: you can play with character, or, like the entire culture, you can play with persona. Persona is a social performance, while character is really make-believe" (Heti "Interview" in *Joyland*). From one perspective, persona is more closely tied to personality because it is a performance that one has chosen. A character, on the other hand, is pure invention and so, in a sense, entirely free from the person doing the invention. From another perspective though, character is fully bounded by the imaginative contours of the individual personality that writes. Persona makes no such demands upon the personality.

While it is clear that both Sheila Heti and Ben Lerner are interested in the way that selfhood gets performed, their approaches to the question bifurcate. In Heti's book, the only people who can see through Sheila's performance are her close circle of friends. For everyone else, presumably, the persona she adopts is never interrogated. As one of the very few critical reviewers of Heti's book described it, in *How Should a Person Be?* "inscrutability is merely a tone" (Tennant-Moore n.pag). Heti is unconcerned about Sheila's character, suggesting that the answer to the book's titular question will always apply only superficially. In Lerner's book, on the other hand, Adam's performances are read by the other characters as symptoms of deeper, truer feelings. Their interpretations (of homesickness and jealousy) are absolutely correct, something which suggests that recognition and intimacy are possible even in a culture so enamored with performance. In Lerner's book, the possibility of intimacy is already foregrounded in the way Adam reflects upon his façade versus his true self, exemplified by his plaintive observation, "that's all I'd ever really wanted from my body, such as it was" (47). In this way, Lerner creates an intimacy with the readers that will eventually be found between the characters as well.



## Authentic Art in a World of Performance?

*Leaving the Atocha Station* begins with an astonished and apprehensive account of the narrator seeing a man moved to tears while standing before Roger Van der Weyden's fifteenth century painting, *Descent from the Cross*. Adam asks himself, "Was he, I wondered, just facing the wall to hide his face as he dealt with whatever grief he'd brought into the museum? Or was he having a *profound experience of art*?" (8) Adam, himself a successful poet, muses:

I had long worried that I was incapable of having a profound experience of art and I had trouble believing that anyone had, at least anyone I knew. I was intensely suspicious of people who claimed a poem or painting or piece of music 'changed their life' especially since I had often known these people before and after their experience and could register no change. Although I claimed to be a poet, although my supposed talent as a writer had earned me my fellowship in Spain, I tended to find lines of poetry beautiful only when I encountered them quoted in prose, in the essays my professors had assigned in college, where the line breaks were replaced with slashes, so that what was communicated was less a particular poem than the echo of poetic possibility. Insofar as I was interested in the arts, I was interested in the disconnect between my experience of actual artworks and the claims made on their behalf; the closest I'd come to having a profound experience of art was probably the experience of this distance, a profound experience of the absence of profundity. (Lerner 8-9)

The man heads to another room where he "stood before *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, considered it calmly, then totally lost his shit" (9). The phrase, "totally lost his shit," captures Adam's perception of the scene perfectly. The man who is possibly having a "profound experience of art" occupies the role of the mad genius: perhaps he is more attuned to the beautiful things of this world (and therefore someone we might envy) or perhaps he is simply crazy (and therefore an object of pity). Another possibility is that he is critically unintelligent. Adam follows the man from gallery to gallery, joining a crew of security guards who are similarly awed by the man's outbursts. Adam says,

I could not share the man's rapture, if that's what it was, but I found myself moved by the dilemma of the guards: should they ask the man to step into the hall and attempt to ascertain his mental state, no doubt ruining his profound experience, or should they risk letting this potential lunatic loose among the

treasures of their culture...I found their mute performance of these tensions more moving than any *Pietá*, *Deposition*, or *Annunciation*, and I felt like one of their company...(10)

These are the inaugural pages of *Leaving the Atocha Station* and they establish Adam's simultaneous desire to be moved by art and a certain disdain for those who are so moved.

The immediate, profound appreciation of art—an appreciation that is entirely aesthetic—is something that forecloses the man's capability of coming to a critical (more serious, more intelligent) judgment of art. When the man "loses his shit," he is so laughable because his reaction is considered sentimental, uncritical: an indication of poor thinking. Critical judgement, in this rendition, reveals itself in a cynical posture, something that the man losing his shit seems not to have. Critical judgement is intellectually superior to that immediacy though it is also paralyzing—Adam is only ever sure that something is beautiful when an authority has cited it as such. Being moved by "beauty" seems alternatively either too bourgeois, too sentimental or too simple-minded; being convinced by a work of art's aesthetic success requires time (in study, in close contemplation of art) that many do not have. All of these roles are infused with and informed by a strong shame theory, a sense and attentiveness to shame that the man in the Prado seems conspicuously free of. Perhaps what Adam finds so disturbing and such a source of envy is that the man can engage with art without any shame at all.

Adam's cynicism about art's potential is further revealed by the fact that he has never "been changed by a piece of art," and also, contradictorily, in his claim that "poems aren't about anything" (36; see also 54, 127). "Being about" something would make poems something they ought not be: useful. While, the aesthetically pure and intellectually superior position is one where one can say that poems do not have meaning, Adam seems to wish they could mean something. Although Adam knows war and leaders like Bush had the potential to create a world where all artworks would be lost and that "in such a world, [he] would swallow a bottle of white pills" (45) he still doesn't want art to sully itself by making political claims.

If *Leaving the Atocha Station* articulates a contemporary doubt about whether or not art can have a profound impact on the viewer, *How Should a Person Be?* takes the project one step further by challenging two painters to create the ugliest painting they can. The competitors in the Ugly Painting Competition are Margaux and Sholem. The competition is born over breakfast in an ugly breakfast joint whose, "owners had repainted the diner walls from a grease-splattered beige to a thick pastel blue and had spray-painted giant pictures of

scrambled eggs and strips of bacon and pancakes with syrup" (Heti 11). There are many ways to arrive at ugly. Ugliness is potentially the result of a lack of attention, but just as potentially the result of a thorough and unflinching determination. "Thicky" is the latter. Any word processing system underlines thicky with a wavy-red line indicating that it is a neologism—thickly or thick, misspelt—and therefore, purposely so. It's not a beautiful neologism that Anne Carson or Paul Celan would use—it is not Carson's "nightsky" or "unlost" or Celan's "atemmünze" (breathcoin). The diction is ugly, but so, too, is its imprecision. The diner owners had either spray-painted pre-existing pictures of scrambled eggs—i.e. painted overtop pictures of scrambled eggs and pancakes with syrup or, they had used spray-paint to depict the scrambled eggs and pancakes. Spray-paint, especially inside, is hallmark ugliness, and here its imprecise use makes it all the more so. Neither option is at all palatable, but by leaving us in between the two options of ugly, spray-painted eggs, Heti gives us both.

In addition to an aesthetic ugliness, the conversation illustrates a moral ugliness that is highlighted by the sudden clarity of the prose:

I remember none of the details of our conversation until the subject turned to ugliness. I said that a few years ago I had looked around at my life and realized that all the ugly people had been weeded out. Sholem said he couldn't enjoy a friendship with someone he wasn't attracted to. Margaux said it was impossible for her to picture an ugly person, and Misha remarked that ugly people tend to stay at home. These are a few of the sordid fruits that led to the Ugly Painting Competition. (11-12)

This passage is economical and neatly divvies the ugly observations up amongst her friends in tidy comments of less than ten words each. These statements are morally ugly—indicating her friends' shared superficiality—yet pithy and straightforward, delivered in honest, clear statements. Heti finds her way out of the ugly pit by regaining some narrative distance from the conversation, summarizing the whole thing—its words, sentences, and sentiments—as a collection of "sordid fruits" that led to the frame of the book. The Ugly Painting Competition is about the intellectual labour and political purpose of art-making, as well as the critical labour of interpreting or judging a piece of art.

Sholem is so disturbed by the idea of the competition that he completes his 'entry' before the end of the day. His ugly is reactionary: "He would just do everything he hated when his students did it" (Heti 13). He begins his

composition smack-dab in the middle of a piece of paper, since paper is uglier than canvas... he painted a weird, cartoonish man in profile with fried-egg eyes,

and he outlined things instead of shading them, delineating each individual eyelash.... Though he thought in the end there would be some salvageable qualities to the painting, it just kept getting more and more disgusting until finally he began to feel so awful that he finished it off quickly. Dipping a thick brush in black paint, he wrote at the bottom, really carelessly, The sun will come out tomorrow. (13-14)

What are the elements of this ugliness? The paper, the mineral sediment, the cliched optimism of the song from the 1982 Disney movie, “Annie.” The composition disobeys the rule of thirds, the images are cliched, and the techniques are pastiche. Worse, the ugliness betrays a lack of imagination: Sholem merely reverses the rules he learned in art school, implying that when he pursues the beautiful, he merely follows them.

The whole experience creates a moral-aesthetic crisis for Sholem. He emails Margaux at the end of the day:

*This project fills me with shame and self-loathing. I just did my ugly painting, and I feel like I raped myself. How’s yours, Margaux?*

Margaux, the better artist, wrote back: *i spent all day on my bed island reading the new york times.* (15)

Freedom, in *How Should a Person Be?* is the capacity to let oneself produce something ugly. Margaux, whose art is characterized by both freedom and a feeling that, “Ugly, beautiful—I don’t even understand what those words mean” (172). Sholem can be shamed by ugly; Margaux can only be shamed by meaninglessness. Though Heti’s Sheila has spent many years of her life in pursuit of beauty, these efforts are symbols of everything that has blocked her. Her marriage, her play, her presentation of self in society: all of these attempts at the beautiful have concealed her true ugliness, something which is, if ugly, still highly valued because, unlike the beautiful, her ugliness is true. The freedom she seeks is a freedom from beauty. It’s a freedom from a beauty that has been defined by men, particularly men who have wanted to teach her something, a refrain we hear repeatedly in the book (Heti 17, 54, 224, 228). More than one reviewer has noted that the book seems, itself, to be a reaction to beauty: cliché, pastiche, awkwardness and a governing lack of imagination are guiding aesthetics for the entire book (Wood, Goad, Peterson, Biggs, Keeler in *The New Inquiry*, *The Economist*).

When, later that day, Sheila goes on a walk with Misha (the fictional version of one of Sheila Heti’s closest friends and collaborators, Misha Glouberman), Heti inserts oddly lyrical moments of summary as if in order to illustrate that the ugliness is intentional. Their walk, for

example, concludes this way: “We had circled ten blocks and the sun had gone down as we were talking. The houses and trees were now painted dark, dusky blue” (19) or, describing an earlier discussion with him: “We were drinking at a party and left to take a walk through the night, our feet brushing gently through the lightly fallen snow” (20). Similarly, the description of meeting Margaux incorporates the same lyricism:

She told me her name was Margaux, and I told her my name was Sheila and lit her cigarette, then sat back, trembling inside. Had she come out here for me? An excitement rose in my being just to think it. But I didn’t say a word. Instead, we smoked together quietly, and as she exhaled, the trees touched each other’s branches in the wind. (Heti 28)

These brief lapses into the lyrical—the dark, dusky blue of night, feet brushing gently, trees touching each other’s branches—are a kind of alibi: Heti’s attempt to show that what she is doing is purposeful, rather than accidental. None of these moments are astonishing in their beauty, but they are lyrical in a way that most of the book is not. “See!” they seem to say: “I can be beautiful if I want. I just don’t want to! I’m sick of beauty.”

Ugliness is something *How Should a Person Be?* pursues for three reasons. First, in terms of art, it refuses the formalism of an aesthetic ideal—beauty—that has been defined by men. Here, aesthetic value is associated with a freedom from the constraints of the old ideals. Secondly, in terms of art criticism, it demands an appreciation that would be informed by a highly developed critical judgement, not a lowly, sensuous reaction to the 'merely' beautiful. Thirdly—and this seems to contradict the previous two points—it creates an aesthetic that is based on accessibility and accessibility is that which is easily digestible not because it has been perfected and made glossy, but because it has been left alone, in the sound and register of everyday speech. Altogether these aims are inflected with a concern about the role of art in contemporary society, a concern that is captured in *How Should a Person Be?* by the word meaningful.

In *How Should A Person Be?*, this concern is manifested in the figure of Margaux Williamson, Sheila Heti’s best friend (both in the book and in real life). Margaux is plagued by the idea that art might mean nothing, a concern that Sheila, the narrator, summarizes:

Margaux worked harder at art and was more skeptical of its effects than any artist I knew....She hoped it could be meaningful, but had her doubts, so worked double hard to make her choice of being a painter as meaningful as it could be....Sometimes she felt bad and confused that she had not gone into politics—which seemed more straightforwardly useful....Her first feeling every morning

was shame about all the things wrong in the world that she wasn't trying to fix.

(Heti 17)

Shame is the affect of an ongoing relationship with something or someone where the joy or interest the relationship inspires is regularly thwarted. And shame is the affect that registers a forsaken ideal, in this case that capable people ought to work to better the world for those unable to do it themselves.

At the outset of both books, Sheila and Adam have been given grants to produce artistic projects that will be of evident benefit to society (to feminism, for Sheila, to memory of Franco's war, for Adam), and both are finding their projects impossible, boring, uninspiring. Adam, in Spain on a prestigious scholarship, is supposedly interested in "the significance of the Spanish Civil War, about which," he says, "I knew nothing, for a generation of writers, few of whom I'd read; I intended to write, I explained, a long, research-driven poem exploring the war's literary legacy" (Lerner 23). Sheila had been commissioned to write a play for a feminist theatre company, but, she laments: "I didn't know anything about women!...I had never taken a commission before, but I needed the money, and figured I could just as easily lead the people out of bondage with words that came from a commissioned play as I could writing a play that originated with me" (Heti 41). Both Adam and Sheila had written grant applications that promised art works that would be socially meaningful, even activist in nature. And both books are the result of a diversion from their funded projects, something which leads Sheila to much anguish and Adam to continually attempt to avoid the foundation's representative in Madrid, María José.

In an article entitled "On Art Activism," Art Historian and scholar of aesthetics and media theory, Boris Groys argues that contemporary artists are creating work that disrupts an essentially conservative nature of art. Heti has described her project in just such terms: having read a 2006 article by James Wood which described the key aspects of successful realist fiction, she set out to do the very opposite (Barber). James Wood was just another man who wanted to teach her something. Such work, according to Groys, "is made against the natural gift. It does not develop 'human potential' but annuls it" (n.pag). Groys goes on to say that we must learn to aestheticize both the presence and absence of gifts. On the one hand, this is a call to a kind of interpretation, where one must learn to take pleasure or feel pleasure in the presence and absence of beauty (the classical meaning of the word aesthetic being about feeling rather than thinking). In *Leaving*, Adam will try (and fail) to appreciate something in cliché-riddled poetry. On the other hand, from the perspective of the artist, the call to aestheticize the presence and absence of gifts seems to be a call to a different kind of

work. The Ugly Painting Competition dramatizes, and makes fun of, this call. Even if *How Should a Person Be?* is intrigued by and, for a time, pursues, the notion of annulling one's natural gifts, it seems to suggest that, eventually, this kind of pursuit is merely reactionary rather than radical. Sholem's ugly painting exemplifies this reactionary approach.

Art-making becomes a shameful activity when it doesn't seem to better the world.

Margaux, Sheila's best friend, is plagued by the idea that art might mean nothing:

Margaux worked harder at art and was more skeptical of its effects than any artist I knew....She hoped it could be meaningful, but had her doubts, so worked double hard to make her choice of being a painter as meaningful as it could be....Sometimes she felt bad and confused that she had not gone into politics—which seemed more straightforwardly useful....Her first feeling every morning was shame about all the things wrong in the world that she wasn't trying to fix. (Heti 17)

Margaux's shame is echoed by other artists in their community, with varying degrees of subtlety. In the chapter titled, "The white men go to Africa," several friends come over and describe their recent trip to an unstated country in Africa:

For me, it was because my life in theater is so consuming and busy and it's such a kind of insular world in a lot of ways, and I was dissatisfied with the absence of doing meaningful—what I felt was meaningful—I didn't feel I was spending my time in the most meaningful way possible, and I wanted to bring a more meaningful, uh, component to the work I was doing. (Heti 160)

The friends quickly identify that going to Africa to do something "meaningful" is both "very fashionable" and narcissistic—something Sheila says it shares with art and books (166). But the play directors persist in believing that in Africa it was possible to do something meaningful because the economic injustice was so extreme, so visible, whereas in Canada, the injustice was "disguised. It's so easy to forget" (162). Margaux responds: "Seems kind of hard to forget; I don't know" (162). The directors—both are men—lecture Sheila and Margaux on their immorality and then leave. One of the refrains in the book is "He's just another man who wanted to teach me something," and this refrain is echoed in these white men. Despite their evident foolishness, Margaux is upset by the conversation, exclaiming at the end of the night:

I'm interested in meaning, not paintings. Paintings can be pretty meaningless, you know. Like, it's insane! I want to create complete meaning in art that's even better than political meaning! (Heti 171-172)

Margaux's pursuit of the meaningful means that she stays serious about her art, while Sheila does not. Having abandoned the idea of a feminist play, she is sarcastic about its aims: "I am writing a play that is going to save the world. If it only saves three people, I will not be happy. If with this play the oil crisis is merely averted and our standard of living maintains itself at its current level, I will weep into my oatmeal" (87). But this changes in the course of the book. As with any *bildungsroman*, the central protagonist does develop morally. In a later conversation with Margaux, Sheila considers the matter more carefully: "I wanted to tell [Margaux] that being a painter was not meaningless, decadent, narcissistic, and vain, but how could I know for sure?" (177)

Ben Lerner's Adam also wishes that art could mean something, and similarly suspects that it never will. In one of the early conversations about meaning and poetry, Adam reflects:

I tried hard to imagine my poems' relation to Franco's mass graves, how my poems could be said meaningfully to bear on the deliberate and systematic destruction of a people or a planet, the abolition of classes, or in any sense constitute a significant political intervention. I tried hard to imagine my poems or any poems as machines that could make things happen, changing the government or the economy or even their language, the body or its sensorium, but I could not imagine this, could not even imagine imagining it. (44)

Even if both Adam, Sheila and Margaux would like art to mean something, tying art to activism or to beauty will not yield the kind of meaning they seek. Groys argues that it is because our society views art as either useless or as celebrating the status quo that, "the art component of art activism is often seen as the main reason why this activism fails on the pragmatic, practical level—on the level of its immediate social and political impact" (Groys n.pag). It is along these lines that Lerner and Heti pursue different solutions to the meaningless of art. Both narrators--Adam and Sheila--abandon their socially-committed projects and contemplate abandoning the beautiful as well. In Sheila's case, what temporarily replaces the beautiful and the meaningful is contempt.

### **Contempt and Ugliness as Freedom in *How Should a Person Be?***

Though I have primarily focused on the story of shame in these books, in *How Should a Person Be?* contempt is equally important because it allows Sheila to extract herself from a variety of attachments that have constrained her. One of those attachments is to a lover, though it is the very contemptible nature of their relationship that, initially, makes her so free.



Another of those attachments is to beauty: an apt description of the Ugly Painting Competition might, in fact, be that it was born of contempt for the beautiful. Contempt appears first and most obviously in the prologue, where the narrator, describing herself giving a blow-job in a tone reminiscent of self-help books says, "I just try to breathe through my nose and not throw up on their cock. I did vomit a little the other day, but I kept right on sucking" (3). Vomit appears elsewhere too, including later when Sheila realizes her mistake in going to New York: "I could have vomited. I saw it all so clearly... somehow I had turned myself into the worst thing in the world: I was just another man who wanted to teach me something!" (228). In order to really examine the implications of disgust, we must remember how we can distinguish it from shame. Shame, as we have seen in the introduction, is the affect that is most closely associated with the experience of being a self:

In contrast to shame, contempt is a response in which there is least self-consciousness, with the most intense consciousness of the object, which is experienced as disgusting. Although the face and nostrils and throat and even the stomach are unpleasantly involved in disgust and nausea, yet attention is most likely to be referred to the source, the object, rather than to the self or the face. (Tomkins 356)

Disgust is the affect that recognizes the physical danger posed by something close, usually a food, either before its consumption or, in the case of accidental consumption, by inducing a physical response to remove the object from the system via vomiting. However, disgust is not limited to moments involving the ingestion of a noxious substance. (If it were, it would not be an affect, but rather a drive). In Tomkins' system, this affect is categorized as contempt-disgust, where contempt is of a lower intensity, toxicity, or duration than disgust.

Tomkins notes that even though disgust is normally evoked by a strong desire to insinuate distance between the self and the object, "disgust may be aroused by a very attractive sex object, if there is both a strong wish for and fear of sexual contact. In such cases, paradoxically, the less disgusting the object, the more disgust may be felt if fear exceeds desire" (Tomkins 357). In other words, fear of intimacy may produce a sensation of disgust, all the more so if the potential for intimacy is heightened by the fact that the (sex) object is actually quite attractive. This may sound like an aside, but its significance will become clear. In Tomkin's formulation, contempt-disgust describes the range of intensity this affect may take wherein contempt is a low-level disgust.

Tomkins also notes that shame-humiliation and contempt-disgust have political counterparts. He says:

Shame–humiliation is the negative affect linked with love and identification, and contempt–disgust the negative affect linked with individuation and hate. Both affects are impediments to intimacy and communion, within the self and between the self and others. But shame–humiliation does not renounce the object permanently, whereas contempt–disgust does. Whenever an individual, a class or a nation wishes to maintain a hierarchical relationship, or to maintain aloofness it will have resort to contempt of the other. Contempt is the mark of the oppressor. The hierarchical relationship is maintained either when the oppressed one assumes the attitude of contempt for himself or hangs his head in shame....Contempt will be used sparingly in a democratic society lest it undermine solidarity, whereas it will be used frequently and with approbation in a hierarchically organized society in order to maintain distance between individuals, classes and nations. (362-3)

Other theorists (Ngai, Miller) concur, describing contempt as a lower, less insistent form of disgust, whereby the rejected object's importance can be nullified through one's indifference to it, rather than one's need to insinuate a definite distance from it. It is for this reason, argues Ngai, that disgust is an affect most typically associated with right wing movements where misogyny, anti-semitism, racism and so on have all considered the other to be disgusting, vile, and something from which one ought to keep oneself separate, or risk contamination. Ngai goes on to argue that disgust is an affect rarely mobilized in literary theory because it seems to run counter to some of the discipline's values, including democracy, relativism, and tolerance:

In fixing its object as 'intolerable,' disgust undeniably has been and will continue to be instrumentalized in oppressive and violent ways. Yet its identification of its object as intolerable can also be mobilized against what Herbert Marcuse calls 'repressive tolerance': the 'pure,' 'indiscriminate,' or nonpartisan tolerance that maintains the existing class striation of capitalist society. (Ngai 34)

If contempt's indifference to its object is what renders that object politically impotent; disgust with an object would mean that the object was impossible to ignore. If the significance of disgust is that it clearly identifies a thing as repulsive, Ngai argues that it is an affect that ought, perhaps, to be taken up with more regularity by literary theorists who wish to generate politically engaged academic work. True disgust is something that requires action. Thinking back to the previous chapter, the intimate public is a tolerated enclave, a space defined by cruel optimism: the shame of being a minor class and the hope something might change.

The significance of this for *How Should a Person Be?*, a book which involves many clearly disgust-infused moments including scenes of sexual encounter that produce vomiting, or parties that inspire constant shitting, is that disgust might, in a sense, be a mode of rescuing art from its tolerated place on the sidelines. Ngai says:

the object of tolerance in any affluent, market-centered democracy is perceived to be harmless or relatively unthreatening. Its ability to be tolerated in this sociopolitical context thus becomes an index of its sociopolitical ineffectuality—in particular, its ineffectuality as a mechanism for dissent and change. From the vantage point of this market society, the best example of such a feckless thing—a thing taken as so ineffectual, harmless, and ‘safely disattendable’ that it can be absently or even benevolently tolerated—is art. (341-2)

Art is stripped of its power to provide an important critique to society as long as it remains tolerated by society. In this way, the tolerated thing--art, literature, literary criticism--resembles the intimate public of the previous chapter. The tolerated thing is always the subordinate thing. To tolerate is a choice only the dominant classes can make.

With this in mind, I turn to a short section of *How Should a Person Be?* entitled “Interlude for Fucking.” Barely ten pages long, the interlude is found between acts two and three of the book. The piece is central for an understanding the role of shame, humiliation, and contempt in Heti’s book. The interlude involves Sheila and her lover, Israel. He is a mediocre painter, but an outstanding lover. He is the only character in the book who does not have an identifiable real-world counterpart. Their affair began shortly after Sheila left her marriage and though she tried to avoid entangling herself with a new man, she was unable to resist. Initially, she tells him that she is celibate, but when he kneels down beside her to whisper, “I’ll decide if you’re celibate or not,” she happily agrees that the decision is his (78). This pattern is repeated throughout their affair such that it is clear that his dominance is something to which she is happy to submit. A good example of this dynamic is the phone call that precedes the Interlude. She and Margaux are at the art fair in Miami, where Margaux is presenting some of her art to international buyers. They are talking to some rich people when he calls:

‘Are you having a good time?’ Israel asked. I said that I was. I tried to explain that we were talking to some rich people. ‘Would you like to have my cum in your mouth right now, talking to those rich people? That would be pretty good, wouldn’t it?’ Not knowing what else to say, I stammered, ‘Yes.’ When I got off

the phone, I made a new rule for myself: that I would never again take his call— or, anyway, not until I finished my play—so never. (Heti 110)

The play is what Sheila “should” be doing; Israel is precisely what she shouldn’t. That she chooses him over her play, then, is the first indication that Sheila will choose freedom over slavery even if it means choosing ugliness over the beautiful.

In the first reading, I situate the interlude in relation to Sheila’s notion of herself as a person with an essential “shittiness” at her core. In the second reading, I explore the potentially positive ramifications of the affect of contempt as Sheila extracts herself from their affair. In the third and final reading, I analyze the relationship as a political allegory where Israel is not the man but the historical nation and their relationship is about Sheila’s notion of herself as a kind of Moses figure, a cowardly leader to ‘her people’. Despite its brevity, the interlude connects importantly to the way shame and contempt define Sheila’s relationship to men and to the political consequences of art.

### **An essential shittiness at her core**

This narrative begins very early in the book, with a play written by Sheila’s high school boyfriend. In a fit of jealousy, he wrote “an outline for a play about [her] life—how it would unfold, decade by decade” (Heti 24). In the play she continues chasing, getting, and dropping men as part of selfish ambition:

While my boyfriend rose in prestige and power, a loving family growing around him, I marked on toward my shriveled, horrible, perversion of an end, my everlasting seeking leaving me ever more loveless and alone. In the final scene I kneeled in a dumpster—a used-up whore, toothless, with a pussy as sour as sour milk—weakly giving a Nazi a blow job, the final bit of love I could squeeze from the world. I asked the Nazi, the last bubble of hope in my heart floating up, Are you mine? to which he replied, Sure, baby, then turned around and, using his hand, cruelly stuck my nose in his hairy ass and shat. (Heti 25)

What makes her boyfriend’s play so impossible to get over was the conviction that he could see her insides, “as he was the first man who had loved me,” (Heti 25). Eventually, Sheila got married because she thought the very fact of it would correct everything that was wrong with her, correct the ugliness inside her, “which would contaminate everything I would ever do” (22). Yet, even married, the shittiness inside her persists. She leaves her husband, a man with whom, “there had [always] been an empathy... a sweetness. It was like we were afraid of

breaking the other" (43), and begins, almost immediately, the love affair with Israel. Read in this context, the relationship with Israel is one that does not expect anything of her. Unlike her marriage, the affair with Israel is one that allows her to be her worst. This freedom—to be ugly—is perhaps what explains the exuberant, clear tone of the writing across these ten pages:

All right, Isreal, cum in my mouth. Don't let me wash it out, so when I talk to those people, I can have your cum swimming in my mouth, and I will smile at them and taste you. (120)

The interlude is addressed alternatively to Israel and to the reader of the book. As though to get the jump on any readers who would wish to judge her, she screeches:

I don't know why all of you just sit in libraries when you could be fucked by Israel. I don't know why all of you are reading books when you could be getting reamed by Israel, spat on, beaten up against the headboard—with every jab, your head battered into the headboard. Why are you all reading? I don't understand this reading business when there is so much fucking to be done. (121)

Addressing Israel again, it gets worse: "I am indifferent to whether you turn me into a sow you lead around the house with a leash, or if you lash me nightly, or if you throw my body into the bed or out of it. If you want my cunt to take your cum, or to turn me into an animal who can take it, I'll learn astrology. I'll be the stupidest whore you ever met..." (126) And on its last page: "Whatever you want me to do, I will do it, and whatever I don't want to do, I will do that too, and will want to." (127) In much the same way that the form of the novel was written as a point-by-point refusal of Wood's 2006 stipulations about what a novel ought to do, the Interlude is written as a point-by-point refusal of feminism's stipulations of what a woman ought to want.

Sheila goes to New York. She has had an argument with Margaux and has decided to go where the "important people" go (188-192). There, she receives an email from Israel in which he asks her to go to a patio, wearing a short skirt and no underwear. She should write him a letter "in the style of a letter home from a first-year university student or camper," and should describe how much she misses his cum in her mouth and "also about how my cock has changed your life." (205) She should do this while spreading her legs for a deserving spectator, an old man perhaps. The next day, she goes to get stationary, finds a patio, an old man, and starts to write:

I was about three pages into a detailed explanation of how his cock had changed my life, when an odd sensation began creeping through me, an awareness of how

sick it was that all this time I had been having so much trouble writing my play, yet instead of laboring away at it, here I was writing this fucking letter—this cock-sucking letter of flattery for Israel! (226)

At every moment prior to this, Sheila has chosen to put Israel ahead of her art. Writing has seemed pointless: it brought neither the mind-blowing satisfaction of sex with Israel nor the feeling of meaning that doing something good for the world might potentially bring. On the night she met Israel, for example, she had gone, “to a party to celebrate the appearance of three more books of poetry in the world,” (75). The tone suggests that the world doesn’t really need any more poetry and this suggestion is echoed in the sarcasm with which Sheila has described her own work, “If this play does anything short of announcing the arrival of the next cock—I mean, messiah—I will shit....” (87). Writing and art-making has been derisory and a source of shame because it has been unproductive; it didn’t produce meaning or pleasure. The scene in the café puts her prioritizing of Israel into question, and is, as such a turning point for Sheila’s development as an artist and a person.

I glanced up and saw that the man across from me had gone, and in his place sat a chubby young boy—and he laughed up at me openly to see my whole cunt. My throat caught and my eyes leapt up to his parents, and, flushing red, I fumbled out some bills and threw them on the table...(226-227)

While Sheila was writing, the old man left and was replaced by a young boy and his parents. Symbolically, the old and forgotten man whose hopes for pleasure were, in Israel’s estimation, severely diminished, had been replaced by people actively involved in the world. Exposing herself before the old man did not shame her, but exposing herself before the family did. Shame propels her away from Israel and back to writing.

The affair with Israel concludes in the following way. They have been out for a night in Toronto, drinking a little but not too much. They go home and start to have sex but don’t.

We lay silently in my bed, and then my body felt it, deep and calm: what I wanted to do—something I had never done before. Without letting myself think about it a moment more, I shuffled down beneath the covers, saying to him as I did it, ‘I want to sleep beside your cock.’ I slithered down there and lay, my lips soft up against his dick. I felt his legs grow tense. ‘Get up,’ he said. ‘No.’ ‘Come up here,’ he said, more forcefully this time. But I knew that if I did, his desire for me might remain, and I wanted none of it left. I had to be so ugly that the humiliation I brought on myself would humiliate him, too.... (Heti 271)

This is the first moment in their affair when what he wants has not been, by mere virtue of his wanting it, what she wants too. What Israel wanted was to dominate her. And she wanted to be dominated, for a time. Until, that is, his domination of her became his humiliation of her.

In the “Interlude for Fucking” and as she sat at the cafe in New York, Sheila had been painting the ugly painting. Ugly has meant unfeminist. The ugliness of the relationship with Israel is textbook in much the way that ugliness in Sholem’s painting is textbook. For him, ugliness is “everything he’d tell his students he hated in painting.” For her, ugliness is everything a feminist artist isn’t supposed to want. About a recent book published by the literary journal *n+1*, in which women were interviewed regarding their college experiences, the editor writes:

the word *should* has a special place in the lives of women, as it’s been a tool of their subjection through social strictures (“women should be X”) and their emancipation through feminism (“women should reject the authority of anyone who says they should be X, or Y, or Z, or anything else”). *Should*, in other words, gives us both *The Rules* and the injunction to break them. (Tortorici n.pag)

I read the arc of this narrative as an articulation of and defiance of the ways one is meant to be feminist today. Feminism’s expectation that women challenge the authority of anyone who says they should be x, or y, or z is precisely what Heti is defying when she portrays Sheila so rambunctiously enjoying her interlude. Consider another passage from that section:

Fuck whichever sluts it’s your fancy to fuck. You will find me in our home one day, cooking or doing your laundry, as you wish, washing your slutty underwear that some girl slutted on while you were out. I’ll make you your meals and serve you them, leave you alone to paint while I go into my room. (Heti 121)

This is the horror show of the contemporary, female, feminist artist: that a relationship with a man with artistic ambitions would render hers null, that she would be reduced to a slave for his artistic ambitions, his sexual desires. Heti’s tone of delighted defiance points to the restrictive model feminism (or a mainstream version of it) sets out for women. But it also complicates our understanding of shame.

Heti brings us to the extremes of what ought to be shameful. Her character chooses humiliating sex, chooses a man over her art, and then chooses the most humiliating posture she can for herself because she knows that shame is catching: that her humiliation will be his. This is very far from the kind of shame that Leon Wurmser would describe, where all kinds of shame involve the admission of some kind of weakness or dirtiness because weakness and

dirtiness are inherently shameful. In *How Should a Person Be?* weakness and dirtiness provide a moment of triumph:

I felt so alert as I felt his dick shrink away, disgusted or ashamed. A few minutes passed. Then he turned his back on me. My nose went into his ass, and I felt its tiny hairs on my skin. (271-272)

She has brought us full circle. We have returned to the scene of the Nazi shitting on her face, but what is so different about this scene is that this time she has chosen it:

What I had done in the night—it felt like the first choice I had ever made not in the hopes of being admired....Then, from inside of me came a real happiness, a clarity and an opening up, like I was floating upwards to the heavens. (273)

The triumph is that she has acted independently of a world that would shame her. In this way, shame in *How Should a Person Be?* is the supremely flexible affect that Tomkins described—an affect sometimes inflected by the restrictions and mores of contemporary society, but just as often not. A shame, in other words, that is idiosyncratic. A shame, for example, that one might even be able to enjoy. Heti's Sheila is independent of the feminists who would shame her for letting herself be so humiliated in front of a man and independent of the men who would tell her that it is up to them to decide. The conclusion to this narrative arc slips in at the end of Act 4 in a section entitled "Intermission," where Sheila is at a play and runs into her ex-husband. The conclusion couldn't be more simple. She says: "And for the first time ever I saw it: perhaps I was not fated to a life of loss and suffering—an end so degraded and mean. Those had been his thoughts and fantasies" (281). Not hers.

### **Contempt and the Political**

Another way of thinking about the scene with Israel is in terms of the political implications of contempt. As we have seen, Sheila's aim in this final scene is to sever all ties with her lover. Imagining their dynamic in terms of a political system, every moment prior to her slithering down to sleep with his cock is a moment of shame-humiliation in which both parties maintain an interest in each other and in the humiliation of Sheila. Indeed, Israel's desire to humiliate Sheila is part of what makes him interesting and desirable to her. Her deciding to sleep with his cock is the moment that she pushes this engaging play of humiliation into a disengaging play of disgust, something that he clearly registers in the morning when, "After buttoning his shirt, he looked down into his shirt pocket and pulled out a quarter. He placed it on the windowsill beside my head with real deliberateness, then turned



and walked away" (272). He has adopted the role of the oppressor, a role that rests upon the permanent renunciation of the relationship, as we saw at the opening of this section (Tomkins 362). Tomkins imagines two possible scenarios when one has found oneself or another contemptible. Either: "the hierarchical relationship is maintained... when the oppressed one assumes the attitude of contempt for himself or hangs his head in shame" (362) or the oppressor teaches the oppressed to "have contempt for themselves," (362-363). Yet he also acknowledges that contempt can be met with contempt, signaling an absolute rupture in a relationship. What is most significant about this complete rupture is that it permits a positive use of disgust. Crucially, Sheila reciprocates Israel's contempt; in fact, she invites it. This is the astonishing redemption contempt offers that shame does not.

### **Israel as Place**

In a final reading of this scene, I'd like to explore the possibility that the name Israel is meant to stand in for the country and for Sheila's relationship to it. In some of the passages quoted above we have seen the repetitive use of Israel's name. In total, there are almost thirty repetitions of his name in under six pages. I have also mentioned that Israel, unlike the other key figures in the fictional Sheila's circle, does not have a real-world counterpart. That is, unless we consider the country. The name, Israel, according to a comprehensive "baby naming website," is more common than France, Germany, Canada, or Spain, but less common than Jordan, and about on par with Georgia and Chad. At what point could we start to suspect an analogy of such direct proportion? Can we?

What we do know is that the character Sheila has been traveling through the desert for much of the book: that journey began in the prologue. Sheila describes the journey "her ancestors" took as they "left their routines as slaves in Egypt to follow Moses into the desert" (4). Just as her ancestors had to leave a life of slavery, Sheila has had to leave a life of slavery. Her marriage is set in those terms: one night she looks around at the friends they had gathered and reflects that an outsider would surely look upon the scene and "say, 'That could only have been built by slaves'" (26). When she went to "football school," Sheila fantasized about being able to lead her cohort, but realized "they weren't going to let some withered wanderer with half a plan lead them" (34). In thinking about her ambitions for the feminist play, she fantasizes that it could lead people "out of bondage," (41). When her marriage ends, she writes "I knew from then on I would have to make decisions without any footprints in the sand to follow, without any hand guiding my path" (46). When she has a bad dream

and calls her analyst in the middle of the night, the analyst tells Sheila the story of the Puer. It's a morality tale—don't be a puer, or eternal child—instead, you should walk through the difficult things.

“What's wrong with walking?” asked the analyst, “It might take much longer...forty years as opposed to four hours. But you're more likely to arrive there, safely.” (83)

And so she resolves to work, articulating how important she wants it to be by stating it ought to announce “the arrival of the next cock—I mean, messiah” (87).

Israel, read as a geographical place, seems to stand in for freedom or for redemption. This reading accords with an understanding of Israel as a historic place towards which her ancestors marched:

It took forty years for the Israelites to get from Egypt to the banks of the Jordan, a journey that should have taken days. It was no accident. That generation had to die. They could not enter the promised land. A generation born into slavery is not ready for the responsibilities of freedom. (247)

The movement out of slavery requires learning several things, one of which is that, “It is cheating to treat oneself as an object, or as an image to tend to, or as an icon. It was true four thousand years ago when our ancestors wandered the desert, and it's as true today when the icon is ourselves” (183). It is the leader of the Jews, then, that inspires her most:

I hadn't realized until last week that in his youth he killed a man, an Egyptian, and buried him under some sand....And he is king of the Jews—my king....I don't need to be a great leader of the Christian people. I can be a bumbling murderous coward like the king of the jews. (188)

And Moses is one reason for the language of the book: “I thought a lot about how Moses didn't want the job — didn't feel like he could speak well enough to be a leader. And so in this modeling oneself after the great leader, I think I wanted the language in the book to not be great, to be really plain and utilitarian” (Keeler, “Reality Fiction” n.pag). Throughout the latter third of the book, Sheila imagines herself in the desert: bits of sand are found in the spine of her book (189), on the surface of the table (225), on the seat of the Greyhound bus (239), and coming loose from her body on her return home to Toronto, when she showered and “washed everything away,” (241). It is difficult to know what to make of their sexual relationship when reading Israel as a nation, until, that is, that one realizes that their relationship is actually quite ordinary. Sheila thought Israel was hot; they got together and had sex:

Sheila feels “faint” and “intoxicated” whenever Israel calls her, despondent when he is out of touch. The story of Sheila and Israel’s affair is entirely ordinary except for the fact that neither Heti nor Sheila seems aware of its ordinariness...what makes these natural heterosexual urges worthy of our contemplation? (Tennant-Moore n.pag)

The ebb and flow between humiliation, domination, shame and contempt is, even when reading the interlude as an allegory for a historical relationship with the nation, nothing special, but the freedom Sheila gains is.

### **Shame as Commitment in *Leaving the Atocha Station***

In this section, I discuss the way that shame works to reveal Adam’s ongoing commitment to two ideals—to the aesthetic and political importance of poetry and to the value of being American citizen. In the first section, I identify the way that perceiving and being perceived illustrate both Adam’s ideals and his shame at failing to attain to such ideals. As I have discussed in the introduction, shame is utterly idiosyncratic and when we notice its blush, utterly revelatory. There, I characterized shame as a figure of inadequacy and isolation, but also one that hopes for recognition. We may not know how important something or someone is to us until it is disparaged by another. If we come to its defense, it is clear that an identification of some sort is at work. Yet, sometimes our attachments are indefensible. In the case of Adam’s identity as a poet, Adam overcomes his shame by attaining to the ideal of writing a poetry that *is* both politically committed and beautiful. In the case of his shame at being an American, this is a shame that cannot end. In the final part of this section, I will examine the relationship between those two shames, asking whether Adam’s eventual recommitment to poetry amounts to a sublimation of his shame of being American. I will conclude that it does not: writing does not sublimate his shame, it manifests it.

### **Profundity in the Gaps: Poetry and Citizenship as Manifestations of Shame**

A recurrent trope in *Leaving the Atocha Station* is the way Adam’s hope for a profound experience is ritually found not in the thing that promises to deliver such profundity (a piece of art, a poem, a love affair), but into the gaps or absences that surround it. In the opening scene to *Leaving the Atocha Station*, we found our protagonist at the Prado art

gallery one morning, shocked to find that a man had taken up his usual post in front of Van der Weydon's *Descent from the Cross*. Adam says,

for a moment I was startled, as if beholding myself beholding the painting, although he was thinner and darker than I...I wondered if he had observed me in front of the *Descent* and if he was now standing before it in the hope of seeing whatever it was I must have seen. (Lerner 8)

Up until this moment, Adam had ritually gone to see the *Descent*, happily unaware of how he might appear to other gallery visitors. Like Sartre at the keyhole, his absolute absorption in the "dimensions and blues" (8) of the painting had meant that he was unaware of himself. Now, he becomes aware of himself not because someone has come up behind him but because he has come up behind someone who is looking as he usually looks. Though he does not say it, the man's repetition of Adam's morning ritual has about it something potentially mocking. By virtue of the repetition, Adam suddenly reevaluates what he has been doing. When the man bursts into tears in front of the painting, Adam is intensely curious about what those tears mean to the man and what the absence of those tears means for Adam. Adam asks himself whether the man is "having a *profound experience of art*," (8) and then immediately reflects upon his own concerns about his incapacity to experience art in such a way (8). Adam identifies with the man, and this identification makes it possible for him to react shamefully about his own suspicions about art's meaning, this despite the fact that he is a supposedly talented writer (8). His identification of himself as a writer means, for him, an identification also with ideals of what it ought to mean to be a great artist, namely, the capacity to create profound work. At the same time, he is ashamed by this assumption because if it were true, *his writing* would have to mean something and he doubts it ever could.

That Adam holds art to the highest ideals is what motivates his disgust with poets whose work fail those ideals, with audiences who do not recognize that failure, and with himself. Interestingly, when the experience of writing poetry fails him, Adam turns to interpretation as a mode of finding profundity. Interpretation becomes an artistic endeavor in and of itself. We see this in the way he discusses his own poetry, where he imagines profundity as something that exists in the gaps between whatever is stated. In this scene from early in the book, Adam has been slated to read some of his poems after a local poet named Tomás. Adam describes Tomás' reading as follows,

To my surprise this poem was totally intelligible to me, an Esperanto of clichés: waves, heart, pain, moon, breasts, beach, emptiness, etc.; the delivery was so

cloying the thought crossed my mind that his apparent earnestness might be a parody. But then he read his second poem, ‘Distance’: mountains, sky, heart, pain, stars, breast, river, emptiness, etc. I looked at Arturo and his face implied he was having a profound experience of art. (37)

Because Adam respects Arturo, he tries to take seriously this “Esperanto of clichés,” an effort that requires heightened attention to the sound of each word, but the effort is exhausting and ineffective: at most, it permits Adam a momentary reprieve from disgust (37). Yet, when Adam looks around the room, he is shocked to see an audience whose faces all suggest that they are being profoundly moved:

It was not until I considered the scene more generally that my interest caught: there were eighty or so people gathered to listen to this utter shit as though it were their daily language passing through the crucible of the human spirit and emerging purified, redeemed; or here were eighty-some people believing the commercial and ideological machinery of their grammar was being deconstructed or at least laid bare, although that didn’t really seem like Tomás’s thing; he was more of a crucible of the human spirit guy. (38)

Note the disdain of Adam’s conclusion that Tomás is a “crucible of the human spirit guy.” As in the scene with the museum guards in the Prado, Adam finds himself more moved by the hopes the audience have of being moved than he is by the artwork itself. He says

If people felt the pressure to perform absorption in the face of what they knew was an embarrassing placeholder for an art no longer practicable for whatever reasons, a dead medium whose former power could be felt only as a loss—these scenarios did for me involve a pathos the actual poems did not, a pathos that in fact increased in proportion to their failure, as the more abysmal the experience of the actual the greater the implied heights of the virtual. (38)

Thus, “the perfect idiocy of Tomás’s poetry,” becomes a kind of accomplishment, having captured, as it were, the lamentable state of contemporary poetry and, even more powerfully, the terrible bind of those who gather to listen to it: when an audience recognizes the way the poems fail, they cannot show it; if they don’t recognize the failure of poetry, they fail themselves. What might redeem them is only the possibility that their looks of absorption are actually a result of them contemplating all that poetry has lost. As we have seen elsewhere in this book, Adam holds onto the possibility that there is such a thing as depth or beauty, but imagines that it is only expressible by way of its absence or gap. Here the gap is between the travesty of Tomás’s words and the transcendent experience they fail to express. We’ll see this

same trope at work when Adam discusses his own poetry where its negative power is not imagined in some sort of spiritual transcendence but rather in a kind of political potency.

There are two ways that Adam hopes to imbue his poetry with significance—first in his mode of delivery, and second in discussions of its interpretation. Interestingly, neither depend upon the language of the poems themselves. Here is how he describes himself delivering his poems:

[I] read as if either I was so convinced of the poem's power that it needed no assistance from dramatic vocalization, or, contrarily, like it wasn't poetry at all, just an announcement of some sort: this train is delayed due to track work ahead, etc. I fantasized as I listened to myself that the undecidability of my [delivery] style—was it an acknowledgement of the poem's intrinsic energy or a reading appropriate to its utter banality—would have its own kind of power. (39)

After the reading is over, Adam goes outside to have a cigarette and is approached by several local artists, two of whom begin to argue about the significance of Adam's work. They become impassioned, much to Adam's surprise. One offers that his poetry was like an early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Spanish poet "whose capacity to dwell among contradictions without any violent will to resolution formally modeled utopian possibility," (43). Another counters saying that such an interpretation was a

knee-jerk association of formal experimentation with left-wing politics, when in fact the leading Modernist innovators were themselves fascists or fascist sympathizers, and in the context of U.S. imperialism...he argued, reestablishing forms of sufficiency complexity and permanence to function as alternatives to the slick, disposable surfaces of commodity culture was the pressing task of poetry. (43-44)

The first countered that one could not "overcome the commodification of language by feeling into an imagined past" (44). The conversation goes on this way for some time, revealing that Adam is either already a highly sophisticated Spanish speaker and a theoretically versant poet, or merely the latter with a high capacity to project meaning onto those in his midst with a convincing degree of coherence. Eventually the two disputants turn to Adam to ask for his opinion. True to his *modus operandi* in this phase of his research, he opts for a position between the two, a synthesis of their dialectical opposition:

I said or tried to say that the tension between the two positions, their division, was perhaps itself the truth, a claim I could make no matter what the positions were, and I had the sense that the smokers found this comment penetrating. (44)

Despite Adam's professed disbelief that poetry or art could mean anything, his reliance on the power of undecidability tells us otherwise. He does believe that there is such a thing as profundity, he merely doubts that anything he has to say would ever attain to it. Yet his shame is his redemption: it signals both his hope for the ideal even as he knows he is failing it. His disgust with Tomás emphasizes this point. Tomás disparages the art by using clichés *without even knowing* that he is doing so. When Adam and Tomás are introduced, Adam doesn't articulate his disgust but hopes that he can convey it without words: "I just smiled slightly," says Adam, "in a way intended to communicate...that I in fact believed his writing constituted a new low for his or any language, his or any art" (42).

Adam's hope that the unspoken or the undecidable will be read as depth is important in his political and aesthetic discussions with his love interest, Isabel, as well. Here we begin to get glimpses of how Adam's identity as an American is a source of shame. In one scene, they stand before Picasso's *Guernica* and Adam mutters a phrase suggestively, such as "To photograph a painting," or "Blue is an idea about distance." Isabel gladly completes the sentence, thus creating their own synergistic discourse that relies entirely upon his being unable to thoroughly articulate his thoughts. To his dismay, this changes when she starts to ask him about the real commitments behind his poems. His glib explanations for why he would want to study poetry at the time of Franco is met with her cold assessment: "'I'm sure the people of Iraq are looking forward to your poem about Franco and his economy'" (50). Suddenly, the nature of their misunderstanding is not the wellspring of profundity but something terribly banal: "much more of the actual than the virtual" (50-51). His Spanish has become too competent to hide the fact of his essential inadequacy—that he is not profound, that he is nothing more than "a typically pretentious American" (50). When Isabel and Adam go on a road trip, Adam describes his impressions of seeing fellow American tourists:

My look accused them of supporting the war, of treating people and the relations between people like things, of being the lemmings of a murderous and spectacular empire, accused them as if I were a writer in flight from a repressive regime, rather than one of its most fraudulent grantees. (48)

That last line, where Adam admits his own fraudulence is what prevents his disdain for Americans from festering into full grown contempt. He is one of them and he knows it:

I reserved my most intense antipathy for those Americans who attempted to blend in, who made Spanish friends and eschewed the company of their countrymen, who refused to speak English and who, when they spoke Spanish, exaggerated the

peninsular lisp. At first I was unaware of these subtler, quieter Americans, but as I became one, I began to perceive their numbers... (48)

Adam will return to America at the end of his fellowship year. The Americans who evoke his ire are not those who differ from him—not those with the fanny packs or the guidebooks—but those who are exactly like him. Shame, as an emotion, is always linked to our identities and to the stories we tell about ourselves.

These two shames—that of being a poet and that of being an American—coalesce in the latter half of *Leaving the Atocha Station*. The book we are reading manifests this shame by being exactly what he has foresworn. This begins with him realizing that he *is* the kind of poet who gets inspired by his environment and writes his notes down. Throughout *Leaving*, Adam has carried around a satchel whose purpose is to transport his white pills and hash. In order to give the bag weight and, in the eyes of others, a legitimate purpose, he also uses it to carry his pens, notebooks and a few collections of poetry. When Adam finds that his Spanish has improved too much for it to continue insinuating a coquettish fragmentation into his conversations with Isabel, he finds that the notebooks can do more than simply weigh down his bag: now Adam turns to writing in his notebook in an effort to “preserve [his] aura of profundity” (53). Isabel cannot read English, so the notebooks reinstate the distance they lost once he could properly communicate in Spanish. One night, however, Adam is shocked to find himself turning to the notebook to record a thought *even though he is alone*. He stops himself, asking:

Why would I take notes when Isabel wasn't around to see me take them? ...the idea of actually being one of those poets who was constantly subject to fits of inspiration repelled me; I was unashamed to pretend to be inspired in front of Isabel, but that I had just believed myself inspired shamed me. (57)

His lack of shame in performing for Isabel indicates that as alluring as she may be, her estimation of him matters little. His shame when he is alone might be an indication of the opposite: that despite all the ways he seems burdened by a lack of self esteem, his standards for himself—strange as they may be—matter very much to him, and shame him when he forsakes them. Instead of writing down the observation, Adam rolls a spliff. Yet the observation was obviously noted, the book is a manifestation of it.

In a similar instance, Adam is alone in his apartment, reading about the war in Iraq. He says,

And when I read *the New York Times* online, where it was always the deadliest day since the invasion began, I wondered if the incommensurability of language



and experience was new, if my experience of my experience issued from a damaged life of pornography and privilege, if there were happy ages when the starry sky was the map of all possible paths, or if this division of experience into what could not be named and what could not be lived just was experience, for all people for all time. Either way, I promised myself, I would never write a novel. (64-65)

As above, Lerner's book is the punchline to Adam Gordon's joke. Later, after Madrid's Atocha station has been bombed and protests have erupted throughout the city, Adam finds himself at a friend's apartment where a man comments that it must be an interesting time to be an American in Spain (133). Adam thinks that he is being mocked but isn't sure until the man says, "Are you going to write a poem about the bombings?" (134). Adam says he won't. But he does write a book about them and the protests that followed.

This is where we see that Adam cannot overcome his shame of being an American, nor of the shame of writing about that shame, but he can overcome his shame of believing that poetry can be profound. After an unspecified period of time during which Adam has doubled and then tripled his dosage of white pills, he finally says that he wanted to write great poems (101). He recognizes that he has been fooling himself and admits that:

I wanted my 'work' to take on the United States of Bush, to shed its scare quotes, and I wanted, after I self-immolated on the Capitol steps or whatever, to become the Miguel Hernández of late empire....This was a structure of feeling, not an idea, which made it harder to dismiss, and I felt it more intensely in direct proportion to its ridiculousness....I began to read and write feverishly. This was less a new faith in poetry than a sudden loss of faith in pure potentiality. (101-102)

Though there is an element of self-mockery even in these drug-induced idealizations, they are mirrored by the fact that the world of Madrid is no longer content to let him continue riding on his negative power. It is the first time that he has felt like a writer and his hopes for his writing start to reflect the ongoing presence of the Iraq war and the travesty of Fox News (103). He hopes that he can become (or be seen as) "a poet who alone was able to array the fallen materials of the real into a song that transcended it" (104). While this might sound, in content, much like Heti's hopes that her play would change the world, the tone of it and the quiet beauty of the writing already adds a level of sincerity that Heti's "if I don't, I will shit into my oatmeal," purposely forecloses.

## Friendship

While this chapter has focused on the way shame emerges in relation to the ideals one has for oneself, shame often emerges also in much more social contexts, and especially in our most intimate relationships. Yet, when one thinks of selfhood in terms of performance—as both Adam and Sheila do—intimate friendship is difficult to come by, and shame has a tendency to emerge in more idealistic than social terms—as it has. Indeed, it is only in the latter half of Lerner’s book that Adam finally begins to look at the woman he has been dating—Isabel—as a real person. He discovers, for example, that she has a long term boyfriend named Oscar and that her brother died when she was sixteen, leaving behind nothing but a notebook full of dates: “1066, 312, 1936, 1492, 800, 1776, etc” (96). Mistaking them for an elaborately coded message meant specifically for her, the notebook became her prized possession, until Oscar pointed out that the notebook must have been a study aid—the dates are all historical. Adam is devastated to find out that Isabel has had a life that preceded (and will continue without) him but must mask his feelings as he responds to Isabel’s painful memories. It is a turning point in his capacity to think of someone besides himself as real.

Similarly, the idea that the self is performance has hamstrung most of Sheila’s relationships. *How Should a Person Be?* begins with the narrator admitting she hadn’t had a real friend until the age of 25, and even then she realizes, in the awkward phrasing so typical of the book that, “she’d never had a woman either,” by which she means she’s never had a woman friend (31). Heti’s book has been widely praised for being a model of feminist writing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in part because it passes what is called the Bechdel test. The American cartoonist and recent recipient of a MacArthur Foundation “genius grant,” Alison Bechdel says that a work of fiction passes the test when its main protagonists are women who do not spend all their time talking about men. In *How Should a Person Be?* the most central relationship is between Margaux and Sheila; their conversations are usually about art, art-making, or friendship. However, Heti’s preference for superficiality—personas instead of characters and talk so lacking in substance, “one occasionally [have] to remind oneself that the book’s author is thirty-five and not twenty,” (Wood 68)—means that even the relationship with Margaux lacks depth. It is hard, in this aesthetic context, to take seriously this central relationship and the way that shame emerges there. Nevertheless, I would be remiss if I overlooked it altogether.

When Margaux and Sheila become friends, they try to make each other feel famous (3): Sheila records Margaux, Margaux paints Sheila (93). Then Sheila betrays Margaux in two

ways. First, Sheila buys the same yellow dress as Margaux. This leads to their first fight. Second, Sheila uses all of the recorded material from their conversations not, as she had promised, to write the play, but to write about them. Margaux is outraged. In what is the most emotionally wrought—read: melodramatic—section of the book, Sheila recounts her shame at having betrayed her friend’s explicit wishes about what should happen with those recordings:

I had come too close and hurt her....Instead of sitting down and writing my play with my words—using my imagination, pulling up the words from the solitude and privacy of my soul—I had used her words, stolen what was hers. I had plagiarized her being and mixed it up with the ugliness that was mine!....Shame covered my face and hands. I would abandon my play for good. I would never tape us again! (179)

This betrayal is described as creative cheating. Sheila has poached her friend’s being and is ashamed of it. She flees to New York. When she returns, she finds a numbered note from Margaux that reads, in part:

3. To be my closest friend and record me, then as soon as you’ve learned how a person should be, you’re done with me! ....
5. I always feared that one day you would forget why we wanted to see each other all the time, once you know longer felt it or wanted to...
6. Why would you still hang out with me? You’re already off to the next thing that will help you be a genius. (242)

Sheila lies in bed and contemplates slitting her wrists in the shower (242). She writes, “I wanted to shoot myself in the face with a gun that released so many bullets at once, which would fan out and hit every part of my face and explode it into nothing, into mush” (242-3). Sheila’s dreams that night are horrifically violent: countless knives are delivered to an apartment; an orgy begins; girls get “skinned alive and kept alive,” and then are destroyed, “ripped away, so that you could not tell one girl from the other ...[they were] just bloodiness, like animals turned inside out” (244-45). In the morning she wakes and concludes “I had hurt Margaux beyond compare. The heat of shame was the heat of my body. There was not one cell in my body unsullied by what I had done” (245). When she finally meets Margaux and does what she can do to repair the damage, Margaux demands that Sheila finish the play: “Does it have to be a play?” asks Sheila (262). As I noted above, Margaux says no. This is the turning point that brings Sheila back into harmony with Margaux; by writing the book, a process she describes as “throwing her shit,” she overcomes her shame (277). She becomes,

she says, "a real girl" (277). Writing has manifest Sheila's shame, but it is also (by way of it signaling the fulfillment of a promise to her friend), shame's overcoming.

Crucially, Ben Lerner's book ends the same way. When the Atocha station is bombed and protests erupt in the street, Adam struggles to join the chanting crowds but finds that his "voice sounded off" (123). His friends, all of them Spanish and involved in Madrid's art scene, participate in the protests without irony, detachment, or suspicion. Adam eyes them curiously: amazed at how easily they belong, at how forcefully they say something and mean it. Finally Adam seems to make peace with meaning. Although he maintains that he is no genius, "No duende here, I would think to myself, checking my body for sensation, no deep song" (164), he does find himself surprisingly protective of his poetry and of the self that it represents: "my research had taught me that the tissue of contradictions that was my personality was itself, at best, a poem, where 'poem' is understood as referring to a failure of language to be equal to the possibilities it figures" (164). And, it is within the nature of friendship that he comes to realize not only that he speaks the language he has enjoyed misunderstanding for the majority of the book, but also that he might even be capable of saying something about literature, "in [his] second language without irony" (168). Isabel has left him and he has begun seeing Teresa. She asks him "When are you going to stop pretending that you're only pretending to be a poet?" (168) which prompts him to consider the possibility that "maybe only [his] fraudulence was fraudulent" (168).

The final pages of the book abandon irony completely. Kisses without irony, speeches without irony, friendships without irony. Adam returns to where the book began, in the Prado, "standing before *The Descent*, oil on oak, hash and caffeine; I hadn't been there in a while and the blue was startling" (179). For the first time, Adam evokes history in a sincere way:

It was the deadliest day since the invasion began. Unmanned drones made sorrowful noise overhead. It was 1933. The cities were polluted with light, the world warming. The seas were rising. The seas were closing over future readers. Confused trees were blooming early; you could view the pics from space online. It was 1066, 312. (178)

For the first time, Adam permits the weight of history to fall on him without irony as refuge. He goes to the panel discussion, speaks his second language, reads his poems and all of it with a surprising lack of nervousness. The book concludes: "Teresa would read the originals and I would read the translations and the translations would become the originals as we read. Then I planned to live forever in a skylit room surrounded by my friends" (181).

Similarly, *How Should a Person Be?* returns to where it began. The friends—Misha, John, Sholem, Margaux and Sheila—convene to judge the results of the Ugly Painting Competition. The hard work of ugliness has been evident throughout *How Should a Person Be?* and in the concluding pages, this reigning aesthetic is again held up as an ideal, with Margaux as its principal philosopher: “Well, everything I like is ugly-beautiful...I think anything tight is truly ugly for me” (291). By “tight,” Margaux means anything that follows the rules of what is meant to be beautiful. After a friendly art critique of both pieces, the friends agree that Sholem’s painting is probably uglier than Margaux’s. The deciding factor is pointed out by Sholem:

But see, the saving grace is your touch. The nonugly is your touch. I knew it would be like this! The way this line sort of whorls in on itself, and you have these two beautiful streaks of this gorgeous red....Again, so special. Your touch is all over this painting. " (Heti 294)

The surprising turn at the end of both books could have been written by Montaigne: they are unlikely odes to friendship.

Numerous critics have noted the similarities of Sheila Heti’s *How Should a Person Be?* and Ben Lerner’s *Leaving the Atocha Station*, and some have come to the conclusion that what negative criticism Heti’s work did receive is illustrative of an ongoing gender bias in literary criticism, a poor explanation in my estimation. While both books offer original and highly contemporary responses to whether or not art, poetry or novels can be meaningful, and by this they usually mean “in the face of war, capitalism, racism, or poverty,” Lerner’s book takes this question seriously and in doing so far surpasses Heti’s intentionally superficial book. Heti’s novel is, as its UK edition proclaims, a “novel from life.” Yet anyone who has ever tried to write dialogue by transcribing a taped conversation will know that human speech, no matter how intelligent the speakers, is wrought with redundancies, pauses, ugly turns of phrase and dropped threads. In life, stories never end; arguments never conclude. Heti’s prose preserves the awkwardness of recorded speech, while Adam’s prose is transcendently artificial. The difference between the books reveals that art needs artifice for it to ever hope to represent something meaningful about this, our shamed human condition.

## Shame's Lyric: Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*

Perhaps writing is not really *pharmakon*, but more of a *mordant*—a means of binding color to its object—or feeding it into it, like a tattoo needle drumming ink into skin. But ‘mordant,’ too, has a double edge: it derives from *mordere*, to bite—so it is not just fixative or preserver, but also an acid, a *corrosive*.

Maggie Nelson, *Bluets*

Ecstasy and dullness; blindness and the gaze; the prevailing pains of the body, heart, and spirit; and what-does-anything-ever-mean-anyway: these are the motifs that ebb and flow in Maggie Nelson’s *Bluets* in cycles so rhythmic, they almost feel liturgical. The form of the book has been described as fragmentary, poetic, or, in her words, “propositional” (Nelson interview with DeFord *BOMB* n.pag). Her propositions are part autobiography, part quotation, creating an impression of Nelson that is sometimes aphoristic and inconclusive, and sometimes intellectual and crass. Of all the possible ways critics have tried to pin *Bluets* to a genre, the lyric essay seems most apt, if only because that genre, itself, defies genre (Lorsung, Schlegel, Rooney). When critics have tried to define the genre, they become lyrical themselves, saying that the lyric essay “partakes of the poem in its density and shapeliness, its distillation of ideas and musicality of language. It partakes of the essay in its weight, in its overt desire to engage with the facts, melding its allegiance to the actual with its passion for imaginative form” (Tall and D’Agata n.pag). Yet it bears at least some resemblance to lyric poetry, which typically involves an isolated speaker (Frye 54), so in *Bluets*, a solitary speaker stands before us, uttering, in one of Helen Vender’s coy descriptions of lyric, “an utterance that is ours” (qtd. in Jackson 88). In her meandering, Nelson engages and disrupts all of the emblems of the lyric, yet it is the pursuit of epiphany that pulls the reader ever forward. This is especially true if by epiphany we mean a sometimes mystical revelation, arrived at after a difficult time of pilgrimage or meditation. In *Bluets*, our wandering is our reward because the epiphany, to its credit, never quite arrives. Through an aesthetic that is, in turns, exposing and reclusive, defiantly shameless and too-ashamed-to-even-say-so, *Bluets* embodies the dialectical (and lyrical) nature of shame in a secular world.

In earlier chapters, we've looked at efforts to curtail the affects of shame, but now I'd like to explore more carefully the way shame appears in our relations with the world—how we perceive it and how we express such perceptions. This chapter is about looking and storytelling. It is about blighted sight and the forms of writing that try to come to terms with it. This chapter enacts shame theory as a mode of reading. We look for shame, and *voilà*: there it is! One of the things we'll be on the lookout for, then, are what I'd call an aesthetics of shame: an aesthetics of the dialectic, masking, confession, and withdrawal. This is an aesthetic that tacks the way a sailboat does, back and forth across the wind where the wind is a sailboat's ally and its enemy; despite the wind and because of it, the boat moves ever forward. Shame is like the wind: we must contend with it, even if no one else can see it. Contend in the right way, and it can be a source of tremendous power. Tacking is the term for how a sailboat steals the wind's power, but to one standing on the shore, tacking can make a sailboat look a little lost. It is all a matter of perspective.

Though the primary focus of this chapter will be on *Bluets*, I begin the chapter with a discussion of looking and love as they appear in the work of psychologists Silvan Tomkins and Leon Wurmser. In the introduction we saw Tomkins and Wurmser as complementary thinkers in that both engage with shame as something an individual feels. Here we look at how their discussions diverge on the topic of love's relation to shame.

Silvan Tomkins tells us that looking, or especially the look-look of intimate connection can be a source of shame. Shame is paradoxically produced by looking, registered in the face even when one wishes one could hide it, and produces, in the shamed person, the desire to hide away. Visuality—our perception of ourselves and of ourselves being perceived by others—is at the heart of this affect. We look because we are interested; we look away because we are ashamed. More than any of the other affects, shame takes place in the realm of the visual. While all of the affects register on the face—and therefore *are* visible—only shame's visibility increases the phenomenological experience of the affect. Knowing that we are blushing makes our shame all the more intense. At the same time, shame is closely related to the experience of looking or wanting to be looked at.

For Tomkins, shame explains the age-old taboos against looking, exposing and interocular looking, or, looking into another person's eyes. The latter expresses shame in intimacy because when one looks into the eyes of another, one sees affect and one can share it:

...the taboo on mutual looking is reinforced by its specific linkage with sexuality.

To the extent to which there are taboos on the free expression of sexuality, mutual

looking, which is an important part of sexual exploration and contagion, also comes under taboo. (Tomkins 374)<sup>6</sup>

Looking is dangerous. Whole graveyards in the Middle Ages were thought to have been full of victims of the evil eye and no less than two Popes were accused of having it. Pope Leo XIII's evil eye was "believed responsible for the death of a large number of cardinals and the assassination of King Humbert of Italy" (Tomkins 375). Despite ample "evidence" that men can possess the evil eye, it is women who are most often associated with it (378).

There is also a way that fascination has to do with infatuation. Both are something one does to another and that indicates a morally suspect love, and both are predicated on a tantalizing power imbalance. Fascination is way of looking at another person that wants to hold them in your grasp: paralyze them, render them dizzy, blind, and unable to break away. Fascination is what the predator does to its prey. Is what a snake does to a little mouse: it establishes a position of power.

Infatuation is the opposite. Infatuation is what the prey does even when the predator has lost interest: it keeps looking. Infatuation is absolutely passive, except for one thing: it chooses that passivity. It adopts a position of weakness, but enjoys it, perhaps because of the risks it entails:

Infatuation is idealization and admiration based on a spurious assessment or a vain hope of what the other should be. True love respects and admires because of knowledge, not illusion. (Wurmser 308)

Both fascination and infatuation can feel wonderful and we may submit to them willingly and without real harm. The only harm is when we make a related perceptual mistake: when we confuse fascination or infatuation with love. The problem is that we make this mistake too often:

It has become evident that, just as shame as two logical levels (function versus content), genetically it may have two roots. To put the distinction as simply as possible, shame originates on the one hand in anxiety related to theatophilic and delophilic impulses—in traumatic failure in the perceptual-expressive fields—leading to many layers of defenses and wishes. (Wurmser 168)

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<sup>6</sup> It's beyond the purview of this chapter to discuss this aspect of *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness* in any more detail than this, but Tomkins' list of manifestations of the taboo on looking is extensive and entertaining. Instances of the fear of the evil-eye, for example, are found in the sayings of Jesus, in ancient Iraqi civilization, and in the poisonous filth left on a mirror by an old woman's evil gaze.



In other words, shame operates in the world of perception and expression. One's incapacity to accurately perceive the world can be a source of shame. Likewise, one's incapacity (or shame-induced unwillingness) to express oneself is at once a manifestation of shame but also its source. The divide between what one seems to be (to the world) and what one knows of oneself is always a source of shame, especially when one's interior knowledge reflects a further gap, a distance between how one would like to be and how one knows one is. There are three parts: how the world sees us, how we see ourselves, how we would like to be. Sometimes we manage to project our ideal, which means that the world sees us as we would like to be seen: in which case the only hidden aspect is the truth we know of ourselves.

To complicate matters further, the power and weakness expressed in infatuation and fascination that are typically intersubjective, that is, between two people, are also blunted modes of seeing that we can turn on ourselves, that is, intrasubjectively. One term we have for this is narcissism. Looking at others is dangerous, but so is looking at oneself:

Plutarch thought it possible for a vain person to thus fascinate himself, citing the case of Eutelidas, who lost his beauty and health by looking at his own reflection in the water. Ovid's account of Narcissus is similar. (Tomkins 376)

The centrality of these various modes of looking and how they relate to good love and bad love (infatuation, fascination, harmful narcissism) are all central to understanding shame in *Bluets*.

Shame relates, according to Leon Wurmser, to a basic flaw (or a fear that we exhibit a basic flaw) that would render us unlovable. We fear that we are "a loser, defective, weak, or dirty" (168). Shame, says Wurmser, "is the night side of love. When love is eclipsed by power, the somber hues of shame darken life" (309). Shame and love cannot, in Wurmser's estimation, co-exist, or at least not for long. He says,

Love's enemy is neither shame nor self-loyalty, but the precedence of power, of self-concern. Where the other is *used*, partially or fully, emotionally or physically, unconsciously or consciously, love flees and shame enters. (309)

Though shame and love are not precisely antithetical, they do not nourish one another. Shame is symptomatic of love's absence and of the lack then, of love's power to recognize and accept our every dark corner. As Joseph Adamson puts it:

This is the ultimate wish of all human beings perhaps: to be recognized for what one is, by a loving eye from which the need to hide or cover oneself, with all

one's flaws and defects, imagined or otherwise, is absent, without the fear of judgment or shame. (Adamson 73)

Love is a freedom from the critical eye of shame. To the extent that one's romantic relationship fails to fulfill one's ideal—of total acceptance, for example—it too can become a source of shame.

Silvan Tomkins characterizes the relationship between love and shame somewhat more subtly. While shame might, in one instance, be a corollary of a fear of unlovability, this is by no means its only appearance in life. Instances of shame, in Tomkins, extend far beyond the realm of love and interpersonal relations. We can experience shame before an ideal just as well as we can before a person. In his assessment, shame emerges in love as it does in work, as it does in one's desire to write, sing, or perform anything well. Shame emerges in relations with loved ones and with strangers and can be both intensely idiosyncratic as well as thoroughly the result of socialization. Shame is always, in Tomkins' work, a partial reduction of the affect of interest joy (138). The "partial" part is important. It is a bandaid only partially removed. Shame is on the way to contempt, but it isn't free like contempt is. Contempt has severed the ties from the individual who hurt them, but shame keeps us hanging around, like a stray dog that once had a home.

Consider the innocuous situation of running into a friend on the street, a friend who ends up being a stranger who looks like a friend. If intense excitement or joy is akin to the pleasure of exploration,

... any barrier to it, whether because one is suddenly looked at by one who is strange, or because one wishes to look at or commune with another person, but suddenly cannot because he is strange, or one expected him to be familiar but he suddenly appears unfamiliar, or one started to smile but found one was smiling at a stranger—any of these which involve an interruption and incomplete reduction of interest or smiling will activate the lowering of the head and eyes in shame and thereby reduce further exploration powered either by excitement or joy. (142-3)

I include this passage here because it serves two purposes: not only to show the subtlety with which Tomkins addresses the topic of shame, finding it in degrees of retreat rather than in the more dramatically sketched withdrawal we see in Wurmser, but also because it captures the very dialectical movements of the affect, the way it both extends itself out into the world with a beautiful vulnerability and then retreats with a withered downturned gaze. And yet, that downturned gaze—as we know, and Tomkins knows, and most advertising executives, models, and seductive people know—can be read as coquettishness. Our embarrassment at

being caught looking can be so attractive that a species of that downward gaze is actually often replicated or feigned, even in the absence of the affect that usually inspires it. Shame can be very alluring.

Where shame exists in relationship to love, the potential to be ashamed is increased, not lessened. This is because love is a condition of very high attachment to another person and, oftentimes, to the ideal of love itself. The degree to which one feels an intense interest, joy, or excitement at being around another person (all typical affects associated with love) is also the degree to which one is vulnerable to shame. The attachment is a precondition for shame. Tomkins explains that “Defeat is most ignominious when one still wishes to win. The sting of shame can be removed from any defeat by attenuating the positive wish” (Tomkins 361). If we fall out of love, in other words, we can fall out of shame. Not so easy, but still.

One can imagine, given the flexibility of what is shameful in Tomkins’ system, that the question of shame’s relationship to unlovability might become utterly idiosyncratic. If we imagine shame as a register of our fear that we might be unlovable, then, in Tomkins’ system, our unlovability could be due to an infinite array of failures: To the extent that Tomkin’s shame is highly idiosyncratic, so too are the potential explanations for what makes us unlovable. At the very least, they extend far beyond the sources of shame catalogued by Wurmser, where most shame amounts to a failure to attain society’s standards—of cleanliness, sexual attractiveness, sexual orientation, or intellectual, physical, emotional strength. Given a strong enough shame theory, any idiosyncratic source of shame could render one (in one’s own eyes) unlovable. Luckily, others see us differently than we see ourselves. To a degree.

Despite these differences, they are differences of degree. Both Wurmser and Tomkins agree that because love promises the very deepest kind of connection—the recognition, acceptance, interest and freedom to be ourselves, whatever that may be at any given moment—it is, in both Wurmser’s work and in Tomkins’, the site of shame’s most debilitating maneuvers. As models for thinking about shame’s relation to subjectivity, Wurmser and Tomkins provide interpretive rather than diagnostic tools. Whether or not a core self exists isn’t the question here. The question is how these conceptions help us to better understand the working of shame in Maggie Nelson’s *Bluets*.

In much the same way that looking concerns two types of perception—the phenomenology of perception, or the idea or feeling that seeing creates internally, and a phenomenology of epistemology, where the fundamental gain from looking is thought to be

knowledge, or facts—shame operates dialectically. On this point, Tomkins and Wurmser seem to agree. Wurmser, true to the redemptive narrative he tells about shame, looks at shame's dialectics in a positive light:

Philosophically speaking, profound theoretical insight moves dialectically. Seeming opposite truths may complement each other, and only so can they be fully appreciated. And is not this old philosophy of dialectic...itself an epistemological prototype for our more narrowly defined conflict model in psychoanalysis? Is not shame itself, then, part of overarching dialectical movements? (Wurmser 28)

Wurmser's shame moves dialectically, and one of the directions a healthy shame can move in is in the direction of creativity and originality. (The sailboat, out there in the bay, tacks back and forth, looking lost, but moving ever forward). Even the masks we wear in an effort to conceal our shame could be considered within a dialectical framework. When we wear a mask, we are two things at once, both of them true:

The most accessible, largely preconscious, level of shame contents is a characteristic duplicity, one probably inherent in every one of us, a doubleness of 'how I want to appear' and 'how I really am.' (Wurmser 169)

The self monitoring that Tomkins identifies as the acting of a strong shame theory identifies itself most strongly dialectically, either between the self and society or between the self and the self.

At the end of Wurmser's book, the dialectics of shame have been resolved in two ways: through romantic love and self love. In the first, our lover has leapt past our deficiencies and seen through to our core self, loving every dark circle it passed along the way. In the second, self-love has been achieved through a heroic transcendence of shame that, paradoxically, benefited from the kind of protective withdrawal shame provided prior to the heroic leap. And the leap was, indeed, creative: something new exists where nothing did before. The leap has overturned the status quo through a scientific, artistic, or intellectual achievement. The dark night of the soul led to the triumph of the day. In this way, Wurmser's assessment of shame and the way out can, paradoxically, create a new ideal, and therefore, a new source of shame. Wurmser's hero, finally able to express its core, original, unique selfhood, is nothing short of the romantic ideal of the individual. That is, at least, how the solitary hero reads in *Bluets*.

The most fundamental ideal in *Bluets* is that of independence. It's not an explicitly foregrounded ideal, but it's there, in the interstices, lurking, even. Its most evocative and repeated presentation is in questions about perception. *Bluet's* speaker experiences anguish over the fact that knowledge and perception are not the same thing. What she's after is a kind of perceptual independence: a way of looking that would mean that one could trust that what one saw was real. Perception would be epistemological. It would lead to knowledge. Being able to trust one's sight would mean that falling in love would no longer have anything to do with going blind. It would mean that colour, and especially blue, would be a measurable thing. The problem is expressed here:

As in *Humboldt's Travels* (Ross, 1852): 'We beheld with admiration the azure colour of the sky. Its intensity at the zenith appeared to correspond to 41 degrees of the cyanometer.' This latter sentence brings me great pleasure, but really it takes us no further—either into knowledge, or into beauty. (Nelson 40)

We'll see this problem repeatedly in *Bluets*, where independence is held up as a kind of ideal with various guises: the objective scientist, the detached lover, the sexually liberated woman, and the one who can bear pain. Scientific, romantic, artistic, sexual, spiritual, and emotional independence are *Bluets's* ideals. We turn to those ideals now.

The three forms inspire *Bluets*: the philosophical tract, the lyric poem and autobiography weave together a compelling rethinking of shame in women's writing particularly as it relates to love, loss, depression, and physical pain. In interviews, Nelson has described how Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* inspired the structuring of *Bluets*:

I basically took half of the book's locutions from Wittgenstein, and the other half from Goethe: the anecdotal locutions about perception come from *Theory of Colours*, and the relentless form of self-questioning, of pulling the rug out from under the speaker each time she has come to perch, comes from *Philosophical Investigations*. (Nelson in interview with DeFord)

This method, of relentless self-questioning aestheticizes the workings of a strong shame theory and makes it possible to explore what the consequences of a strong shame theory are for political engagement, friendship, and autobiography.

Even if *Bluets* does not trace the development of the author's personality as Lejeune would expect in an autobiographical work, the author's circumstances certainly correspond with those of the speaker. When the speaker is interviewed for a position at a university, she

tells them that she is writing a book about the color blue: “One of the men asks, *Why blue?* ... We don’t get to choose what or whom we love, I want to say. We just don’t get to choose.” (Nelson 5) Later, when the speaker describes scenes from the academic institution where she works, we can imagine it is Pratt, in Brooklyn, or Cal Arts in California: places Maggie Nelson has worked. And when the speaker addresses her depression, narrates the way the Prince of Blue disappointed her or how the Princess of Blue inspired, readers connect these moments to a real life lived by a real person. *Bluets* is not the first autobiographical book Nelson has written. Two of her books—*The Red Parts* and *Jane: A Murder*—recounted the murder of her aunt. Another, *Something Bright, Then Holes* is a poetry collection that speaks, in part, of her friend’s motorcycle accident; this friend reappears in *Bluets*. Maggie Nelson, the writer, is the writer and speaker of these propositions and the stories they tell are Nelson’s stories, taken from her life. I will return to the question of genre at the end of this chapter.

The book opens with a rhetorical device designed to create sympathy between the reader and the writer, and to teach us a thing or two about how to read the text. It is a confession, a model that she will, throughout the course of the book, dismantle. She knows that the confession reads, in Western culture, as the “prime mark[er] of authenticity, par excellence the kind of speech in which the individual authenticates his [or her] inner truth” (Brooks qtd. in Jamison 165). The opening proposition is:

Suppose I were to begin by saying that I had fallen in love with a color. Suppose I were to speak this as though it were a confession; suppose I shredded my napkin as I spoke. *It began slowly. An appreciation, an affinity. Then, one day, it became more serious.* Then (looking into an empty teacup, its bottom stained with thin brown excrement coiled into the shape of a sea horse) *it became somehow personal.* (1)

The repetition here is incantatory, and a paradox is at work. What is the nature of the paradox? The repeated word is “suppose.” Its repetition enchants and dizzies. Its repetition and its tentative meaning bring to the text a sense of orality, the intimacy of a whisper, but the truth of the matter is that the speaker of this first proposition is beyond the stage of supposing anything. The reader knows this. The reader holds in her hands a blue book entitled *Bluets*, and the first proposition confesses the truth of the matter: *Bluets* is a love letter to blue. Yet the word suppose suggests that “it could be like this, or it could be like that.” Said aloud, in conversation, the word suppose means what it says it means: it really could be one way or another. In text, however, the word suppose has been inked,

permanently, onto the page. Suppose, in text, is only *rhetorically* suggestive. What then, is the rhetorical purpose of this word? Perhaps its purpose is to dazzle, but read alongside the use of the subjunctive mode, this italicized, subordinated whisper reads like a secret—a coy one, a secret for pleasure’s sake, but a secret all the same. It suggests that if we ever do get a confession here, it won’t be one that seeks redemption or forgiveness, it will be one that is confessed for our reading pleasure, because it is time that we be honest: confession doesn’t seek redemption here and autobiography doesn’t have to be true to be meaningful. The main purpose of foregrounding the word suppose is to invite the reader into the dialectical logic of *Bluets* where words and their meanings shift, slip, slide.

Perhaps an even clearer illustration of this technique can be found in Nelson’s use of the word “you,” and again, this technique appears in the book’s earliest propositions. As with “suppose”, the “you” serves a dual purpose of creating a feeling of intimacy between the speaker and the reader and of emphasizing the slipperiness of language, meaning, and address. The first “you” addresses the reader, wherein the reader is imagined as a skeptic: “Well, and what of it? A voluntary delusion, you might say.” (2) Nelson knows she has her work cut out for her: the reader is not yet ready. Nelson is hospitable to her skeptic reader. In proposition 5, the speaker includes the reader in the investigation at hand, saying, “But first, let us consider...” (2) but in proposition 7 she is playfully antagonistic, admonishing the reader, saying “Don’t fool yourself,” (3). In proposition 7, she challenges the reader: “Admit that you have stood in front of a little pile of powdered ultramarine pigment in a glass cup at a museum and felt a stinging desire” (3), even going further,

You might want to reach out and disturb the pile of pigment, for example, first staining your fingers with it, then staining the world. You might want to dilute it and swim in it, you might want to rouge your nipples with it, you might want to paint a virgin’s robe with it.... (4)

And so the reader is included in the ecstatic desires evoked by a powdered blue and, here again is the incantatory anaphora that makes our inclusion in the text as a sort of interlocutor all the more powerful.

But I said that Nelson’s use of the word “you” is dialectical. The first “you” is us, her readers. The second “you” is someone else. Notice the subtle shifting of the possessive pronouns in this proposition:

4. I admit that I may have been lonely. I know that loneliness can produce bolts of hot pain, a pain which, if it stays hot enough for long enough, can begin to

simulate, or to provoke—take your pick—an apprehension of the divine. (*This ought to arouse our suspicions.*)(2)

Nelson includes us throughout this proposition, first by her forthright admission of loneliness, an admission that seems totally guileless, second by the use of “your” and, even more strongly “our,” and, so the dialectical process of swinging from one idea to its opposite or negation becomes ours. *Bluets* is warming up. Consider the personal pronouns here:

8. Do not, however, make the mistake of thinking that all desire is yearning. ‘We love to contemplate blue, not because it advances to us, but because it draws us after it,’ wrote Goethe, and perhaps he is right. But I am not interested in longing to live in a world in which I already live. I don’t want to yearn for blue things, and God forbid for any ‘blueness.’ Above all, I want to stop missing you. (4)

In this proposition, Nelson establishes the full range of “yous” she will use in *Bluets*. Because the previous “yous” have consistently addressed the reader, when, at the end of proposition 8 the “you” suddenly becomes someone else—the Prince of Blue—she has already developed a sympathetic relationship between us and this means that the switch to a different you becomes *our* switch to a different you. When the ‘you’ suddenly becomes a figure we’ll come to know as the Prince of Blue, the I, the speaker of the text, becomes ‘us,’ and ‘we.’ Her Prince of Blue is Our Prince of Blue. The man that she wants to stop missing becomes, simultaneously, our object of longing. And she has taught us how to read her: the move from one you to another is already so well established that she need not give the reader the space of several sentences to cope with that change, as we see in proposition 9:

9. So please do not write to tell me about any more beautiful blue things. To be fair, this book will not tell you about any, either. (4)

The first “you” is addressed to her Prince of Blue. The second “you” is to him, but also the reader. This practice will be one way that shame is seen, but not heard, in the text. It is a shame that is incarnated in the body of the text, not spoken aloud. In these propositions and throughout the book, Nelson establishes a dialectical aesthetic that enacts the ‘yes, no’ structure of shame.

This section begins and ends with one of *Bluets* central stories, that of the erotic, romantic attachment the speaker feels toward the Prince of Blue. We begin with them apart, flash back to them together, and then end with her having renounced him completely. In between, perception and perceptual errors come into *Bluets*’ exploration of the history of colour, the speaker’s attachment to blue, and a spiritual quest marked by both irreverence and



wonder. Throughout, we will see the speaker grappling with the shame of emotional dependency.

This story begins in the first few pages of the book. It begins with interwoven descriptions of love, heartbreak, the depression that followed, and concludes with a sexual episode that, in and of itself, is marked with shame. Parallel to the love story involving the Prince of Blue is another love story involving the color itself, an affair that comes before and lives on long after the love story with the man has come to an end. The desperation played out with the Prince of Blue is all the more heightened with the colour, such that we see the desperate turns of fascination, thralldom, possessiveness, objectification, and finally a slow letting go play out more clearly with the colour than with the Prince, though the parallels she creates between them suggests that the stories are more similar than they are different.

As a result of her obsession with blue, she was introduced to a man “with the face of a derelict whose eyes literally leaked blue,” and she “called this one the prince of blue, which was, in fact, his name” (6). We have seen how Wurmser argues that a fear of unlovability is the core of shame. It is what he calls “the basic flaw,” but also, possibly, “the ‘mortal wound’ all tragic heroes have” (293). Their story goes like this: they meet, they fuck in the Chelsea Hotel, she dreams of him abandoning her, he does abandon her, she writes him a letter, he carries it around with him for months, unread. She doesn’t see him again. In one of the dreams he has escaped her, floating away down a river: “So I stayed behind,” she narrates, “and became known as the lady who waits, the sad sack of town with hair that smells like an animal” (8-9). She becomes, in other words, a rejected person, an outcast. Unlovability and shame, says Wurmser, spring from the painful exposure of one’s weakness or contemptibility—of the body that betrays us by smelling, looking, or desiring *inappropriately*.

Along those lines, the central problem with the Prince of Blue wasn’t even that he left her, it was that she should have seen it coming and that he became an object of obsession once he was gone. In other words, her errors were perceptual: a blindness in his presence and an obsession in his absence. “Above all,” she says, “I want to stop missing you” (4). There is, of course, something romantic about loving the wrong man. In speaking of both blue and the Prince of Blue she says, “We don’t get to choose what or whom we love, I want to say. We just don’t get to choose” (5). But she wishes that she’d been equipped to think more clearly about what she was doing. Part way into the story of the depression that ensued him leaving,

Nelson reports her therapist's view of things: "*If he hadn't lied to you, he would have been a different person than he is,*" (17). And then,

She is trying to get me to see that although I thought I loved this man very completely for exactly who he was, I was in fact blind to the man he actually was, or is.

45. This pains me enormously. She presses me to say why; I can't answer. Instead I say something about how clinical psychology forces everything we call love into the pathological or the delusional or the biologically explicable, that if what I wasn't feeling wasn't love then I am forced to admit that I don't know what love is, or, more simply, that I loved a bad man. (Nelson 17-18)

What pains Nelson is that an expert is telling her that she was mistaken: that what she saw wasn't actually there. What she wants is knowledge: a perception that she can trust to deliver her the facts of the matter. At issue is the possibility that everything we see with our blunted, blue eyes, might not be what we think it is.

Midway through the book, Nelson explicates a secondary source of shame—depression. Much as her obsession with blue led her to the Prince of Blue, her obsession with the colour led her to a book on depression, or so she says:<sup>85</sup> One afternoon in 2006, at a bookstore in Los Angeles. I pick up a book called *The Deepest Blue*. Having expected a chromatic treatise, I am embarrassed when I see the subtitle: *How Women Face and Overcome Depression*. I quickly return it to its shelf. Eight months later, I order the book online. (33)

There is an identifiable source (or sources) of the speaker's shame in this proposition: this is shame-as-emotion at work and it explains itself through the cause-and-effect logic of narrative. It is one or more of the following: depression, women's depression, the desire for help and self-help, the desire to hide that desire, the giving in to a shameful genre later on, in hiding. The shame of *The Deepest Blue* is not just its existence, and the fact that she buys it: the shame is also aesthetic:

88. Like many self-help books, *The Deepest Blue* is full of horrifyingly simplistic language and some admittedly good advice. Somehow the women in the book all learn to say: 'That's my depression talking. It's not 'me.'

89. As if we could scrape the color off the iris and still see. (34)

Maybe, she seems to say, *some* people could scrape the color off their irises and call what they perceived sight. But, not her: "<sup>35</sup> Does the world look bluer from blue eyes? Probably

not, but I choose to think so (self-aggrandizement)” (14). Self-help books in *Bluets* are an ongoing source of shame and shame’s sister—contempt:

136. ‘Drinking when you are depressed is like throwing kerosene on a fire,’ I read in another self-help book at the bookstore. What depression ever felt like a fire? I think, shoving the book back on the shelf. (52-53)

The aesthetic shame of the poorly wrought metaphor—of depression as fire—masks the more fundamental shame—that she would be reading such a debased genre in the first place. The genre itself shames her. *Bluets* attempts to unshame the story she is telling—of heartbreak, of depression—in part, by challenging the genre in which such stories are typically told. I will return to how she concludes her love affair with the Prince of Blue, but first I want to look at Science, the love affair with blue, and women’s right to look.

In *Bluets*, the prospect of scientific objectivity is—like love, like blue, like spiritual fulfillment and emotional freedom—a chimera. In its first third, Nelson’s exploration of perception relates to the physical, scientific configurations of it. Perception is what happens between the perceiver and the object perceived. That the perceiver can be mistaken about the perceived is a source of pain and confusion, and sometimes shame. The quagmires of visual perception—the way our eyes trick us—act as an entry point for even more difficult questions of perception, as we will see. Nelson’s approach is experimental: “Try, if you can, not to talk as if colors emanated from a single physical phenomenon” (20). Scientific locutions in these sections import the language of objectivity, certainty or truth-finding into her more metaphysical quests, but then her use of the language is poetic, and soon enough science stops suggesting surety. She says, about the question of colour, that we ought to:

Keep in mind the effects of all the various surfaces, volumes, light-sources, films, expanses, degrees of solidity, solubility, temperature, elasticity, on color. Think of an object's capacity to emit, reflect, absorb, transmit, or scatter light. (20)

This is the language and the advice of a scientist, but then her examples from scientists who have worked on such problems always undercut any hope of objectivity, suggesting that she hadn't hoped for objectivity at all. This is her account of Newton's investigation into color:

in his zeal, in the 'dark chamber' of his room at Trinity College, Newton at times took to sticking iron rods or sticks in his eyes to produce then analyze his perceptions of color. (19)

Pythagoras, Euclid, and Hipparchus proposed that our eyes “emitted some kind of substance that illuminated, or 'felt,' what we saw” (21). Epicurus thought the objects themselves

produced a ray (21). Plato "split the difference, and postulated that a 'visual fire' burns between our eyes and what they behold" (21). When we return to Newton, it is to find him referring to an "invaluable 'assistant'" who aided him in his discoveries, an assistant who many now consider a "rhetorical fiction": Newton's own invention. It is within the logic of *Bluets* that we might imagine Newton's assistant was invented, perhaps, to offset the loneliness of his dark chamber. The question of what seeing is and what colour is remains, in *Bluets*, irresolvable, a "systematic illusion." The authorities she consults—from the Encyclopedia to an expert on guppy menopause—cannot help.

38. For no one really knows what color is, where it is, even whether it is. Think of a honeybee, for instance, flying into the folds of a poppy: it sees a gaping violet mouth, where we see an orange flower and assume that it's orange, that we're normal. (15)

The male guppy needs to be orange to attract a mate, but it doesn't care what orange is. We cannot know the answers to these questions, she seems to say, and the Encyclopedia agrees: "51. *You might as well act as if objects had the colors*, the Encyclopedia says" (19). Re-reading these sections, we see that they are about the erotic thralldom with that which we cannot explain. Why else would Newton's laboratory be described as a dark chamber or the folds of a poppy as a gaping violet mouth? The central question is this: How do we know we're not just like that honeybee, blazing towards a violet-coloured poppy or like the speaker of *Bluets*, in love with a bad man? If we can't trust our eyes to see things clearly, what can we trust?

Blue is obviously the metaphorical centre of the book, but as metaphors go, it's not so clear what it means. If the structure of a metaphor is that which involves a gestalt-like shift where two dissimilar objects are suddenly brought into a strange but true kinship, blue as a metaphor fails us because blue fails: we don't know what it means, exactly, so we don't know what it means when we say it's like something else: "For a prince of blue is a prince of blue because he keeps 'a pet sorrow, a blue-devil familiar, that goes with him everywhere' (Lowell, 1870). This is how a prince of blue becomes a pain devil" (36). Blue is pain, a devil, a true love: Nelson assigns meanings to blue throughout the book, but it's strongest link is to love. *Bluets* is the story of what it means to love someone or something. Sometimes we love a thing too much. Sometimes we objectify it. In the ways that Nelson tacks between one kind of love—the blinded love of infatuation, say—to another—the love of a friend who lets us

see her pain—we see the dialectical movement of shame as it leads us down what will ultimately be a redemptive path. Not all loves can be redeemed, but perhaps love, itself, can.

Following the blue in *Bluets* takes us through a story of gifts, commodification, sacralization, and ruin. It is what happens to all kinds of attachment, but it begins with an attachment that Nelson doesn't seem able to escape, which is one reason the book opens with a confession. Attachment, especially one that is the result of self-indulgence or decadence, is one of the sources of shame here, and the story of blue is the story of the attempt to overcome it, or at least, accept it. The story she tells of shame, then, as we see its deft switchbacks from one notion of self to another, is a redemptive story: shame brings us back to ourselves.

Nelson's blues are a collection that she has gathered in the course of writing the book. She says, "Over the past decade I have been given blue inks, paintings, postcards, dyes, bracelets, rocks, precious stones, watercolors, pigments, paperweights, goblets, and candies" (6). These blue objects have been delivered to her by her "blue correspondents, whose job it is to send me blue reports from the field" (6). Though she has many correspondents, two are most important: The Prince and Princess of Blue. The Prince of Blue teaches her about heartache (because he makes her heart ache). The Princess of Blue teaches her about pain (because she suffers a terrible accident and experiences terrible pain as a result, a pain she allows Nelson to witness) (38).

One of the disarming (or fascinating) aspects of Nelson's propositions is the way they can be read to mean so many different things. I am tempted to say that this means they are pretty, in a formal way, but meaningless. A less cynical reading of this would be what Sartre has to say about freedom: we are holding hands, but unless we say so, it doesn't mean anything. Isn't this why her claim to see the world's blues better due to her blue eyes can read as playful (when we read it immediately following the discussion of one of Viagra's side-effects: that it taints the world blue), or incredibly sad (where the effort to separate oneself from one's depression is likened to an agonizing-to-imagine surgery—scraping the color off one's iris: impossible in other words and akin to a kind of death: I see the world blue because I am this person with blue eyes and being in possession of these blue eyes permits me the extravagant divinity of seeing *more* blue, but also of feeling more blue too: separating myself from my depression would amount to suicide—even if I was still alive, it wouldn't be *me* seeing the world).

I have already discussed the opening propositions, where Nelson admits to having fallen in love with a colour, and introduces a shifting "you" that draws us into a story that will become our own. Here I return to those opening propositions, citing them again in an

effort to draw out something new: the way that Nelson is suggesting that color has a magical power over her, in the way anything or anyone who fascinates can. Proposition two reads: “2. And so I fell in love with a color—in this case, the color blue—as if falling under a spell, a spell I fought to stay under and get out from under, in turns” (Nelson 1).

She has nourished her infatuation with blue, indeed the book we are holding provides ample evidence of that. That she has done so makes her complicit in her dependency: she’s been foolish, and she knows it:

3. Well, and what of it? A voluntary delusion, you might say. That each blue object could be a kind of burning bush, a secret code meant for a single agent, an X on a map too diffuse ever to be unfolded in entirety but that contains the knowable universe. How could all the shreds of blue garbage bags stuck in brambles, or the bright blue tarps flapping over every shanty and fish stand in the world, be, in essence, the fingerprints of God? (Nelson 2)

In this proposition, Nelson begins the slow process of commodifying blue. I mean commodifying in Marx’s sense of the word, and I mean it as a means of getting us to the sacred:

A commodity appears, at first sign, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. (Marx 27)

The commodity is not just its use value and its exchange value. It is those values, and something else. An object that is the result of human labour, that can be exchanged for another object or can operate as a kind of currency, permitting further trade. This rational explanation does not explain, however, the secret of the commodity: that which makes it a fetish object, an object of unexplainable desire, but also the bearer of a “metaphysical subtleties.” In *Bluets*, the next proposition takes us from the fingerprints of God (the marks God leaves behind, if you will) to God itself (himself, herself, as you wish):

4. I admit that I have been lonely. I know that loneliness can produce bolts of hot pain, a pain which, if it stays hot enough for long enough, can begin to simulate, or to provoke—take your pick—an apprehension of the divine. (*This ought to arouse our suspicions*). (Nelson 2)

Here we see the familiar switchback, and an insouciant suggestion that loneliness—which is blue—can simulate (falsely) or provoke (truthfully) the divine. When she recommends a hermeneutic of suspicion, then, what would she like us to be suspicious of: the simulation of the divine, or its provocation? That is: should we doubt an image of God—because it isn’t a

*real* God—or the appearance of a *real* God—because there is no God? At this point, Nelson doesn't want to have to choose. She's content to have the appearance of something more, even if what that something is remains unclear. The something more is metaphysical, but what kind of metaphysical isn't clarified. All we know is that the something more is the kind that takes hold of us and doesn't let go.

That Nelson's blues are as quotidian as torn scraps of blue tarpaulin, the turquoise of a robin's egg, the moody blue of her very own eyes and as transcendent as the divine is what makes them so attractive to her. Fine, you might say, but why commodity, why not just say Maggie Nelson makes of blue a fetish object in the anthropological sense, where an object is invested with supernatural powers or a fetish in the Freudian sense, where an object replaces a desired or missing object of sexual interest or desire? Or even, why not say simply that Maggie Nelson makes of blue a cipher, a wildcard?

One reason is simply that blue *is* a commodity. It has use value, exchange value, and, after Marx, something more. The painter Yves Klein "invented and patented his own shade of ultramarine, International Klein Blue (IKB)" (30), and the source of blue's blue—lapis—can be mined, like gold. When "the miners use dynamite to bleed a vein, [they do so] in hopes of starting a 'blue rush,' (31). The magical quality of a commodity is that it seems to be "endowed with life," in a manner that cannot be explained (or is insufficiently explained) by the amount of human labour required to produce it, nor by its physical properties, nor by the use to which it can be put. Indeed, the liveliness of the commodity is what distinguishes it from a mere thing—a useful, exchangeable thing. The commodity in bourgeois society, for Marx, symbolizes the fact that "the process of production has [gained] mastery over man, instead of being controlled by man" (Marx 33). The power of objects to transform their owners is of central importance in *Bluets*. On this point, Nelson remarks:

What kind of madness is it anyway, to be in love with something constitutionally incapable of loving you back?

37. Are you sure—one would like to ask—that it cannot love you back?

*Bluets* entertains the idea that the thing could love us back, but not really. Thinking about blue in terms of commodity speaks to the mystical surplus that confounds (and fascinates) our capacity to see. To the degree that the thing is fascinating, it is also partly imperceptible, or immune to looking. The commodity lures us in to such an extent that window shopping in french is called "lèche-vitrine"—window licking. We don't lick the commodity itself, just the display of it. From the birth of the commodity we have a parallel birth of looking (Bowlby). And, now, in the contemporary context, our ongoing fascination with such imperceptible

things (our love of them, objectification of them, and misperception of them) becomes a source of shame. Writing about them—“admitting that we have fallen in love with a colour”—confesses that shame, even as it revels in it.

Yet Nelson doesn't want blue to stay a commodity as such. She insists, for example, that “Generally speaking I do not hunt blue things down, nor do I pay for them” (Nelson 25). What market value they may once have had—24.99\$ for a Blue Tarpaulin in the local REI—is long gone. Yet, though the economy of blue may be short lived, it is an important way station for what blue can become:

151. Ultramarine is not, of course, holy in and of itself. (What is?) It had to be made holy, by the wicked logic that renders the expensive sacred. So first it had to be made expensive. From the start, however, its preciousness stemmed from a sort of misunderstanding: ancient people thought the shining veins in lapis lazuli were gold, when really they are iron pyrite: ‘fool’s gold.’ (59)

Tack, tack, tack. The stuff isn't holy and couldn't be until commerce (evil thing) made it expensive, but it wasn't expensive until appraised as such, and of course (tack again) the appraisal was mistaken—the blue had fooled them into thinking it was rare, and then once again, into thinking it sacred.

So, blue has had the hint of metaphysical nicety, has become a commodity on its way to becoming the holiest of colours (though not before a quick detour wherein it “symbolized the Antichrist” (59). Now, at the end of the book, it is described in the most nostalgic of terms—as a ruin. Though it should have been clear from her descriptions all along that her collection of blue was more detritus than jewels—valuable because of their value to her—towards the end of the book she starts to talk about the blues as pale markers of what they used to mean: “171. When one begins to gather ‘fragments of blue dense,’ one might think one is paying tribute to the blue wholes from which they came. But a bouquet is no homage to the bush” (68-9). Blue starts to decay. In one way, we return to the place we began. An early proposition positions us on the mountain, a solitary seeker in a sea of blue. She can say, “Don't fool yourself and call it sublimity,” (3), but she's the one that mentioned sublimity to begin with. This is why, when we come to the following passage I see a nineteenth century Romanticism: the nostalgia captured most sentimentally in the nineteenth century love of the ruin. She says:

204. Lately I have been trying to learn something about ‘the fundamental impermanence of all things’ from my collection of blue amulets, which I have placed on a ledge in my house that is, for a good half of the day, drenched in



sunlight. The placement is intentional—I like to see the sun pass through the blue glass, the bottle of blue ink, the translucent blue stones. But the light is clearly destroying some of the objects, or at least bleaching out their blues. Daily I think about moving the most vulnerable objects to a ‘cool, dark place,’ but the truth is that I have little to no instinct for protection. Out of laziness, curiosity, or cruelty—if one can be cruel to objects—I have given them up to their diminishment. (82)

Or is this ruin something different—not nineteenth century nostalgia—but twenty first century detachment? This is possible. While, on the one hand, blue seems to have journeyed quite far—from love object to commodity to an embodiment of all things holy to a fading emblem of former obsessions—on the other, she wonders if “seeking itself is a spiritual error,” (46). Or not an error, exactly, but simply the way it is.

As nightliness will in *Nox*, blue in *Bluets* operates as Nelson’s wildcard. It means a lot of things and nothing at all: “I am trying to talk about what blue means,” she says, “or what it means to me, apart from meaning” (Nelson 16). Blue is the thing you most want to possess; blue is an ephemeral beauty; blue will fade. Sometimes, when it is indigo, or a pale matte turquoise, it betrays. Blue is what *Bluets* is after, yet, she admits, she has avoided “writing about too many specific blue things—I don’t want to displace my memories of them, nor embalm them, not exalt them.” (77) On the one hand, writing cages blue and on the other, it sets it free: “I think it would like it best if my writing could empty me further of them, so that I might become a better vessel for new blue things.” (77)

Nelson’s treatment of the female gaze is a perfect example of the dialectical zigzag of the self-monitor as it tacks and tacks and tacks again around the idea of women’s right to look. Nelson knows that looking is more shameful for women than it is for men. Of course there is Oedipus who loses his eyesight out of shame and Milton, whose blindness let him think, but Nelson is more interested in the stories of the saints. Saint Lucy, Saint Medana, and Saint Triduana, in particular, all lose their eyes: they pluck, gorge or tear their eyes from their heads in order to “prove that they ‘only have eyes’ for God.” (22). Nelson quotes from the religious accounts that say:

these women [were] announcing, via their amputations, their fidelity to God. But other accounts wonder whether they were in fact punishing themselves, as they knew that they had looked upon men with lust, and felt the need to employ extreme measures to avert any further temptation. (23)

In the first tack, Nelson says,

59. There are those, however, who like to look. And we have not yet heard enough, if anything, about the female gaze. About the scorch of it, with the eyes staying in the head. ‘I love to gaze at a promising-looking cock,’ writes Catherine Millet in her beautiful sex memoir, before going on to describe how she also loves to look at the ‘brownish crater’ of her asshole and the ‘crimson valley’ of her pussy, each opened wide—its color laid bare—for the fucking.

Her diction here refuses all the subtle euphemism that whispers about sex and, instead, adopts a raucous, shameless attitude. It’s a knowing effort which is immediately followed by another turn:

60. I like to look, too. ‘Saint Lucy, you did not hide your light under a basket, begins one Catholic prayer.’ (23-24)

Saint Lucy’s light isn’t normally understood to be anything like a crimson valley, but Nelson draws the parallel in order to make fun of ecclesiastical euphemisms but also to remind us that even if Saint Lucy’s light wasn’t sexual, plenty of other biblical imagery surely was—one has only to think of King Solomon’s odes to peaches. More importantly, Nelson’s trickery here counts as shamelessness of the irreverent sort. Cultures of shamelessness, says Wurmser:

simply shift their sense of shame (as typically occurs with reaction formations)—from violence and dishonor, from betrayal and sexual exhibition to feelings of kindness, of loyalty, of tender regard and tactful restraint. These now become viewed as signs of worthlessness and feebleness and have to be shunned.  
(Wurmser 262)

Perhaps we might agree. Nelson seems to think so, at least in the subsequent proposition where sexual prudishness has replaced sexual promiscuousness as shameful:

61. In his book *On Being Blue*, William Gass argues that what we readers really want is “the penetration of privacy”: “We want to see under the skirt.” But his penetration is eventually tiresome, even to himself: What good is my peek at her pubic hair if I must also see the red lines made by her panties, the pimples on her rump, broken veins like the print of a lavender thumb, the stepped-on look of a day’s-end muff? I’ve that at home.” After asserting that the blue we want from life is in fact found only in fiction, he counsels the writer to ‘give up the blue things of this world in favor of the words which say them.” (Nelson 24)

But Nelson tacks again by accusing Gass (of all people!) of puritanism: “This is puritanism, not eros,” she says, though we ought to note the moralism of her accusation (Puritanism is bad! Eros is Good!), not to mention the Gass-defying, glossy magazine-defying, effort to celebrate every imperfect female everything:

For my part I have no interest in catching a glimpse of or offering you an unblemished ass or an airbrushed cunt. I am interested in having three orifices stuffed full of thick, veiny cock in the most unforgiving of poses and light. (24-25)

Remember the “fingerprints of God”? Those are blemishes too. Yet another reading must be that Nelson’s call for more of the female gaze is an ethical call. Nelson knows that the gaze is a position of power, and Nelson wants women to adopt it. Shamelessness here is a refusal of shame-as-diagnosis. The shame she is refusing in these passages is the shame that has privileged the male gaze and enlisted patriarchy in a taming of women’s sexuality (Mirzeoff). She is also refusing the shaming male gaze which would want to hide the imperfections of a body being a body. Women should have the right to look at what they want and they should have the right to be seen as they are. The shamelessness here is political defiance; it is feminist.

But there are exceptions. In a head-to-head with William Gass, Nelson can declare her intention to look at whatever she wants, but she won’t make a general rule of it: even her gaze and her desires ought to be tempered. This is most clear in her discussion of the Tuareg.

141. I have also imagined my life ending, or simply evaporating, by being subsumed into a tribe of blue people. I dreamed of these blue people as a child, long before I knew that such people actually existed. Now I know that they do, in the eastern and central Sahara desert, and that they are called Tuareg, which means “abandoned by God.” I also know that many Westerners—including several Western women—have shared in this fantasy. (54)

She invites us into this exoticism, relishes in it, aestheticizes it, and then provides a corrective: “I know that it bears all the marks of an unforgivable exoticism,” (54). This exoticism is what made first Muslims (who named them “Abandoned by God”) and later Christians want to convert them in the first place. By acknowledging her exoticism and then dwelling on the consequences of such exoticism—“In Virginia, in 2002, for example, a group of Southern Baptists organized a day of prayer exclusively for the Tuareg, ‘so that they will know God loves them’” (58), Nelson is indicating that she knows that her right to look extends—indeed, ought to extend—only so far. Westerners should not idealize the other by

wanting to sleep with them or disappear amongst them, nor should Westerners other the other by praying for them, nor by calling them forgotten by god. She concludes the story of the Tuareg with one final turn:

149. It should be noted that Tuareg do not call themselves Tuareg. Nor do they call themselves the blue people. They call themselves Imohag, which means ‘free men.’(58)

Nelson leaves the subject there—with the Tuareg in possession of their own agency and their own name—and moves on to something new. This is a strong shame theory in action—it pushes as far as it can in one direction before making an absolute about-face. First it allows us a fetishized object, and then it removes it as it ought to be removed. First we please one part of ourselves, then we please the other.

Although this episode with the Tuareg and with the crater-obsessed looking that preceded it is most revealing about the shame-sanctioned switchbacks of the female gaze, I think it also reveals something about the spiritual quest in *Bluets* and the way it, too, is imbricated in looking. With the above episode in mind, then, consider the following comparison. In his writing about Jean Genet, Sartre noticed something which Sontag neatly summarized in her “Sartre’s *Saint Genet*, ”:

Crime, sexual and social degradation, above all murder, are understood by Genet as occasions for glory. It did not require much ingenuity on Sartre’s part to propose that Genet’s writings are an extended treatise on abjection—conceived as a spiritual method. (Sontag 95)

Something similar is at work in *Bluets*. Nelson elevates the abject to the level of spiritual quest, but before we go too far, we must acknowledge that it’s not all that abject. In Sontag’s conclusion to her essay, where she has described Sartre’s *Saint Genet* as philosophy posing as literary criticism, she says:

Sartre correctly describes Genet’s spiritually most ambitious book, *Funeral Rites*, as ‘a tremendous effort of transubstantiation.’ Genet relates how he transformed the whole world into the corpse of his dead lover, Jean Decarnin, and this young corpse into his own penis. ‘The Marquis de Sade dreamt of extinguishing the fires of Etna with his sperm,’ Sartre observes. ‘Genet’s arrogant madness goes further: he jerks off the Universe.’ Jerking off the universe is perhaps what all philosophy, all abstract thought is about: an intense, and not very sociable pleasure, which has

to be repeated again and again [and] a rather good description, anyway, of Sartre's own phenomenology of consciousness. (Sontag 99)

In keeping with this tradition of a consciousness that is world-creating, world-devouring and ultimately world-procreating, the story of the speaker's sexual freedom, (mis)perception and love/desire for the Prince of Blue concludes in this way:

231. That month I touched myself every night in my narrow bed and came thinking of you, knowing all the while that I was planting the seeds of a fresh disaster....The most I can say is that this time I learned my lesson. I stopped hoping. (Nelson 93)

Masturbation is a strange shame. Speaking of it aloud is a way one signals one's awareness of Havelock Ellis and Sigmund Freud, of the Kinsey Report, of Foucault, and of all of the other disciplinary measures to which sexuality and especially female sexuality have been subjected. Artists speak about it like they sometimes do about violence: in full knowledge of its toxicity, they speak of it loudly so as to proclaim their immunity to society's conventions. Indeed, Nelson's latest book, *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning*, addresses just that. Yet their loud voices betray them: they *need* their activities to read as transgressive: they are thankful that masturbation retains at least some shame, so that they can defy it. It is similar to the way Sartre described Baudelaire:

Baudelaire is analyzed as a man in revolt whose life is continually lived in bad faith. His freedom is not creative, rebellious though it may have been, because it never finds its own set of values. Throughout his life, the profligate Baudelaire needed bourgeois morality to condemn him. (Sontag 96)

Similarly, Nelson's *Bluets* requires the moralizing of contemporary society in order to have something to defy. She defies constraints on female sexuality without deciding to transgress too far; she defies the silence imposed upon admissions of depression, but does so in a whisper; she develops a form of writing that seems to defy narrative autobiography, but it doesn't, and a form of thinking that suggests philosophical relativism but that is nevertheless staunchly moralistic about women's right to look and be looked at.

That is, until she changes her mind. The story of the Prince of Blue may conclude with masturbation, but the story of *Bluets* concludes with love.

There is one important strand of *Bluets* that I have left out. It is the story that anchors *Bluets* in its belief that life will improve. The tone of this section is characterized by tenderness, dedication, and unwavering commitment. Recall Wurmser's cry about shameless

societies where sex and violence are no longer shameful but friendship and tenderness are; in my reading so far, *Bluets* has likewise defied any notion of the meaningful. Yet, there is meaning: the real counterpoint in *Bluets* is the story involving the speaker's recently paralyzed friend.

Friendship is the corrective to patriarchy, commodification, the allures and betrayals of organized religion and it is the only place in *Bluets* where perception perceives what is. Friendship is *Bluets* response to shame. (It's Leon Wurmser's response, too). A friend of Nelson's had been in a near-fatal accident, resulting in the horrible combination of a complete paralysis of her limbs and a pain so searing she said it made, "her skin feel like crinkly, burning Saran Wrap" (38). Like all pain, her friend's pain is not exactly visible. It registers in side affects. The color drains from her face. Nelson says:

I'm sorry she is in so much pain, pain I can witness and imagine but that I do not know. She says, if anyone knows this pain besides me, it is you (and J, her lover). This is generous, for to be close to her pain has always felt like a privilege to me...(39)

Unique to this situation, Nelson is content to say that witnessing and imagining are enough. She may not know her friend's pain, but she doesn't need to: she can perceive it all the same.

What has been missing for Nelson throughout this book is dignity, yet dignity is precisely what her friend never loses. Nelson says "I have been trying, for some time now, to find dignity in my loneliness. I have been finding this hard to do," (28) and shortly after that: "Mostly I have felt myself becoming a servant of sadness. I am still looking for the beauty in that" (29). When she spends a night weeping while staring at herself in the mirror, all she sees at the end of it is a "rite of decadence" (34). She admits this to a friend who says, " (kindly) that she thinks we sometimes weep in front of a mirror not to inflame self-pity, but because we want to feel witnessed in our despair" (35). Strikingly, these passages sit alongside passages that describe her friend's excruciating physical pain:

after a few months in the hospital, my injured friend is visited by a fellow quadriparalytic as part of an outreach program. From her bed she asks him, If I remain paralyzed, how long will it take for my injury to feel like a normal part of my life? At least five years, he told her. As of next month, she will be at three. (36-37)

If these passages operated along the same logic as those we've seen previously, the purpose of her friend's physical injury would be as a corrective. But the friend is smarter than that and

uninterested in shaming. She allows her friends to care for her and to witness her pain. When thinking about why her friend's pain has brought them closer, Nelson muses, "Perhaps this is because she remains so generous *within* [her pain], and because she has never held any hierarchy of grief, either before her accident or after, which seems to be nothing less than a form of enlightenment" (Nelson 39). This is not the only friend in *Bluets* who is represented this way—under the sign of enlightened being or oracle, though to detail the other instances of this would only belabor the point. It is friends who have brought her blue, and included amongst her friends are those who are living and those who are gone: they are Wittgenstein, Goethe, Marguerite Duras, Joni Mitchell, Stéphane Mallarmé, William Gass—friends who have written or painted blue before her. These are the correspondences that matter most since she admits that almost everything she writes is written as a letter (41). Some will read that letter (us). And some will not (The Prince of Blue):

177. Perhaps it is becoming clearer why I felt no romance when you told me that you carried my last letter with you, everywhere you went, for months on end, unopened. This may have served some purpose for you, but whatever it was, surely it bore little resemblance to mine. I never aimed to give you a talisman, an empty vessel to flood with whatever longing, dread, or sorrow happened to be the day's mood. I wrote it because I had something to say to you. (71)

*Bluets* is that letter. One of the last propositions returns to the 'you' that is the Prince of Blue, only to speak, for the first time in a tone that is no longer bitter. What remains may be the ruin of blue, the nostalgia of it—"there was a time when I would rather have had you by my side than any one of these words...than all the blue in the world," but that time is over.

Though she ends the book just one page after the account of pure decadence—the month long period of touching herself every night—she ends it on an entirely redemptive note. The penultimate proposition cites Simone Weil, whose self-effacement is legendary. An unidentified interlocutor seems to correct Nelson, saying:

239. But now you are taking as if love were a consolation. Simone Weil warned otherwise. 'Love is not consolation,' she wrote. 'It is light.'(95)

Nelson accepts this, providing a conclusion to *Bluets* when we might have expected anything but:

240. All right then, let me try to rephrase. When I was alive, I aimed to be a student not of longing but of light. (95)

*Bluets* is so perfectly tuned to contemporary progressive culture that it manages to capture the way shame is felt in the discourse of academe and the world of art even as it also captures the way one educated in such schools of thought might knowingly refuse to be so shamed. In *Bluets*, feminist thought demands the right to look, but even women can be guilty of exoticism. Christianity canonized lustful Saints and evokes contempt through the mere mention of Southern Baptists. Up until its final pages, *Bluets* seems to want to stay free of meaning, even the meaning of writing: “For better or worse,” she writes, “I do not think that writing changes very much, if at all.” (74) Should we believe her? Is *Bluets* nothing more than pretty intellectualism? Is it merely beautiful to read, a book full of quasi-challenging references, and a well-bred, well-educated awareness of what one should or should not fetishize, a momentary defiance of political correctness that is swiftly (though politely) brought back into line and beneath it, a quiescent cynicism? “*Fucking leaves everything as it is*” (Nelson 8). At this reckoning, I don’t think so.

I began this chapter by suggesting a vast array of genres in which Maggie Nelson’s *Bluets* participates. One of them was the lyric, a famously difficult to define genre: Northrop Frye in 1982, commented that it was high time for critical theory to come to terms with it (Cureton n.pag). Lyric genres, according to Helen Vendler, are variously elegies, nocturnes, and pastorals; they are spoken in apostrophe, prayer, debate and apology; and almost always from the perspective of the first person (116, 120, 126). In the figure of the solitary speaker; in the sublime—if dystopic—settings of mountaintops, valleys, sky rises, and the detritus of Brooklyn in the Winter; and in the way the fragments of *Bluets* accumulate, pulling the reader and the speaker towards epiphany, Nelson draws on traditional elements of the lyric, but modernizes them, bringing the lyric poem into conversation with both autobiography and philosophy. In a description that could easily apply to *Bluets*, *The Seneca Review* described the lyric essay as follows:

its voice, spoken from a privacy that we overhear and enter, has the intimacy we have come to expect in the personal essay. Yet in the lyric essay, the voice is more reticent, almost coy, aware of the compliment it pays the reader by dint of understatement. (Tall and D’Agata n.pag)

The lyric essay is personal without being sentimental, confessional without seeking redemption. The lyric essay, in Nelson’s hands, hints at shame, but it doesn’t blush. If the philosophical tract seems devoid of subjectivity, the lyric poem is overwhelmed by it.



Nelson's mingling of these forms produces a startling portrait of shame and the way it redeems and is redeemed by the recognition that comes from love.

By approaching autobiographical subject matter in such a way, Nelson's utterances become ours. Nelson never demands identification, but she makes the invitation, allowing her sadness to be ours in an act of generosity that is both dignified and wise. This differs drastically from what we saw in *Heroines* where Zambreno's unrelenting insistence on the universality of her experience—for women writers—was more alienating than inviting. Like Zambreno, Nelson's work has been described as self-indulgent (Schmid), but the form of her writing makes it a gift, not an imposition. Nelson's approach to grief differs drastically, also, from what we will see in the next chapter. There, in *Nox*, Anne Carson will come to terms with the disappearance and death of her brother. Though *Nox* does not situate its deepest feelings in the voice of the solitary speaker, some elements from *Bluets* will be familiar: the poets and philosophers of yesteryear will read like contemporaries; night, like blue, will become a wildcard; and an aesthetics of fragmentation will whisper of shame's secret dignity.

## On Shame and the Scholarly Girl: Anne Carson's *Nox*

They ask us to see their forms of feeling as a pattern that can be unraveled, a writing that can be unwritten, a story that can be ended—not by bringing it to the usual happy or unhappy ending but by ending the storytelling life. If stories are learned, they can be unlearned. If emotions are constructs, they can be dismantled....[These thoughts] are especially subversive, dangerous, and necessary for anyone who wishes to claim that fictional narratives play a central and, so to speak, a positive role in self-understanding, a role that is not adequately played by texts that lack narrative form.

Martha Nussbaum, "Narrative Emotions"

In this chapter, I analyze Anne Carson's *Nox*, a book she described as an epitaph for her brother. I examine the relationship between the form of *Nox* and its content, particularly as they relate to shame and subjectivity. As an elegy, *Nox* is as much about the person mourned—her brother—as it is about the person writing, herself. Shame is a central theme here, but not primarily as an element of personality (though it is sometimes that), but rather as a formal mode of writing. *Nox* illustrates the various shames a self can feel but also the way shame can emerge as an aesthetic or poetics independent of the feeling self. Shame in *Nox* is both an emotion felt by individuals and an affect that emerges in the very aesthetic of the book. Through figures of space, distance, and repetition, Carson lends dignity to a life (Michael's) and form (autobiography) that might otherwise have been overwhelmed by the shame of subjectivity.

What is *Nox*? Already this question asks the impossible. Anne Carson's *Nox* defies description. We might call it a book because it was purchased there, in a bookstore, alongside other books, some of which are Anne Carson's. We might call it a box with a single page inside, a page that has been folded back and forth upon itself so that it resembles an accordion. We might call it an epitaph because that is what Carson has called it: a replica of the notebook that she made for her brother upon receiving the news of his death. The notebook had tea-stained letters, aged photographs, quotations, sketches, and childlike paintings of hands, legs, and, of all things, eggs. Carson typed out verbatim transcripts of

conversations she had with her brother and narrated scenes with her mother. Its media included tempura paint, crayons, crinkled paper, overhead transparencies and the familiar black of a photocopier that copies nothing: in short, the ready-made aesthetics of a suburban scrapbook. We might also remark that *Nox* looks like a tombstone, and, *for a book*, seems to weigh almost as much. It could be considered a translation of a Latin poem that Carson, a classicist, has loved for most of her life, or we could say it is a book about history or what it means to be a historian. All of these descriptions would be apt; all of these descriptions would fail to capture its whole. Grasping *Nox*, in the sense of understanding it, starts by physically grasping it: *Nox* must be touched, held, carried. To read *Nox* is to clear your desk and unfold the pages so that the book becomes but one very long page, a page that then refuses the confines of your desk top and spills over either side. To read *Nox* is to step back and enjoy the impossibility of being able to describe it. We can revel in its parts and, of its whole, admit that it remains, in many ways, illegible. Indeed, this illegibility is of central importance for its themes. In its illegibility we confront the opaqueness of the self and our human incapacity to articulate what it means to shame and be shamed, love and be loved, and finally, to grieve.

As we will see, Carson's use of narration is emotional, but not in the way one would expect: where *Nox* is its most emotional is in its repetitions and its affect-laden aesthetic, something I'll describe in detail. Carson's choices are striking because the emotional, then, is apparent despite the absence of a subject that feels. Identification—usually essential for fellow feelings such as empathy and sympathy to occur—is absolutely impossible. The reader does not identify with the sadness of the writer nor the shame of the brother, even as the book itself is saturated with both feelings. This is the kind of reading I would like to perform with *Nox*. What this would mean is an attention to the way that *Nox* articulates the various shames of personality, subjectivity and identification, but also to how the form of *Nox* gestures to a less domesticated kind of shame: to the physiology of a book that blushes, averts its gaze, hunches its shoulders. As we will see, such figures of shame will include those identified by Tomkins: figures of distance and withdrawal, of blushing and turning away. They will also exemplify one of the redemptive aspects of shame identified by American psychologist Leon Wurmser: the way such figures/gestures protect creativity and dignity.

### ***Nox* as Elegy**

If the physical dimensions of the book are clear, and I hope they are, I can now turn to its visual and textual scraps: the pasted-in objects that speak with and against each other throughout the book. In ordering these scraps, Carson set one rule for herself and then broke it only once. Perhaps twice. The overall structuring device of *Nox* is that of a bilingual dictionary. *Nox*, in this reading, is a translation of a Latin poem written by the poet Catullus in the waning years of the Roman Republic. Poem 101 is an elegy written for the poet's brother who died sometime before 57 BC and on a distant shore. The rule that Carson set, then, was that every left-hand-page of the book would be given over to a lexical entry that would help in the translation of Catullus' poem. The poem appears in full on the first page of the book. It is short, so I quote it in full:

*Multas per gentes et multa per aequora vectus / advento has miseram, frater, ad inferias ut te postremo donarem munere mortis et mutam nequiquam alloquerer cinerem. / quandoquidem fortuna mihi tete abstulit ipsum, / heu miser indigne frater adempte mihi, / nunc tamen interea haec, prisco quae more parentum / tradita sunt tristi munere ad inferias, / accipe fraterno multum manantia fletu / atque in perpetuum, frater, ave atque vale.* (Italics here and elsewhere are hers)<sup>7</sup>

The fully translated poem appears twice in the book—at the end, where it is so soaked in tea that the bleeding ink has rendered it indecipherable—and earlier:

Many the peoples many the oceans I crossed - / I arrive at these poor, brother, burials / so I could give you the last gift owed to death / and talk (why?) with mute ash. / Now that Fortune tore you from me, you / oh poor (wrongly) brother (wrongly) taken from me, / now still anyway this — what a distant mood of parents / handed down as the sad gift for burials - accept! soaked with tears of a brother / and into forever, brother, farewell and farewell.

In including this translation so soon, I have already betrayed one apparent purpose of the poem's inclusion in *Nox*: its illegibility. Carson understands Latin, but she also understands that most of her readers do not. Her inclusion of the bracketed “why?” and “wrongly” suggest something permanently incomplete about her translation, just as her act of mourning her

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<sup>7</sup> *Nox* has no page numbers which makes the work particularly resistant to academic standards of citation. Where possible, I will include the numbering system that Carson uses, where the right-hand pages are numbered as a philosophical text might be (1, 1.2, etc.) However, that these numberings serve purposes that are more aesthetic than practical will be clear when we come to the repetition of Section 2.2. Citations that come from the left-hand pages have no associated numbering system, but are recognizable as left-hand pages because they are in a combination of Latin and English.

brother will never end. That illegibility is one of its virtues is clear in Carson's choice to include the indecipherable version of the poem on the last page rather than what we'd anticipate: her completed translation. *Nox* does not pursue completion. Whatever conclusions we reach, she seems to suggest, will later fade or blur. The poem provides the scaffolding for the book and is as important in its architectural role as it is in its thematic affinity. The lexical entries on the left-hand pages become rooms through which we will pass.

On the right-hand pages, then, we find the fullest expression of the scrapbook aesthetic. She cites classical texts by Herodotus, Plutarch, and others who muse about the meaning of history and translation. There are narrative entries, stamps, and photocopies of a letter written in her brother's hand. The disordered rubbings, transcripts, child-like paintings and italicized reflections all act as a counterpoint to the seeming rigidity of the lexical entries. Once, there is a sketch of a garbage bag. Many of the photographs have been torn or cut into fragments; some of them are stapled together. If there is a logic to the ordering of the photographs, it seems to be one of increasing fragmentation, especially of the once-nuclear Carson family. The closest we get to a family portrait comes early on. It captures the two children and their mother in front of a white house on a winter's day. In the foreground of the picture is a large shadow—the photographer has caught himself in the act of taking the photo, and one can safely assume that the photographer is Carson's father. The apparent garbage bag which was sketched on the previous page turns out to be an exact outline of this shadow. This is the only image of the father that we have, unless we count the bright yellow egg we come across later and the comment about his sweater, yellow, on the day he was buried.<sup>8</sup> The visual correspondence of his outline to that of the garbage bag is no accident. The overall impression these scrapbook images leave is one of randomness: the sporadic inclusion of this quotation or that photograph seems to be without design. However, either by virtue of design or by virtue of my interpretation (or both), there is an order to be found.

The three governing aesthetics of the visual and textual scraps are, then, the Catullus poem, the lexical entries and the scrapbook materials. Before I analyze the latter elements in detail, I'd like to inch my way through the first few pages of the book so that something of its flavour can be captured. Carson establishes her *modus operandi* on the book's second page, with her translation of the poem's first word: *multas*. In a form that plays with the structure of

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<sup>8</sup> Carson's father appears very rarely in her works. It is only in *Plainwater* that we find out that he was a gruff man who, late in life, suffered from dementia and spoke in those years in a word salad whose words changed meaning from day to day.

bilingual dictionaries but entertains etymology, Carson provides what appears to be a straightforward translation of the word until the entry's last line: "*multa nox*: late in the night, perhaps too late." This line is typical of Carson: gnomic and carefully stylized. "Late in the night, perhaps too late" is an example of epanalepsis: a figure of repetition as old as the Greeks and used, then and now, to deepen feeling in a text. Subtle efforts such as these are typical of the way Carson suggests feeling without lyricism or confession. She manages this careful balance throughout *Nox*—indeed throughout her oeuvre—through such formal techniques as well as various modes of distancing that sometimes come off as cold cleverness, though I will argue that they make room for a more philosophical reflection on the nature of the self and the self that feels.

On the third page, Carson establishes herself as the speaker of the text and then, just as swiftly, retreats into the reserved posture of the academician, a posture that affords her a distance from the story she will tell and the pain that it will convey. She says,

1.0. I wanted to fill my elegy with light of all kinds. But death makes us stingy. There is nothing more to be expended on that, we think, he's dead. Love cannot alter it. Words cannot add to it. No matter how I try to evoke the starry lad he was, it remains a plain, odd history. So I begin to think about history.

It would be too simple to say that Carson's turn to history is mere rhetoric. She is, after all, a classics scholar. History, especially ancient history, where history is poetry and story, is a quite natural mode of enquiry. Yet, musings on history are hardly typical fare for elegiac poems. In Carson's hands, history looks quite unlike the modern day discipline. In her words, a historian is:

one who asks about things—about their dimensions, weight, location, moods, names, holiness, smell...But the asking is not idle. It is when you are asking about something that you realize you yourself have survived it, and so you must carry it, or fashion it into a thing that carries itself. (1.1.)

Carson then recounts a story written by Hekataois which was about the phoenix, whose activities mirror that of Carson's historian: "The phoenix mourns by shaping, weighing, testing, hollowing, plugging and carrying towards the light." It is through careful repetition that Carson aligns the figure of the phoenix with the historian. The historian asks about dimensions; the phoenix mourns by shaping. The historian asks about weight; the phoenix weighs. Similarly, the figure of the phoenix is the figure that rises out of the ashes. The phoenix is, like the historian, one who has survived. Thus it is through a series of kinships—Carson as historian, historian as survivor, survivor as phoenix—that we can see Carson

establishing herself in the text, even as she maintains her distance from the death of her brother. As for the questions of ash, Carson will insert herself even there: “this ash was a scholarly girl.”

Carson’s description of the historian changes over the course of the book from one who asks about things to one whose answers may not (ever) satisfy. Though the figure of the historian inserts distance into Carson’s elegizing (through time, through shadow), at least at the beginning, she asserts that the historian deals in facts: “1.2. Autopsy is a term historians use of the ‘eye witnessing’ of data or events by the historian himself, a mode of authorial power. (1.2.)” Though I’ve never heard of the term autopsy used by any practicing historian, it is still a significant gesture towards history as a practice of truth-telling. The term fits here, of course, in the context of establishing the cause of her brother’s death, though if that autopsy were ever conclusive, we don’t know it. The speaker’s expectation of certainty is unsettled later in the text.

3.3 We want other people to have a centre, a history, an account that makes sense. We want to be able to say This is what he did and Here’s why. It forms a lock against oblivion. Does it?

A repetition of this sentiment comes later beneath a blurred photo of a door, when, in italics, the text reads “*Always comforting to assume there is a secret behind what torments you.*”

History, she will come to admit, is not so sure of itself. Historians distance themselves, too:

10.1 When Herodotus has got as far as he can go in explaining an historical event or situation he will stop with a remark like this: “So much for what is said by the Egyptians: let anyone who finds such things credible make use of them.” (2.123.1)

Carson does little with these remarks, indeed, the form of the book requires her readers to make sense of how such incredulity relates to the sad story of the starry lad that was her brother. Is it with a sense of resignation that Carson quotes Plutarch’s critique of Herodotus? “Such sentences moved Plutarch to denounce the author of history: ‘It seems to me that just like Hippokleides doing his headstand upon the table, Herodotus will dance the truth away and say: That’s no concern of Herodotus.’ (Moralia 867b).” Is Carson like Plutarch—concerned with Herodotus’ irresponsibility? Or is she, perhaps, like Herodotus—unconcerned with all that cannot be known?

The other figure Carson adopts in this elegy is that of the translator. As with the historian, this is a strange kind of translator, and one who is bound to fail. First, with regards to the translation of the Catullus poem she explains:

7.1. ... I have loved this poem since the first time I read it in high school Latin class and have tried to translate it a number of times. Nothing in English can capture the passionate, slow surface of a Roman elegy...I never arrived at the translation I would have liked to do of poem 101.

This she admits as she is about half way through a translation of that very poem. Is she telling us that she continues to fail? This seems a legitimate reading given that entry 7.1 continues: “But over the years of working at it, I came to think of translating as a room, not exactly an unknown room, where one gropes for the light switch. I guess it never ends. A brother never ends.” The failure to translate, if we can call it that, never ends. Translation, then, becomes a metaphor for mourning, as does history.

To return, then to the overall structure of *Nox*, we can see that the bilingual dictionary becomes an apt form for an elegy that is as much about the failure—to know, to love, to grieve—as it is about any attempt to capture a true portrait of her brother who died. In an interview with CBC’s Eleanor Wachtel, Anne Carson said she had spent, “a lot of [her] life looking at books with left-hand-page Greek or Latin, and right-hand-page English, and you get used to it, you get used to thinking in the little channel in between the two languages where the perfect language exists” (Carson, Interview in *Brick Magazine* n.pag). If we believe Carson that *Nox* is another example of her failure to translate poem 101, can we also believe her that its structure, composed of right-hand and left-hand entries and drawing from the aesthetics of the bilingual dictionary, embodies, somehow the perfect language? Is the space—the distance—between the pages, then, the embodiment of the perfect language for mourning? The perfect language for failure? Might the space in the book be the place we find the perfect language for the failure to mourn? These are questions I will return to. For now, we must simply hold onto the idea that Carson establishes, through the figures of the historian and the translator, her own distance from the subject of the book—her brother.

I hope that I have sufficiently established that distance is an essential trope in *Nox*. There are the distancing personae that the narrator adopts, the scrapbook technique that, especially when the book is laid out as a single page, relies as much upon white space as it does on the pasted-in scraps to tell its story, and there is the little channel between the two languages where something perfect exists. Though an interest in gaps, lacunae, and space is a hallmark of our postmodern age, I think it significant to note that here the space speaks not to a horrible aporia but rather to something more positive, more perfect, more mystical. Distance, like nothingness, can be considered from the perspective of the things it separates—wherein the separated objects provide the substance to the image—or, in a sort of



gestalt shift—distance can be considered as a defining feature of the image wherein the distance defines the image's shape. Consider Sartre's example of the road, here summarized by American philosopher Vincent Spade, though with different cities:

(1) We can think of it as the road, which is terminated at one end by [Montreal] and at the other end by [Toronto]. If that is the way we are looking at it, then the road itself appears as a positive, whereas the end-points are negative: they are where the road terminates.

(2) Or we can think of the same configuration as consisting of [Montreal] on the one hand, and of [Toronto] on the other, and the road is what separates them. If that is the way we are looking at it, then the two end-points appear as positive, and the road itself now comes on as a negative. (125)

In *Nox* distance emerges as theme, form, and figure. In its physical form, as a book with many distinct pages or just one, Carson provides us with the equivalent of a road that constitutes by making space and a road that separates the essential figures. We see many pages when we choose to read it that way; we see just one when we step back. A similar process is at work thematically. When *Nox* is read as elegy, these figures of distance express grief and the impossibility of mourning. However, *Nox* is not just about Carson's desire to find the right form for mourning her brother. It is also about shame, and, as we will see, it is about the self.

What is shame's relation to distance? At first glance, there is little to recommend this pairing. Shame, after all, is associated with looking or being looked at, with exposure and the desire to expose. Above all, shame seems to be associated with closeness more than with distance. The blush cannot be seen from afar. Yet, within the painful proximity wherein shame appears, there is the paradoxical and often futile attempt of the self to gain some distance. Silvan Tomkins describes this as the desire to disappear. The effort to withdraw, the downturned gaze: these are the manifestations of shame's desire to hide, fail as it may. As I have discussed elsewhere, shame can occur between conflicting parts of the self or between the self and an external figure or idea. Sartre's maxim that one feels shame of the self before the other articulates the tripartite structure of shame when we experience it in the world. On another level, we saw in the previous chapter how Leon Wurmser described shame operating as a dialectic, which another mode of inserting distance (28). Dialectics, also based on a three-part structure, are made up of a thesis, an antithesis and a synthesis. Between these three parts, though, there must be some distance. Every theory of shame requires some element of distance; all self-awareness is predicated on the capacity to step back.

Now I would like to return to the narrative element of the scrapbook pages, those that appear on the right-hand-side. As I discussed at length in the introduction, many theorists claim that narrative—the notion of beginning, middle, and end—is to be held responsible for emotions whereas affect is the shimmering sensation that appears in such literary elements as style and form. I have already discussed the theoretical distinctions between emotion and affect elsewhere. Suffice it to say that here, in *Nox*, Carson effectively makes use of both the formal expectations of narrative—and the emotional impact it provides—and the unexpected hit that comes of more affect-laden prose. While affect, on its own, can seem detached and abstract, lyrical but subject-less, emotions tell us why they mean what they do. Emotions, according to most theorists of feeling, “must be about something” (Terada 196). They involve objects and beliefs, and as with narration, they involve expectations whose eventual fulfillment or disappointment explains the resulting sensation (Terada, Altieri). Narrative form—with its beginning, middle and end—tends to situate feeling within a more well-worn literary path, a path Carson typically avoids. Yet, like Picasso and Dali, Carson is a classicist: Picasso and Dali could paint a classical portrait and Carson knows how to tell a good story. In *Nox*, Carson turns to very straightforward narration to deliver the most obvious emotional content of the book.

Yet, what is most revealing about Carson’s use of narration is that the sympathy, emotion, and attachment it creates is not for the brother. The first instance of such narration appears in entry 2.1 on a right hand page that has been etched with the words, “WHO WERE YOU.” The entry tells of her mother on her death bed telling her daughter (our narrator) that there is a box at home with all of her letters in it. There is only one letter the narrator’s mother would like to keep: “The one your brother wrote from France you know that winter the girl died.” In an elegy, one might expect to find an affecting death-bed scene, but here, it is of the narrator’s mother, not of the long-lost brother. A similar scene finds Carson’s mother perpetually looking out the kitchen window, always hoping and praying that each approaching car might be bringing back her son. Later, Carson also employs narrative to tell the story—limited as it may be—of her brother. Section 2.2. reads:

2.2. My brother ran away in 1978, rather than go to jail. He wandered in Europe and India, seeking something, and sent us postcards or a Christmas gift, no return address. He was traveling on a false passport and living under other people’s names. This isn’t hard to manage. It is irremediable. I don’t know how he made his decisions in those days. The postcards were laconic. He wrote only one letter, to my mother, that winter the girl died.

What emotions emerge in this narration? On first read, Carson's language here is cold and detached, replicating *Nox's* first reckoning with the death of the brother: "There's nothing more to be expended on that, we think, he's dead." Yet Carson provides us with not one but four opportunities to read section 2.2.

In the first and second instances of 2.2., the entry appears on the right-hand side of the page. Above the first, is a letter that has been folded in half; above the second, the folded up letter has been turned over such that the sentences begun in on the first page are completed in the second. Above the third 2.2., the same section of letter has been unfolded; above the fourth, we find the reverse page of the letter. When these pages are opened up and spread out, so that instead of seeing only two facing pages, we can see eight, the fragments of the letter start to become a whole. Michael writes of the girl, of how she'd met some "out to lunch head shrinkers who take advantage of weak people." He writes that he'll "never know how she met them. Six days later she was dead. I went crazy." The letterhead is from a company in Kashmir; the stamp is from Denmark; who knows where it was written.

In the first instance of seeing entry 2.2 and the corresponding letter, the arrangement upholds the reading that what we are seeing is a replica of the original notebook Carson made. Yet, by the time of the third 2.2. we start to question such a reading. 2.2. remains in the bottom right hand corner of that page in the notebook, but the letter has shifted place and is now unfolded so that its width reaches beyond the border of the page and out into the black space that comes of a photocopier copying nothing. The final 2.2. is paired with the obverse side of the letter, thus confirming that the letter exists separate to the pasted-in section and that this "replica" of the notebook contains repetitions and additional black and white space that the original would not have had. Through this repetition, Carson emphasizes the centrality of the narrative told in section 2.2. By juxtaposing this repetition with the unfolding letter and the invading blackness of a photocopier copying nothing, Carson also insists upon the difference inherent in repetition. We re-read section 2.2. and though its words are unchanged, what it says is always somewhat new. The effect she achieves, then, resembles the emotional weight of a well-told story without the easy explanation that the difficulty of the brother's death is the result of something we'd expect in grief, namely that the brother was a good brother, a brother she loved dearly. The narration Carson provides does not paint a delicate, honorific portrait of the brother. But its repetition sets his disappearance as central to *Nox* all the same.

Another example of Carson employing more straightforward techniques of storytelling, or, indeed, of historical writing, is in her use and description of a photograph from her

brother's childhood. The photo captures her brother standing at the foot of a tree in which an elaborate tree-fort has been built and in which three boys—all older than her brother—are sitting, staring insouciantly at the camera (not down, as Carson says), haughty, perhaps, in their defiant awareness (shame) of how they are being mean. The boys have pulled up the ladder. They are being mean. Yet the existence and inclusion of the photograph itself seems to be a mean kind of exhibit, capturing the brother in a moment when he might better have been served by a hug. The photograph cements him in this moment of shame; it becomes exhibit A of his exclusion. Of this photo, Carson says:

He is giving the camera a sideways invisible look. Years later, when he began to deal drugs, I got the old sinking feeling—not for the criminality of it, not for the danger, but that look. No one knew him. (8.2)

That “sideways invisible look,” is the look of someone shamed, of this we can be sure, in part because of the accompanying narrative Carson provides:

8.2 When we were children the family moved a lot and wherever we went my brother wanted to make friends with boys too old for him. He ran behind them, mistook the rules, came home with a bloody nose, it puzzled me from the beginning, it made my heart sink.

Carson concludes this passage by saying that her brother was never known. From this we can conclude not only that Carson never knew him, but that perhaps no one in his first life did, or wanted to.

I began my discussion of distance by saying that it had something to do with shame and selfhood. This is not an account of the shameful body or of shameful desire but rather an exploration of how shame looks (to us, and at us). There is no easily identifiable cause for Michael's shame; his experiences—of exclusion in childhood, of eventual drug-use and drug-dealing in adolescence—are not the obvious beginnings of the shamed personality: they are too quotidian for that. Or are they? We need not find a singular cause, nor is that the purpose of my exploration here. These instances of exclusion and low-level criminality ring true as sources of shame even as they ring true, too, of a near typical narrative of childhood and adolescence in suburban Canada; their ordinariness speaks to the pervasive nature of shame in growing up. The evidence, as it is gathered by Anne Carson, is at once a portrait of shame and a reckoning with it. It would be too easy, *Nox* suggests, to offer a singular cause when shame is so elusively built into the fabric of ordinary human-ness. *Nox* is a description of Michael as he was seen by his sister. This is her account of his shame, but also of her own, at a remove. In Michael we have the first layer of shame, but in Anne we have a second.

What does it mean to know someone and how does such knowing also feel like shame, or its opposite, recognition? Philosophy and critical theory have struggled with these questions, as has anyone who has ever loved, hated, or wanted something from someone else. The problem of selfhood, of what it means to be a self, will be attended to later, but for now, we can begin by a most simple answer. One way we know someone is by their name. Michael Carson fled Canada and began a life living under other people's names. He went into hiding. And he stayed there. *Nox* never acknowledges his new name. Of his final resting place, Carson says, "There is no stone and as I say he had changed his name." And even before he died, the family had considered him dead for many years, registered most painfully by Carson's mother:

4.2. She never got an address for him. Indeed during the last seven years of her life he wrote to her not a single word. Eventually she began to say he was dead. How do you know? I said and she said When I pray for him nothing comes back.

Within the family, this declaration has the power of imperative. It makes his apparent death a fact.

4.3. After that we didn't talk of my brother.

More than one person in Carson's life has compared her brother to Lazarus, though the significance of the comparison is not the miraculous story of the dead returning to life but rather, that of, "a person who had to die twice." (8.4) The boy, Michael, who had grown old before his younger sister, old before his time, died and became someone else, reborn, perhaps into a place where someone could see him.

In addition to being nameless, Carson identifies her brother as mute as well. In Leon Wurmser's *Mask of Shame* the fact of being *expressionless* or *mute* exemplifies the workings of shame. The inner turmoil of shame gets masked by the blank stare or the refusal to speak. At least as far as concerns Anne Carson, Michael is always a mute figure.

8.1 Because our conversations were few (he phoned me maybe 5 times in 22 years) I study his sentences the ones I remember as if I'd been asked to translate them.

Again, Lazarus is an important corollary for her brother. Carson says,

[Lazarus] is mute at the famous supper where Mary Magdalene spills spikenard on Christ's feet (John 12). Mute in the 'parable of the rich man and Lazarus'....Mute also throughout his resurrection. Even in the painting of it by Giotto, notice the person with raised hands and no mouth (perhaps his sister) placed behind Lazarus to load this space with muteness. (8.4).

Perhaps his sister. As with Michael's shame, Michael's muteness (Lazarus's muteness) is catching. As we have seen, early in the text, Anne Carson has likened the act of writing history to asking about something one has survived. She casts herself as the historian of her brother because she has survived their childhood and she has survived death—her brother's first and second death and, as later emerges, the death of their parents. Carson here casts herself as a storydog collecting bits of muteness as if muteness were material, a thing one could gather. Indeed, she has constructed such a thing in *Nox*, materializing the muteness of her brother, the truth of how he allowed himself to be seen hiding.

But, do muteness and hiding actually amount to something so bad? The narration we have of him in Europe suggests that in his new identity, he was able to find recognition, to speak out. The experience of shame is always an experience of measuring in which, in one's assessment, the self or an aspect of the self *fails* to measure up to an ideal. This assessment can take place internally (intrapsychically) wherein one aspect of the self fails another. It can also take place externally, that is interpersonally, where one feels shamed by another person. In the case of familial relationships, the distinction between external shame (for example a parent's discriminating gaze) and internal (a child's own self-assessment) is blurred. The parent's critical voice is, more often than not, one's own. Long after our parents leave this world, their assessments (or the way we have perceived them) remain central to our own sense of self-value. One of shame's redeeming qualities is that it protects our inner selves from these critical assessments.

Shame protects privacy: it functions as a guardian against any outer power that might exploit weakness in the essential realms of the self and interfere with one's own inner logic. (Wurmser 66)

...shame as attitude (as anxiety, and subsequent 'pattern of prevention'), precluding naive self-exposure and self-expression. (Wurmser 64)

Michael Carson's refusal to speak—"he phoned maybe 5 times in 22 years"—may be akin to him changing his name: an illustration of shame's redemptive, protective qualities. Shame recognizes when self-exposure poses a risk—a dire risk—to the core of the self, and in such a case, it is shame that keeps us silent. Silvan Tomkins says, "the sting of shame can be removed [at any time] by attenuating the positive wish" (361). In other words, if we fall out of love with the one who shames us, we can fall out of shame, too. Not an easy task, but still. Maybe Michael tried this—falling out of his family, then his country, then his very name—because he wanted to fall out of shame.

As I have noted above, the opposite of shame in relationships is recognition. Though *Nox* shows many photographs of the two children together, there is no sense that their relationship was one of equals, nor of the children being on the same side. Carson relates:

5.1. What he needed from me I have no idea. When I caught up to him in high school (he was older by four years) he liked me to do his homework but that wasn't it. My moral advice he brushed aside, **you're different**. He called me **professor** or **pinhead**, epithets implying intellectual respect but we never had a conversation about ideas in our life.

What an astonishing perspective this captures. Carson is the younger sister, younger by four years, an incredible age difference in the first decades of life. Yet Carson clearly sees herself in a superior role. She offers advice and when her brother calls her professor or pinhead she hears in these names *respect* or *admiration* rather than say, an articulation of the social disdain typically meted out to over-achieving intellectual students in middle-class, suburban culture. Carson determines (or had determined then) that her brother needed *something* from her, though what it was she didn't know. It wasn't that he needed her to do his homework, but she is convinced that there was something he needed, and it is, perhaps, this conviction that keeps her in pursuit of him, as though she's somehow failed him. In any case, this paints a portrait of her as the one who was responsible for this relationship, or at least of her as one who *felt* responsible for the relationship. But they did not recognize each other. Or did they? Pinhead, after all, seems to be his way of naming her in a way that they both enjoy. He may have meant it as an insult, but she didn't take it that way.

5.2. His voice was like his voice with something else crusted on it, black, dense—it lit up for a moment when he said “pinhead” (**So pinhead d'you attain wisdom yet?**) then went dark again.

Pinhead might have been his way of recognizing something in her that she valued; for her, these epithets were a sign of recognition, while for him they were a sign of their distance. Perhaps he could see her, but she couldn't see him.

Many thinkers have emphasized the role of recognition in the establishment of selfhood. Hegel, writing about self-consciousness, said, “the self is a self only by virtue of being defined as such by the recognition conferred by the other” (qtd. in Adamson and Clark 7). Likewise, Lacan noted a profound “*méconnaissance*...at the core of neurosis, and ‘*desir*’ is, ultimately, the wish for reconnaissance, for mutual and reciprocal recognition in relation to the other” (qtd. in Adamson and Clark 7). Shame can be experienced internally, in that one

part of the self can be ashamed of or shame another. The opposite of this feeling is pride. The opposite of the feeling of shame we experience before the other is recognition and love.

In Anne Carson's portrait of Michael, shame was a defining experience, and from Carson's perspective, it was in his relationship with Anna, the love of his life, that he was able to share his shame, to recognize it in her, and have it be recognized in him. Of her, he wrote to his mother, "she missed a lot as a kid felt so different from others Anna was truly a gift," and "I have never known a closeness like that." Anna, like Michael, was always left out. That he is not so mute in his new life in Europe illustrates that Michael's experience of shame in Canada, in his family, required a clear break. At his funeral, his widow says of their relationship, "I do not want to say that much about Michael you all know him in different ways. He and I led a turbulent life and had noisy arguments." His muteness was a particularity to his life in Canada, and not something that carried over into his new identity. The closeness he experiences with Anna seems to have been what brought him back to life. This, at least, is the story that *Nox* tells of him. Whether or not Michael Carson would recognize himself in this account is impossible to say. In any case, *Nox* is part of Anne Carson's ongoing autobiography, not his, and Carson knows better than most how likely it is that she is failing.

In the interview I quoted earlier, Anne Carson describes the structure of the book in relation to bilingual dictionaries, where the space in between the entries—or languages—represents the place where the perfect language exists. In the case of *Nox*, that perfect language is the synthesis of the elegiac poem of a Roman Emperor, so long ago, and Carson's increasingly imagistic scrapbook of mourning on the facing pages. If what we have seen captured in those scraps of letters and photographs, telephone calls and reflections is the story of a boy thoroughly excluded and shamed by his society so much so that he is willing to abandon his identity in search of new life, we can say that Carson captures the life of one who has lived through shame. What she fashions, then, is a heavy thing, a tombstone-shaped thing, an accordion-ing scrapbook that is both elegy and translation, about grief, but ashamed of it.

What I have argued for up to this point is that Anne Carson's *Nox* is, loosely, a portrait of (elegy for) a shamed man. Narrative has played a primary role in this portrait. We know something of Michael's beginning, middle, and end. Narrative is the handmaiden of history, yet even most historians recognize the reasons that govern their selections. They know why they chose one beginning over another, and the reason usually has something to do with persuasion. Yet, Carson has inserted herself into the portrait by being the translator



and historian of her brother. In both cases, these figures bring with them an element of failure in the sense that all translations and all histories fail because of a gap—in time, or between languages. And, Carson’s use of repetition allows feeling to accumulate in a more affective, less reasoned, manner. One of the most obvious ways that Carson uses style and affect to heighten the way *Nox* feels is in her use of the word night.

*Nox*, of course, means night in Latin, but the book’s title is not night’s only appearance. To the contrary: night appears in virtually every one of the lexical entries even though the word *nox* never appears in the original poem. *Nox* and its variations—*noctis*, *noctes*, *noctua-*, *noctem*, *note*, *nocti*, *noctium*,—appears throughout these lexical entries. Their apparent purpose is to illustrate correct usage of another word, making night slip in in a seemingly haphazard way, as if it were an accident that night were so pervasive. Night becomes Carson’s wildcard, as blue was for Maggie Nelson: a recurring figure that is variously a character, a time, a place, a feeling, a state of being, and an orientation (of mood but also of the body in space). Night becomes the Thingness of the poem: it is a Lacanian lack, a Sartrean nothingness, it is the unspoken grief that structures the book even as it remains unspoken, it is the brother who was so resolutely unknowable, it is Carson herself and all the ways that she finds herself impossible to know. It is the shame of loss, the shame of unknowability, the shame of survival, the shame of what it is to exist in the world where we must inevitably grieve someone we didn’t know but loved all the same.

In the space between her translation and her collected scraps, then, is her own night, her own shame. At several points, *Nox* associates death with the blush. The narrator says, “If you are writing an elegy begin with the blush,” and earlier, “Why do we blush before death?” These moments, at first, appear preposterous. I have never blushed before death. What are we to make of this association? Of the blush with death? What if she means by death the loss of self-hood that is associated with shame? What if she means our association with, responsibility for and recognition of shame-induced withdrawal? What if the blush is our way of saying that we, too, have withdrawn in such ways? What if the blush is her way of saying that she understands why he needed to withdraw? What if she withdrew? Is pretending one no longer has a brother just another way of saying that one has withdrawn from the search of him, given him up for good, for dead? The tendency to blush, says Darwin, “is inherited” (312). In an interview, Carson admitted that she herself didn’t understand the relationship between blushing and death. It had come from another poem by Catallus. It didn’t make sense to her despite her having thought about it for sometime; nevertheless it still seemed “true”, so she says she “secrete[d] it into writing and [hoped it would] work its truth by itself

without me knowing how to control it" (Interview in *Brick Magazine* n.pag). Carson trusts her readers to continue the puzzling.

In the same way that the garbage bag sketch speaks to the shadow of the father, the night passages speak to one another from entry to entry and to the facing texts and images. There is a playfulness about this, but also a meditative, liturgical quality that becomes increasingly somber as we near the end of the text. In this section, I'd like to read *Nox* only for its nightliness, creating a highly redacted text where everything but the night is gone. In doing so, I think this at once maintains the integrity and complexity of Carson's observations and evocations of night, but also illustrates her orchestration of night's movements and how these movements shape the affective tone of the entire text.

I have already mentioned night's first appearance in the lexical entries—"late at night, perhaps too late,"—but here I'd like to emphasize how this first evocation establishes a familiar temporal relationship with night. The "perhaps too late" brings with it an element of visceral regret, the kind that can appear after one too many whiskeys, or of the apology we never uttered to the loved one we lost forever. Time, in this instance of night, permits of painful reflection, sober or otherwise. Nighttime is initially familiar but soon enough, Carson makes it strange. She populates it with night people, and then addresses her reader directly: "(you know it was night)." Having been addressed directly means that when Carson uses the pronoun "we," the reader can include herself. As in, "...*inmensumne noctis aequor confecimus?* have we made it across the vast plain of night?" Night becomes adjectival—describing a people—and it becomes a location—"the vast plain of night"—so that the night people live in a time and place with corners that lead to nothingness. Though night does not appear in every single lexical entry, it does in the first nine entries. Carson teaches us that one way to read this gnomic text is by looking for night. The first entry not to reference night is *frater*, or brother.

Later in the entries, Carson's night becomes an object or place of sadness. One can own night, and one can offer it. This is when Carson starts to make the link between the brother and night. Here, the first instance of night as object:

*noctis fratris quam ipso fratre miserior*: made sadder by the brother's night than by the brother himself.... *ad noctem* ready for night....*inferias offerings* (of wine, honey, flowers, night, etc).... (All italics are in the original)

Night can be a thing one suffers or a thing one offers:

*donarem ego te quid donem?* What would I give you? *nox nihil donat* nothing is night's gift....*munere debita nocti munera*— gifts owed to night...

This question—what would I give you?—is echoed a while later in the facing pages where Carson laments that she never knew what her brother needed from her. Night is a kind of nothingness that has shape.

Night is also a state. It is associated with death, with the unconscious, with speechlessness and with blushing.

*mortis in nocte* death as a state....*et dubitas quin sensus in nocte nullus sit?* and do you still doubt that consciousness vanishes at night? *mutam silentia muta noctis* deep speechlessness of night....*nequiquam et sero et nequiquam pudet* late and pointlessly she blushes....*cinerim Troia virim et noctium acerba cinis* Troy, bitter ash of men and nights.... *abstult quidquid nox aufert* whatever night grabs ...*indigne* (with nox) blushing.

As we will see later, the dark unconsciousness of night seems, at first, to be a source of shame. It makes us blush. Yet, the nothingness in a shape that is night might also be a source of dignity. As with Michael and his sad history, the dignity of night might come later. It might come only after one has been a fugitive for a while. Or not. The lexical entries are intentionally gnomic. They have affective weight without the burden of narrative and should be read as one reads Joyce (the aptness of this comparison will become clear later):

*adempte nox diem adimat* the day would not be long enough [night confiscates day] *nunc nox!* night now! *tamen* (strengthened by night) *tamen nocte* deadly all the same....*interea contra ius interea solum nocte* against the law yet only at night *haec media nocte bis: hoc decet?* you go away in the middle of the night: is that decent? ...*parentum parenti potius quam nocti obsequi* to obey one's parent rather than night...

These entries are meant to wash over the reader in a way that creates an affect of sadness and mourning without tying it to a subject (who, to warrant such sadness, might need to be portrayed as excellent or blameless):

*more more noctis* a habit of sadness; without system, wildly... *tradita tristitiam et metus tradam in mare* I will consign sadness and fear to the sea...*noctis satietatem trado* here is my opinion of night's satiety....*sunt hoc est id est nox est* that is...*tristi* (of shade, night-coloured things, etc) *odor tristis* night smell

Finally, once night has a sad, fugitive side.

....*ad ad dextraim, laevam, noctem* on the right, left, night side....

Having been evoked in all these ways, night then carries with it both the stars, visible at night—like the starry lad her brother once was—and the fugitive, sad, regret of a time that is

always too late. Night is just one of the ways that Carson introduces the feelings of honour, shame, and mourning into *Nox* without relying on the more traditional modes of story-telling that would situate such feelings within a narrative. Traditional narrative explanations of grief rely upon the goodness of the one we mourn; in Carson's *Nox*, however, these feelings of grief exist independent of the need to elevate her brother's character.

When Carson does align night to her brother more specifically, she also speaks about how much their nights resembled one another. Again, a redaction from multiple lexical entries:

*inferias accipe oculis aut pectore noctem accipit* he lets in night at the eyes and heart...*manantia omne supervacuum pleno de pectore manati* the whole pointless night seeps out of the heart...*atque similiter atque ipse eram noctuabunda* just like him I was a negotiator with night...*atque similiter atque ipse eram noctuabunda* just like him I was a negotiator with night...*atque similiter atque ipse eram noctuabunda* just like him I was a negotiator with night....

In the same way that the significance of section 2.2 was highlighted through a repetition that did not stay the same, Carson includes the lexical entry for the word *atque* three times.

Repetition is Carson's most enduring technique for creating affect.

A similar method of redacted reading could be undertaken for other important themes, including shame. Themes of wretchedness, rejection, pity, and condemnation pile up in these entries:

*haec vituperare*: to denounce your own day; this amount, this much of (often with depreciatory force)...*laudatur ab his culpatur ab illis*: he is praised by some, reviled by others.... *miser misera miserum* adjective (sic)...[cognate with MAERO, MAESTUS] (of a person) that is to be pitied, sad, poor, wretched, unfortunate, (applied to the actions of persons in a pitiable state) attended by misery, grievous, distressing ; *miserrima Dido*: most sad Dido; (in special use) wretched in health, sick, suffering; (also applied to those sick in heart); (with ablative of cause)... wretched in one's social or financial circumstances; pitiful, mean, contemptible (as a term of contempt); *solacium miserum*: worthless consolation; (exclamatory) *me miserum-eram*: alas woe is me! (as substantive) the wretch...*ad contemuliam omnia accipere* to read everything as an insult

Though these lexical entries are partly to blame for what makes *Nox* and other works by Carson so opaque, I think they must be quoted in the unwieldy forms they come in as opposed to in a more tidy, controlled manner. To do the latter would mean to disrespect the

stylistic choices Carson is making and would make it harder to understand the argument I will make later, namely that the unwieldy-ness of these entries captures something of what Lacan would call the singularity of Carson as a writer: her own specific lack.

Within the entry for *atque*, Carson evokes shame, and between the repeated entries, Carson evokes lack. *Atque* is a conjunction, but here it speaks to the swift dialectical movements of thought and, finally, her own similarity to her brother. I quote this section in full:

[AD+QUE] and, as well as, together with; *honestataque inhonestata* descent and indecent; and...too, and what is more; and in fact, and indeed; yes and; (introducing a comparison); (introducing a new point) and now; (correcting the first term) or rather, and not rather; and when, and thereupon; (introducing a principal clause) forthwith, lo and behold; (slightly adversative) and yet; (in various collocations of pairs of words); *alius atque alius* one and another; *etiam atque etiam* again and again; *longe atque* late far and wide; (as a simple compulative) and; (in compound numbers); as; *ac si* as if; *simul atque* as soon as; *statim atque* from the moment that; (after comparative) than; *similiter atque ipse eram noctuabunda* just like him I was a negotiator with night.

This is the dialectic as switchback. It races. *Atque* connects decency with indecency, a principal clause with its comparison, correction, and its slightly adversative contrast. Yet the road is still the same road. For all the ways Carson complicates her relationship with her brother and his death, at the end of the day she is “just like him.”

I have already discussed the way *Nox* slowly unfolds the one and only letter Michael to his mother, in which he told the story of the girl who had died. In that discussion, I describe the letter’s relation to the floating and repeated section 2.2 that began “My brother ran away in 1978, rather than go to jail.” Other pieces of the letter appear later in *Nox* as torn up scraps so that scraps of the story Carson has told are re-told, but in Michael’s own hand: “I have never known ...like that. like wind in....” “I was away.” “(No charge).” In the letter’s last iteration, the scrap is folded over on itself so that we can see two typed notes that have been pasted onto the blank side of the letter. The first one reads “Or:” The second is a quotation (likely from Herodotus) that we can only partially read but easily decipher: “I have to say what is said what is said. I don’t have to believe it myself.” The second appearance of the note reveals the Herodotus quote in full. The last unfolding is in Michael’s hand: “Love you. Love you. - Michael.” The repetition of Herodotus’ disbelief alongside the repetition of Carson’s dialectical definition of a conjunction and, finally, the repetition of Michael’s last

lines all highlight the way that *Nox* wrestles with grief and Carson's own relation to it. These entries shimmer with affect without the narrative content that would otherwise pin these feelings to a specific cause or effect.

I have established that repetition is one of the central strategies Carson employs to complicate the story she tells of her brother, her mother, and herself. I have already discussed the repetition of section 2.2 and of the lexical entry for *atque*, the first of which tells Michael's sad history in a detached tone and the second of which aligns the narrator and her brother in their futile negotiation with night. Now I would like to reexamine repetition in the photographs. I earlier mentioned the way images of the family members slowly disappear from the text. Yet there are photographs right through to the last page. These latter photos are generally slivers or squares cut from the larger originals so that a firm process of selection is evidently at hand. What has Carson selected for in these latter images? Brick walls, stairwells, windows (from outside), the trunks of trees, the shadow of a man. The scrapbook aesthetic makes these selections seem accidental in much the same way that night seeps into the lexical entries, yet their repetition adds to the affective weight of the book. The stairwell is an especially potent repetition and is, in itself, a repetition—of self-same steps. The stairwell is where Michael met the wife who would become his widow, but that was not his first encounter with such a space:

5.3. My brother's widow tells me that when she first met him (Amsterdam) he was penniless....They lived together for two years on the street, sleeping in stairwells, eating once a week, this was after Anna, drinking a lot. Stairwell smell (I remember) him huddling in the stairwell where we kept our coats and boots winter Sunday blood on his face he was about nine and my mother around him with all her hands crying What now oh what now?

This is the only instance where Carson creates such a time-shift. Those were the women who loved him, this passage seems to say, and they—his mother, his widow—always met him in the in-between hiding place of stairwells. None of the images of steps are of staircases: none of these steps are ever inside. These are exterior spaces, places of exclusion. We know how such stairwells smell; we know how they shame. Carson, too, loved him and it is in that space that *Nox* encounters him last: "*He refuses, he is in the stairwell, he disappears.*"

Far more than narrative, then, it is through various forms of repetition that Carson is able to introduce the affects of melancholy, sadness, mourning, and shame. Up to now, the object of this analysis has focused primarily on the brother who disappeared and then died. My study of repetition though, has prepared us for an analysis of style and the one who

collected these objects—the authorial figure of Anne Carson. Mari Ruti, writing of the repetition compulsion in Lacanian analysis says that it is a kind of benign trap: “a protective shield without which our lives would be much more difficult to handle,” precisely because repetition permits us to return to the familiarity of our story, of the thing that we know, rather than the nothingness that we don’t (*The Singularity of Being* 16). That the nothingness could bring us ecstasy is no real draw, for we know that pain is just as likely, and the ‘overmuchlessness’ of either is what the repetition compulsion protects us from. Read ‘slant,’ like a rhyme, or like Emily Dickenson’s truth, I think these elements of repetition, lack, the unconscious, and the story of the shamed man and his sister who survived, speaks to a modern relationship to emotion and authenticity that is complicated by and inflected with the kinds of questions Freud and Lacan, Derrida and Foucault, Zizek and Ruti, would have us ask.

### **Nox As Autobiography**

In my initial description of *Nox*, there was one generic category that I purposely left off the list. Because Carson doesn’t describe *Nox* as autobiographical, I didn’t either. But, with this book, Carson has added her brother to the list of significant people in her life who have become the subjects of her writing. Her ex-husband, in *The Beauty of the Husband: A fictional essay in 29 tangos*, her mother, in *Glass, Irony, and God*, her father in *Plainwater: Essays and Poetry*. What makes Carson’s approach so distinctive is that these same texts could also be said to be about Keats, Emily Brönte, and Basho, or even, in all cases, about form, grief, walking, faith, what it means to be a self in the world and what it means to try, at all costs, to avoid the sentimental despite the loss and longing that propels much of her work. Speaking of her 2005 work, *Decreation*, Carson explained her use of Simone Weil’s notion that decreation was “an undoing of the creature in us—that creature enclosed in self and defined by the self.” In a sense, all of Carson’s work is engaged in this bipolar practice, that is of abandoning the self in works whose form could be accomplished by no one else. All of her work is personal without being sentimental, and autobiographical without relying on narration, emplotment and the coherent self that one normally associates with the genre. In this section of the chapter, I would like to explore how *Nox* exemplifies a new kind of autobiography based on contemporary ideas of selfhood that accept opacity, misunderstanding, emotion, affect and an ongoing attachment to or desire for coherence as parts of the self that compete and co-exist. Following this, I’d like to explore how this multivalenced self experiences shame in a way that can both humiliate and dignify.

To the degree that Barthes, Foucault and Derrida have made an imprint upon literary culture, our belief in autobiography is now as shaky as our belief in the authenticity, even existence, of the author. Where some theoreticians of the genre have held fast to definitions that might settle the matter, most admit that autobiography is no more a clearly defined genre than is fiction or history. This is true even of figures like Phillipe Lejeune whose oft-quoted definition didn't satisfy even him (Anderson 2). Despite Lejeune's own reservations about pinpointing the genre, it provides a telling counterpoint to Barthes', Foucault's and Derrida's autobiographical writing.

These thinkers were very anxious about the kind of identification Lejeune saw as defining the genre. Their autobiographies are marked by an aesthetic of anxiety. With regards to *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, Anderson notes:

The text's most salient break with tradition is achieved through discarding the first-person singular and substituting instead multiple-subject positionings: 'he', 'R.B.', 'you' and 'I' exchange places almost arbitrarily in an attempt to reinforce the effect of distance between the writer and the written text: [said Barthes] 'I had no other solution than to rewrite myself—at a distance, a great distance—here and now...Far from reaching the core of the matter, I remain on the surface. (70)

By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, these sorts of textual games had become par for the course. Yet, far from thoroughly dismantling the idea of a core, authentic, coherent personality, these texts, by working so hard to provide an alternative managed, in a sense, to reify the very author(ity) they were trying to dismantle. Just as the presence of an originating self was suspect, so too was narrative order:

The alphabetical order erases everything, banishes every origin. Perhaps in places, certain fragments seem to follow one another by some affinity; but the important thing is that these little networks not be connected, that they not slide into a single enormous network which would be the structure of the book, its meaning. (Barthes 148)

Autobiography, especially written by academics, was the source of much apprehensiveness. Furthermore, it was associated with death. Derrida posited that autobiography should be renamed thanatography because it was "a writing not of a living but a dead author" (Anderson 81). The intellectual maneuverings were so consistently a part of these works that they became their defining style, admitting, then, of an anxiety-prone, overly-intellectual consciousness behind every sentence, even as that consciousness was supposedly being written out of existence.



It was at around the same time as these autobiographies-that-weren't were published that Barthes argued that, in modern life, sentiment had replaced sex as a primary source of shame (178). Sentiment, associated with the lyric outpouring of an untarnished authentic self, or worse, overwrought and downright dumb—the stuff of mass-market melodrama—has long been jettisoned in the upper realms of *literature*. Along similar lines, the study of emotion has only in recent decades regained a footing in academe. Anne Carson, academic and poet, certainly belongs to and writes for a world suspicious of, indeed ashamed of, sentiment. Her work has been accused of such coldness. Yet, I hope it is clear from my reading of *Nox* that Carson's work isn't unfeeling so much as it feels in an unexpected way.

It's not very original to comment upon the overlap between shame and autobiography. Nor is it very original to argue that autobiography—especially literary autobiography—has changed in keeping with poststructural skepticism about the coherent, authentic self. With regards to the former, Timothy Bewes has argued that autobiography, even when it participates in the confessional tendencies of the genre, always manifests the shame of privilege through the power inscribed in the act of writing itself. (We will explore this more fully in the next chapter). Elspeth Probyn's *Sexing the Self* similarly asks, "whether a particular autobiographical speaking position can be sustained without it solidifying into an identity, with all the problems of privilege and exclusion that that raises" (Anderson 110). In Barthes, we've seen an anxious attempt to overturn that privileged identity. Yet these examples of shame, autobiography and a changing selfhood uphold a shamefulness that is always, in some way, effable.

Carson's *Nox*, and the other creative autobiographies I discuss in this dissertation disrupt the role of shame as an articulate arbiter of all that is good or bad in the self or in the Other. Through style, these books are finally able to find a way out of the identity-difference quagmires that have caught autobiographical writing in such shamed and shaming territory. Shame is not outed or confessed, but rather sensed as a affective shimmer that can't quite be pinned down. The authors may be able to articulate its outlines, notice their blush, say, but few of these books will pinpoint an originating source of the feeling. When they do, as in the case of Kate Zambreno's *Heroines* or Cvetkovich's *Depression*, such explanatory narratives read as histrionic or simplistic. In Ben Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station*, Adam Gordon ritually manifest sources of shame, but his awareness of this made all of his activities comically sad. The shame-affects we see emerging in *Nox* are blameless. This is a refreshing move away from the confession as a model for self-understanding and a welcome

complication of the affect of shame. Ultimately, autobiography can stylistically reconfigure selfhood and, by doing so, reshape our understanding of shame.

If poststructuralism wounded our belief in the coherent self, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and post-Lacanian theory, has allowed for a different way to understand autobiographical writing: through style. Style, like shame, is aware of what constitutes normal. Tim Parks, writing for the *New York Review of Books* says:

Style, then, involves a meeting between arrangements inside the prose and expectations outside it. You can't have a strong style without a community of readers able to recognize and appreciate its departures from the common usages they know. (n.pag)

Style that gets noticed is style that knowingly meets and departs from such expectations. The generic expectations of autobiography—that it be narrative, first person, retrospective and that the identity of author, narrator and protagonist correspond—also imply stylistic expectations that are usually similar to realist fiction. Style can be understood as guise, but we all wear masks, just not the same ones. In that sense, style admits of something unique in a given author. Sometimes we call it voice. It is a slippery topic, as D. A. Miller notes in his brilliant *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style*:

Here was a truly out-of-body voice, so stirringly free of what it abhorred as 'particularity' or 'singularity' that it seemed to come from no enunciator at all. It scanted person even in the linguistic sense, rarely acknowledging, by saying *I*, its origination in an authoring self, or, by saying *you*, its reception by any other. (1)

Austen, Miller is arguing, achieved a narrative voice that was utterly free of "not just body, but psyche, history, social position" (1). This is quite the opposite of Barthes' insistence upon the *I*, the R.B., the you. Yet, sooner or later, the readers of Austen all discovered that to read Austen was to be a Woman, or at least an effeminate reader and therefore shamed as such. The apparent absence of style turned out to be style itself. In the same way that Barthesian trickery is stylistically true to some aspect of Barthes-the-writer, Austen's out-of-body voice consistently resembled itself. I'm not saying that authorial style does not change. Of course it does. But style, especially in-so-far as it is hard to pin down, might be the closest we can get to the ever-retreating singularity of being that Lacan theorized in *das Ding* and Sartre in his 'nothingness'.

Traditionally speaking, autobiography has always told a story of personality, but in *Nox*, as elsewhere, Anne Carson creates an autobiographical figure that is neither subject nor

personality but, of the three Lacanian figures, closest to Singularity. Literary theorist Mari Ruti describes these three parts—the subject, the personality, and the singularity—this way:

The ‘subject’ comes into existence through symbolic law and prohibition. ‘Personality’ can never entirely transcend the narcissistic fantasies of wholeness, integration, and the extraordinariness that buttress the subject’s imaginary relationship to the world. ‘Singularity,’ in turn, relates to the rebellious energies of the real that elude both symbolic and imaginary closure. (*The Singularity of Being* 1)

That Carson’s work consistently eludes symbolic and imaginary closure is exemplified by the inclusion of the blurred poem 101 at the end of *Nox*. Her autobiographical figure doesn’t wholly avoid the prohibitions and decrees of symbolic law nor of the narcissistic desires of wholeness, but she does not limit the self to those aspects. In the autobiographical forms she chooses, the modern self is more than mere personality.

Similarly, the shame experienced by the modern self goes beyond the narrative explanations where only a dark secret can explain its existence. Rather, this is a more quiet shame, less easily observed, but powerful nonetheless. In *Nox* we see the shame of narrative coherence itself. Carson’s strategy of distancing is just one way she makes space into a thing. Mari Ruti offers two examples from Lacan:”that capture the relationship between lack and signification, namely an empty mustard pot and a hollow piece of macaroni (‘a hole with something around it’)” (*The Singularity of Being* 127). While on one level, *Nox* tells us that her brother was something of an asshole (that this was his personality), that he abandoned his family and left his mother bereaved well before she needed to be (since her death preceded his), *Nox* also tells us that Carson has struggled with grieving for him just as she struggled with knowing him. When, for example, her mother finally declares that he must be dead because when she prays for him “nothing comes back,” Carson describes her reaction as follows:

I wasn’t sure new feelings were finished arriving from him yet, but there was no practical reason to say so. It was a relief not to have him droppping (sic) through every conversation like a smell of burning hair, to be honest, from my point of view. (4.3)

Yet, the relief Carson feels does not sustain itself.

It is a hallmark of pop-psychology to try to reclaim shame’s redemptive qualities. Strategies for doing so involve claims that echo original sin—we all feel shame, it’s only human to do so—or that shame is what permits us to absorb the rights and wrongs of society

so that we will not embarrass ourselves, or at least are equipped to decide when, where, and in front of whom, we will do so. But while some of these may help us navigate the world better or know where to look for empathy in our darkest moments, I think the most useful element of shame is the way it grants us access to our own specific integrity. This is not the integrity we're used to. This is not the integrity that an ethicist might speak about. Nor the self-sacrificing adherence to a noble value, nor the associated unwavering coherence we often demand of politicians and philosophers, where their changeability is a sign of weakness, and not, say, thought.

The kind of integrity shame permits is the kind that acknowledges our darkness without pathologizing it. Darkness isn't only where we sin; it's also where we dream. Wurmser argues that shame protects integrity by protecting the self's deepest feelings and most supreme values from exposure (48). This kind of integrity doesn't look like coherence or predictability. This kind of integrity actually can't be predictable because it is the strange alchemy of the self that, when we dare, makes us our most original. The kind of art that emerges from this integrity is art that transcends the status quo. That art has a kind of bravery to it. Lacan argued that James Joyce's inimitable style came from his singularity. Mari Ruti summarizes the point:

If we accept Joyce as a paradigmatic singular subject, we might be left with the impression that only the obscure, ambiguous, fragmented, and to some extent indecipherable discourse of modernist (and postmodernist) literature fits the mode of singularity—that the singular, even when it is no longer fully allied with the asociality of the real, carries the mark of this asociality in the form of solipsism and nonreferentiality. (Ruti 124)

Ruti calls this kind of writing “asocial.” Undoubtedly, many critics (and readers) have kept their distance from Anne Carson's work for such reasons. Her style is demanding and often inhospitable.

Yet, throughout this chapter, I have argued that Anne Carson is a master of form. She is also a master of register. Only Anne Carson, after all, could unblinkingly begin a collection of translated Greek plays called *Grief Lessons* with an epigraph taken from Stevie Nicks: “It only thunders when it rains.” Unlike Barthes, Carson holds no attachment to making things difficult for difficulty's sake. There is no anxiety involving alphabetization and, as I have shown, there is much that orders *Nox* even if, at first glance, it seems to exemplify the singular, asocial language of which Ruti speaks. That *Nox* speaks Carson's language is clear: it could be written by no other.

I hope that my reading of *Nox* demonstrates that Anne Carson has managed to write autobiography in a way that illustrates how shame can dignify. Dignity emerges as a central theme in *Nox* in several ways. First, through the beauty of the book itself; second, through Carson's selectiveness that capitalizes on silence and privacy rather than confession and exposure; and third, through her use of affect rather than emotion, something most obvious here in her use of repetition rather than narration to propel the text. Carson also lends dignity to grief and to her own sorrow. If traditional autobiography most often betrays a narcissistic tendency, one of the ways it does so is by expecting autobiography to seal the wounds of a sad history: to provide some end to the hurt of the story. Carson refuses this, ending *Nox*, instead with disappearance and a blur.

Michael, a figure who hid out in stairwells, has warranted this object, this beautiful collection. Lacan once described a collection his friend had made of matchboxes. Ruti quotes him as follows:

It was the kind of collection that it was easy to afford at that time....[The match boxes formed a decorative ribbon]: they were all the same and were laid out in an extremely agreeable way that involved each one being so close to the one next to it that the little drawer was slightly displaced. As a result, they were all threaded together so as to form a continuous ribbon that ran along the mantelpiece, climbed the wall, extended to the molding, and climbed down again next to the door. I don't say that it went on to infinity, but...(qtd. in *The Singularity of Being*, 131)

Lacan's friend had transformed the ordinary object. It had been elevated to, "a dignity that it did not possess before." As is the case with the matchbox, Carson's brother is similarly elevated to the dignity of the Thing.

*Nox*, then, is a kind of sublimation. Leon Wurmser describes creativity and scientific achievement as heroic transcendences of shame. A work of art has, "meaning [that] is many-layered, multidimensional and, in some few instances, possibly inexhaustible in meaning" (Eissler 298). I wonder if it is possible to see Lacan's lack in Wurmser's shame. Insofar as the shame arises from a disjunct we cannot quite name, and insofar as its protection permits creative and scientific transcendence, this might be possible. As we have seen, shame is incredibly flexible and utterly dependent on ideals, values, identifications and loves that one can and cannot choose. Sometimes shame knows itself and sometimes it does not. *Nox* is a beautiful *objet d'art*, and is all the more beautiful because it is made of scraps and uglinesses that usually remain hidden away.

As a genre, an epitaph (to use Carson's classification of *Nox*) must be one thing. It must be dignified. Carson could have told a different story about her brother. Section 3.2. tells us:

3.2. I go to Copenhagen. My brother's widow gives me some old diaries she found. From his wandering years, filled with photographs that he developed himself in hotel rooms of Hyderabad, Bangalore, Amsterdam, Kathmandu, Paris, Deinze, of the girl who died, usually naked except for some jewellery, a blonde delighted girl. She was the love of his life, his widow says calmly.

An epitaph is written about the person who has died by the person who is still alive. An epitaph marks the distance between death and life in a permanent way; it is usually etched in stone. An epitaph is made public. Truth be told, most epitaphs don't say much. Truth be told, most epitaphs are clichés, and so they only mean something for someone who can see round the bend, for one who knows the person, say, or for one who writes around the bend, like Anne Carson. *Nox* is both elegy and autobiography, but it is always dignified.

Some autobiographies betray. This is because all an autobiography has to do is offer the record of one person's consciousness, one person's interpretation of events that involved others, which is precisely what it cannot help but do. If and when it tries to speak for others, the sense of betrayal it provokes can be even stronger. (Nelson 147)

Because *Nox* does not reveal much in the way of consciousness nor much in the way of events either, it also does not betray. Where Carson offers an interpretation—I've shown here how *Nox* can be read as a portrait of a shamed man—it is clear that this was her view, from her perspective. The snippets we have of the other brother, the one she didn't know, don't necessarily provide a counter-narrative, but they do provide ample room for one.

While *Nox* may betray a certain shame of sentimentality, it is not ashamed of feeling. *Nox* does point to her brother's experiences of shame (and, by extension, the family's), the book neither erases this sad history nor plunders it. Shame remains an elusive figure in *Nox*: as elusive as night, as elusive as Michael. Traditional autobiographical form remains similarly out of reach, even as an intertextual reading of *Nox* alongside Carson's *oeuvre* makes it difficult to ignore the autobiographical slant of her work. Style and affect are Carson's answer to confession and narration. These choices lend dignity to the shame she and those she has cared about have experienced without subjectifying them or their shame to a simplifying scrutiny.

## Inadequacy and Transcendence: Shame's Redemption

Timothy Bewes' *The Event of Postcolonial Shame* begins with a prologue where he reflects on his person—from physique to personality to his aptitude for academic work—and then on the nature of the book we're about to begin. He is physically average, he tells us, with "a growing paunch and an incipient stoop, the effect of many hours spent each day at a desk, reading literature or working on a computer" (Bewes, *The Event* 1). His appearance, in his own eyes, is that of a misanthropic man, pointy and angular, and increasingly colourless: bland and pasty from too many hours spent indoors. He admits that he is unsuited for intellectual work. His pursuit of it, despite that, aggravates his own "sense of lifelessness and isolation... a state of misery that is sometimes apparent to others as an air of superiority" (1). This autobiographical gesture last barely two-thirds of the first page, yet its prominence and the degree to which it appears to contradict everything the subsequent two-hundred or so pages will argue makes it a mysterious opening. In this chapter, I will argue that this paradoxical opening is both *The Event*'s motivation and a formal manifestation of its arguments. The subtle melding of a personal register with a rigorous academic argument begins on the very first page:

What better reason to write, asks Gilles Deleuze, than the shame of being a man? What better reason, one might add, than the shame of being born a European, of having been raised at the chilly hearth of an empire in decline by a family whose ancestry includes, within living memory, a history of Christian mission in the 'Third World'? What better reason to write than the shame of living and working within the bounds of the largest political, economic, and military power in the world?(1)

These questions articulate a shame of privilege, but their form, register, and resonance with the book that inspired them—*Manhood*, or *L'Âge d'homme*, the 1939 autobiography of French anthropologist Michel Leiris—foregrounds what Bewes will come to define as an Event of shame. *The Event* is about shame as a formal property, one that exists in (or as if in) response to the incommensurability of the aesthetic dimensions of literature and the ethical responsibilities to which it is always inadequate (Bewes 1). It is written in the first-person, and although the prologue is the only explicit instance of autobiographical reflection, I read its inclusion as an invitation. In an earlier article, Bewes remarks that "Leiris takes his self-

absorption to a level at which it becomes reflexive, such that the failings of his project to anatomize the self become part of the project; at this point the text might be said to be no longer autobiographical at all" (Bewes, "The Shameful Order" 462). Leiris's relentless self-attention merges with an intense exploration of the genre of autobiography itself. For all its apparent narcissism, Leiris' "acute awareness" of the limitations of the form are precisely what make his final text transcend those limitations. With a similar relentlessness, Bewes' work seeks to overcome formal limitations. In echoing a text written by a self-reflective, shame-filled, intellectual observer of the colonial era, Bewes is reflecting on his own privilege and the shame that it entails. It is a gesture that invites the reader to turn *The Event* back on itself, to interrogate its claims as they relate not only to the field of postcolonial literature and its criticism but also to writing itself and the figure of the literary critic that undertakes it. That is the project of this chapter.

In the context of this dissertation, this chapter provides a counterpoint to my first chapter, where we saw two other illustrations of literary criticism inflected with the autobiographical. Ann Cvetkovich and Kate Zambreno turned to autobiography in an effort to dismantle the discursive—and, they argued, normative—register of academic thought. Their writing was "risky" because they exposed themselves, but they did so with a purpose. The purpose was political: they wrote on behalf of minoritarian communities—women writers, queer academics, the depressed, the emotional. Cvetkovich's *Depression* explored the quotidian nature of systemic injustice in the United States: we saw Cvetkovich go to the dentist, we read about a black family being pulled over by a police man on a winter's night. Zambreno wrote about the shame of being a minor writer; Cvetkovich wrote about the pleasure-pain of privilege in academe. I concluded that their efforts, when thought about in the context their political goals, failed. They mistook fellow-feeling for their goal, when what it should have been was a beginning (Jamison "Against Empathy Forum" n.pag). And, they failed to take seriously the way their writing manifest, rather than overcame, the wrongs they decried.

Writing, Bewes argues, is both a marker of privilege and, especially when a writer writes about one's shame, a marker of shame. Nevertheless, Bewes writes. This contradiction is merely the beginning of what makes *The Event of Postcolonial Shame* such a paradoxical work. Throughout, we will find that central to Bewes' thought is a concern about inadequacy. The inadequacy of intellectual pursuits in the face of systemic injustice; the inadequacy of literature and art to fulfill the visions that inspire them; the inadequacy of readers to fully grasp the artistic vision pursued; the inadequacy of *feeling* shame or writing about it, even to



the most maximal amount, given that even the capacity to feel and write about shame all indicate privilege and therefore inspire further shame. These fears are not unique to Bewes': we saw them in Adam Gordon as he sat through the esperanto of clichés that passed for a poetry reading in Madrid; we saw them in Sheila Heti's anxiety about her failure to write a play about women; we saw them in Zambreno's fear that she would forever be a minor writer and in Nelson's fear that loving blue would never mean it would love her back. In Bewes' case, these concerns precede *The Event of Postcolonial Shame*. In *Reification, Or the Anxiety of Late Capitalism*, there was the inadequacy of any word at all being able to articulate the fullest range of an affective experience—that which exists at the greatest reaches of our imagination either by extreme closeness—in our most intimate experiences—or by the *au-delà*—in the figures of God, or of the proletarian revolution, or of the twentieth-century versions of those transcendental figures, the absences and gaps that have come to signal truth in and of themselves. Sometimes, the concern is the inadequacy of critical thought, and sometimes of literary criticism. I say concern, but one consistent (if irritating) aspect of Bewes' thought is his delight in reversals, and so I could equally say that central to his thought is the celebration of inadequacy.

Several years before publishing *The Event of Postcolonial Shame*, Bewes published an article entitled "From the Shameful Order of Virility: Autobiography after Colonialism." There, he writes:

The hypothesis behind this essay is that the popularity of the autobiographical register in contemporary writing, a register which frequently results in a literature of self-absorption, depression, solipsism, or abjection, may be read as the expression, variously, of a Europe that is attempting, and chronically failing, to process its colonial past; or a West in pathological conflict with its economic privilege; or a male heterosexuality radically ill at ease with its own preeminence. (Bewes, "The Shameful Order" 465)

The roots of *The Event of Postcolonial Shame* are to be found in that article, which, like *The Event*, begins with an autobiographical statement that reflects upon Bewes' own position of privilege. It is a gesture that is imbued with shame: not simply the shame of a privileged past and present, but also the shame of self-exposure, and, moreover, the shame of continuing to assert "I" even as it is subjectivity that is at the root of the shame. The gesture invites the accusation of hypocrisy. Bewes knows this, and so it is a knowing gesture, and one he makes twice, at the beginning of the 2004 article and of the 2011 book, with adjustments for age being the only revision. Why does Bewes do this?

There are a lot of reasons that other writers do this. The purpose of Bewes' 2004 article, after all, was to reflect upon how insertions of the autobiographical had become something of a trend: writers sought absolution "at the personal level for crimes committed by the collectivity" (Bewes, "The Shameful Order" 467). Politicians, male novelists, cultural historians, and playwrights all did it. Academics like Bewes did it. "The academic's gesture of using material from his own family history in order to examine his 'cultural implication' in the history of colonialism," signaled self-reflection and the hope that the shame of such 'cultural implication' might be overcome through confession (Bewes, "The Shameful Order" 467). American activist and intellectual Andrea Smith wrote about the prominence of such gestures in her essay "Unsettling the Privilege of Self-Reflexivity," in an edited volume entitled *Geographies of Privilege*, remarking on the ephemeral nature of confessions of privilege in her anti-racism work, where, "The sayer of the confession [would confess and] could then be granted temporary forgiveness for her/his abuses of power and relief from white/male/heterosexual/etc guilt." In a society where self-reflexivity is closely associated with self-determination, shame's capacity to make us see ourselves is supposedly what renders it one of our most powerful tools for change. Or so we like to think. Smith articulates one problem with such confessions: "Because of the perceived benefits of this ritual, there was generally little critique of the fact that in the end, it primarily served to reconstitute the structures of domination it was supposed to resist." The individual confession leaves everything the same. Is Bewes statement of the same order? Is he seeking absolution? Are these admissions meant to be read as first steps toward undoing his personal privilege? First steps that might also happen to add to his publication record? First steps that might have earned him a tenure-track position at an Ivy League school, or that might have secured it? Are such cynical responses something Bewes hoped to elicit? To what end? The shame of privilege is perhaps the most difficult shame to write about: one cannot write about it in the hopes of eliciting empathy for it is a shame many will never have (but might like to), nor can writing about it elicit absolution, for to earn absolution in such a manner would be utterly hypocritical. What can writing do? What can writing admit? If the spoken confession was ephemeral and left everything as it was, can the written confession fair any better? Bewes says,

Insofar as they fail to realize the connection...between self-absorption and the quest for absolution—such autobiographical literatures seem destined to reinscribe the very relations between self and other which made colonialism, for example, inevitable. ("The Shameful Order" 465)

If Smith's problem with these confessions is that the social upset they create is merely temporary, Bewes' problem with such confessions is that they uphold the self-other binary upon which the colonial order was based. Systemic injustice described by terms such as sexism, racism, and the colonial cannot be overcome through individual acts of confession precisely because the binary structure of confessor—confessee replicates the self-other binary upon which colonialism was predicated. So, why begin with writing in such a confessional mode?

If one possibility is that Bewes is hoping to absolve himself of his various privileges, another possibility is that these "confessions" are part of a larger project: an effort to imagine a new form for writing about shame in the postcolonial era. Part of that project might involve putting so much pressure on the truth-telling forms we've traditionally relied upon—the confession, the academic study, the objective voice—that they collapse. Part of that project might involve juxtaposing those forms of truth-telling within one long piece of writing such that they would push up against each other, so that the generic boundaries of these forms might start to crumble, permitting something else to emerge.

In his conclusion to "The Shameful Order," Bewes argues that what distinguishes the writing of the militant doctor, Franz Fanon, and the Christian missionary, Thomas Francis Cecil Bewes (Timothy Bewes' grandfather), is that, despite their use of the personal voice, "each writes *in the name of* something which annuls the opposition between self and other, which mediates and overcomes it, the significance of which is *simultaneously* universal and particular" ("The Shameful Order" 478). I am struck by the simultaneousness of universal and particular because of the way those terms have come together in descriptions of the beautiful, as well as in what Bewes describes elsewhere as a state of dereification (exemplified variously as the Christian incarnate God, the moment of proletarian revolution, or any time subject and object, theory and practice become one), and in writing about shame: "Shame is the most reflexive of affects in that the phenomenological distinction between the subject and object of shame is lost" (Tomkins qtd. in Sedgwick 136). What if writing *in the name of* The Event of Shame were something that might mediate and overcome the opposition between self and other, the significance of which could be simultaneously universal and particular? In order to see how this might be possible, we'll need to see what Bewes means by *The Event of Shame* and how it differs from subjective shame. Only then can we begin to answer why Bewes might introduce a book that so thoroughly rejects the "ethical" call to confession (of privilege and its attendant shame) with just such a confession.

The critical aim of *The Event* is nothing less than a reframing of postcolonial studies. Rather than continuing in a critical tradition that has read postcolonial texts for what they revealed, through “certain cultural motifs, identity formations, historical struggles, or emancipatory goals,” ( Bewes, *The Event* 7) Bewes proposes a new form of reading that would read around or beyond such motifs, formations and struggles. It would look less for what had been positively shown (by way of such motifs and struggles) and instead for what had been left unsaid. Incommensurability is the term he uses not only for the Event of shame but also for way it seems to emerge in the postcolonial novel as “a chronic anxiety toward writing itself” (Bewes, *The Event* 7). Bewes demonstrates this in his re-reading of key postcolonial writers— Caryl Phillips; V.S. Naipaul; Joseph Conrad, Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, and Zoë Wicomb; and J.M. Coetzee. Their bodies of work, even when Bewes’ admiration for it is clear (it isn’t always), are a means to a theoretical reformulation of postcolonial writing and its relation to shame rather than as an end in and of themselves:

the novel, the dominant form of the postcolonial as well as of the colonial period, emerges from the same disparity between subject and object as colonialism itself. The same might be said, of course, of literary criticism, particularly in the mode of exegesis and interpretation. The further ambition of this work, then, is to point towards a mode of reading that would be faithful to the discrepancy between subject and object at the heart of the critical enterprise. The aim here is not any merely subjective escape from the shame of the critic, but the evolution of a method that will avoid projecting the shame onto the object of study. ( Bewes, *The Event* 7-8)

As we have seen throughout this dissertation, shame wears many masks. So far, Bewes has identified at least two: a critic experiencing shame might try to absolve themselves of shame by confessing it, or try to escape shame by projecting it onto the object of study. Yet if shame can be a form, its form is one of absence rather than presence. This isn’t the mask of an expressionless face, but rather something one might not even be able to see: something more tonal or textural. You have to listen or feel for it, if it is there at all. And sometimes its absence is total—a nothingness made visible only by what surrounds it. Bewes’ project has required that he, as critic, adopt what Tomkins would call a strong shame theory. In order to detect the absences and gaps that are the basis of his argument, Bewes had to be able to find shame where it didn’t necessarily want to be found. The opening passage speaks to the self-reflectivity that strong shame theories engender and laterally to the prominence of autobiographical literary criticism that has been on the rise for several decades.

## Two Types of Shame

As mentioned, the guiding question of Bewes' *The Event of Postcolonial Shame* is the following: "*The ability to write—is there any better reason to feel ashamed?*" This question is an inversion of an earlier question posed by Deleuze and quoted by Bewes: "The shame of being a man—is there any better reason to write?" About this, Bewes writes: "Implicit in Deleuze's question, although by no means obviously so, is the emblematic status of 'man' as the species, and the gender, that writes" (15). The male writer, then, is always implicated in a shameful economy because *he* benefits from a position of power just as soon as he is capable of mastering the forms of the powerful. Yet this privilege is not limited to men only. A mastery of narrative fiction, academic argumentation, or, more subtly, of the eloquent sentence or the rhetorical figure manifests the shame of the dominant classes, the shame that caused Lukács to equate the novel with "absolute sinfulness" and led Adorno and Primo Levi to lament literature altogether. At the heart of the shame that interests Bewes is privilege.

The claim is that writing that speaks about the shame of the (privileged) author in straightforward terms seeks absolution, exculpation. Such writing, by maintaining the "I" of the writer and his subjectively felt shame, replicates the structures of which he is ashamed. This problem was something about which Levi was painfully aware. For him, every sentence manifest the unfair fact of his survival. Levi was aware that his survival was the result of his own inaction—he had not, as another man had, attempted to blow up the crematoria and had not, as that man had, died as a result (Bewes, *The Event* 21). His very survival was emblematic of the shame of inaction and, everything he did afterwards, including writing, was seeped in that shame. Bewes writes: "Levi feels his very eloquence to be shameful: an emblem of the suffering he did *not* experience, and of the inaction that ensured his survival, as against the action of the worthier man who died—worthier, in some sense, for Levi, because he had died" (21). Writing manifests—renders material—Levi's shame. It did not, nor would Levi have wished it to, *free* him of that shame. Yet many writers (and scholars), continue to write as if their capacity to write were something along the lines of "a call to witness," a vocation, in other words, that exempts them from the shame of their capacity to write. I myself have, at one time, hoped that this were true. Regarding this, Bewes' is unequivocally critical: "What better means of sublimation than the claim to write ethically, for the improvement of the world or in order to draw attention to inequality and injustice" (*The Event* 145). The privileged writer who feels ashamed of that privilege (not all do), does

wrong in thinking that writing is a means of escaping that shame. It may appear that Bewes is advocating an end to writing or to intellectual pursuits in general. It may also appear that Bewes is arguing in favour of unending shame. This is one possibility, but if that is the case, it is also possible that such a shame would be less the toxic *feeling* that inhibits us as individuals in our daily lives and more the dynamic structure composed of gaps, inadequacies and uncertainties that enliven one's capacity to engage with the world in a manner Bewes called for in his 2005 essay: a mode which would "annul the opposition between self and other, which [would] mediate and overcome it" (Bewes, "The Shameful Order" 478).

In *The Event*, Bewes describes two types of shame which, taken together, begin to upset the opposition between self and other. The first type of shame is that which maintains a subject, the second vacates it:

On one hand, there is a shame predicated on the category of the ego, a shame that preserves its own substance, its self-exemption, precisely to the degree that it is able to instantiate itself; on the other hand, there is an illimitable shame that includes itself among the categories by which it is ashamed. The singularity of this second shame is measured precisely by its inability to instantiate itself. (Bewes, *The Event* 188-189)

The second shame is preferable to the first. Bewes refuses the notion that shame is a subjective feeling or an ethical response to systemic injustice on the grounds that such understandings of shame maintain the centrality of the "I" that feels shame. Maintaining the "I" replicates the founding myths of all forms of inequality where the subject and object are ontologically opposed:

Shame is not a subjective emotion...[it] has no positive existence or provenance; it is not expressible, nor does writing resolve or enable us to 'work through' our shame...[this, in contrast] with certain treatments of shame that insist upon its subjective quality, for example, in the works of writers such as Giorgio Agamben and Emmanuel Lévinas, for whom we are ashamed for what or who we are. (Bewes, *The Event* 23)

Bewes' formulation here rejects one we have seen earlier, in the work of Silvan Tomkins, Eve Sedgwick and Jean Paul Sartre. Sartre's formulation, remember, is "I feel shame of myself before the other." In Bewes' work we see a fully developed distaste for the formulation of shame in the subjective, a formulation that upholds the self even as it castigates it. "I apologize," that shame seems to say, "for being a self, but I have no plans to stop." Self-castigation may hurt, but it leaves the self (and the colonial structure) intact. So

does the quest for self-absolution. Shame, in Bewes' view of it, "is not an ethics predicated upon the obligation of the 'self' towards the 'other'; it is an occasion, rather, in which the ontological entity of the self may begin to be vacated entirely" (*The Event* 29).

The second shame is the Event of Shame. This shame exists in the gaps, absences and silences of prose. It may even exist alongside personal expressions of shame, but should not be confused with those. This Event of Shame is an affect, but not in the subjectively felt definition of the term. Rather, it is the affect of Deleuze. The purpose of maintaining shame as an affect rather than transforming it into an ethics is that to turn it into an ethics, "would be to turn it into an abstraction, to remove its corporeal quality, to make it fungible" (Bewes *The Event* 163). Such an abstraction of shame would mean that its subjective articulation—"I feel ashamed of my privilege"—could be traded against the myriad ways that the subject has benefited from that privilege. The shame, then, that Bewes finds most philosophically and aesthetically honest, is that which remains uninstantiated:

Whereas responsibility or guilt would presuppose an ontology of the subject, shame is an experience of the subject's dissolution, of the fundamental complicity that, in the modern world, constitutes living... For Deleuze, what is shameful is not just the world in which we happen to find ourselves, but the very regime of *what exists*, the logic of ontology and of everything that attends it: expression, identity, subjectivity, volition. (28)

One question we must keep in mind, then, is how Bewes' own work constitutes an absence or a gap—how it, itself, manifests an Event of Shame.

Another way of thinking about shame is as a form of thought, or, even, a form of writing. Bewes says "understanding shame in structural rather than ethical terms will involve suspending the inclination to see shame as a problem requiring a solution, or as implicated in a relation of cause and effect," (166). In contrast with other forms of thinking, argues Bewes, what is distinctive about shame is its radical discomfort with itself as such; thus, the analysis of shame can help us understand the ways in which we are dependent on form, or forms, even as those forms restrict and limit our thought. Shame is the form in which we most directly encounter the necessity—indeed, the ethical necessity—to think in the absence of forms, which is also to *think* the absence of form. ... what we have in shame, potentially, is an approach to reading that understands that the truth of the text cannot be present in it as a positive entity. The text is read, then, not as a *vehicle*—of thought, of atonement, of ethics—but as an

*event*, neither privileged over nor lessened in significance alongside other events.  
(*The Event* 46)

As above, Bewes here seems to be articulating something we have seen throughout this dissertation where form—or genre—have themselves become sources of shame. The form could be a style of painting—as in *How Should a Person Be?*—or a form of writing—such as the discursive style of academia. Whatever it is, staying within the limitations the form had set became a source of shame and something one ought to transcend. When it comes to subjective shame, I read Bewes' work not as a call to complete silence, nor to silence about the shame we may honestly, as individuals, feel. *The Event of Shame* is uninterested in hierarchy: in this way, although it may humble the subject, it does not silence it.

This is because the evacuation of the self in writing can only ever be partially accomplished. When it is, shame emerges in the form of incommensurability. An important nuance to Bewes' two types of shame can be found in his discussion of work by South African Nobel Prize winner, J.M. Coetzee where Bewes says:

This is not to say that shame in Coetzee's works is not rooted in ethical horror at, say, the political system in which he grew up; nor that the psychodynamics of a personal or family history don't supply a viable narrative of shame to place alongside this political or ethical one. It is to say rather that the logic of shame, considered as an affect that volatilizes its linguistic and conceptual forms, requires that we give up categories predicated upon the centrality and sovereignty of the human, in all their explanatory power. Shame is a revulsion from that sovereignty.  
(Bewes, *The Event* 143)

What Bewes is proposing, then, is not a regime of absences, nor an abandonment of ethical responses or subjective feelings. Those exist. As do, presumably, assessments of injustice where guilt plays an important role, such as in trials for crimes against humanity. But the question here is how literature and literary criticism can adequately respond to our postcolonial world where writers are caught in the following quandary: "How is it possible to write conscientiously while also acknowledging the complicity of one's writing in the conditions one hopes to bring to an end?... How can I justify the supreme presumptuousness of writing?" (Coetzee qtd. in Bewes, *The Event* 139). On the most basic level, these concerns are common to many who dedicate their lives to academic study or artistic endeavors. This line of thinking asks what purpose study in the humanities or artistic activity has if it isn't to improve the world. Directly following from that question is this one: "Who am I to say I



know how the world could be improved?” This is another version of the shame spiral and its centrifugal force is, as always, the pronoun “I.”

Yet, one continues to write. And what Bewes writes about, always, is how our forms of thinking might address the inadequacy of the “I” and the inadequacy of forms of thinking that circle around it. In *The Event*, one of the best examples he provides is his analysis of French film director Louis Malle’s *L’Inde fantôme*, a mini-series created some thirty years after Michel Leiris’ *L’Afrique fantôme*. Leiris, remember, is the author of *Manhood*, and the model for Bewes opening paragraph. Leiris’s *L’Afrique fantôme* was written in 1934. Malle’s *L’Inde fantôme* was made in 1969 and registers much of the same disenchantment with film that Leiris’ did towards ethnography. In it, Malle comments on his experience of filmmaking in India, then in the Seychelles when he was fifteen years younger, then again on the discrepancy between the filmmaker’s activities and the film itself :

Malle's voiceover registers a discrepancy that exists throughout the film between words and images, a discrepancy that is alluded to so frequently that, even when it is not thematized explicitly, it is part of the fabric of the film. Words, of course, are not the only means of noting such discrepancy. One of the principal uses that Malle makes of words through all seven episodes is to inform of us their inadequacy. (179)

Discrepancy, then, alternatively manifests the shame of ethnography in a postcolonial world, responds to Malle’s shame at wanting to express himself, and responds to Malle’s dismay at the ongoing inequality of the world and at his role as subject in it. Inadequacy and discrepancy become a poetics, a practice of writing and of criticism.

What I have summarized so far in *The Event of Postcolonial Shame* are the general academic arguments of the book. Much more could be said on these lines, of course: the book re-reads its writers in provocative ways, but my interest is in the overall challenge posed by the concept of shame as event. As an example of academic writing, *The Event* fulfills the expectations of the genre: it makes claims and then proves them. Genre dictates how we write, but it can also dictate how we read. In that sense, an academic reading of *The Event* ought to pay closest attention to its lines of argumentation, to its contribution to its field (postcolonial studies) or to study of the individual authors mentioned above. Yet, part of Bewes’ argument, especially in the chapter on British-Caribbean author Caryl Phillips, involves habits of reading. Phillips is the author of *Cambridge* (1991), *Crossing the River* (1993), *Dancing in the Dark* (2005) among others, and is typically read by academic critics interested the “black ‘diaspora’ in contemporary literature” (Bewes, *The Event* 49) and hardly

at all by mainstream book reviewers. The discrepancies between academic and mainstream critical response to Phillips work permit Bewes to use it as a foundation for studying habitual modes of reading:

The wider argument of this chapter and this book, then, involves habits of critical reading that seem to have become entrenched in the literary academy, habits that presuppose a stable relation between what is present in the text and what is extrapolated from it: that is between the aesthetic and the ethical (or political) dimensions of literature. (Bewes, *The Event* 52)

One way that academic critics have failed Phillips' work is that they have not paid attention to the materiality of his writing; on the other hand, critics in the press have, perhaps, laid too much emphasis on its aesthetics (Bewes, *The Event* 53). An implication of Bewes' challenge to read differently might be that literary criticism could expand its scope—applying its modes of reading to not just literature but to literary criticism as well. If the overall hope in Bewes' work is that a postcolonial writing might emerge, one where categories such as self and other, ethics and aesthetics, form and content, might cease to be thought of as ontologically distinct, it seems reasonable to add to the list of binaries that stand to be overcome, those of the literary and the non-literary or literature and its criticism. Reading academic work with an eye for what in the work exceeds or transcends the limitations of that genre might be one way to chip away at the very idea of genre. What exists beyond the assertiveness of the academic voice? The autobiographical opening of the text is merely *The Event's* first gesture towards undermining the apparent authority of academic writing. Now I would like to look for where else this occurs, studying *The Event of Postcolonial Shame* as an Event in and of itself. The purpose here is not to insinuate myself as an objective, academic reader of *The Event*, but rather to read alongside it, past the lines of argumentation and into the words, sentences, and affect of the prose: the materiality, in other words, of the text.

In such a reading, it is hard to overlook the admiration that permeates Bewes' discussion of J.M. Coetzee, nor of the generosity that slips into his discussion of Caryl Phillips. Academics have emphasized the postcolonial themes, images, problematics of Phillips's work while ignoring what "critics and reviewers in the press...[have called] the 'irritations' and 'frustrations'" of his prose (Bewes, *The Event* 53). Bewes seems interested in treating what he calls "the difficulties and infelicities of the work," with a more generous spirit. He argues that:

Questions of 'success' or 'failure' in respect of such a piece of writing are invidious. It is tempting to surmise that Phillips has sought out the very subject

matter that was guaranteed to produce a shamed sense of the ethical deficit of literature; that the real subject of Phillips's work is the inadequacy of his own writing; that the greater the dissonance between words and experience, the sharper the sense of shame, and the more closely the form of the work approaches its ethical substance. (Bewes, *The Event* 55)

In this passage, Bewes is reading alongside Phillips rather than evaluating from an authoritative position wherein questions of success or failure would be paramount. It suggests a kind of patience and it believes in Phillips' intentions: that whatever is infelicitous about the prose is something Phillips chose. Yet even within this generosity, there is an honesty. Bewes doesn't rescue Phillips: there are no claims that Phillips' prose is anything other than lifeless, say, or flat. Reading a text for what is there rather than what it ought or ought not to have been requires a kind of attentiveness that steps outside the self. Attending to what has been left unsaid takes this practice one step further. I have not, for example, managed to achieve such a thing in my evaluation of Sheila Heti's work nor of Kate Zambreno's, though I leave my failures there as failures because they illustrate something, or so I hope.

In a later chapter on Coetzee, much about the writing suggests that Coetzee is the writer with whom Bewes most identifies. Sometimes this identification comes in the form of a layering of voices, where Coetzee is made to voice an anguish we might otherwise say belonged to Bewes, or where one of Coetzee's characters appears to speak for both of them. Sometimes this identification comes in the form of admiration: "Works that lack such self-interrogation, after all, are easily found, works in which people with varying degrees of cultural and economic power 'have their say'; but they tend not to involve the participation of figures with scruples such as Coetzee's " (Bewes, *The Event* 142). Bewes admires not only Coetzee's self-interrogation but also a unique kind of integrity: Coetzee doesn't see self-interrogation as an ethical, moral, or psychological end to the shame of his privilege. Shame does not end. Coetzee never suggests it will, nor that it ought to. If it did, our connections and commitments to community would end as well. Shame keeps us cemented in community, even if it feels, at times, intensely isolating (Bewes, *The Event* 21). The cement is identification. This means that the identification that registers in Bewes' readings of Phillips and Coetzee, readings imbued with attentiveness, generosity and admiration, puts Bewes in community with them: as a critical ally, rather than as a critical adversary. A further thing they might share, however, would be shame at this alliance.

This identification appears most strongly in Bewes' discussion of Coetzee's *The Master of St. Petersburg*, through a layering of voices. Bewes cites Coetzee who writes from

the perspective of Dostoyevsky. Of course, citations and summaries are the bread and butter of literary academic writing, but Bewes' use of these techniques goes far beyond the standard need to substantiate one's claims through citation. In one scene from the novel, for example, Dostoyevsky encounters his landlord's young daughter who brings him tea, then flees:

[Fyodor] is aware, even as it unfolds, that this is a passage he will not forget and may even one day rework into his writing. A certain shame passes over him, but it is superficial and transitory. First in his writing and now in his life, shame seems to have lost its power, its place taken by a blank and amoral passivity that shrinks from no extreme. It is as if, out of the corner of an eye, he can see clouds advancing on him with terrific speed, stormclouds. (Coetzee qtd. by Bewes, *The Event* 144)

The advancing storm clouds are two things: Dostoyevsky's epileptic fits, but also his next novel. "There is nothing mystical about this anticipation; it refers simply to the work's projected existence in the mind of the author, affecting his perception before any artistic transfiguration has taken place" (Bewes, *The Event* 145). Writing is like epilepsy for Dostoyevsky, "the burden he carries with him in the world" (Coetzee qtd. in Bewes, *The Event* 144). Dostoyevsky is portrayed as having resigned himself to this, just as he is resigned to the "superficial and transitory" shame. It is as though writing has taken shame from him, not in the sense that it has relieved him of it, it has *robbed him of it*. What is left is a blank and amoral passivity: a capacity to observe, describe, cannibalize, without any of this activity leaving its shaming mark on Dostoyevsky. A life without shame, in this sense, seems to be a life that lacks vitality, will, even agency. It lacks something mystical. The only agency that is left is the capacity to write: a blighted kind of agency, given that writing hardly does anything at all. But where is Bewes in this? On what grounds do these observations about shame and writing apply to him, as I have suggested? Generosity and attentiveness are not enough.

At some point, Bewes' use of summary and citations become so insistent and resonate so clearly from paragraph to paragraph and chapter to chapter that their insistence takes on a life of their own. Oftentimes, Bewes makes his strongest points through the (seemingly) rhetorical question. At these times, it becomes hard to distinguish which questions are whose: is Bewes speaking for Coetzee, or Bewes speaking for Bewes? It is also difficult to know to whom the questions are addressed: are they questions for Coetzee? Or for the reader? These ambiguities are not accidental. In the following citation, I quote such a series of questions. In the rhetoric of the argument, the questions are summaries or extrapolations following a passage from *The Master of Petersburg* that dramatized Dostoyevsky's anguish about the

shame of writing. The quote ended "A life without honor; treachery without limit; confession without end" (Coetzee qtd. in Bewes 145). Then Bewes begins:

'If I can find a way': what is meant is a way, or a form, that will not levy too much shame; that will enable the fact of the 'selling' to be hidden from the seller, if only momentarily, and from the buyer. What better means of sublimation than the claim to write ethically, for the improvement of the world or in order to draw attention to inequality and injustice? And if that claim becomes corroded by too overt an appearance in the work, how about the claim to be writing the very lack of ethical substance, the shame of writing, into writing? Each time the shame returns, greater than before. Is there any truth to writing?(145)

Whose anguish is this? Might this anguish be the Event of *The Event*? Might it sit between Bewes and Coetzee, Coetzee and Dostoyevsky, or between any writer who ever wanted to write something true and any reader who ever read in search of it? And what of the clause "How about the claim to be writing the very lack of ethical substance, the shame of writing, into writing?" This, of course, is the project of *The Event of Postcolonial Shame*. Shame never ends. The questions appeared rhetorical, but Bewes tries to answer them, returning to the declarative sentence and with it, the academic's authority:

The truth that Coetzee's Fyodor imagines in his darkest moments is the truth of the body, the truth of the epileptic fits, but that truth has no positive content; it is, in its negativity, like the truth of writing and shame: 'They are not visitations. Far from it: they are nothing—mouthfuls of his life sucked out of him as if by a whirlwind that leaves behind not even a memory of darkness'(69). (Bewes 145-6)

For Dostoyevsky, the truth of the body, like the truth of writing, comes in visitations, in mouthfuls of nothing. For Bewes, the truth of the body, like the truth of writing, registers in the inadequacy we saw at the prologue—a body that is losing its shape and colour, eyes that are sunken, a coldbloodedness among other amphibious qualities, and finally a lack of suitability for intellectual work—a defect of the mind. But these truths as they pertained to Dostoyevsky, says Bewes, had "no positive content" (69). And as they pertain to Bewes, their truth content seems, equally, illusory: *The Event* is hardly evidence of a mind ill-suited to academic thought. What appeared at the outset as a frank autobiographical statement is losing its hold on truth. The writer's authority is being overturned even as it is being asserted.

What is at work in such paradoxes is a principle Bewes refers to frequently in his work: a principle of reversal. In the conclusion to the 2004 article, the principle of reversal becomes something of an ethics:

Insofar as it tends towards abjection or self-loathing, autobiographical writing implies the reification of self and other, a reversion from the fundamental *interrelatedness* of human existence, and an unwillingness to take on board the alienating effects of colonialism and capitalism on the very conception of the self. . . . If autobiography is to be a force for the betterment of the world, it must proceed on the basis of the reversible nature of the relation between self and other, and eventually to the elaboration of the self as other. (Bewes, "The Shameful Order" 480)

In his 2002 study *Reification, Or the Anxiety of Late Capitalism*, Bewes defines reification as the process by which "the world as we encounter it, including our selves and the products of our labour, is transformed into a series of objects that are removed from us, and towards which we may feel a sense of reverence, or loss, or revulsion" (Bewes, *Reification* xi). Reification separates us from the real, from truth. A reified self is, therefore, not a real self; it is a self shorn of complexity and contradiction. It is a self that could be commodified or objectified, a self that could be subjected to racism or sexism. We don't always feel the same way about the reified object: it can repulse us, but it can also enchant us. What we do always feel about the process of reification is anxiety. Just as the process of reification is supremely flexible, so to is the process of identification that creates the conditions for shame (but also love, community, recognition). Both concepts share an essential reversibility. If autobiography stands a chance of bettering the world, it will invite an "elaboration of the self as other." If the opening passage permits a mode of reading *The Event* as an autobiography of Timothy Bewes, perhaps we are witnessing the elaboration of self as other throughout the work: where Bewes's shame is Dostoyevsky's shame, where Phillips' ventriloquism is Bewes.'

One of the motors for making such reversals possible is the figure of the paradox and it is a persistent feature of Bewes' prose. This appears on the level of the sentence, across paragraphs, and, as I have already suggested, throughout Bewes collection of work. A typical Bewes' sentence begins strongly in one direction and then tacks, tacks and tacks again. He asks, in his chapter on Coetzee:

How is it possible to talk, or to write critically, about a shame that is indescribable, unconceptualizable, and unnameable? Paradoxically, one place in which such a shame may be discerned is a text in which Coetzee writes about shame more directly and explicitly than anywhere else. . . . (Bewes, *The Event* 146)

Bewes employs paradox and reversibility as literary figures but also as forms of thinking, forms whose key feature is that they seem to gesture towards the disintegration of all forms of thinking, paradox and reversibility included. In *Reification*, much of his argumentation depends upon such forms of thought:

Reversibility implies a certain underlying assumption: that there is an other to language, something completely outside the text and inarticulable by it; that the text is as nothing, merely thinglike, in relation to this outside; and that to speak in the name of this inarticulable otherness is necessarily to elaborate, or simply to presuppose the contradictory aspect of everything that constitutes the here and now. (Bewes, *Reification* 202-203)

Such examples illustrate not only a stylistic tic or a habitual form of thought, but also the importance of reversibility to the arguments, both in the work on reification, and in the work on shame. In a chapter called “On Reversibility,” Bewes shows how total reification is ultimately its complete absence “‘Religion’ implies freedom from all reification—including, in the final analysis, from religion” (Bewes, *Reification* 202). Circularity, paradox, reversibility: these styles of thinking and writing seem to be contemporary registers of both a poetic intelligence and an ethics of writing that might be described as a desire to reverse traditional claims that writing has made: that the world is knowable, that the self is representable, that writing must mean one thing for sure if it is to mean anything at all. Maggie Nelson, in *Bluets* says “I am trying to talk about what blue means, or what it means to me, apart from meaning” (16).

All of these elements serve to undermine the assertive/ omniscient voice that is academic writing. And, all of these elements posit a certain unknowability about the world. The predominance of this unknowability in contemporary criticism and literature can be found even in the terms that have expressed it, terms that speak either to barriers to human expression—ineffability, inutterability, ambiguity—or barriers to human perception—incomprehension, incommensurability, undecidability, inadequacy. *Reification* reads, in many ways, as a study of these figures. Bewes notes, for example, the tendency towards paradox in Derrida’s writing:

Derrida’s writing is characterized by the proliferation of mechanisms intended to insulate his work from violent misreading and from ‘metaphysical’ interpretations. The textual richness of Derrida’s writing, the words preserved ‘under erasure,’ the endlessly paradoxical statements which simultaneously affirm and deny the possibility of eluding ‘metaphysical discourse,’ reinscribe the

concept as central to his work, at the very point of its exclusion and denial.

(Bewes, *Reification* 115)

Of course, one pleasure of reading such a sentence is the way Bewes' uses a Derridean technique—paradox—against him, arguing that his anxiety about metaphysical interpretations made such interpretations all the more inevitable. A further pleasure is that Bewes' observations about Derrida's circularity open up a possible reading of his own.

The first time I finished reading *The Event of Postcolonial Shame*, I wondered if the work wasn't imbued not only with a shame of privilege but with a shame of metaphysical longing. This is most evident in the book's final chapter, entitled "Shame and Subtraction: Towards Postcolonial Writing." I was reminded of Canadian poet and philosopher Jan Zwicky's question in *Lyric Philosophy*

Why are we academics so embarrassed when people earnestly assert that philosophy addresses eternal questions—the nature of goodness, beauty, truth, being, death, 'the meaning of life'? Do we think such questions don't exist? Have been solved? (36)<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, in an earlier article, Bewes names the tendency to avoid asking such questions the "Metaphysical taboo" and, there, remarks upon the tendency of literary criticism to avoid transcendental interpretations of Flannery O'Connor's body of work. He asks:

To what extent has a 'transcendental' model of reading—that is to say, an approach to the text as a vehicle, a transmitter of truths that exist outside it—been replaced in the course of the twentieth century by materialist or 'historical' models of criticism in which the text is viewed as a homologue of ideological, nationalist, ethnological, or otherwise political interest? Is such a 'historicizing' or 'sociological' reading necessarily more truthful—or more productive—than one predicated on its 'transhistorical' or 'universal' meaning? Why read at all, if not to discover something that in some sense transcends the text? (Bewes, "What is a Literary Landscape?" 64)

As we saw earlier, a litany of questions reads differently than a series of declarative statements, creating an affective charge that suggests personal attachment rather than a purely

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<sup>9</sup> Two of Jan Zwicky's books of philosophy—*Wisdom & Metaphor* and *Lyric Philosophy*—insist upon the importance of space in their very presentation. Left hand pages feature often aphoristic observations written by Zwicky while the right hand pages cite thinkers whose thought compliments, contradicts or informs the aphorism. Both books lack the typical connective tissue of academic argumentation, relying on what Zwicky would call resonance, instead.



academic curiosity has motivated the work. Reading these questions in the context of *The Event*, however, one would think that he had changed positions because there he calls for what seems to be a different mode of reading: “The text is read, then, not as a *vehicle*—of thought, of atonement, of ethics—but as an *event*, neither privileged over nor lessened in significance alongside other events” (*The Event* 46). While the structure of that sentence suggests a reversal where the terms “vehicle” and “event” would describe antithetical modes of reading (a conclusion facilitated by Bewes’ style which creates the expectation of reversal at every turn), the terms are actually nearly synonymous. In the citation from the article, the clause “a transmitter of truths that exist outside it,” clarifies what Bewes means by the word “vehicle.” In citation from the book, the realm of vehicle has been tamped down to that “of thought, of atonement, of ethics,” truths, in other words, that one could nevertheless articulate. Event is different from vehicle because it really does exceed language and form. And, unlike vehicle, which might offer a too tidy summary of a text’s purpose or meaning, event is not interested in summary. Event lacks the authority of vehicle; this is its highest virtue. When Bewes’ asks “Why read at all, if not to discover something that in some sense transcends the text?” perhaps he means something more quotidian than beauty and truth, or perhaps he means the beauty and truth of the quotidian. Because Bewes’ conception of the Event of Shame exists beyond the realm of the instantiable, it seems to retain the mystery we once attached to transcendence. It becomes a mystery in our midst. Something words cannot explain, cannot attain to. “The ‘primary characteristic’ of what forces us to think,” said Deleuze, “is that ‘it can only be sensed,’ not comprehended” (qtd. in Bewes, *The Event* 171).

If perception and existing concepts do not provide a foundation for thought but impede it, what does this mean for writing? What can writing do to escape perception and the pre-existing concepts that often inform it through the expectations of genre, for example? One of the questions at the core of *The Event* is what kind of self is a writer. It shouldn’t be surprising that, in light of the link Bewes makes between privilege and the capacity to write, he is not all that drawn to conceptions of the writer that are framed in terms such as “genius,” “inspiration,” “expression,” or “bearing witness,”—all notions that Primo Levi and J.M. Coetzee found repugnant. The benign authority such terms imply are precisely what Deleuze wanted to overthrow when he “replace[d] the term philosophy with ‘miso-philosophy,’ suggesting that violence, trespass, enmity, and necessity are all elements of thought” (Bewes, *The Event* 171). Shame is implicated in figures of benign authority, no matter who adopts them. It isn’t that women such as Kate Zambreno are also privileged and ought also to feel shame for that

privilege (much as this might be true), it is that the very positioning of subject-object, or identity vs. difference, or even critic vs. writer or writer vs. reader is a structure that Deleuze would obliterate altogether.

All these terms—lack, subtraction, ‘no positive content’—suggest that there is no purpose in writing, but there is. It is hinted at in Wittgenstein’s famous advice: “only [if] you do not try to utter what is unutterable then nothing gets lost. But the unutterable will be—unutterably—contained in what has been uttered!” (qtd. by Zwicky 371). The image is structural where what *can* be uttered creates a space for what cannot. Only in that space can ideas or affects or events resonate. Or Zwicky: “What one needs then is not words that pretend they are doing justice. One needs words that convey an awareness of their own inadequacy,” (*Lyric Philosophy* 531). There is a difference between knowing that there is something that remains ineffable (an unnameable wrong, for example), to which, or about which, we are unable to speak, and not knowing at all. Both amount to silence on the subject, but they are silences of a different order.

If Bewes’ shame were perfectly aligned with these other forms of the incommensurable or ineffable, on what grounds would it merit the name shame? Even though Bewes argues convincingly that the event of shame is neither an ethical response nor a subjective emotion, it seems that, in some ways, it depends upon the ethical demands and subjective feeling in order for it to be read as such. In the books Bewes studies, the historical and structural environs of the works are undeniably imbued with a feeling of shame and an injustice that calls for an ethical response. While the writers do not pursue the path of articulation which might lead to novels where the characters or narrative arc were puppets of some greater “lesson,” nor a shame-drenched aesthetic where the novel felt like shame, it seems that, all the same, Bewes’ form of shame depends upon contexts where the ethical and affective world surrounding the book’s production imbue them with shame. Of course, capitalism alone provides such contexts on a daily basis.

Though the attributes he gives to shame-as-event echo the kind of non-subjective shimmer, movements, and swells of affect (rather than the heartache, rage, or boredom of emotion), shame, itself, as a word, retains its former connotations. What distinguishes Bewes’ shame-as-event from Wittgenstein’s ineffability and Bergson’s pure perception, is that Bewes’ shame retains traces of toxicity. In other words, it remains tied to subjectivity.

Deleuze poses the following question: ‘How can we rid ourselves [*nous défaire*] of ourselves and demolish [*défaire*] ourselves?’ The question is irresolvable, as Deleuze realizes, for how is it possible to demolish oneself, or even disparage

oneself, without thereby positing, asserting oneself? The question makes less sense as an aesthetic or ethical project, therefore, than as a principle of thought. However, to name or conceive of this principle as 'shame' would interrupt the operation by *subjectivizing* it; consequently...Deleuze does not use the word at all. (Bewes 173, English Italics mine)

But Bewes does use it. While ineffability and pure perception are useful principles of thought, they cannot be used as a basis for an ethics or politics of writing. This is what explains the prescriptive tone that concludes this work and emerges in some of his earlier work: it is the hope for a transcendental writing whose commitment to the political can emerge as much from its awareness of its own shame as it does from its incapacity to ever fully express it.

As a point of comparison, consider Brian Massumi's justification for the use and misuse of scientific concepts by writers in the humanities. He says, "When you uproot a concept from its network of systemic connections with other concepts, you still have its connectibility. You have a systemic conductibility without the system. In other words, the concept carries a certain residue of activity from its former role....When you poach a [psychological or moral] concept, it carries with it [psychological or moral] affects." (20) In their new context, those affects must be negotiated with. They may, as with the scientific concepts Massumi is speaking about, be misused, but their misuse will be more effective if the writer knows how and in what ways the concept is being misused. This isn't a warning: it is an encouragement. The affective and ethical pull of a concept like shame is enormous.

Its ethical and psychological ancestry persists throughout *The Event*, in the tone of Bewes' writing and in the ethical weight of his argument. When Bewes' talks about Coetzee's scruples, it would require a wilful misreading of the word scruples to read it as anything other than approbation along highly ethical lines. Those sentences know a thing or two about being good. Without the subject, shame would cease to be shame. Nevertheless, the subjective shame should not dominate but, rather, sit alongside, shame-as-event:

The subject is not a centre of 'determination'—that is to say, of action or perception—but rather of 'indetermination': the interruption of action and the blockage of perception....Shame would be a quality of any speech or writing in which an intimation of this fact—in however tentative a form, and whether acknowledged or not—is expressed *in subjective terms*. (Bewes 174, Italics mine)

For shame to be shame, it must be tied to the subject, if ever loosely. The terms that describe human perception—subtraction, inadequacy, shame—are all connotatively negative, but must

that be the case? Mightn't subtraction, inadequacy, intimation, and even shame, be something which tentatively adds to the world? "Deleuze writes, 'As for *our* consciousness...it will merely be the opacity without which light, 'pass[ing] on unopposed, would never have been revealed'" (qtd. in Bewes 174). The opacity which registers the passing light—blocking it, but also, in a sense, rendering it—is also the opacity which will attempt at representing it. "The real question of subtraction, says Deleuze, is that of 'attaining once more the world before man, before our own dawn, the position where movement was...under the regime of universal variation, and where light, always propagating itself, had no need to be revealed,'(qtd. in Bewes, *Event* 176). The notion of a far-distant or long-lost world where light always propagated, is the postcolonial world that *The Event* hopes for, not the postcolonial world we currently live in, where the structures of colonial thought persist practically unchanged from the colonial era. It is also the dereified (or totally reified) world of Bewes' earlier book on *Reification*. In both books, an affect—anxiety or shame—registers the impossibility of representation and in both books, truth is what is found in the remaining spaces, in the gaps and absences that are free of form. Even more importantly, anxiety and shame are affective divining rods that signal a moral, political, spiritual precariousness inherent to our present forms of thought. Anxiety and shame both seem, strangely, to be contemporary manifestations of hope for a better world. "Better" would be one where the ontological distinctions that made colonialism possible--self and other, primitive and civilized, this world and other worldly--had been overcome. In a longer argument where Bewes claims that anxiety "is the prevailing form of the manifestation of god," he says that, "anxiety arises when there is a disjunction between the actuality of truth and the forms in which it resides—when those forms appear inadequate or too rigid. Hence the object of anxiety is always a nothing—a gap, a space, an absence" (*Reification* 247). The inadequacy of form is the inflexibility of form. In *The Event*, "Shame is the form in which we most directly encounter the necessity—indeed, the ethical necessity—to think in the absence of forms, which is also to *think* the absence of form" (46). By way of concluding, I wonder if what this similarity speaks to is the possibility that shame, which seems inseparable from what it means to be human, might be our most important tool for overcoming the distinction between self and other because it is an affect as powerful as the moment of revolution or, even, as a God. "God," says Bewes, is "the prevailing signifier of spiritual truth, is produced by human beings; he is therefore as real as human beings themselves, and the hinge between our universality and our particularity." (*Reification* 246).

Bewes concludes *The event* by saying that

If a truly postcolonial writing is to evolve, a writing unburdened by the shame of its partiality and inadequacy...it will take the form of a machinic writing...Such a writing is crystallized whenever an instance or a detail of the work cannot be explained in terms of the apprehension of an object by a perceiving, writing subject; or whenever the opacity of an anchored consciousness is felt, within the work, as the condition of its truth. (192)

One form of the anchored consciousness might, then, be the situated human, the one ashamed enough to know his perspective is limited, subtractive, partial. In other words, perhaps one example of that “opaque anchored consciousness” is played out in this book in the figure of Timothy Bewes.

The autobiographical opening passage, whose tone initially read much like other self-strafting, self-conscious memoirs of which Bewes was so critical can now be read as a signal of his own subtractive consciousness. The truly postcolonial writing is not one that is free of shame but rather one that is “unburdened” by it. Shame cannot end. The opening passage speaks of true facts about Bewes’ biography—born in England, living in America, the grandson of a missionary in Kenya. All of these elements are instrumental to the grounding of a subjective shame, one that has identified and been identified with the inequalities that led to colonialism and, further, to ongoing inequalities in our present day. Yet, if the self can be strange to itself, or opaque to itself, and this much seems easy to accept after a century of Freud (even if his model of unknowingness is not what I mean, exactly), then isn’t this one way in which the reversibility of self and other might be possible even within the autobiographical form? What Bewes has done in *The Event* is declare that human consciousness is at once subtractive, limited, positioned *and*, that this limitedness is what renders the unlimited so visible. This is what makes *The Event* a surprisingly hopeful work: it not only calls for a postcolonial writing, it also begins to write it.

## Conclusion

In the introduction I proposed that shame could be thought of as a *pharmakon*. I meant it in the sense that Spivak refers to when she describes a *pharmakon* as a “poison that is medicinal when knowingly administered” (84). It can harm, but it can also heal. I went on to suggest that autobiography, especially in the ever-changing forms we have seen in this dissertation, might also be a *pharmakon*. In his essay, “Plato’s Pharmacy,” Derrida says that,

Operating through seduction, the *pharmakon* makes one stray from one’s general, natural, habitual paths and laws... The leaves of writing act as a *pharmakon* to push or attract out of the city the one who never wanted to get out, not even at the end, to escape the hemlock. They take him out of himself and draw him onto a path that is properly an exodus. (Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy” 429-430)

Who doesn’t become, ever so slightly, someone else when they find themselves transplanted to a new land? Our name may not change entirely, but we introduce ourselves with an accent—we make ourselves strange to ourselves so that we might be more familiar to someone new. In Silvan Tomkins’ description of the affect, anything strange or unfamiliar can produce shame (Sedgwick *Touching Feeling* 97). Our name, in the mouths of foreigners, is mispronounced, but yet we see it as ours, we see that they are calling out to us. Shame is the affect of having been taken out of ourselves; we become strangers to ourselves, and it is precisely this that happens when we witness ourselves written on the page. “Writing is one of the major ways in which we place ourselves before the other, or (which amounts to the same thing) represent others to ourselves—or, indeed, ourselves to ourselves” (Bewes, *The Event* 60). The *pharmakon*—poison, remedy, the thing that takes us out of ourselves—can be writing, and it can be shame. It can be the clay pot that delivers the drug, or it can be the drug itself. It can be a form, then, or it can be content.

When an interviewer asked about her writing process, Anne Carson quoted John Cage: “I wanted to get every Me out of the way in order to start doing whatever the work will be.”

“But your ‘Me’ is the best part,” responded the interviewer.

“Still,” said Anne Carson, “I’d like to be free of her.”

“Wouldn’t we all,” sighed the interviewer, then asked, “How do you do it? Do you use the Greeks?”

“Sure,” said Anne Carson, “But it could just as easily be a pencil.”

Anne Carson then held up a pencil, and the interviewer saw what she meant: contemplate anything intensely enough and you forget about your “Me” for a while.<sup>1</sup>

To a greater or lesser extent, all of the autobiographies this dissertation has studied have done their best to take the “Me” out. Their contemplated objects have been things they have lost—a brother, a lover—and things they have loved—the colour blue, the mad wives of the modernists, the subtlety of night. They have stood before paintings and been drawn in by a line that “sort of whorls in on itself,” (Heti 294) or the apparent weightlessness of a body (Lerner 8). They have done drugs, sought help, given in to the pleasures of the body even if it meant reigniting the pains of the heart. They have looked for meaning, and wondered if they had the right. They have been privileged, and they have called their privilege unearned. They have felt powerless and empowered.

What does writing do, they have asked, as they contemplated the blush of death and the sounds of their words translated into a foreign tongue. What does writing do to shame in the age of The United States of Bush? Does writing free us of shame, or does it manifest it? Does it rob us of shame, or does it give it back?

Contemplate anything intensely enough and you forget about your “Me” for a while. Until, that is, you are caught contemplating. Caught, for instance, by the sound of footsteps approaching or by the slightest quiver in the brush. “Behold! I am somebody!” says Sartre in this vulnerable moment and suddenly he feels pride, shame, recognition or something else. We have fallen into the world. We have been seen.

This study began with a reflection on the way the binary relation of self and other replicated itself in any system defined by a power imbalance. It is there in sexism, colonialism, self-strafing autobiography and in the critical enterprise in general. The implied antagonism of

the self-other binary suggests a contest that only ever concludes with a winner and a loser. Sartre's study of shame, however, suggested that the self-other binary was dependent on a third element: perception. Furthermore, he noted something else: that the "self" was hardly so impregnable and certainly not a coherent whole. Tomkins couldn't have agreed more. Sartre's structure of shame: "I am ashamed of myself before the other" says as much. Perception may lead to a binary structure of self and other, but this happens internally as often as it does in the world. In other words, perception fractures the binary by multiplying it. Perception is kaleidoscopic.

In his observations about the tendency for contemporary writers to express their shame of privilege through the self strafing memoir, literary critic Timothy Bewes wrote: "If autobiography is to be a force for the betterment of the world, it must proceed on the basis of the reversible nature of the relation between self and other, and eventually to the elaboration of the self as other." ("The Shameful Order" 480) Did he mean we must invent new selves? Did he mean we had to take the "Me" out, replacing it with a pencil, or blue, or night?

Let us trace the presence of the *pharmakon* in this dissertation. In the first chapter, shame was the *pharmakon* that hurt; writing was the *pharmakon* that healed. Society administered the former; the lone writer administered the latter. Shame's toxicity was destructive. It led to mental illness and for both Cvetkovich and Zambreno, writing, rather than medication, provided the authors with a form of healing. Writing also generated alliances with others so that a community sprung up around Kate Zambreno's blog, *Frances Farmer is my Sister*, and Cvetkovich hoped that her depression journals would do the same for those who were similarly afflicted: the graduate students and adjunct professors, the precarious classes of academe. Writing gave voice to the particular shames of minoritarian cultures—of women writers whose work was overlooked and of those who identified (or wrote) as queer. Both Zambreno and Cvetkovich described their writing as political not only because it spoke out against the systems that were harmful—a patriarchal literary establishment, or the everyday pressure of racism and capitalism—but also because they wrote in forms that defied the strictures of those systems. Zambreno's writing was defiantly hysterical; Cvetkovich's risked writing an account of depression that was dull and deadened, the way depression can so often be. Both wrote out of the desire to normalize what had

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<sup>1</sup> I have only slightly dramatized the conversation that took place when Eleanor Wachtel interviewed Anne



been pathologized. It was what made Ann Cvetkovich describe her melancholy as political depression and it was what made Kate Zambreno describe her invalidation in the same terms she used to describe a century-old misogyny. They wrote criticism with the self left in (Zambreno 281). Leaving the self in was an antidote to the way society would shame them and to the discursive, objective forms of writing society demanded of them; it was an antidote that was both self-administered and freely shared: the memoir made it available for anyone who was similarly afflicted. Shame was the *pharmakon* that hurt; writing was *pharmakon* that healed.

In the second chapter, shame starts to transform. Instead of being defined, as it was in the first chapter, as the result of external dictates about how one ought to be, in the second chapter, shame starts to move inward to the personal desires and ambitions of the semi-fictional characters and the authors who write them. Autobiography transforms from being a genre tied to an authentic voice to something looser—more inventive, sometimes even fictional. For the characters, shame comes from the failure of art to be meaningful, beautiful, or political. For the writers, shame comes from the form of realist novel, a form that both Sheila Heti and Ben Lerner sought to undermine. These are not the ideals and aspirations of contemporary society; they are much more idiosyncratic, much more local, and the associated shame is as well. When thought of as a *pharmakon*, shame's toxicity starts to become reparative. Writing as a *pharmakon* shifts as well; in *How Should a Person Be?* Sheila nearly destroys her relationship with her best friend through writing. It is only her shame at being so selfish that rescues their friendship. Adam's shame at being a poet in *Leaving the Atocha Station* is what finally urges him to overcome it and his shame at being an American is what keeps him tied to a darkness he cannot flee.

In the third chapter, Saint Medina cuts her eyes out for shame at her own lust but Maggie Nelson insists upon looking. Unrequited love, depression, and the solace that comes from caring for another provide the barest narrative structure to a lyric essay whose pursuits are wildly disparate but always united by the love of blue. Blue is the *pharmakon* here: it is what dizzies and inspires, what disappoints and what shames. Blue makes writing possible. "I am writing all this down in blue ink, so as to remember that all words, not just some, are written in water," says Nelson, evoking Plato's *Phaedrus* and its debates about the permanence or impermanence, the danger or impotence, of writing (92). We don't need to ingest the *pharmakon* for it to have its way with us: it is enough for us to see it for us to fall under its spell. Nelson's speaker is Nelson

herself, and this is autobiography, but you'd hardly know it from the form. The two-hundred and forty propositions that make up her lyric essay drag us out into the streets and leave us weeping before a pile of ultramarine blue for reasons we could never even fathom. The "Me" of the writing is there in every sentence, but somehow totally absent as well. When blue makes Nelson a fool and a philosopher, it makes one of her reader as well. Nelson offers her readers a taste of her *pharmakon*, and we willingly accept.

Melancholy or depression has been a recurring mood in all of the chapters until the fourth where its absence is a surprise. Anne Carson's *Nox* takes the "Me" out, and with it, the sentiment. Gone too is almost all trace of narrative. In the absence of a feeling subject and a fulsome narrative, shame registers as a form more than a feeling; as an affect more than an emotion. In the language of the *pharmakon*, shame is more clay pot than it is noxious substance. The form of shame is one defined by absence. Carson knows that autobiography can betray and she knows that "It's hard to keep the dignity of the [elegized] subject without getting your own fingerprints all over it" (Interview with Wachtel). Her fingerprints are there, in her gnomic style, her trademark translations, her use of tempura paint, and above all in her use of space. Much is left unsaid about the brother she once had, but she permits him his stairwells, a dog that loved him, a wife with whom he shared a complicated history. That is enough, she seems to say: anything more would make the book a betrayal. There is some shame, but not too much: this is a dosage that heals rather than harms.

In the final chapter, an autobiographical gesture begins a book that argues against such gestures on the grounds that they manifest the shame of privilege rather than absolve their authors of it. Timothy Bewes' *The Event of Postcolonial Shame* takes the literary figure of the paradox and uses it as form of thought. Shame, after all, is a paradox. As a feeling it is what makes us feel so alone, but only in the midst of community. As a form, it is an absence rendered visible by the presence of something else. Bewes' autobiographical gesture acknowledges the way that autobiography reads as authenticity, confession, and truth but its purpose is paradoxical: the book argues against such modes of truth-telling. Bewes' uses the autobiographical gesture as a starting point. As with *Nox*, it is the clay pot of the *pharmakon*: shame's shape, but not shame's content.

Shame is the affect that notices the strangeness of everything, including ourselves. Writing is what takes us away from familiar streets, and out beyond the city walls. By way of concluding, allow me one last anecdote. When Frédéric Sauser left France in 1911 on a steamer

bound for New York, he had already written his semi-autobiographical *Prose du transsibérien et la Petite Jehanne de France*, which detailed a transcontinental train trip he never took. On board, he had brought with him Baudelaire's "Mon Coeur mis à nu" and Goethe's *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, or *Poetry and Truth* (Sieburth). When, after three weeks on the open sea, the skyline of New York finally came into view, Sauser sketched a self-portrait beside which he wrote "Je suis l'autre." From that point on, he called himself Blaise Cendrars. Shame and writing are *pharmakon*. Shame and writing take us out of ourselves, making us Other, which is simply another form of ourselves. Shame and writing always threatens to kill us. But they can also intoxicate. To hear Plato talk of it, there wasn't a single *pharmakon* that Socrates could refuse.

Perhaps it isn't true that contemplating anything intensely enough will suffice for taking the "Me" out. Perhaps it really must be a pencil. Or a book.

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