Shameful Attachments / Attachments to Shame: Affective Unreliability and the Contemporary Moment

by

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Abstract

This dissertation undertakes a critical consideration of the productive and beneficent potential of shame. By examining texts in which characters or individuals depart from more traditional narratives, experiences, and/or manifestations of shame, this project aims to deconstruct the historically-entrenched definition of shame as a negative affect and provide a more inclusive and potentially liberating formulation. The introductory chapter charts the dominant trends in shame theory since Freud and articulates some of the main questions that propel the arguments of this dissertation: how do attachments to shame form? What is it that attracts individuals to shame? How do we begin to conceive of a form of shame that does not operate as shame “should?” Via close-readings of Rick Moody’s The Ice Storm, Chapter Two begins to answer some of these questions, examining the relation between shame and desire in order to demonstrate not only the necessity of desire to shame’s instantiation, but the ways in which shame alters our understanding of discourses of desire. Chapter Three investigates the life, writing, and art of Bob Flanagan, performance artist and “supermasochist,” to reveal the sometimes erotic nature of shame. Chapter Four’s analysis of NBC’s The Biggest Loser focuses on the more familiar narrative of shame as an enforcer of social norms, suggesting that the ostensibly passive desire to see others humiliated (schadenfreude) is actually a form of active participation in the modes of governmentality embedded in reality television and thus reveals the ubiquity of attachments to shame in contemporary culture. Chapter Five engages with two Steve McQueen films—Shame (2011) and Twelve Years a Slave (2013)—in order to suggest that the existence of so many different (and differently productive) relations to shame, when widely visible, produces uncertainty about the relation between, and about what constitutes, shame
and/or shamelessness. Chapter Five’s discussion of the (un)reliability of affective markers leads me, in the Conclusion, to provide a new lens through which we might be able to envision the current affective economy of the United States, one paradoxically characterized by both shame and shamelessness.
Acknowledgements

In his introduction to *Shame and Pride*, Donald Nathanson recounts the moment he learned that “the very idea of shame is embarrassing to most people” (15), observing that it often seems “Better to hide new ideas in obscurity than risk exposure and humiliation, especially ideas about an unpopular subject” (15). The possibility that individuals might attach to shame, that shame might be a pleasurable experience, or that there might be a relation between shame and desire or shame and eroticism, are all, to put it bluntly, fairly unpopular subjects. This dissertation topic has been met quite often with incredulity, confusion, and cynicism, with many people unable to imagine—or perhaps unwilling to imagine—that shame might, for some, be experienced or function differently. It is with immense gratitude, then, that I acknowledge the individuals that took an interest in this project, that supported it, and that helped me release it from the constraints that sometimes bind so much of shame theory.

Words will never express how grateful I am to so many of the Professors in the Department of English at Queen’s University. When not one, but both members of my original supervisory committee received jobs at American universities, I found myself suddenly committee-less, two chapters deep in a project that, at its inception, both terrified and exhilarated me. Fortunately, however, I also found support in Prof. Scott Straker, Prof. Glenn Willmott, and Prof. Sam McKeegney, all three of whom stood firmly in my corner. Their kindness, generosity, and willingness to “go to bat” for me were much-needed lights in what was, at times, a very dark tunnel.

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Chapter 1: Introduction
The Shoulds and Shouldn’ts of Shame

In 2011, a professor suggested I read Rick Moody’s *The Ice Storm*, a novel that, unbeknownst to me at the time, would not only motivate me to abandon my previous thesis topic and inspire me to pursue a new one, but would become the basis of my entire project, informing the foundational questions for each and every chapter. While reading the novel for the first time, I was struck by the strange relation it presents between shame and desire, by the ways in which the characters not only *attach* to shame but also revolve around its sometimes *pleasurable* guarantees. I had never before encountered such a strange yet thrilling presentation of shame, undercutting dominant theories and understandings of it which state that shame is *always* an unhappy, alienating, even excruciating experience. When I began to really think about shame and desire, however, I realized that this relation was not only evident in other texts with which I was already familiar, but that it was evident *all around me*.

In order to approach more radical understandings of shame, this thesis begins by thinking through the “should” of shame, the “you should be ashamed of yourself!” rallying cry of the shamer, and that strange almost-imperative notion that shame *should* be felt in a certain way, at certain times, with certainty. But how *should* shame be felt? *Should* it be felt in particular ways? And if so, why? As Leon Wurmser notes, the very word derives from notions of covering and concealing:

The word shame is derived from a Germanic root *skam/skem* (Old High German *scama*, Anglo-Saxon *scamu*), with the meaning ‘sense of shame, being shamed,
disgrace (Schande).’ It is traced back to the Indo-European root kam/kem: ‘to cover, to veil, to hide.’ The prefixed s (skam) adds the reflexive meaning – ‘to cover oneself.’ The notion of hiding is intrinsic to and inseparable from the concept of shame. (The Mask of Shame 29)

But if hiding or the avoidance of unwanted exposure is as integral to the concept of shame as its etymology suggests, how is it that shame, for some, is experienced so differently? When I spoke with friends and colleagues about my project, I was stunned by how often they so willingly disclosed their own shameful secrets or embarrassing tales to me. Their confessions suggested that “hiding” may not always be essential to the shame experience or that there might be, in fact, something truly exciting or exhilarating—even beneficial or empowering—about shame (and confessions of it).

Of course, the “should” of shame is not quite a “must,” which raises the possibility of escape or avoidance. But how does one escape the “should” of shame? Despite being semantically weaker than deontic modals like “must,” “should” has incredible perlocutionary or imperative power, given its admonitory connotations. When uttered to another, “should” refers to a necessity, especially in terms of social norms or moral codes; it indicates a judgment as well as a desire that the addressee alter his or her behaviour accordingly. Though “should” is not restricted to the more coercive set of rules of “must,” the “should” in shame does have the force of a negative command, such that if one does not follow the “should” of shame, one might feel shame regardless. As such, “you should be ashamed of yourself!” is a trap which functions in the same way as that other performative utterance, “Shame on you!”; it is a call to feel shame, but in a very particular way. As we shall see throughout this dissertation, though, individuals are often resistant to this interpellative gesture, and it is my intent to examine the ways in which
individuals escape the “should” of shame and experience shame differently. For some, the question arises: what about shame makes it a desirable or attractive object? What can shame offer individuals who seek it out? And is this form of shame different than the shame that functions as a concomitant of “should”? 

First, though, we will need to think about what, exactly, shame is. Ever since shame became a topic of widespread interest in the academy (circa the mid-twentieth century), individuals working on it—from biologists, psychologists, and psychoanalysts to sociologists, philosophers, and literary critics—have contributed to defining the experience of shame: what is it? How, why and when is it felt? While studies of shame vary in their approaches and insights, one thing that remains relatively constant (at least, until very recently) is the way in which most studies refuse to depart from understanding shame as a wholly negative force or experience. Spurred by my interest in Moody’s The Ice Storm, I have thus envisioned this project as the opening of a conversation about a more positive relation to shame, and between shame and desire; and though my thesis is far from exhaustive in its analysis of shame, I do aim to be thorough in examining attachments to shame. Shame discourse is a diverse and often eclectic body of work spanning many fields, and as such, I often pit theorists against one another when, elsewhere, such a coupling might seem unlikely, in order to provide a variety of lenses through which to view and analyze shame. Because of the field’s diverse and lengthy history, giving an exhaustive account of the development of shame discourse in Western culture is an impossible task; in the section that follows, however, I will provide a summary of its main theoretical movements as they have developed in Western discourse since the writings of Sigmund Freud at
the turn of the twentieth century. Demonstrating how understandings of shame have developed over the years will provide the context within which one can see how my conceptions of shame depart from what has come before me, and will help illuminate the historical and conceptual gaps which my conceptions of shame and its more positive possibilities help to fill in.

The Development of Shame Theory, or How Did We Get Here?

In Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality (1905), Sigmund Freud defines shame as the force that “opposes scopophilia” (23) and that which “stands in opposition and resistance to the libido” (25). Any sexual aim that does not fall within the “normal range” for Freud, which is to say, any sexual instinct that “goes to astonishing lengths in successfully overriding the resistances of shame,” is labeled “pathological” (27). For the most part, that is the extent of Freud’s interest in shame, and it is his successors who took up the topic of shame. Erik Erikson, for instance, in Childhood and Society (1950), saw shame as an emotion which had been “insufficiently studied, because in our civilization it is so early and easily absorbed by guilt” (223). Indeed, Freud was much more fascinated with guilt, which took priority over shame in his writings, and as a result, many theorists working on shame throughout the twentieth century became preoccupied with differentiating the two. Christopher Lasch, however, expresses incredulity at this preoccupation in his article “For Shame: Why Americans Should be Wary of Self-Esteem” (1992). Seeing this theoretical investment as “curiously misplaced,” Lasch notes that no theorist “has ever explained why so much rides on the difference between shame and

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1 I take Freud as a necessary starting point largely because it is his focus on guilt that prompted subsequent psychoanalysts and individuals in a variety of other discourses to question Freud’s neglect of shame. This collection of reactions and responses, taken together, seems to mark the birth of shame theory in Western discourse.

2 For a detailed account of these theorists’ arguments, see Stephen Pattison’s Shame: Theory, Therapy, Theology (2000).
guilt. When this becomes the overriding issue, both concepts undergo a certain trivialization” (“For Shame”). While I agree with Lasch’s argument (for reasons that will become clear later in this introduction), I also recognize that Freud’s interest in guilt is what catalyzed interest in the differences between shame and guilt, thus also jump-starting the academy’s fascination with shame. Erikson went on to provide his own definition of shame, in which “one is completely exposed and conscious of being looked at: in one word, self-conscious. One is visible and not ready to be visible; … Shame is early expressed in an impulse to bury one’s face, or to sink, right then and there, into the ground” (223). Ultimately, Erikson argued, shame is “essentially rage turned against the self” (223).

In contrast, Gerhart Piers and Milton B. Singer’s Shame and Guilt: A Psychoanalytic and a Cultural Study (1971) emphasizes the distinction which Lasch spurned; they argue that Erikson misattributes the “inward turn of rage” to shame, when, in fact, it “is an important guilt mechanism” (21). Piers and Singer differentiate themselves from Freud’s theory that shame results from the inhibition of libidinal desires by insisting that what they mean by shame is “something quite different from ‘sexual shame’” (28); what stands behind the feeling of shame is “not the fear of hatred, but the fear of contempt which, on an even deeper level of the unconscious, spells fear of abandonment, the death by emotional starvation” (29). Thus shame, Piers and Singer suggest, has more to do with a fear of the loss of love.

Susan Miller, in The Shame Experience (1985), is heavily critical of Piers and Singer’s discussion of shame, which she believes exemplifies the practice of ignoring felt experience: “Piers and Singer label the situation shame based on their definition of shame as a tension between the ego and the ego ideal. This nonspecific use of ‘shame’ discourages attention to the great variety of felt experiences (e.g., anger, depression, withdrawal, anxiety, or humiliation)
with which a person may respond to a perception of failing” (5). Moreover, Miller posits that Piers and Singer’s argument leads to ambiguity over whether or not shame is a conscious experience and how such an experience is psychologically meaningful. As such, Miller grounds her analysis of shame in “felt experience and what it can tell us” (8). Despite her seeming attention to the singularity of experiences of shame, however, her various case studies lead her to much the same conclusions as many of her predecessors, namely, that shame is “displeasure about the status of the self. The displeasure occurs within a context—well-defined or inarticulate—of comparison between self and others” (167). Set as she is against Heinz Kohut’s understanding of shame, in *The Analysis of the Self* (1971), as having some more positive qualities given what he sees as shame’s potential to “ground a person who is so overstimulated by feelings” (Miller 12), Miller focuses her attention on the form of shame experience that *curbs* arousal (14).

All the same, Miller does see value in Kohut’s work, calling it one of the most “convincing presentation[s] of shame” (14) because of its attention to the “self.” And indeed, despite the fact that his focus is on narcissism rather than shame, and that he views shame only through its capacity to ground the narcissistic self, Kohut’s work prompted a shift in focus from shame as an intrapsychic conflict to the *whole* self and the ways in which that self is related to others. Andrew Morrison, one of Kohut’s followers, develops the relation between shame and narcissism in *Shame: The Underside of Narcissism* (1989), arguing that shame is “an affective response to a cognitive sense of *failure* to attain ideals and fantasied perfection, a reflection of a sense of *inferiority*” (48). Morrison goes on to argue that shame *can* be experienced “internally and alone, in social isolation, as well as in response to active interpersonal humiliation or to the presence of an observing audience” (48). He later expands on this theory in *The Culture of*
Shame (1996), arguing that feelings of shame derive from our ability to fulfill the roles of both the self and the other. We are able to do this because we take in the qualities or image of our caretakers and mentors during infancy and childhood. The judgments, values, and criticisms of these figures operate unconsciously but constantly as internal presences that form our conscience … and serve as the source of many of our ideals … We are not aware that the judgments we make or the ideals we espouse come from anyone but ourselves. To feel shame, therefore, we do not need the presence of an actual shamer or even a viewing audience; we need only those internalized figures that have become part of who we are. (15-16)

While Morrison is the first to really focus on this ability of the self to act as its own shamer (indeed, it is one of the “guiding questions” of Shame: The Underside of Narcissism), his theories surrounding shame concentrate on its painful and self-destructive nature, and on its status as “the fundamental painful affect” (53).

Situated in the midst of these varying accounts of shame and the ways in which it is experienced is Helen Merrel Lynd’s On Shame and the Search for Identity (1958), a sociological study that refocuses attention on shame’s relation to one’s self-esteem and self-awareness. Interested primarily in modern society’s quest for identity, Lynd recognizes the characteristically painful experience of shame but notes that “it is possible that experiences of shame if confronted full in the face may throw an unexpected light on who one is and point the way toward who one may become” (20). Taking this idea one step further, Lynd suggests (somewhat revolutionarily) that “shame may become not primarily something to be covered, but a positive experience of revelation” (20). While not cited in, for example, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick or Elspeth Probyn’s
more recent theoretical work on shame, which begin to render shame more positively, Lynd’s leanings toward a positive aspect of the shame experience (and shame’s relation to identity and conceptions of self) seem to mark something of a turning point in theoretical fascination with shame in suggesting that it may not be as negative as previously thought. Lynd is convinced that to confront shame “makes way for living beyond the conventions of a particular culture. It makes possible the discovery of an integrity that is peculiarly one’s own and of those characteristically human qualities that are at the same time most individualizing and most universal” (257).

Despite Lynd’s recognition of shame’s beneficent potential, however, theorists in diverse disciplines remained (and remain) committed to conceiving of the experience of shame in more traditional ways (even as some of these more traditional ways still hint at shame’s positive potential). Wurmser, for example, proposes, in *The Mask of Shame* (1981), that “shame may be needed as a guard for the autonomy of the primary processes, the most intimate life we all have—our feelings” (66). The other end of this spectrum, he notes, “means that shame fences in that field of life that allows creativity to blossom and insight to arise” (66). Shame, according to Wurmser, 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 logic” (66). Wurmser makes shame out to seem like an external protective force that one can control and hide behind, or a protective shield that binds one to certain values and societal codes such that one never puts oneself in the position of wrongful exposure. Ultimately, however, he believes that shame “relates to a basic flaw: being a loser, defective, weak, or dirty—all redounding ultimately to the taint of unlovability” (168-69). Similarly, drawing on Nietzsche, Carl D. Schneider suggests, in *Shame, Exposure, and Privacy* (1977), that shame functions primarily in a discretionary manner and is associated with a kind of respect for boundaries. Like Wurmser, then, Schneider
understands shame as protecting the self from harmful exposure; shame is that which allows personal privacy to exist (38). This notion of shame is marketed as helpful in maintaining social order and relationships. It is a positive rendering of shame only insofar as it issues a kind of warning: if one damages this protective covering, it will seep into the self, and one will feel ashamed.

In 1962, the arrival of Silvan Tomkins’s first two volumes of *Affect Imagery Consciousness* revolutionized subsequent investigations of shame, and even today, his work remains the cornerstone of Affect Theory for many theorists. Tomkins popularized “Affect Theory,” a theory that tied particular feelings to a primary motivational system in human beings that was distinct from the drives. These affects, he argued, designate the autonomic and

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3 While Tomkins spent much of his eventual four volumes of *Affect Imagery Consciousness* outlining the mechanics of shame-humiliation (mechanics that continue to serve as a foundation for many theorists’ understanding of shame), this dissertation does not engage at length with Tomkins’ writings (or, indeed, the writings of those who shared many of the same viewpoints as Tomkins with regards to shame, such as Leon Wurmser, Donald Nathanson, or Gershen Kaufman). Despite the fact that some of these theorists (most notably Tomkins and Nathanson) leave room in their discussions of shame for the possibility of more productive renderings or formulations of shame, these theorists do not, themselves, imagine or theorize shame as something that can be experienced in more positive ways. For example, in his development of what he calls “script theory,” Tomkins contends that habitual experiences of any given affect can charge that affective experience with a level of importance that creates in individuals a “script” that dictates the individuals’ future engagement with that affect. This theory suggests that we become conditioned, over time, to “savor and maximize positive affect,” such that shame *could* be experienced positively. But Tomkins also insists that shame *cannot* be experienced at the same time as positive affect. Indeed, though Tomkins recognizes the intricate relation between shame-humiliation and the positive affects, interest-excitement and enjoyment-joy, he argues that shame-humiliation is experienced only in the *incomplete reduction* of such positive affects. The “incompleteness” of such reduction suggests that “the original excitement or joy may be increased again” (354) but only if shame is inhibited. The only scenario in which Tomkins allows the simultaneous experience of shame and positive affect is in masochism, an experience which, for Tomkins, often results from situations when “human beings fail to learn to tolerate their own negative affects” (441). Indeed, even in such masochistic scenarios, Tomkins suggests that the individual must adopt a “strategy of reduction through magnification” (“do whatever is necessary to magnify [negative feelings] in intensity and duration so that they are finally spent, their fires burned out” [441]) in order to eventually *eliminate* shame. As we will see in Chapter Three’s analysis of Bob Flanagan’s life and works, however, such wishes to eliminate shame are not always the goal. Similarly, even as Nathanson suggests that “our own scenes of shame” are so “deeply personal and uniquely individual … [that] nobody else ever seems to ‘know’ exactly what shame means to us” (“Prologue” xix), thus suggesting that it *could* be possible that shame might be experienced in ways other than it is traditionally conceived (as outlined in this introduction), Nathanson still argues that shame is “the dominant negative affect of everyday life” (“Prologue” xix, my emphasis), which “people will go to great lengths to avoid” (*Shame and Pride* 15). We can see, then, that such accounts of shame, despite what they leave open in terms of further theorizations of shame, *in and of themselves* do not explicitly render shame as positive, nor do they examine shame in its capacity for generating more positive feelings.
embodied dimensions of feeling: they are our innate and biological responses to the world around us. Although there exists no real consensus on what the primary affects are, how many there are, or what they should be called, most scholars working on affect theory follow Tomkins’s model, which, as Joseph Adamson and Hilary Clark note, “isolates nine innate affects,” including: interest-excitement, enjoyment-joy, fear-terror, distress-anguish, anger-rage, shame-humiliation, dissmell, disgust, and surprise-startle (*Scenes of Shame* 12-13). Adamson and Clark note that the hyphenation attendant to all but dissmell and disgust reflects “the range of intensity” of the affect in question (13). It is perhaps easiest to think of each affect category as existing on a spectrum—or even perhaps as carrying an analogic quality—whereby the affects listed are two of many “versions” of that affective experience. The shame-humiliation affect, Tomkins contends, can be experienced variously as shyness, embarrassment, discouragement, guilt, mortification, and more. Indeed, less preoccupied than most regarding the differences between shame and guilt, Tomkins asserts that these “are one and the same affect” (351) simply experienced with different intensities and attached to different objects. Tomkins argues that the two are interconnected and difficult to separate, and derive from the same innate and embodied sense of inhibition; the labels we put to these affective experiences simply reflect our different (culturally-specific) associations with, and interpretations of, events and their felt consequences.

In my own argument, I follow Tomkins’s logic in relation to making such distinctions. As Lasch notes, the preoccupation with the distinctions between these various sub-categories within the shame-humiliation spectrum often distracts from more important considerations about the experience of this affect. As such, throughout this dissertation, I, like Tomkins, often treat guilt, embarrassment, humiliation, and other similar affects as variations on the experience of shame in order to make my arguments about shame’s positive potential. Significantly, Tomkins ties
shame—“the affect of indignity, of defeat, of transgression and of alienation” (351), which is “felt as an inner torment, a sickness of the soul” (351)—to the positive affects interest and enjoyment, not only suggesting that shame is an auxiliary affect (one that is experienced secondarily, after the activation of other affects) but illuminating a dynamic system of embodiment in which affective states react to and influence one another prior to our conscious knowing. Shame is activated, Tomkins argues, when one is interrupted in the midst of being interested in something, exposing “the face of the self to pitiless scrutiny by the self or by others” (362).

A devoted Tomkinsian, Gershen Kaufman similarly argues, in *Shame: The Power of Caring* (1980), that “the root of shame lies in sudden unexpected exposure. We stand revealed as lesser, painfully diminished in our own eyes and in the eyes of others as well. Such loss of face is inherent to shame” (11). Kaufman’s focus here is on the interpersonal bridge that exists between two individuals—especially when those individuals care about one another—a bridge which becomes severed when shame occurs. Kaufman sees potential in shame, insofar as the eventual “restoring” of this interpersonal bridge is part of the healing process by which an individual “move[s] beyond shame toward a self-affirming identity” (31). At the same time, shame, for Kaufman, is not something to dwell in/on or to spend time with: it is merely something one should want to *move beyond*, an unfortunate stepping stone on the path to personal growth. Kaufman continues his examination of shame in *The Psychology of Shame* (1992), developing Tomkins’s theories to explain how certain experiences of shame can build to the point that shame becomes a dominant character trait, shaping—even determining or governing—the individual’s personality such that the person’s other emotional experiences become bound by shame. Here, as before, Kaufman remains tied to notions of shame as an experience of
unexpected and unwanted exposure, one that the individual must work through in order to reintegrate with society.

Setting himself apart from psychologists like Tomkins and Kaufman, Michael Lewis argues that shame is not an affect because, unlike emotions such as joy, sadness, interest, anger, and fear, it relies heavily on self-consciousness. In *Shame: The Exposed Self* (1992), Lewis argues that shame is the consequence of “the self’s failure in regard to a standard, goal, or rule” and that it is not possible “to feel shame without comparing one’s action against one’s standards or beliefs” (9). The differences in perspective between Tomkins and Kaufman and Lewis are reflective of a larger definitional debate at the centre of much critical discussion about shame, namely, whether it is an affect or an emotion. For some, however, this question risks oversimplifying the myriad and complex body of possible experiences of shame. Caitlin Charos notes that, while

> Tomkins identifies shame as an affect, a biological response, rather than an emotion … [Elspeth] Probyn [suggests that] shame can be an affect and an emotion … Because shame is accompanied by a physiological response, we might think of it as automatic; yet, it is also characterized by a re-evaluation of the self and the social that suggests it involves an interpretation of one’s environment and relationship to others. (276)

Like Charos and Probyn, I find value in understanding shame as sometimes affect and sometimes emotion; as such, I refer to shame as an affect or as an emotion interchangeably, stressing its status as one or another depending on the context.

Though unconcerned with shame’s “status,” Jean-Paul Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology* (1943), suggests that shame is something one learns as
one realizes one is always already in relation to others and the world. Shame, he argues, is “shame of oneself before the Other; these two structures are inseparable” (303). To experience shame is simultaneously to experience “the alienation of [the self], which is the act of being-looked-at, [and] involves the alienation of the world which [the self] organize[s]” (353). This experience of alienation via shame, Sartre argues, turns the subject into an object: shame is the feeling “of being an object; that is, of recognizing [oneself] in this degraded, fixed, and dependent being which [one is] for the Other” (353). Somewhat implicit in Sartre’s analysis of shame is his recognition of shame’s more positive potential: shame, he realizes, is “an intimate relation of myself to myself. Through shame I have discovered an aspect of my being” (301). Despite his focus on the objectification of the subject through shame, and of shame’s capabilities to alienate the self not only from itself and from others, but also from the world in which one lives, Sartre recognizes that shame involves the continual (re)discovery of identity.

More recently, Giorgio Agamben’s work on shame, in Remnants of Auschwitz (2002), draws on the theories of Aristotle, Derrida, Foucault, Heidegger, Kant, and Levinas, arguing mainly that shame is felt when the individual becomes aware of his or her self, seeing that self in a way that is contrary to what s/he had imagined. Quoting Levinas’s assertion that shame is “the radical impossibility of fleeing oneself to hide oneself from oneself, the intolerable presence of the self to itself” (qtd. in Agamben 105), Agamben points out that when we experience shame, it is the experience of being “consigned to something from which we cannot in any way distance ourselves” (105). Shame is thus “the fundamental sentiment of being a subject” at the same time as it is an experience of desubjectification (107); the self becomes “witness to its own disorder, its own oblivion as a subject” (106). Agamben calls this paradoxical nature of shame its “double movement, which is both subjectification and desubjectification” (106). At the same time as one
experiences desubjectification (the radical undoing of the subject, of one’s relation to others),
one also experiences subjectification (the re-constituting of the self as a subject, and as such, as a
subject in relation to others). So while shame has the ability to make one feel incredibly alone
and isolated, it also has the ability to make one feel incredibly connected, even if that
connectedness is unwanted.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick similarly recognizes shame’s double movement, noting in
simultaneously “toward painful individuation, toward uncontrollable relationality” (37). Unlike
Agamben, though, Sedgwick sees in this paradox the possibility of a positive experience of
shame. Eight years previously, she and co-author Adam Frank published the seminal *Shame and
Its Sisters* (1995), in which they communicate their first taste of (and delight in) Silvan
Tomkins’s work on affects: “In a sodden landscape of moralistic or maudlin *idées recues* about
what is, to the contrary, the most mercurial of emotions, Tomkins’s formulations startle: for their
sharpness and daring, their amplitude, and a descriptive levelheadedness that in the dispiriting
context sounds almost surreal” (4-5). In *Touching Feeling*, Sedgwick continues to draw on
Tomkins’s work, providing a more positive evaluation of the shame experience. Like many
others before her, Sedgwick notes the disruptiveness of shame, the ways in which it signifies a
kind of failure of “identificatory communication” (36); but in interrupting identification,
Sedgwick argues, “shame, too, makes identity” (36). This double movement turns shame into the
place “where the *question* of identity arises most originarily and most relationally” (37) and thus,
for Sedgwick, opens up a world of productive possibilities.

Similarly taking her cue from Tomkins, Elspeth Probyn reflects, in *Blush: Faces of
Shame* (2005), on the intimate connection between shame and interest. It is this connection,
Probyn asserts, that makes shame “remarkable” because “it reveals with precision our values, hopes, and aspirations, beyond the generalities of good manners and cultural norms” (x). While acknowledging that shame is not generally thought of in a positive light, Probyn, like Sedgwick, focuses her attention on shame’s more beneficent potential, particularly in its function as catalyst for self-evaluation, even self-transformation (xii). “Wouldn’t it be interesting” she asks, “if we could all talk about shame in more productive ways?” (xv). Probyn’s work might be frightening to many of her shame theory predecessors, and not just because she imagines shame as positive; recognizing the boundaries that mark different disciplines’ approaches to shame and the ways in which each discipline “owns” shame or claims a particular “truth” regarding the shame experience, Probyn transgresses these varying disciplinary definitions and refuses to draw her own, asking “What do radically different ideas about shame do to our understanding of it?” (12). Her approach to shame is an act of amalgamation, and it is open-ended: there are no hard truths to be found in her exploration. My own approach to shame is, as will become evident, in line with Probyn’s methodology; however, while she recognizes the potential of shame to be productive (15), my work diverges from hers at her caveat that she is “not making the claim that shame is ‘good’” (15). Some of the primary questions that motivate my own exploration of shame arise from the possibility that shame can be good: what happens when bodies feel or react differently to shame than they “should”? How can we understand those reactions and/or feelings in order to make them seem less alien? What happens when shame becomes a pleasurable experience? And what might it mean or look like to embrace shame?

As I stated previously, I am fascinated with such experiences of shame, experiences that depart from the more traditional understandings of it outlined above. I want to make clear, however, that, while this dissertation examines primarily contemporary texts (with the exception
of Solomon Northup’s *Twelve Years a Slave* narrative as juxtaposition for my analysis of Steve McQueen’s film, *12 Years a Slave*), the attachments to shame I examine are not new or even necessarily recent phenomena. In Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), for instance, Hester Prynne’s complicated relation to shame forms the novel’s narrative and thematic centre. As David Leverenz writes,

in Puritan Massachusetts during the 1640s, Hester Prynne’s community tries to bring a sexually active woman under patriarchal control, though without flogging or killing. *The Scarlet Letter* begins with the most famous instance of public shaming in American literature. Yet Hester transforms her public shaming before she steps outside the prison door. Using gold thread, she makes the scarlet letter’s branding beautiful, ‘greatly beyond what was allowed by the sumptuary regulations of the colony.’ As one of the angry women says, she has made ‘a pride’ out of her punishment. (88-89)

Hester, though at times seemingly ashamed of having sinned by having sex with Reverend Dimmesdale, simultaneously refuses to repudiate the act, even embraces it; similarly, the marks of her shame—both the scarlet letter at her breast and the strange child, Pearl, who is the product of the illicit coupling and thus the living embodiment of her mother’s pride and shame—are both a bane and a boon to her existence, and her relation to them is a complex of pride, shame, love, and regret. Hester’s pride in her shame angers her Puritan community, and also incited the ire of many of Hawthorne’s contemporaries; indeed, it has haunted literature and criticism in America since the novel’s publication. Leverenz himself, for instance, chooses not to pursue its significance, instead focusing on the relation between blackness, shame and sin in the novel.
Sedgwick, too, has noted a strange relation to shame manifest in American letters and literature. In her analysis of perhaps Hawthorne’s most direct literary descendant, Henry James, titled “Queer Performativity: Henry James’s The Art of the Novel,” Sedgwick describes the older Henry James reflecting on his younger, ashamed failure of a self. This looking back, however, does not merely recall the painful shame he once felt; instead, James glamorizes his earlier stories, attributing to them an “impudence that bespeaks not the absence of shame …, but rather its pleasurably recirculated afterglow” (10). James is compelled here, not by the shame itself, but by its narrativization, and by the “impudence” stemming from having experienced shame and come through the other side able to talk about it (and here, James’s admiration of the “impudence” of shame’s “pleasurably recirculated afterglow” recalls both Deleuze’s reading of shame’s “insolent beauty” and the delicate pride with which Hester embroiders the mark of her shame). Indeed, though James, like Hawthorne, and unlike many of the characters and individuals I examine in this project, may not have been one to actively seek out shame, many of his works deal with the complex and, at times, erotic relation between individuals and their shame. For Sedgwick, James’s works refuse to depict shame as it is normally depicted, that is, framed by moral judgment, either “good because it preserves privacy and decency” or “bad because it colludes with self-repression or social repression” (14). In her reading of James, Sedgwick disposes of both categorizations, arguing that “shame is simply the first, and remains a permanent, structuring fact of identity: one that has its own, powerfully productive and powerfully social metamorphic possibilities” (14). James’s attachment to shame—or to himself in its afterglow—colours the way his experiences are rendered, allowing for a narrative reworking of the self in its relation to shame after the fact. For Sedgwick, this narrative reconstruction of the self is precisely what shame offers us—or foists upon us—as the primary
principle of identity. Because we are social beings, and because shame is the experience which most fundamentally calls into question our relation to the social order, shame becomes the structuring principle of our subjectivity. Further, Sedgwick’s metaphor for James’s narrativization of shame is quasi-erotic, its “pleasurably recirculated afterglow” suggesting both the “pleasurable afterglow” of sexual intimacy and the additional erotic possibilities provided by remembering it after the fact, the original pleasures “recirculating” through the body as memory and fantasy (re)quicken the circulation of blood. The erotic undertones of Sedgwick’s metaphor, though only vaguely realized, gesture toward the possibility of a (sometimes erotic!) attachment to shame and its “productive and powerfully social metamorphic possibilities,” an attachment which, as I will now discuss, forms the thematic core of this project.

In my discussion of the possibility of attachments to shame, I ask what it means to enter into shame, on the way to attempting to answer a question that Sara Ahmed poses in The Cultural Politics of Emotion: “What does it mean to claim an identity through shame?” (101). Though Ahmed’s question pertains to narratives of national shame and the ways in which “declarations of shame can bring ‘the nation’ into existence as a felt community” (101), my project, by focusing mainly on individual narratives of (more often than not) willful attachments to shame, works to re-imagine this question as well as its potential answers. It is my intention, in the subsequent pages, to do away with the “should” of shame, to suggest that there is no “proper” way to experience shame. I must be emphatically clear, though, that I am not advocating that individuals refigure their relations to shame, or that the relation to shame I investigate in this dissertation is for anyone or should be embraced. Instead, I am curious about relations to shame that diverge from the ways in which it is traditionally conceptualized and understood. This is not an attempt to do away with shame, nor is it a call to shame; this project does not advocate that
we engage in the shaming of others or that we necessarily enter into shame. Shame does not offer, for everyone, the benefits this project makes evident, and it is still, for many, experienced in the more traditional sense.

Instead, this project is, first and foremost, a proposal that we dispose of our expectations when it comes to shame. Why shouldn’t we free shame from some of its constraints? What might an attachment to shame look like? Why might such an attachment form? Why might individuals want to (re)produce such attachments and even, in some cases, sustain them? What does shame offer such individuals? As will become abundantly clear, this dissertation examines characters and individuals whom we might designate—to use Ahmed’s term—“affect aliens”: “those who are alienated by virtue of how they are affected by the world or how they affect others in the world” (*The Promise of Happiness* 164). To be an affect alien, Ahmed writes, “does not mean you necessarily respond to the same events with a different affect … Rather an affect alien might experience the same affect but in relation to different objects, which are judged by others as ‘the wrong objects’” (171). I would add, here, that an affect alien might also experience the same affect but in a different way than is considered “normal.” Ahmed suggests that “We become alienated—out of line with an affective community—when we do not experience pleasure from proximity to objects that are attributed as being good” (41). One can, I would note, also become alienated when one experiences pleasure from proximity to objects that are generally viewed as “bad,” since, as Ahmed argues, affect aliens are those who are not “aligned” properly, who are facing the wrong way (41). It may not be hard to imagine that those who attach to or desire shame (especially for themselves) are generally understood as such. In some ways, then, this dissertation seeks to “normalize” attachments to shame—which is not to argue that “normal” is what one should strive for! Rather, I seek to make such attachments a little less strange, a little
less alien or alienating. If this is an impossible task, then it is my hope that I will have at least demonstrated that to be alien in one’s affective orientation and desires is to have found possibility and potential in facing the wrong way; as Leo Bersani recognizes in *Is the Rectum a Grave?*, “there are certainly better ways of fighting shame than to eagerly embrace the norms of the dominant culture. But we will never participate in the invention of what Foucault called ‘new relational modes’ if we merely assert the dignity of a self we have been told to be ashamed of” (69). In what follows, I analyze texts whose characters and individuals exhibit different—and differently productive—relations to shame, which might help us to conceive of one such “new relational mode” to which Bersani refers. After all, if shame, as many have suggested, is the fundamental social affect, directly involved in (re)constituting subjectivity, changing our understanding of it might help us to re-conceive of what it means to exist in relation to both self and other.

As will become clear in the following chapter breakdown, Chapters Two, Three, and Four of this dissertation investigate some of the different forms attachments to shame can take, while Chapter Five breaks only slightly from this pattern by thinking through attachments to particular *understandings* of shame and showing how such attachments can severely limit our readings of others as well as our abilities to communicate affectively (and *effectively*). By way of conclusion, I turn to a wider national narrative of shame in order to think through contemporary American culture’s attachment to shame and to show how such attachments may have produced a culture characterized, paradoxically, by both shame and shamelessness.
Chapter Breakdown

Chapter Two initiates this dissertation’s discussion of the relation between shame and desire by thinking through the possibility of shame not only as an object, but as an object of desire, or an object to which one attaches. Despite the fact that, for some, desire has no place in discourses of shame, I demonstrate, in Chapter Two, not only the necessity of desire to shame’s instantiation, but the ways in which shame alters our understanding of discourses of desire. Though it may seem strange to think about shame—or any affect/emotion—as an object, thinking of it in this way helps us conceive of its relation to desire. Tomkins suggests that “Any affect may have any ‘object’” (190), and while his discussion of objects is limited mainly to external objects (though he does note that “a sudden thought” could equally activate interest-excitement [190]), he seems interested in the idea that one affect can activate another affect—that, for instance, when one blushes, one’s realization of this bodily betrayal can initiate sudden anger or self-disgust. Indeed, Sedgwick, expounding on Tomkins’s assertion, recognizes that affects “have far greater freedom” with respect to their range of object choices (18-19), and “can be, and are, attached to things, people, ideas, sensations, relations, activities, ambitions, institutions, and any number of other things, including other affects. Thus, one can be excited by anger, disgusted by shame, or surprised by joy” (19, my emphasis). My argument, in conceiving of shame as an object and examining its relation to desire, thus delineates the possibility that one can be excited by shame and even enjoy the experience of shame. Via a close-reading of Rick Moody’s The Ice Storm, I provide the beginnings of an answer to the question that runs through this entire project: why is shame an object individuals might desire? Specifically, though shame, as we have seen above, has been typically theorized and/or experienced as an obstacle to happiness, The Ice Storm suggests that it can also be the object that leads to happiness. Indeed, to
desire shame would be to desire what shame promises; instead of promising the feelings of, for example, indignity, worthlessness, self-disgust, and self-consciousness (as outlined by many of the dominant shame theorists over the past century), shame is precisely what allows some of the characters in *The Ice Storm* to *thrive*—even as that thriving might only be conceived of as feeling *something* instead of nothing. Despite shame’s alienating qualities, it seems to offer Moody’s characters a way out of the disaffection that characterizes their lives. Because shame reminds us of the ways in which our being-in-the-world is always already socially constituted, shame becomes a kind of survival mechanism in the face of their disaffection and loneliness, even as their engagement in it tends to re-produce the very loneliness from which they attempt to escape. The loneliness some of the characters experience via shame, however, is presented in the novel as *not* always debilitating; instead, their active engagement in shame (and the loneliness it produces), I argue, can be understood as an active refusal to orient themselves toward “the good life,” a life of failed promises and disappointments. Shame allows some of the characters to understand, then, the (un)importance of some of their attachments, helping them to reconfigure their desires and affective orientations. For others, shame offers a way *out* of loneliness, allowing the individual to foster intimate connections, suggesting that shame may *not* be an always alienating experience since it guarantees both recognition and a realization of relationality/connection. Indeed, *The Ice Storm* demonstrates the ways in which intimate connections can actually be *created* through shame.

Chapter Three more directly investigates the potentially *erotic* nature of shame by examining the life, writing, and art of Bob Flanagan, performance artist and self-proclaimed “supermasochist.” Why might one desire shame for oneself? What does it mean for shame to be integral not only to one’s identity or conception of oneself, but to one’s ability to achieve
pleasure (especially of a sexual nature)? To understand shame as potentially erotic, we must remember, as Tim Dean argues in *Unlimited Intimacy*, that “since nothing is inherently erotic, virtually anything can become so. A feat of the imagination has been accomplished when persons, objects, and actions that seem conventionally unattractive or even repulsive are made sexy and pleasurable” (149). Flanagan demonstrates how shame can be “sexy” and “pleasurable,” and illuminates some of the benefits concomitant with experiences of shame that go beyond the reinvention of the self discussed in Chapter Two. Whereas the characters’ engagements in shame in *The Ice Storm* stem from disaffection, Flanagan’s engagement stems from overaffection, an overaffection that binds him within his own subjectivity, thereby inhibiting social and erotic connections. In my analysis, I show how shame makes permeable the rigid boundaries that exist both between self and Other and, significantly, *within* the self. In my analysis of the latter, I conceptualize Flanagan’s complex relation to pain, shame, and selfhood as an “embodied masochism,” whereby his masochistic performances serve as reconstructions of the always-already masochistic relationship between his self-identity and the body which, because of his Cystic Fibrosis, serves as his Dominant. Significantly, Flanagan’s embodied masochism brings to light the intrasubjective experience of shame, all too often subordinated to the more obvious intersubjective dynamics of sadomasochistic relationships. In analyzing Flanagan’s relation to shame, I demonstrate how shame, by shattering his coherent self, opens up the possibility of freedom from an unpleasurably self-destructive self, thereby allowing him to come into a more loving relationship to himself and, accordingly, to others.

In the subsequent sections of Chapter Three, I analyze the relations between Flanagan’s desire for shame, his experience of loss and trauma, and his narcissism. Flanagan’s willing engagement with shame and pain helps him navigate other, less pleasurable shames and pains
which threaten him with the traumatic loss of control over himself and his position in the social order. And though Flanagan’s narcissistic selfhood would seem, by traditional definitions, to preclude the manifestation of shame (narcissism is self-love, whereas shame is self-hate), I demonstrate that Flanagan’s narcissism instead becomes a necessary condition for the subjective and social reconstitution at the heart of his masochistic engagement in shame. In the end, it is Flanagan’s narcissism which allows him to come into a loving (and erotic) relation with/to his own body and self and, as such, it becomes, somewhat paradoxically, the condition for his re-engagement with the social realm.

In Chapter Four, I shift my focus from the masochistic desire for shame for oneself to the desire for others’ shame, theorizing such a desire as a form of schadenfreude (for taking pleasure in another’s shame is certainly a version of taking pleasure in another’s misfortunes). In so doing, I also shift my gaze from the “strange” relations to shame examined in the previous two chapters to the more familiar narrative of sin, punishment, and redemption wherein shame functions as an enforcer of social norms. Via analysis of NBC’s The Biggest Loser, I suggest that the ostensibly passive desire to see others humiliated is actually a form of active participation in the modes of governmentality embedded in reality television, and as such, tells us a lot about the modes of relationality and mechanisms of power existing in the societies in which we live. In my analysis, I demonstrate how viewers are conditioned to believe in the necessity of such traditional forms of shame with regards to such televisual transformations of “undesirable” (in this case, obese) selves into productive and valuable subjects, and unpack the ways in which the show valorizes the process of shaming and reaffirms, for viewers, that the person feeling shame is paying a just price for not being a productive citizen and thus threatening the social order. Significantly, the show also suggests that undergoing such punitive shaming can be a rewarding
process (and here I also raise the question of whether subjecting oneself to shame in its traditional form is still rewarding). Viewers thus become invested in the righteousness of witnessing the destruction of undesirable subjects and their reconstruction into more recognizably acceptable social beings and, ostensibly, derive pleasure from witnessing shame functioning “properly.”

In Chapter Five, I engage with two Steve McQueen films—*Shame* (2011) and *Twelve Years a Slave* (2013)—to extend my analyses of the different forms of shame from Chapters Two through Four in order to suggest that the existence of such different relations to shame, when widely visible, produces uncertainty about the true definition of shame. If shame is experienced in a multitude of ways and produces a multitude of behaviours and effects, how can we know when we are looking at shame at all? Recognizing that such uncertainty seems to have reached a point of near-crisis in a contemporary moment marked by widespread concerns, in the popular media, about the “death of shame,” I argue that, rather than witnessing the disappearance or death of shame, what we are witnessing is the widespread dramatization of the unreliability of affective interpretation in general. Via analysis of McQueen’s two films, I demonstrate that reading affect is an uncertain and, in the extreme, problematic process which, though convenient in handling day to day encounters, should nonetheless be undertaken with attentiveness. My approach in this chapter explores the ways in which McQueen’s films are potentially void of the feelings and emotions that the words or physiological markers might indicate. Though, for affect theorists like Tomkins, affect is supposed to be recognizable, McQueen’s films confront viewers with the gulf of indeterminacy that inevitably exists between individuals when the expected markers of affect fail to appear. McQueen’s films pose the question that, at a time when social media has facilitated the perpetual publication of individuals’ most private information and
experiences, is implicit in the controversy over the so-called death of shame: what happens when we cannot tell whether what we are looking at is shame or shamelessness? As Chapters Two to Four demonstrate, shame—like any other affect—can be felt and communicated in very different ways, depending on the particularity of the individual experiences in question. As such, though it can be useful to talk about generalized understandings of shame (and other affects), this chapter serves as a reminder that we must always remain flexible. Affect theory is built upon the impulse to generalize, to create connections across particularities, and in this project, though I try to be mindful of the pitfalls of losing sight of singularity, because I, too, am limited by the gulf of indeterminacy, I also, occasionally, fall back upon the generalizing “we.” Though this is often done as a rhetorical strategy rather than as an attempt to truly generalize across experiences, at other times, I am simply limited by the lack of better options. After all, even if affects are uncertain, there is still much to be learned and gained from studying them. Similarly, although I read shame, humiliation, guilt, and so on, as variations on the same experience, this does not preclude my ability to recognize the textures of affective experiences, the intensities or extremes with which they are experienced.

Because this project began with *The Ice Storm* and with a fascination with the various forms that attachments to shame can take, it did not begin as a historical project. As I began searching for texts that revealed such attachments, however, it became clear that they were overwhelmingly *American* texts. I am not an Americanist and therefore cannot speak to any detailed history of American politics or culture, but I do recognize the place of shame in the developing history of American literature and culture; moreover, I do see the importance of historicizing shame in relation to the ongoing narratives that make up the body of American history and culture. My approach in this dissertation, however, like Ngai’s approach in *Ugly*
*Feelings*, aims to demonstrate its strengths “not in the historical detail it will supply, but in the theoretical groundwork it will construct” (8). Again, like Ngai, the arguments I make here “provide motivation for further historical research by explaining why these feelings might be interesting enough to merit attention in the first place” (8). Thus, while a detailed historical analysis is beyond the scope of this project, I do attempt, in my conclusion, to begin to address the role of shame in contemporary American culture. Though, as I indicated before, attaching to shame is not a new phenomenon, it is one that is more visible now than ever before. This is, of course, in large part because of the advent of internet technologies and social media, but its roots go further back than one might initially imagine. Chapter Five’s discussion of the relation between shame and shamelessness and the (un)reliability of affective markers leads me, in the Conclusion, to provide a new lens through which we might be able to envision the current state of American culture’s relation to shame. I suggest some possibilities for moving beyond the texts this dissertation investigates to an understanding of the relation between shame and shamelessness in contemporary American culture and, via engagement with the cultural theorists that have similarly interrogated America’s relation to shame, I suggest that America’s status as a “shame culture” is characterized neither by individuals avoiding shame, nor by shamelessness. Instead, I propose that it might be more accurate to define contemporary American culture as one that thrives on shame, wherein shame is pervasive precisely because it now circulates as a form of affective currency. In fact, it seems to serve as the gold standard of the country’s affective economy. This shift (which I will attempt to put into some historical context) suggests that the very meaning and nature of shame may have altered (and, of course, that relations to it have similarly altered) such that shame may no longer have the power to regulate individuals in the ways it used to, that shame may not have the same consequences it used to, and that,
paradoxically, shame might now have much more significant consequences (even global ones—considering social media’s role in shame culture). Indeed, the fact that Americans are confronted—even bombarded—with humiliation in their daily lives seems to create a perverse need for it in other aspects of their lives, thus generating attempts to create it elsewhere. For this concluding discussion, I interrogate John Limon’s capacious claim that “being normal in America now means living with perpetual shame” (“The Shame of Abu Ghraib” 566). Such an assertion indicates that Americans may have developed a different relation to shame in order to effectively or productively navigate a life that might now be filled with embarrassments—both personal and political—some of which may actually have been sought out. While Limon’s observation seems astute in many ways, my conclusion (and this dissertation as a whole) questions this relation between shame and socio-affective normativity.

There is, as my Conclusion suggests, much at stake in this project: we could lose the sense of what shame can (and still does) mean for the many individuals that experience it in situations over which they have no control (I think primarily of survivors of any type of abuse or injustice); there’s the risk of glossing over felt shame experiences or assuming that all individuals should orient themselves toward this particular experience of shame (as if, for instance, their experiences of shame are too bad, and therefore not good enough); there’s also the risk of inducing feelings of shame in individuals for whom more positive relations to shame have not been—may never be—possible. These are all risks I am intensely mindful of and hope my project does not elide or produce. This project, then, is strictly a recognition that alternative forms of shame experiences not only exist but are potentially useful or beneficial for some people. I am simply searching for new affective possibilities in an attempt to expand the ways in which we understand shame and how it is sometimes felt and sometimes mobilized, and as such,
I recognize that there are limits to my arguments and analyses. Still, I strongly believe that my project is useful for generating more flexible conceptualizations of shame, and thus also for understanding the many and diverse experiences of so-called “affect aliens.” It is true that shame has traditionally been seen (and is often experienced) as what Ngai calls an “ugly feeling,” one that, “like rage and fear … can be described as dysphoric or experientially negative, in the sense that [it] evoke[s] pain or displeasure” (11). Like rage and fear, shame might be “described as ‘semantically’ negative, in the sense that [it is] saturated with socially stigmatizing meanings and values …; and as ‘syntactically negative, in the sense that [it is] organized by trajectories of repulsion rather than attraction, by phobic strivings ‘away from’ rather than philic strivings ‘toward’” (11). However, my central question throughout this dissertation, which I have gone a long way toward answering, remains: what if shame is sometimes not felt or experienced in these ways?
Chapter 2

Affects as Objects: Desiring Shame in Rick Moody’s *The Ice Storm*

“I want to be / at least as alive as the vulgar”
(Frank O’Hara, “My Heart”)

Rick Moody’s *The Ice Storm* tells the story of two neighbouring middle-class white families, the Hoods and the Williamses, in suburban Connecticut in 1973. The novel’s chapters rotate through the focalized perspectives of the four Hoods—Benjamin and Elena, and their two children, Paul and Wendy. The sexual revolution has finally made its way to New Canaan and registers itself in the form of affairs and a key party, around which the novel revolves. At the same time, the ice storm that lends the novel its title has descended upon New Canaan, a town described as “barren as a rock face” (38); taken alongside the affairs and key party, such a description is suggestive of a pervasive tension between liberation and frigidity, lurking throughout the novel. The Hoods navigate this tension by engaging in a whole litany of shameful actions and behaviors. Most notably, they *actively seek shame out* (and how could they not, really, with a surname like theirs? The word “hood” itself is reminiscent of covering and uncovering, both central to dominant understandings of shame).

*The Ice Storm* itself comes out of a particularly shameful period of American history. Moody admitted to David Ryan in an interview conducted for *The Paris Review’s* Spring-Summer 2001 issue, that prior to writing the novel he had been reading

4 Moody provides some background information for key parties in *The Ice Storm*: “The rules were appallingly simple. The men tossed their house keys into a convenient container … and the women, at evening’s end, selected a set at random. And then the party retired to taste novelty. Sometimes the men looked on as the women selected …; sometimes the women wore blindfolds…; sometimes, the proceedings took place with a joyless resolve, as if the participants were merely plugged into a circuitry of compulsion” (110).
a lot about American policy in Cambodia, because I sometimes get really obsessed with public-policy issues and historical difficulties. I had read I think three or four books on Cambodia in a row and I was reading *Sideshow* by William Shawcross, this really tremendous book about Nixon’s immoral policy over there. I decided that if I was going to write a book about the early seventies in Connecticut, I might somehow indicate, too, the immense hypocrisy of the Nixon administration, as it trickled down into a group of people. … What would make this story go? Turned out it was the so-called sexual revolution, which, when it finally got to the suburbs, looked exactly like Nixon policy in Cambodia, after a fact. Both were founded on deceit and hypocrisy.

In the preface to James Schamus’s *The Ice Storm: The Shooting Script*, Ang Lee, the director of the film adaptation, recognizes Moody’s investment in what he calls “the greatest themes of American history and experience” (vii-viii). Lee writes that his producers and he “often joked that 1973 was America’s most ‘embarrassing’ year, with Nixon, polyester, the admitting of defeat in Vietnam, stagflation, [and] the energy crisis” (viii). But Lee also realizes that embarrassment “can be a profound and enlightening experience … and that we two decades later have much to learn from this ‘embarrassing’ past” (viii). Even four decades later, we still have much to learn from this embarrassing past. Though I will save any detailed discussion of the significance of these embarrassing years to our understandings of the changing conceptions of and responses to shame and shamelessness in contemporary culture for my concluding chapter, it is important to note here that, despite Lee’s assertions, the majority of the novel’s embarrassing scenes are curiously *left out* of the film. While the film does make a few references to Nixon’s presidency, the references are often subtle, serving merely as props to indicate the film’s
historical setting (a poster of “Tricky Dick” in Wendy’s room, a copy of Nixon’s *Six Crises* on Libbetts Casey’s coffee table) or treated as insignificant preoccupations of an adolescent girl. The most direct criticism of and reference to Nixon occurs at the beginning of the film when Wendy attempts to convince Paul over the phone of Nixon’s deceit; Paul, however, is barely listening and interrupts Wendy to tell her to “calm down” because he [Paul] “wasn’t in on it.” Further, Benjamin chastises Wendy when she suggests to Paul that Nixon “should be shot,” demanding she “drop the political assassination stuff.” Wendy’s continued criticisms fade into background noise as the focus of the scene turns, instead, to the disengaging of ice cubes from a tray and to Benjamin and Elena, who are getting ready for a dinner party.

Moreover, given the film’s similar refusal to exhibit or engage with the strange and shameful *personal* moments replete in the novel, it successfully erases the “trickle down” effect of which Moody speaks, ultimately suggesting that the political (insofar as it *is* represented in the film) has little to no effect on the personal. James Schamus, the film’s screenplay writer, defends this refusal in the preface to the 1997 publication of the film’s script, calling it a stylistic decision that derived from the impossibility of finding “some kind of filmic equivalent to the novel’s powerful literary devices” (x). He argues that it is one thing to read about these “horrifically endearing” shameful episodes, but that “seeing [them] would have been something else altogether, in particular if [those] image[s] were stripped of the help the book’s narrator gives us in appreciating the moment in all its pathos and humor” (x). Schamus insists that these scenes “would read as pruriently desperate, especially if thrown explicitly against the screen” (x). But the shame in the novel *is* often pruriently desperate—even if masked with pathos and humor. We might then read this covering up or erasure of the novel’s main preoccupation in a different way; indeed, the covering up of shame is shameful in its own right, and this decision to ignore even
the more traditional moments of shame (when it is not sought out and when the characters do not want to be caught) speaks more to the notion that Lee and his crew were perhaps too embarrassed to actually and accurately (re)present the novel’s shame in its various forms.

At one point it seems that Lee attempts to make up for these erasures by filming two scenes not included in the novel. In the first scene, we watch Wendy park her bicycle at the local convenience store. She walks into the store and stuffs her pockets with candy. Turning around, she finds herself face to face with an elderly woman, another of the store’s customers. Wendy’s face registers the surprise of being caught, but she grows defiant and simply walks past the woman and out of the store. Wendy does not seem ashamed here, nor does she seem ashamed at any other point in the film (unlike her character in the novel). At the end of this scene, she simply bikes away to safety. Wendy’s mother, Elena, having watched Wendy ride past on her bicycle, reflects on how long it has been since she, herself, was on a bicycle. Later in the film, Elena repeats this very same scene. Elena bikes to the store, parks her bicycle and walks in. She finds the makeup aisle and pockets a number of lipsticks. Looking up, she realizes there is a mirror that allows others in the store to see what she is doing. She walks quickly toward the door, but is pursued by two of the employees who ask her to come back into the store. Given this second opportunity to deal with the shame of being caught, Lee simply decides not to. Viewers follow Elena outside the store and watch the employees come after her. They ask her to step back inside, which she does, but the camera (and viewers) are left outside. The glass storefront allows us some visibility (we see Elena empty her pockets, words are exchanged, presumably excuses and/or apologies are offered), but ultimately, we cannot fully see or hear the extent to which the shame of the moment is registering (or whether it registers at all). Thus even when Lee has the opportunity to deal with the shame he believes to be so enlightening, he literally keeps it behind
closed doors. Peter Matthews reads the film-maker’s “cleaning up” of the novel’s more discordant elements as an attempt to “induce a deliberate monotony of mood. Even the adolescent characters labour under jaded, menopausal emotions unlikely to induce a viewer’s active dramatic identification” (“The Big Freeze” 12). By both freezing the emotions of the film’s characters and/or removing any residual emotional responses from our view, Lee effectively leaves us on the outside. Incapable of identifying with the characters, we begin to feel the sense of isolation that Lee seems set on portraying.

It is, then, unsurprising that the novel is much more symptomatic than the film adaptation of the era’s (and Moody’s) preoccupation with morally objectionable behaviours on a national level. Indeed, as I mentioned above, while Lee cleans up the novel’s behavioural dirt, he also cleans up much of the political dirt to which the novel refers ad nauseam. The opening pages of The Ice Storm document the events of “the recent past. … Nixon had shipped arms to Israel for the ’72 war, but slowly, slowly. … Kissinger had become Secretary of State … Rose Mary Woods had just accidentally erased eighteen and a half minutes of subpoenaed conversation” (4). Interestingly, the narrator assures us that “None of this, though—not the Watergate Hotel and its palette of hypocrisy, coercion, and surveillance … troubled Benjamin Hood’s sanguine and rational mind” (4). And yet, a mere two pages later, Benjamin reflects on the fact that “by 1973 desire surprised him at inappropriate moments: during television broadcasts of Southeast Asian massacres, during the Frazier/Ali rematch, when Archibald Cox was fired, when Thomas

5 This brings to mind Frederic Jameson’s concept of “national allegories” in “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism.” While his argument implausibly maintains that all third-world texts are necessarily national allegories, he also finds it ridiculous that we Western readers are “trained in a deep cultural conviction that the lived experience of our private existences is somehow incommensurable with the abstractions of economic science and political dynamics” (69).
Eagleton admitted to shock-therapy treatments” (6-7). Despite the narrator’s insistence, then—and in light of Moody’s own intention to demonstrate the ways in which the political becomes personal—this textual juxtaposition of embarrassing socio-political history with Benjamin’s own desires prompts us to read the innumerable shameful episodes as indeed indicative of a preoccupation with the mechanics of shame, especially as it moves between public and private, the political and the personal (again, I will provide a much more detailed discussion of this movement between public and private in my conclusion). Further, the narrator’s articulation of Benjamin’s erotic response, whereby he is “surprised” and set upon by an active desire, relegate him to the object of the sentence, foregrounds Benjamin’s lack of control over his physiological and psychological response. The “inappropriate” relation between stimulus and response thus opens Benjamin to the possibility of shame as an affective response to his failure to feel in concordance with social expectations. It also, however, serves as an illustration of the way public shame is often refracted in the novel’s private realm.

Without exception, every character in The Ice Storm feels shame at some point in the story. Their experiences with shame are mostly positive, marked by some form of desire, but the text by no means ignores the more common experience of shame that Tomkins designates as “the affect of indignity, of defeat, of transgression” (351) and as that which “generates the torment of self-consciousness” (351). Benjamin, for instance, is “guilty of drunkenness, of boorishness, of adultery, of forging a bad relationship with chance. Guilty of presuming upon chance. Guilty of weakening and diluting what bonds of family remained … Guilty of following bad impulses … He was quarantined and he deserved it” (216). Elena “felt shame rise in her like adrenaline”

6 Given the schadenfreude suggested by this quotation, I will return to it in Chapter Three.
when her husband makes a drunken scene at a neighbourhood party (169). Wendy’s “first spanking was the great organizing event of her early memory” (237), an event that “humiliated her” (237); moreover, her mother’s appearance in Jim and Janey’s house after she inadvertently falls asleep (naked) next to their son, Sandy, is so unexpected, so shameful, that “Later this moment replayed itself again and again in Wendy’s consciousness, as if things would have turned out differently if she just hadn’t gone out of that guest room” (234). Paul attempts to make a move on a girl he likes while high, but is reprimanded and discouraged, which prompts him to do “the only sensible thing. He fled the common room. He waited for the drug, and his shame, to pass” (83).

But what is it that drives Moody to divert from these more traditional narratives of shame as it is generally experienced? Interestingly, Moody published the novel in 1994, in a decade that saw a shift in theoretical understandings of shame toward a recognition of its more beneficent potential. Whether Moody was conscious of this theoretical shift, or whether he was seeing this shift in other ways (culturally, politically), it is clear that Moody’s characters are “turned on” (and not necessarily in the sexual sense) by shame, despite its alienating qualities. This chapter seeks to address the above questions by first looking at the relation between loneliness and/or alienation and shame, before moving on to delineate what theories of desire look like when shame is the object of desire. Via analysis of The Ice Storm’s characters, I will demonstrate not

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7 Interestingly, in the film adaptation, Lee once again erases the shame that pervades this scene in the novel. In the film, Elena opens the door to the guest room and finds Wendy naked and under the covers with Sandy, who is fast asleep. Wendy rolls over and sees her mother at the door. The camera refocuses on Elena, who simply says “get dressed” and leaves. There is no searching for stains on the sheets, lectures over underage drinking, washing mouths out with soap, uncomfortable breakfasts, etcetera. The scene ends abruptly, and we move swiftly to the next part of the plot.
only that it is possible to desire shame, but that this desire for shame takes many forms and has many different (often promising!) results.

Two negatives can make a positive: Loneliness and Shame

In *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed writes that alienation is “a kind of self-estrangement” (167); it is a form of suffering that shapes how one inhabits the world. She argues that to be conscious “of alienation involves both the recognition of suffering and recognition of what produces that suffering. To become conscious of alienation is to become conscious of how one’s being has been stolen” (167, my emphasis). Alienation is concomitant with experiences of shame: it is one of shame’s “products,” so-to-speak, and it is the result of a recognition that one’s sense of self has turned strange—or, in Ahmed’s words, been stolen. In shame, one does not just feel apart from the world, one feels apart from oneself: shame is felt as loneliness within the self as the self that existed prior to shame becomes estranged from the self in shame.

This alienating feeling of shame—a more traditional understanding of shame than I will generally be dealing with in this chapter and dissertation—is prevalent throughout *The Ice Storm*. It is initially hard to tell, however, whether the characters’ states of loneliness are a result of shame or the conduit to shame. On the one hand, the characters seem motivated by a desire to escape loneliness, and shame provides that escape. On the other hand, however, shame is often theorized as an acute feeling of alone-ness or, in the moment of being shamed, the wish to be alone. So if the characters do intend to employ shame as a survival mechanism in the face of loneliness, they are doomed to end up where they began. One might be tempted to theorize this circuitry as a kind of repetition compulsion, but I will argue that there is potential not just in shame, but also in the loneliness that accompanies or results from shame.
Melissa Carroll’s ground-breaking work (a yet unpublished manuscript) on loneliness recognizes the ways in which loneliness is positioned “as an abnormal and dangerous setback to Western sociability and its progress” (Abstract). Even Dan Savage’s “It Gets Better Project” (a project seeking to alleviate whatever motivating factors are lurking behind the sudden spike in gay teen suicide), she argues, frames “loneliness as a degenerate feeling that warrants survivalist tactics” (Abstract). “Often conflating loneliness with solitude, alienation, and singleness,” Carroll writes, “scholars have even suggested that loneliness ‘necessarily signals misery’ (Christenson 589), that it is a sign of a ‘damaged self,’ a ‘spoiled’ (Goffman 107-108) or ‘disqualified identity’ (Love 4), and that it has the potential to turn the world into a dangerously ‘lonely crowd’ (Cobb, Single 19)” (8). These ideological characterizations of loneliness impart a message: get out and feel better.

_The Ice Storm_, in some ways, is no exception: the characters are trying, desperately, to escape from or find relief from their perpetual feelings of loneliness; they believe that “Abandonment [is] in the parlors of America, in the clubs, in the weather” (187), that “loneliness is the music of the spheres around here” (72). Elena and Benjamin Hood, for instance, are both characterized as being overwhelmed by loneliness; for Elena, “small things … led to a bottomless pit of loneliness” (67), including “a pen mark on the designer pantsuit she’d bought for the holidays, … the slight warp in her Paul Simon album, … [and] the acrid taste of old ice cubes” (67). That Elena’s loneliness seems attached to odd particulars—things we would not normally associate with loneliness—is a reflection of the failure of the “buy this and you’ll be happy” logic of consumer culture. It is precisely these things that have ceased to produce affection of any kind; for Elena, loneliness is lurking in the cracks, in the small and seemingly insignificant mishaps of life, which is what makes it so pervasive, and so seemingly inescapable.
Loneliness, then, becomes a breeding ground for disaffection, to which Benjamin also succumbs. Benjamin is lonely

in his wife’s arms, lonely in crowds, lonely at meetings, lonely throwing tennis balls for his dog, lonely playing *Operation* with his kids. He had been lonely during commuter conversations, lonely during late-night heart-to-hearts with old fraternity brothers. His dad, living alone up in New Hampshire, made Hood lonely. The severe landscapes of November made him lonely. (5-6)

What is most striking about Benjamin’s feelings of loneliness is the way in which they all seemingly involve an intimate connection, yet each and every one is described as making Benjamin feel “lonely.” This anaphoric use of “lonely” lulls readers into Benjamin’s quotidian loneliness; the word is used not just as a structuring principle for the above paragraph, but as the structuring principle for Benjamin’s life. Loneliness becomes a trap, the referent around which everything else revolves, both syntactically and diegetically. Indeed, the very organization of the novel’s chapters (focalized perspectives of each member of the Hood family) serves to further alienate the characters from one another—characters already narrating their lonely lives in this most affectless of communities.

In *The Ice Storm*, then, loneliness is presented as entrapping and debilitating; it is an all-encompassing feeling that transforms insignificant details and everyday intimacies into alienating experiences. At the same time, however, the novel also suggests that this pervasive loneliness, as such, is not all bad. As Carroll argues, while loneliness *does* demonstrate a lack, it is not necessarily a lack of the social; rather, loneliness “is the feeling and the condition of knowing that there is something lacking in the social” (307-308). She goes on to argue that
if loneliness is thought to be triggered by a lack of social connection, or an inability to find meaningful connections because of loneliness’ pessimistic symptoms, [then] loneliness actually evidences the possibility that there is something unsettling about the current way we Westerners envision ourselves in relation to each other and other non-Western bodies. (308)

Benjamin’s alienating intimacies, then, are perhaps signaling this failure in the social to adequately aid in providing the conditions for meaningful connections, such that this “turn to loneliness” does not necessarily indicate a failure on the part of the individual; instead, loneliness may very well be indicative of, Carroll suggests, a need for better socialities (308). Janey Williams, for example, “can’t be happy. … She just can’t do it. … She just doesn’t want the life she used to think she wanted” (177). The characters’ turns to loneliness may thus be refigured as refusals to continue to orient themselves toward “the good life,” a life they had already oriented themselves toward only to be met with disappointment and failure.

Loneliness can also teach us the importance of some attachments; in the moments we feel most alone or most lonely, we can recognize the attachments we want the most or about which we are happiest. In The Ice Storm, though, it is shame which, in conjunction with loneliness, and in its dislocation of the self, facilitates such recognition. A prime example of this occurs when Mike Williams, who is wandering around outdoors during the ice storm, arrives at his friend Danny Spofford’s house. Eventually, Mike starts to tell Danny about Wendy Hood, with whom Mike had a sexual encounter the previous night. By this point, readers are well aware of this tryst between Mike and Wendy: it has already been narrated to us in full. We are told about how their

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8 I phrase this situation of loneliness in this way in order to indicate that loneliness is not simply a passive condition one finds oneself in; rather, it can be refigured as an actively sought-out way of being-in-the-world that refuses the “connections” available to individuals.
“hips locked together uneasily, like mismatched pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. They ground themselves against one another slowly” (44). And in the middle of it all, Wendy’s father comes down the stairs and catches them in the act, his face “scarlet. Not the color of drinking, which [Wendy] knew pretty well, but the scarlet of shame and rage” (47). Recalling this episode, Mike suddenly realizes that “He couldn’t explain [to Danny] how Wendy’s dad had caught them with their pants down, because it was too embarrassing, and how this entrapment … had only deepened his feelings for her” (208). What Mike cannot explain here is the way in which shame has not done what it is “supposed” to do: instead of renouncing the object of interest in favour of lessening his feelings of shame, the very notion of the forbidden object or act initiates, for Mike, a new kind of desire. Elspeth Probyn has similarly recognized the power of shame to teach us something about our connections or attachments: “Shame is the body’s way of registering interest, even when you didn’t know you were interested or were unaware of the depth of your desire for connection” (Blush 28). In the loneliness that accompanies shame, Mike realizes just how much he cares for Wendy. The alienation Mike experiences in shame (further exemplified in his inability to share the story with Danny) thus activates or renews his desire in a more intense way. This process is not depicted as shamelessness in the novel, but as a purposeful desire to maintain one’s relation to the object and to one’s feelings of shame precisely for the sense of knowledge it has produced about one’s relation to the object of interest.

Mike finds comfort in the alienating power of shame as well as its didacticism, and decides to continue transgressing (this time in the form of trespassing on the grounds of Silver Meadow, the local psychiatric institution). He notices during his trespassing how

Everywhere New Canaan was sheathed in this ice, in this coating that seemed to render the stuff of his everyday life beautiful again—magic, dangerous, and new.
He recognized trees in a way he never had, recognized the vast, arterial movement of roads in his neighborhood, recognized the gallant and stalwart quality of telephone poles, recognized even the warm support, in the occasional candlelit window, of community. (210)

Throughout the novel, the ice that freezes over the landscape serves as a metaphor for the characters’ perpetual and frozen states of loneliness and disaffection. Benjamin actually recognizes that “The ice was like some polystyrene coating that separated him from the world, some wax curtain that pronounced his guilt” (216). Reading the ice in this way—as a protective covering that separates the shameful subject from the rest of the world—we can read Mike’s admiration of it as an admiration of the power of shame not only to protect him, but to reconstruct the world as he knows it, fostering connections he did not realize were there already. Mike “wasn’t lonely now” (211).

Unlike Mike, Wendy has a peculiar relation to loneliness: she is drawn to it. While Wendy believes New Canaan to be a “desolate village,” there is one place within it that does interest her: “Silver Meadow! A private residential psychiatric facility” (31). Wendy “had seen the lonely and decrepit emerging” (32) from this institution and feels that she “was among her people here” (32). More than any other character, Wendy seeks out situations that guarantee feelings of shame. I want to suggest here that Wendy turns to shame to maintain loneliness because loneliness paradoxically offers her a sense of community that sticks.

We are told that Wendy “yearned for vulgarity, for all the sloppy stuff. She yearned for some impolite rustling or a torn piece of fabric; for some late-night moaning. … For anything that didn’t have the feelings bleached out of it” (39). This is why, one afternoon, she “successfully persuaded [Sandy Williams—Mike’s younger brother] to let her enter the
bathroom with him” (33). Though Sandy “didn’t talk much, Wendy thought what he thought and knew what he knew. Until that time in the bathroom” (33). Sandy unzips his shorts and squats on the toilet, at which point Wendy is struck by “the absolute nakedness of his skeletal body” (33). But then “the enormity of being observed in this private ritual, this ritual of cleanlieness messed [Sandy] up” (34); “His usually peaceful face became twisted and raw as he rose up toward her” (34) and “he started to shout” (34). Hearing the commotion, Janey Williams pulls Wendy out of the bathroom and attempts to communicate to Wendy the sacredness and private nature of the human body: “We come into this world alone, Mrs. Williams said, and we permit this aloneness to be understood by another maybe once or twice in a whole life. And in adolescence, which Wendy probably knew about from her own parents, our bodies betray us. They grow strange” (34). Assuming that Wendy’s wish to watch Sandy on the toilet is part of an adolescent curiosity in sex and sexuality, Janey attempts to instill in her the logic of hormones to discourage future episodes of Wendy’s disrespect for another’s privacy. Instead, what Janey seems to confirm for Wendy is the importance of privacy and of being alone. So Wendy continues to seek shame, to the point that “there was something compulsive about the way she got entangled, as though Wendy herself had picked the posture and activity that would make her feel ashamed” (133). We

This notion of bodily betrayal is echoed, for some, in the structure of shame. Indeed, when shame registers, it is often felt as an intense desire to hide or to flee the scene of shame but the biological markers of shame (for some, the blush) can give an individual away, necessitating that one figures out how to cover him/herself up again, or recover from this bodily betrayal. It is as if the body requires recognition for feeling ashamed, requires others to share in one’s shame. This calls to mind Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Giorgio Agamben’s recognition of shame’s paradoxical “double movement,” in which, Sedgwick writes, shame moves us toward “painful individuation, toward uncontrollable relationality” (Touching Feeling 37). On the one hand, this bodily technique seems to invite witnesses to share in shame rather than alienating the ashamed or shamers from it. On the other hand, it is through this sharing of shame that wrongdoings can be taught to, and acknowledged by, the one being shamed. Authority figures often use the technique of shaming as a teaching strategy to illustrate that which is “wrong” or forbidden. Because shame can generate such negative feelings, the individual more often than not internalizes the wrongdoing: lesson learned. For Wendy—and many of the other characters in The Ice Storm—the lesson is not learned (or learned but willfully ignored).
see this playing out a number of times throughout The Ice Storm, but perhaps most notably at a slumber party, where Wendy “put her tongue in Debby Armitage’s vagina. In the corner, Sally Miller watched with an expression of excitement and horror both” (132). Because of Sally’s nonparticipation, she went public with this story and “talked up [Wendy’s] transgression, her instigation, her perversion. [Wendy’s] reputation as a slut spread quickly along the corridors of Saxe [Elementary School] and across the street to the high school” (134). While Wendy’s engagement in shame seems on the one hand to have led to further isolation or alienation, “At the same time, Debby Armitage was Wendy’s friend for life, and actually Wendy didn’t like her that much at all. Debby was a whiner” (134). While Wendy and Debby’s mutual oral gratification is considered by their peers to be transgressive, a perversion, and thus shameful, Wendy derives no pleasure from Debby or the sexual act—it is only what the act guarantees (the recognition and connection to others) that produces feelings of pleasure for her.

Indeed, “Wendy had never wished, even in her idle algebra class fantasies, that she was a hummingbird darting between the legs of Debby Armitage. Not really. Though she hankered after some association with the people of her town, some sense of community that stuck deeper than the country club stuff” (133). In fact, this “sexual perversion” is described instead as Wendy’s “strategy … [which] turned out to be pretty effective” (133); it guarantees “some association” and “some sense of community” that Wendy yearns for. And shame certainly “stuck deeper”; shame, like its proximal affect disgust, is what Ahmed would call a “sticky” affect, one that binds to the individual, making the individual sticky: to name something as shameful “is to transfer the stickiness of the word … to an object” (Cultural Politics of Emotion 94). Ahmed argues that to “designate something as disgusting [or, in this case, shameful] is also to create a distance from the thing, which paradoxically becomes a thing only in the act of distanation”
(94). When we are told that, following Wendy’s transgression, the “public school kids turn[ed] away rather than talk to her” (201), we might begin to understand this turning away as a form of recognition; it indicates that an impression has been made and taken hold. In the distancing of her peers from Wendy, in the act of casting her out and pulling away, shame works to, as Ahmed argues, “align the individual with the collective at the very moment both are generated” (Cultural Politics of Emotion 95). In order to judge somebody, in order to make them feel shame (and its concomitant conditions of feeling isolated, alienated, alone), one must first care enough to make that judgment. As Caitlin Charos notes, “shame requires intimacy or an affective investment in another that allows him/her to be ‘taken and kept’ within one’s emotional and physical borders” (283). It is not, however, as Charos suggests, simply that in order to feel shame, one must already have an intimate connection. Instead, Wendy’s engagement in shame reverses this formulation so that in some cases, in order to create intimacy, one must first feel shame.

As I hope the above examples have demonstrated, the characters’ engagements in shame sometimes aid them in escaping loneliness and sometimes aid them in maintaining loneliness and its promises. I want to stress, however, that even when one chooses shame to escape loneliness, the choice of shame, in particular, as object is significant. After all, one can escape loneliness without recourse to shame. Individuals turn to shame because shame offers them something they did not have before. In this next section, I examine the possibility that one desires shame in order to be happy.
Desire and Shame: Shamefully Happy Objects

Lauren Berlant suggests thinking of an object of desire as a “cluster of promises” that someone or something can make possible for us (23). To think of our attachments in this way is “to allow us to encounter what’s incoherent or enigmatic in our attachments, not as confirmation of our irrationality but as an explanation of our sense of our endurance in the object, insofar as proximity to the object means proximity to the cluster of things that the object promises” (23). For Berlant, a desire for shame would be a desire for what shame promises. An investment in shame seems, at the outset, characteristic of what she terms “cruel optimism,” which she defines as the “condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object” (24). But Berlant also states that what makes an attachment cruel—as opposed to simply inconvenient or tragic—is that individuals may not be able to “endure the loss of the object/scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being, because … the attachment … provides … [a] sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world” (24).

Cruel optimism, she argues, is “a kind of relation in which one depends on objects that block the very thriving that motivates our attachment in the first place” (“Rorotoko”). A desire for shame, I argue, does not always fit into Berlant’s model. Indeed, some of The Ice Storm’s characters desire shame for its potential to aid in the kind of thriving one might normally assume shame would block. In such cases, shame functions as that which—unlike the cruel object—“promises to guarantee the endurance of something, the survival of something, the flourishing of something” (Cruel Optimism 48). While shame is not an object with which we would normally associate optimism, optimistic attachments can, as Berlant argues, “feel any number of ways, from the romantic to the fatalistic to the numb to the nothing” (13).
Similarly to Berlant, Ahmed in *The Promise of Happiness* is skeptical about optimism, at least in the ways it appears in regimes of happiness. She also sees desire as a kind of promise, orienting us toward a particular affective experience. This affective experience, for Ahmed, is happiness; she argues that desire “is already double. We desire x, and we desire x because we desire y, where y is happiness” (30). Happiness, Ahmed argues, has become “the placeholder of human desire” (15); it is “the endpoint, the telos, … what all human beings are inclined toward” (199). No matter what we desire and why, what we really desire, she suggests, is to be happy. This condition of happiness, for Ahmed, often stems from (more often than not) ideological coercions such that happiness becomes “not only what we are inclined toward … but also what we should be inclined toward” (199). Her book explores “how we are directed by the promise of happiness” (14) and the ways in which happiness “participates in making things good” (13). The promise of happiness, Ahmed argues, “turns us toward objects” (21). I am particularly interested in Ahmed’s formula here because I agree with her theorizations of how happiness works (it is mediated by an object, which is to say that it is an auxiliary effect of experiencing something else. Happiness is always already a future project, one in which something else must come first). But I also want to make clear that, while this formula is certainly useful for thinking through the reasons people desire or engage with particular objects, I do not believe this is the only reason we desire; happiness is not always the endpoint or what we are inclined towards. Just as the “x” in Ahmed’s formula is infinitely substitutable, so too is the “y.” We can desire “x”

10 Ahmed notes that “the etymology of happiness relates precisely to the question of contingency: it is from the Middle English word *hap* suggesting chance. The word *happy* originally meant having ‘good “hap” or fortune,’ to be lucky or fortunate. This meaning may now seem archaic: we may be used to thinking of happiness as an effect of what you do, as a reward for hard work, rather than being ‘simply’ what happens to you” (22). Understanding happiness as something we must cultivate and defend, Ahmed argues, “could be read as a defense against its contingency” (22). As such, Ahmed aims to “return to the original meaning of happiness as it refocuses our attention on the ‘worldly’ question of happenings” (22).
where “y” is shame—or anger, or fear, or interest, or any number of states of feeling or non-feeling. Happiness can be overwhelming, untenable, unachievable, which means that happiness can also turn us away from objects, or turn us toward more attainable objects.

Working with Ahmed’s formula, a desire for shame can never actually be a desire for shame because shame will always be x; it will always occupy the position of the object, and in doing so, will always guarantee that one desires it in order to desire something else (happiness or satisfaction or a general sense of fulfillment). While Mike’s sexual encounter with Wendy seems to fit this narrative of shame-as-avenue-to-happiness (especially because when Mike realizes he does not feel lonely anymore, he simultaneously realizes that he “was happy” [210]), Mike’s happiness seems rather a happy happenstance, a happy but unexpected occurrence. Indeed, the novel does not portray Mike as consciously orienting himself toward happiness. Benjamin, however, is a different story. Benjamin exemplifies a much more active search for shame because of a previous knowledge of shame’s potential to make him feel happy. Benjamin is so consumed by loneliness that his attachment to and desire for shame seems to stem from an awareness that shame’s simultaneous alienation and sociality enable him to have an embodied experience of connection with himself and with others; as we shall see, this experience originally produces an unexpected result (happiness) but is precisely what leads him to continually engage with and in shame (for its promise of happiness).

In the opening pages of The Ice Storm, Benjamin reflects on “the first blossoming of adultery” (15): at the time, he was driving Melody, a co-worker, home from the office Christmas party. Having pulled over, he “simply put his face in her lap. … He began to tongue the spot on her skirt where he imagined his disgrace might concentrate itself” (16). Benjamin was “doing his best to feel bad” (17). And, during the act, despite the fact that he “was close to tears,” he was
“determined to go through with it” (17). Benjamin has internalized those whose judgment he cares about, such that during this moment, he thought of how his children and wife “would feel when they found out. The look of inconsolable shame and remorse with which they would greet him” (17). It is immediately after thinking about his family’s looks of “inconsolable shame” that “He came. … And then the moment turned. Really. For a second everything smelled sad and good … he had been happy right then, for a moment” (18).\(^{11}\) Benjamin’s attachment to shame thus reconfigures shame as positive, in part because it is better than the nothing he feels otherwise. Happiness, in Benjamin’s case, comes only through the shame that derives from recognition by an internalized or imagined other—but the very possibility of this internalized or imagined other-as-shamer relies on his relationality. Realizing this alerts him to the fact that his being-in-the-world is actually much more socially constituted than he previously understood. Furthermore, Benjamin’s favouring of shame over the disaffection that stems from his feelings of loneliness protects him and allows him to feel happy (if only momentarily). When we are told that “Something led Hood these days into degradation” (17-18); that he “gorged himself on his discomfort” (16) and engaged in activities “where he imagined his disgrace might concentrate itself” (16); and that, in short, Hood “was doing his best to feel bad” (17), we can begin to understand how his desire for shame is potentially part of a much larger project. Working with Ahmed’s formula, the “something” that leads Benjamin into degradation is the promise of happiness that shame seems curiously able to fulfill.

Understood in this way, to aim for happiness in shame, one aims to move beyond the pain that so often characterizes the shame experience. A desire for shame thus risks feeling bad

\(^{11}\) I acknowledge here the masochistic nature of this particular scene (deriving sexual pleasure from pain and shame), but reserve any nuanced discussion of the relation between shame and masochism in this scene—and more generally—for Chapter Three.
momentarily in order to feel better later. Regardless of whether the object of one’s desire is negative or not, there is an element of happiness in the fulfillment of that desire; the satisfaction that accompanies the fulfillment of desire is a happy one, thus one can be happy in one’s (or another’s) shame. If one desires shame and that desire is fulfilled, one has activated the feeling of happiness by achieving shame. Another way of thinking about this is that we attach ourselves to or desire what is “bad” (in this case, shame) because it is so achievable. There is a certain agency in being able to fulfill desire, such that finding pleasure in pain would be a way of feeling like a self-authorizing subject.

Nine months after committing this first instance of adultery with Melody, Benjamin “began to execute his affair with Janey Williams” (19). The novel opens in Jim and Janey Williams’s guest room, where Benjamin is seeking refuge from his stalled and sorrowful marriage. He is “wait[ing] happily for his mistress” (4, my emphasis), Janey, to return from installing her birth control device. When Janey does not return, Benjamin goes looking for her, believing it to be a kind of erotic game. He stumbles upon a black lace garter belt in the washroom, which he initially interprets as a clue Janey has left for him so he might find her. He believes this garter belt is “Meant for him. Hood marveled at her boldness. And having completely surrendered to an appreciation of her tactics, he decided he still couldn’t forgive her [for abandoning him]” (26). Liberating the garter belt from where it is draped and “Realizing, of course, that abandonment titillated him, that he was mildly aroused, that his beleaguered member thrived under bad circumstances, he unzipped anew his flannel slacks and, using the garter belt as a spur to his isolation and arousal—as a dressing gown for his hard-on— ... he began to stroke himself” (27). Benjamin is aroused by isolation, titillated by abandonment; his shameful situation produces good feelings (once again!). His ability to thrive under “bad circumstances”
demonstrates that Benjamin’s attachment to shame is far from cruel; the object that “should”
deteriorate the conditions for happiness instead initiates feelings of happiness.

Desire in Benjamin’s case stems from reflection or retrospection and thus the objects he
desires (for what they guarantee) become predictable. Ahmed suggests that we “assume that the
relationship between an object and feeling involves causality: as if the object causes the feeling”
(The Promise of Happiness 27). Drawing on Nietzsche’s The Will to Power, she argues that “the
attribution of causality is retrospective” (27), which is to say that the “object of feeling lags
behind the feeling” (27). Our very formation as desiring subjects necessitates that we recognize
objects that we like, or objects that make us feel a certain way. Once we have recognized these
objects and what they do for us, our future relation to them—and whether or not we desire a
continued relation to them—depends on how they once made us feel. If the object generated
interest-excitement, we form a happy relation to that object, and may desire it in the future. If the
object, however, generated a negative affective experience—perhaps one of anger or disgust—
we may never desire an encounter with that object again (though I should note that in the
psychoanalytic spirit of repetition compulsion, negative experience often compels one to repeat
for the sake of eventually working through it).

In Deceit, Desire, and the Novel, René Girard proposes a similar formula for desire. He
argues that desire is far from spontaneous; one desires an object “so long as he is convinced that
it is already desired by another person whom he admires” (7). Desire is thus always triangular
because the object is always obstructed by an Other that mediates that desire and transfigures the
object. This process of mediation, argues Girard, “creates a very vivid impression of autonomy
and spontaneity precisely when we are no longer autonomous and spontaneous” (38).
Benjamin’s desire for shame, however, seems to problematize Girard’s formulation. There is no
indication in the text of a third party in relation to whom shame and Benjamin are triangulated; moreover, Benjamin, in his self-absorption, does not seem to admire anyone. If anything, Benjamin’s desire for shame seems, at least to him, something new. For example, in his first recollection, Benjamin’s desire relies entirely on a moment of fiction within his own imagination: he imagines the looks of “inconsolable shame” with which he would be greeted when his family found out about his affair with Melody. Imagining the possibility of being caught produces a profound sense of shame that, in turn, produces happiness. Benjamin’s future relation to shame is transfigured, but not because of an external other. Benjamin’s only “other(s)” here are products of his own imagination, reflecting back upon him his shame, first imagined, then real, without desiring it for themselves. The desire seems to spring upon him, surprising him (much as it does when he is watching moments of national shame on television) with his capacity to “get off” on shame. Indeed, even in the act of recollection, Benjamin seems hardly able to believe it, and anticipates our doubt, too, attempting to convince us (and maybe himself) that “the moment turned. Really” (18). If Benjamin himself can scarcely credit shame’s allure, then how might we fathom a third party who might allow us a way back to Girard’s theory of triangulation?

Of course, as Girard himself points out, the fact of a subject being unaware of the mediation of his desires is exactly what one should expect when it comes to explaining his desire. Benjamin is, after all, the focalizer of his own sections, and the text never strays far from his field of vision, so his new, autonomous sense of his own desire tells us only that he, like everyone else, has succeeded in fooling himself. And yet, the novel does offer us a way back to Girard. Returning to Benjamin’s narration of the incident with Melody, we can see subtle changes in narrative structure: “And then the moment turned. Really. For a second everything
smelled sad and good … he had been happy right then, for a moment” (18). As the narration moves from the first to the second invocation of its anchoring words “then” and “moment,” the shift in verb tense from past simple to past perfect signals the narrator’s (and Benjamin’s) temporal relocation from immediacy to nostalgia. Benjamin’s experience of desire (and happiness) is rooted in the “then,” the “moment”; but it is also rooted in shame, and so the location to which the narration is anchored also marks the dislocation of Benjamin’s self, or Benjamin’s othering from his self in shame. As such, I want to suggest, it also marks the birth of Benjamin’s self-in-shame, the creature who “had been happy right then, for a moment.” In Girardian terms, it is this self-as-other who completes the triangle and mediates Benjamin’s desire for shame. Benjamin admires no one but himself, and even then, only when he is finding happiness in shame; it is this repeated dislocation of self—or recreation of self-as-other—which Benjamin begins seeking, more and more aggressively.

When Benjamin next encounters Janey at the neighbourhood key party, he decides to recreate the details—up to a point. He tells her about his search for her, that he discovered her lingerie, that he believed it to be a game, “a romantic trail or something” (125). By retelling his abandonment, the desperation he felt in searching for Janey, and reminding her of their adulterous tryst, Benjamin “became a sort of erotic revenant. … He reveled in the hot flashes, in the indignity of the predicament. … He was flattered by the degradation of his adultery, and as he told the story he felt its shame and joy. He knew he wished to be caught” (125, my emphasis). Until this point in the novel, and as discussed above, Benjamin is consumed by loneliness. His existence, as suggested by the word “revenant,” is deadened; it is the shame of the affair and abandonment—the memory of his shame—and the retelling of it, however, that arouses him rather than acting as a debilitating force. Shame is precisely what allows him to thrive under
what might normally be considered “bad circumstances” (27). For Benjamin, shame has become seductive and inviting. The feeling of shame and (in this case) its concomitant condition of being seen allows him to simultaneously experience joy. His ability to locate joy in shame is reminiscent of Ahmed’s assertion that “It is not that good things cause pleasure, but that the experience of pleasure is how some things become good for us over time” (The Promise of Happiness 23). To be sure, Benjamin has already experienced happiness in shame, which seems to have reconfigured the experience of shame for him. Benjamin’s joy in shame seems to come from a version of self-mimesis, such that he has already experienced happiness in shame, so his decision to “recreate the details” (even if only in his own head) conjures up shame, but shame now brings with it joy. In Girardian terms, the relation between Benjamin and the object of his desire, shame, is being mediated by an idealized other; in this case, however, Benjamin is imitating himself-as-other, an imago produced in the moment of self-dislocation made possible by Benjamin’s experiences of shame. Indeed, sometimes desire is based on the happenstances, mishaps, or unexpected nature of our own desires and what those desires produce.

When Janey asks Benjamin what he did with her lingerie, Benjamin lies, telling her that he “took it, the garter belt, to [the] dresser and buried it with its compatriots, with the lacy underthings, with the slips and panties and bras and stockings” (125). When I first sat down to write about this particular passage, the fact that Benjamin lies completely escaped me. For weeks, I wrote about his willing exposure of autoeroticism. When prompted to go back to the text and look at Janey’s response to his exposure, I found that I had missed something. What seemed most fascinating to me then was the way the novel glosses over the actual lie, allowing readers to believe, if only momentarily, that Benjamin tells all. Although Benjamin does not feel the need to lie—indeed, he “knew he wished to be caught” (125)—he still does, because in
addition to being an adulterer, “he was a liar, too, an exaggerator” (125). In this “next moment of fiction,” Benjamin’s “past lies fluttered and squirmed in this liar’s chrysalis. He was thinking about padded expense accounts and cheating on exams as he spoke” (125). Recalling his masturbatory episode simultaneously recalls a series of other shameful lies from his past. So while Benjamin tells Janey that he simply put the garter belt back in the drawer where it belonged, his lying flatters him. Moody’s use of the word “chrysalis” is interesting; the Oxford English Dictionary defines it as “the state into which the larva passes before becoming a perfect insect” (“chrysalis,” my emphasis). The word thus implies that Benjamin is undergoing a transformation, one in which these shameful lies are playing an important part. The “fluttering” and “squirming” of these past lies help bring Benjamin out of his revenant state. Shame provides him with the opportunity to not only feel, but to feel both better and more alive.

In The Ice Storm, Benjamin’s desire for shame means, of course, that shame can no longer be thought of simply as an inhibitor of, or to, enjoyment; we can now begin to think of it as a condition for enjoyment. As such, shame has the potential to be beneficent in its capacity to bring about happiness. Indeed, shame does not have to be understood as an obstacle to positive affective experiences at all—or if it is an obstacle, it should now be understood as a sometimes necessary one. In this case, one’s shameful experience may inhibit one’s enjoyment of a particular object, but not one’s overall happiness. It is important, however, to note that Benjamin is unable to sustain these happy feelings. As the party progresses, he goes back to being lonely: he “circled the room alone, and no companion … would salve his isolation. He was as alone as Elena, who couldn’t break a silence with a stranger, as alone as some fur trapper in the first light, in the wilderness of the new continent” (129). As we will see shortly, however, Elena’s attachment to shame enables her both to feel not so alone and to break the silences she so relies
on. Benjamin’s inability to maintain the happiness that results from shame may indicate, on the one hand, that shame is unable (at least for Benjamin) to produce prolonged happiness. On the other hand, however, Benjamin’s return to loneliness and unhappiness might also simply demonstrate the fleeting and often unsustainable nature of happiness. After all, as Ahmed argues, happiness “cannot eliminate the hap of what happens. Happiness means living with the contingency of this world, even when we aim to make happiness necessary” (*The Promise of Happiness* 31). In some ways, we might read *The Ice Storm* as a critique of this orientation toward happiness.

Though it may be true that many engage in this “desiring x to achieve y” approach to happiness, the approach is idealistic—and it is not one that Ahmed actively advocates. Indeed, in her conclusion to *The Promise of Happiness*, she writes that sometimes it is necessary to leave happiness for life (218); it may be necessary to cause unhappiness in order to live the life one wants to live. If we stop assuming that “happiness is what we must defend, if we start questioning the happiness we are defending, then we can ask other questions about life, about what we want from life, or what we want life to become” (218). Embracing unhappiness can open us up to possibilities. What if individuals desire shame simply because of how it (the “x” in Ahmed’s formula) makes them feel? What if one desires x for x? What if one finds value in the negativity? Orienting oneself towards feeling negative, after all, is still an orientation toward *feeling*. As my next section demonstrates, placing shame in Ahmed’s formula allows us to see that sometimes we desire things *not* to be happy but to feel something else—perhaps as a rebellion against feeling happy, but also perhaps simply in order to feel or simply to be a (desiring) subject. When Ahmed’s “x” equals shame, we learn that our desires might be more complex than the pursuit of happiness; sometimes we desire simply to pursue.
In Pursuit of Shame and Being

Judith Butler’s understanding of desire in *The Psychic Life of Power* stems from Baruch Spinoza’s “notion that desire is always the desire to persist in one’s own being” (28). While seemingly more pessimistic than Ahmed’s formulation in which desiring subjects have “subscribed” to happiness, Spinoza’s formulation asks us to think about the possibility that we are desiring subjects not in order to be *happy*, but simply in order *to be*. Butler later draws on Hegel’s “The Unhappy Consciousness,” which, Butler argues, implies

not merely that moral wretchedness cannot be coherently sustained, that it invariably concedes the bodily being that it seeks to deny, but that the pursuit of wretchedness, the attachment to wretchedness, is both the condition and the potential undoing of … subjection. If wretchedness, agony, and pain are sites or modes of stubbornness, ways of attaching to oneself, negatively articulated modes of reflexivity, then that is because they are given by regulatory regimes as the sites available for attachment, and a subject will attach to pain rather than not attach at all. (61)

So when one desires shame, it can be because shame makes one feel happy, but it can also be because a shameful attachment is the only attachment one is able to form. Indeed, while Benjamin and Mike yearn for some sense of happiness or community, and Wendy desperately attaches to “anything that didn’t have the feelings bleached out of it” (39), each character finds that shame is the only thing available to him or her. Happily, however, it is also the affect that makes happiness, community, and feeling *something* possible.

If we imagine shame for a moment as the wretchedness Butler speaks of (not a hard task, given the way shame is often felt and described), we must acknowledge Butler’s insistence that
shame cannot coherently sustain the subject—an argument that calls to mind both Sedgwick and Agamben’s recognition of shame’s double movement: when shame is felt, the subject undergoes a simultaneous experience of desubjectification (when the subject becomes an object in the eyes of the other) and subjectification (the creation of a new self, born out of the experience of desubjectification). In this movement toward (re)subjectification, however, it would seem that the subject coheres or becomes newly coherent. Wretchedness, then, might initially risk incoherence, but one can mobilize that wretchedness to create a new, better, freer self that is more coherent because of the wretchedness one has felt.

For Butler, and for Spinoza and Hegel before her, the object of desire is, if not irrelevant, then secondary to the bare fact of desire itself: the subject ensures its own subjectivity, its own being-in-the-world, by the very fact of its pursuit, which is to say by the fact of its desire. For Lacanian psychoanalysts, likewise, the objects to which our desire attaches are of secondary importance to the persistence of desire itself, because what we truly want is both irrevocably lost and ultimately unknowable. Leo Bersani’s discussion of desire in Is the Rectum a Grave? centers on Lacan’s theory of desire, a theory that emphasizes the need to retrieve one’s being that was lost in the moment one became a subject. Lacan argues that desire is “‘grounded in loss—not the loss of any particular object but rather of being itself. The sacrifice of being is the price we pay when we enter language, when we become creatures who have meaning’” (qtd. in Bersani 110, my emphases). Being thus comes to signify lost fullness, and desire is forever doomed “to recover that fullness through objects that are ontologically incommensurable with it” (110).

Drawing on Tim Dean and Kaja Silverman, Bersani writes that there is no foundational object of desire; as such, “we allow other creatures and things to incarnate the originary nonobject of desire. The very lack of that originary object propels us toward the world and toward the future;
lack and loss are the bases for our passionate interest in things, for desire’s multiple relations with the world’s appearances” (111). Every object we pursue is thus meant to recover “that which preexists all object-choices, to ‘repair’ … the ontological castration through which we presumably entered the human community of signification. No object could ever be an adequate substitute” (111). For Lacan and those, like Bersani, who follow him, desire is a fundamental condition of being a “meaningful” subject—or a being who exists in the social world; moreover, because the desire is for some irrecoverable and inarticulable element of pre-symbolic selfhood, being a meaningful subject requires a movement toward the lost object. Thus, despite their differences—and there are several—both strains of thought emphasize the importance of movement toward, or pursuit of, an object whose identity is subordinate to its function. In this sense, the object is infinitely substitutable; it is only important that desire be directed somewhere, in some direction, at something.

In what follows, however, and as The Ice Storm helps us understand, I propose that shame, as object of desire, is not infinitely substitutable, and serves a unique function; in Lacanian terms, it is the closest available approximation of that which is lost in the constitution of the self as subject precisely because of its doubleness: it is an object ontologically incommensurate with fullness or coherence, not simply because it reflects back to us the gaping hole at the centre of our contract with meaning, but because it approximates—even mimics—the moment of our own constitution as subjects. When shame is felt, we, simultaneously subject and object, located and dislocated, become witness to an echo of our “ontological castration”—we, “the creatures who have meaning,” lose that sense of meaning and become creatures (non-human objects of disgust, strangers to ourselves) even as, in the “relocation” which is the complement of dislocation in the mechanics of shame, our subjecthood—which is to say, our “meaning”—is
reconstituted in relation to the social body. To find pleasure in shame, and to seek it as an object in itself is to seek out, not the irrecoverable lost coherence, but the moment in which that loss came; it is to find pleasure in that fundamental schism, the moment of our “ontological castration.” Further, finding pleasure in shame violates the structure of meaning embedded in the social contract: seeking out the moment of ontological castration at the same time as it threatens us with the disintegration of our meaningful relations to the social repositions us outside of the normative codes of meaning through which the symbolic is constituted, even as, simultaneously, we remain inside of it, chastened by its disgusted gaze. In Girardian terms, the subject who desires shame for him or herself mimics the desire of a self whose pleasure emerges from the original castration; shame, then, offers the sensation of being shattered as approximation of the feeling of being whole. In practical terms, the subjective schism produced by the mechanics of shame allows the subject to reposition itself in relation to the social in a more satisfying way.

In *The Ice Storm*, shame’s transformative power as an object of desire is manifest in the way it helps characters reconceptualize their relation to the social. For instance, Elena Hood is characterized early in the novel as “always cold” (53). Wendy sometimes feels her mother “had turned deaf-mute or slipped into a coma; other times, the significance of Elena Hood’s unhappiness … settled over the house and gathered all of the Hoods around it” (132). Elena believes that silence is her “idiom for support and caring. Silence was permissive and contemplative and nonconfrontational and there was melody to it” (56). Elena was “small and compact and reserved. But she was sexual and capable of abandon” (61-62). We are told, with a hint of humour, that Elena “had read widely on the subject of personal growth. She wasn’t impervious to change. There was growth left in her. To pin her down, wriggling like a butterfly specimen, was a kind of violence” (62). Elena, unlike the other characters in the novel, does not
actively (or, we might say *consciously*) seek shame out, nor does she often put herself in situations where shame is not only possible, but a likely outcome. A brief glimpse into her childhood and adolescent experience of shame helps to explain why: Elena’s mother, Margaret O’Malley, is described as an alcoholic who “fell down the staircase and they left her there, at [Elena’s] father’s instructions. Her mother disrobed on the front lawn. Her mother locked herself into a shed, looking for stashed treasure” (58). Margaret O’Malley “lost a little bit of herself every evening. She turned to climb the stairs again, after each episode of humiliation, until there was no dignity left, no character to assassinate” (58). Elena’s father made sure Elena knew about her mother’s condition. He called her down from her room to witness each infraction against him, against his success. So when she was a child and her mother tried to take her own life with sleeping pills, he induced vomiting, called for an ambulance, and then brought Elena into the bedroom. Margaret O’Malley was soiled and unconscious. Shit and piss and bile puddled around her, in her linen, spattered on the rug. *This is your mother. Go ahead.*

*Look.* (58)

Elena is thus no stranger to humiliation; she recalls her father’s refusal to mince words when speaking to her mother, calling Margaret “*a disgrace. Damned disgrace*” (57). And “Elena hid behind servants and furniture and listened. She stored away the results. She repeated phrases of affection and hatred alike, until she couldn’t tell one from the other, couldn’t tell derision from respect, a beating from a fond hug” (57). So while Elena’s relation to shame indicates that she is probably not (consciously) searching for *shame*, the continual interruptions to her narrative focalizations with quotations from self help or personal growth books indicates that she is searching for *something* which, we shall see, the experience of shame helps her find.
When Elena arrives at the key party (the same party where Benjamin feels his shameful story’s shame and joy), she recognizes that the party “was going through some changes” (153) and recalls Thomas Harris’s 1969 self-help book entitled I’m Okay—You’re Okay, which describes these changes as follows:

as you watch and listen to people you can see them change before your eyes. It is a total kind of change. There are simultaneous changes in facial expression, vocabulary, gestures, posture and body functions, which may cause the face to flush, the heart to pound, or the breathing to become rapid. We can observe these changes in everyone. (152)

In The Transmission of Affect, Teresa Brennan notes that one of the primary mechanisms by which affects are communicated is by sight (56-57). This is a mechanism Brennan challenges by taking account of the role of the less valorized senses, but not one that she completely discounts—in fact, it is part of her larger project to demonstrate the myriad ways affects can be communicated. Following in Brennan’s footsteps, Lauren Berlant argues “that affective atmospheres are shared, not solitary, and that bodies are continuously busy judging their environments and responding to the atmospheres in which they find themselves” (15). No stranger to these conversations, Moody’s Elena is busy judging the atmosphere of the party, where she senses this “transactional model” (152) to be in full effect. Elena observes that the party was of “one mind in which the whole game was a shame” (153): “conversations became vague … husbands and wives tried to avoid one another. They slunk from the bar to their conversations with eyes downcast” (153). Sensing the shame that is permeating the party’s atmosphere, Elena “didn’t see how this transactional model was going to work for her” (152). As Elena’s childhood experiences of shame demonstrate, shame is not something to which she
consciously orients herself. And yet, “Uncomfortable as she was, how was Elena to account for the change that had overcome her? How was Elena to account for the joy that seized her not long after her arrival at the party?” (153). Even as shame is the affect most evidently felt in this environment, Elena “found herself suddenly elated at the party; there was no other way to put it. She felt the loosening of the constraints that had bound her since she had come of age, and she realized she would play” (153, my emphasis). The very thing that makes Elena feel elated, then—the object of Elena’s elation—is the effect of shame. While this sudden elation seems characteristic of the desire for shame in order to be happy that I analysed in the previous section, I suggest here that the cause of Elena’s elation is the sudden feeling of the loosening of that which had bound her, that which had previously “pin[ned] her down, wriggling like a butterfly specimen” (62). Indeed, “when Elena learned about the key party, she was stuck in Benjamin’s own constrictive system of decision making. It was hard for her to open up, to be in her own needs, wants” (155, emphasis in original). Feeling shame allows Elena to escape these constrictive systems, to be. As such, we can begin to understand shame as an object which generates a sense of freedom by allowing the subject, witnessing a simulation of her birth, to exert some control over her reconstitution.

Moreover, Elena’s engagement in shame also, as I briefly mentioned above, allows her to break through her attachment to silence and find company, even if only momentarily. Once the members of the key party have left the house and the very drunk and high Benjamin has been

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12 This also suggests that shame is not necessarily felt only through these notions of interrupted interest or broken reciprocity. Teresa Brennan’s concept of the transmission of affects, or affects as contagion, might indicate that affects can be felt where interest does not exist. If one unexpectedly stumbles upon a scene of shame that one does not want to see, one might feel ashamed for being there, feeling the atmosphere of shame, and having the shame of another take over the self: one was not interested in bearing witness to that shame, and yet: there shame is.
installed in the bathroom, Elena finds herself alone with Jim Williams. Having decided that she would play, and having realized that shame has a thing or two to offer her, Elena retrieves the bowl of keys and “dipped her hand in. Two sets of keys remaining there. One set, of course, was her own. But she avoided these keys. … Wistfully, she was playing. Resignedly, but by the time Elena handed [Jim] the dull, leather key chain, she was also hoping” (172). Shame, in this example, carries with it a sense of hope—but this is not a scene in which the optimism inherent in hope is negative or, in Berlant’s terms, “cruel.” Instead, Elena, as a subject that hopes, orients her newfound (shameful) self toward the future, toward the sustainment of a self that is not bound by silences, constricted by the wishes and desires of others. Since Jim is “standing here alone,” Elena proposes that they “just do what makes sense. Stay warm. Pass some time. That’s all” (174). As Elena talks, she and Jim avoid eye contact: “They were looking at their hands, looking at their coffee cups, looking at the lacerations in the very wood grain of the chopping board … They were looking around the room at refrigerator magnets and salt cellars and church keys and the stems of freshly cut flowers in the sink and bottle caps and a lone spice jar marked marjoram” (174). Elena and Jim are looking everywhere but at each other. They are keenly aware that to play this game, to begin this affair, is to subscribe to the shame of it all. But Elena has already felt the effects of this decision, and likes what she feels. As a result, she is rather forceful in convincing Jim to accompany her: “I don’t have any use for you in the long run. If that’s what you’re worried about. If you don’t want to talk about it ever again, you don’t have to. Now don’t make me feel as though I’m being too forward, okay? Don’t make me feel that trying to persuade is unbecoming” (174). In her insistence that he not make her feel as though she is being too forward or unbecoming, there is the recognition that she is being too forward and unbecoming and that the whole thing, like the key party itself, is shameful (a fact made further
evident in her suggestion that he never has to mention the affair ever again). Formerly comforted by silences, this is the longest uninterrupted speech we have from Elena in the entire novel. Shame allows Elena to let go of silence and speak up, confronting Jim in order to be this new and different self.

If, following Spinoza, desire “is always the desire to persist in one’s own being,” a desire for shame would mean that shame is crucial to this persistence. But this formulation is not as pessimistic as it may initially appear. Indeed, as Michael Snediker points out in *Queer Optimism*, shame “inhibits not only enjoyment, but continuity. To live without shame, hypothetically, would be to live continuously, without the trauma of wanting to disappear, without the need to reinvent one’s ‘younger self’ as a new (if no less fictional) person” (18-19). A refusal, rejection, or avoidance of shame could be tantamount to a refusal, rejection, or avoidance of the discontinuity that is integral to the continual reinvention of the self; a desire for shame can thus be understood as a desire to persist in desisting, such that desisting is actually reconfigured as self-persistence. If, however, one’s sense of self is what originally generated the feeling of lack of fullness, then desiring shame is tantamount to desiring that undoing. If one desires shame, then, one consistently desires that undoing, and as such, desires a sense of unfulfillment that runs counter to Ahmed’s formulation of desiring x in order to desire y (where y is happiness or fulfillment). To desire shame is to desire unfulfillment because shame is an object that instead promises that one will be undone, desubjectified. But in desiring unfulfillment (via shame), one paradoxically fulfills that desire: if desire is, as Bersani suggests, that which can never be fulfilled, to desire an object that promises unfulfillment is to have picked the right object, the one that will actually fulfill desire’s impossibility, or at least provide exactly what it promises, which is unfulfillment.
I have already (parenthetically) gestured toward the possibility that we might think of Elena’s desire for shame as an unconscious one. Indeed, her gravitation to shame in the above example may stem from what we might call her melancholic incorporation of her mother’s shame. After all, Elena “liked the sense of possibility in sad things” (161); she is not impervious to the possibilities inherent in negativity. When one desires shame, one desires that which will always make one feel less full—in desiring shame, this sense of doom Bersani speaks of is doubled because shame does not pretend to offer fullness. Instead, shame promises the radical reconstitution of the self, a sense of unfulfillment, and the power to undo in order to make new again. As such, shame holds the potential for reparation: one gives up one’s status as a subject in shame—if only momentarily—in order to put together a new self. Shame provides Elena with the opportunity to change her course. Again, following Spinoza and Snediker’s theorizations of desire and of shame, respectively, Elena may (unconsciously) desire shame because of its ability to aid her in re-evaluating her former/younger self and what she can do to alter aspects of her life. Her elation in shame comes at a key party, which is a pivotal (or key, if I may) turning point in the novel. Having “spent the afternoon thinking about her family” and childhood (154), and having just confronted Benjamin about his affair with Janey, Elena realizes shame’s role in her life—its necessity to her construction as a subject, how integral it is to her being-in-the-world: shame is precisely what allows her to be. For the first time, Elena decides not simply to bear witness to the shames that surround her, but to become an active participant: “She would select a key. She would clutch it to her, permit it to dangle around her neck, between her small, subdued breasts. She would play” (153).

At the beginning of this chapter, I drew on Ahmed’s assertion that alienation is an experience of one’s self being stolen. I want to suggest here that engaging in shame can make
possible the retrieval—or at least recreation—of the lost/stolen self. This desire for shame, then, means that one desires that interruption to interest or enjoyment, which one could say is equivalent to desiring discontinuity (as synonymous with interruption). This is not to say, however, that all experiences of shame are positively regenerative, or even hold the possibility of positive regeneration; instead, this formulation asks that we recognize the possibilities shame can sometimes offer us—that if we reflect on all instances of shame, we may find something regenerative there, and we may not. But even in those wholly negative experiences, we can learn something about others, about societal conventions, and about our need to abide by or break those conventions.

Paul’s experience with shame does not generate the same positive results as it does for his mother, Elena, though he similarly benefits from the knowledge that shame affords him. We are told that Paul “knew what love was. He was going to pursue this education. He didn’t want to be as sad as his parents” (89). Thus, although Paul does not seem consciously attached to shame, the series of rejections he receives in his search for love consistently produce feelings of shame instead. As part of this educational pursuit, Paul is on his way to meet Libbets Casey, a girl from his school, with whom Paul is “infatuated” (89). But Libbets loves Paul only “as a friend” (180). This revelation seems, for Paul, another moment “that just set him up for the next long torture passage” (181), and he marvels “at the sheer beautiful predictability of it, the predictability of his loneliness” (181). When Libbets gets sick from mixing drugs and alcohol, she climbs into bed and falls “into unconsciousness” (188). Paul gets in next to her and means “only to curl his arm around her and to feel for her the sentiment that parents feel for helpless little kids. He meant only to help, to feel that he could help” (188). But instead, “his erection began to rub against Libbets’s voluptuous ass. He knew what he was doing, but he wasn’t admitting it. He was feeling
virtuous. His dick was making its own decisions, ones that involved chiefly sorrow and shame” (189). In many ways, this scene parallels Paul’s father’s autoerotic episode at the beginning of the novel. Unlike his father’s autoeroticism, however, the shame Paul experiences grants him little more than recognition of who he is. Indeed, “Paul was gifted with a sudden moment of insight. He could see that the lovely cheeks of her ass, her coccyx, her knobby lower vertebrae, the breasts he held in his hand, would not bring him the good feeling he wanted. He could see what kind of creep he was. He would be no more there afterward than he was before. … And he came. By himself” (189). Paul understands, in this moment, that he is a “creep”; he understands that he is not going to become a “sensuous man” (189). This experience of shame does not produce happiness—nor does it afford Paul the knowledge or feelings of love that he seeks—but it also does not deteriorate the conditions for good or positive feelings (and as such, is still not a relation of cruel optimism): Paul is no more and no less after this experience than he was before. He is simply “a creep”—there is no judgment that accompanies this realization; Paul just is.

Paul’s experience of shame is perhaps less surprising than his family’s various experiences, especially because it is more characteristic of the typical experience of shame—one that is felt as an acute experience of the self. This experience of himself does not, however, surprise him; he is not disgusted by the self that shame has revealed. Instead, his recognition comes with a sense of acceptance, of placidity: it “was nothing more than a jab in the midst of the precipitous movement toward ejaculation” (189). Realizing that he “wasn’t a man at all. He was a boy. A privileged kid” (191), Paul decides that the “best thing to do was to attempt to adhere to his normal daily schedule” (190). This decision to simply “adhere” to his “daily schedule” signals his acceptance of his current identity. Shame, for Paul, is not revolutionary, but it still provides him with the knowledge that allows him to be and to accept the identity he has
misplaced. And so, Paul gets on the train back to New Canaan where he is met at the train station by his family, who “were looking down, … scuffing the snow and ice in the parking lot” (277). Just as the novel begins with shame, so does it end—or at least with the avoidance of eye contact and the downcast eyes and/or heads characteristic of shame. His family has “a lot to tell” Paul “And it’s not all good” (278). But it is not all bad, either.
Chapter 3

Masochism and the Erotics of Shame in the Life and Works of Bob Flanagan

“Is it that sometimes the pain inside has to come to the surface, and when you see evidence of the pain inside, you finally know you’re really here? Then when you watch the wound heal it’s comforting, isn’t it?”
(Steven Shainberg, Secretary)

“I … did a show called Bob Flanagan’s Sick in New York (at Art at the Anchorage), and in L.A. A magazine from London called Performance gave me a bad review; the writer compared me (which I thought was great) to ‘an amateur magician at a children’s birthday party; embarrassed and embarrassing.’ But I thought, ‘That’s what I’ve always wanted to be!’”
(Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist)

At the beginning of Chapter Two, I argued that the characters in Moody’s The Ice Storm are “turned on” by shame. While I suggested that not all of them are “turned on” in the sexual sense of the phrase, I want to return to one particular scene in the novel—one in which Benjamin does derive sexual pleasure from shame—as a catalyst for this chapter’s investigation into the possibility that, for some, shame can be an erotic experience. The scene to which I am referring here is the one in which Benjamin intends to drive his co-worker, Melody, home from the interoffice Christmas party, but pulls over and “simply put[s] his face in her lap” (16), “tongu[ing] the spot on her skirt where he imagine[s] his disgrace might concentrate itself” (16). In Chapter Two, I noted that Benjamin’s behaviour in this scene is indicative of a form of masochism that derives pleasure from emotional pain (a reminder that masochism is not only defined in the reductive sense of deriving pleasure from physical pain). Indeed, Benjamin is driven by a desire to debase himself; this debasement ultimately leads him to recognize his relationality, his connection to others, and this recognition allows him to feel happy, if only for a moment.
The crucial part of this scene, for my purposes here, is the point at which, thinking about the “look of inconsolable shame” with which his family would greet him upon finding out about this affair, Benjamin ejaculates and “All the life went out of him” (18). In this passage, shame precipitates a moment of intense sexual pleasure, which Moody describes as culminating in a kind of death, a description that recalls Georges Bataille’s designation, in Erotism, of the orgasm or moment of climax as “a little death” (170). Bataille sees the orgasm as a moment of ultimate pleasure in which the individual transcends, if only momentarily, the boundaries that constantly contain and constrain the body and the self from others or otherness. Given this momentary rupture, or “little death,” Bataille argues that central to the very nature of eroticism is violence and/or violation (16). He goes on to suggest that “the whole business of eroticism is to strike at the inmost core of the living being, so that the heart stands still” (17), and to “destroy the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives” (17). Bataille’s argument ultimately suggests that eroticism is the desire to orient ourselves toward these momentary deaths of the self, bringing individuals (who are fundamentally discontinuous beings, existing as individual entities, disconnected from others) into a state in which continuity between self and other, between one body and another, becomes possible. Octavio Paz’s The Double Flame: Love and Eroticism continues this line of thought, suggesting that eroticism is a communicative medium, “a thirst for otherness” (15 emphasis in original), which can revitalize social interaction (128). As I argued in Chapter Two, shame, in The Ice Storm, enables Benjamin to recognize his relationality and thus to understand that his being-in-the-world is much more socially constituted than he previously understood. As such, we might similarly designate shame as a “thirst for otherness,” able to revitalize social connectivity. And, of course, the moment shame is felt, one experiences a violent rupture: the self becomes strange and a new self is born.
Given the similarities between the shame experience and the erotic experience, it should come as no surprise that Benjamin is able to derive sexual pleasure from shame. Indeed, shame here enables a kind of transcendence, what Jesse Goldhammer describes as eroticism’s “ecstatic loss of control” (30). The mere thought of Benjamin’s family’s looks of shame (and the accompanying shame he would feel at seeing these looks) precipitates his loss of control, exemplified by the fact that Benjamin becomes the object of the sentence in which his orgasm is articulated: “All the life went out of him” (18, my emphasis). By seeking out shame, Benjamin dissolves the boundaries of individualism, making possible the ecstatic formation of a sense of community. The pleasure Benjamin feels is in part from the rupture itself (and what it allows him to understand), but also from the return from, and his survival of, the dissolution of his subjectivity. Benjamin brings shame on himself, endures it, and survives.

Amalia Ziv is one of the few theorists (Leo Bersani being another, whom I will engage with later in this chapter) who recognize the possibility that the loss of self experienced in shame can be experienced erotically. Taking her cue from Georges Bataille, she argues that “eroticism always entails violation of individual boundaries and loss of self-posses­sion. Humiliation, like other forms of violence, violates—if only temporarily—our sense of self. Hence, by dissolving our boundaries and divesting us of our discontinuous self, humiliation can inaugurate us into the erotic” (170). We see this with Benjamin in the above example; immediately after all the life goes out of him, “the moment turned. Really. For a second everything smelled sad and good” (18). Shame is what initiates the orgasm, this “little death” of his self; it is what catalyzes his realization of connectivity and brings about a brief moment of pleasure and happiness. While Ziv acknowledges the “tricky business” of prying shame and humiliation apart, “for they both partly overlap and occasionally metamorphose into each other” (169), she maintains that there is an
important distinction between the two such that “shame itself can in no way be considered an erotic affect” (169). Ziv, however, gives few compelling reasons for the necessity of this distinction. She argues that shame “can be a solely intrasubjective affect, while humiliation always involves a relationship—coming from the Latin *humilis*, meaning ‘low,’ it assumes hierarchy, hence a relationship” (170). She goes on to suggest that an individual “can be shamed without being humiliated … and humiliated without feeling shame” (170), and that, finally, “although it’s possible to shame someone unintentionally, humiliating another person usually involves … purposive action” (170). While Ziv is not wrong to point to shame’s status as an intrasubjective affect, she ignores the fact that shame, too, always involves a relationship.

Shame, after all, is the most social of affects; we often feel shame when we have learned what society and others in that society expect of us, and when we *care* about those expectations and our (in)ability to live up to them. Ziv also undermines her argument with a rhetorical structure rooted in qualifiers. Suggesting that, for instance, an individual “can be shamed without being humiliated” and vice versa simultaneously suggests that an individual can be shamed *while* being humiliated. Similarly, to suggest that “it’s possible to shame someone unintentionally” and that “humiliating another person *usually involves* … purposive action” conversely communicates that it is simultaneously possible that a person might feel humiliated *without* having been subjected to purposive action. Ziv’s point about humiliation’s ability to dissolve our boundaries and inaugurate us into the erotic is astute and in line with what I intend to investigate in this chapter.

What I would add to Ziv’s argument, though, is that shame exists on a continuum with humiliation: they are experienced at varying degrees of intensity. As such, both are potentially erotic affects and neither can be said to run counter to sexual arousal.
In Chapter Two, I sought to demonstrate the possibility that one can desire shame. This chapter builds on that possibility, but looks more closely at what it means for shame to be integral not only to one’s identity or conception of oneself as a masochist, but to one’s ability to achieve sexual pleasure—and what it might mean for one to turn to shame, specifically, as the avenue to sexual pleasure. By refocusing attention on the shame that is at the heart of some masochistic practices, we can begin to understand the ways in which these practices are an attempt to master shame, to teach the individual how to find pleasure in an experience that might otherwise result in an intense disgust with one’s sense of self or the intensification of one’s feelings of worthlessness. As I hope to demonstrate (and as I hope the above example from *The Ice Storm* helps to illuminate), one’s desire for shame—in the form of masochism—can be a survival mechanism in experiences of shame (where the pleasure of that survival is not occluded). In this next section, I turn to the work of Bob Flanagan, who, unlike our fictional Benjamin Hood, was a real and self-described “supermasochist.” I investigate Flanagan’s *The Pain Journal* (2000) and a series of interviews conducted by Andrea Juno and V. Vale, printed in *Bob Flanagan: Supermasochist* (1993), to further interrogate what it might mean to derive sexual pleasure from shame and, especially, what might be at stake in such desires.

**Bob Flanagan: Supermasochist**

Bob Flanagan was born with Cystic Fibrosis (CF) in 1952, a genetic disorder that, in Flanagan’s own words, stems from a defective gene that “causes the body to produce far too much mucus … [which] gets into the tiniest parts of the lungs where it never leaves, and furnishes a great breeding ground for bacteria, viruses, pneumonia, etc.” (*Supermasochist* 11). The disease hinders the individual from receiving adequate oxygen, causing depletions in the
blood and brain, and ultimately leads to the individual’s death (from drowning in his/her own bodily secretions). CF is a disease one usually dies from at a young age, but when *The Pain Journal* (Flanagan’s personal day-to-day account of his physical deterioration in his final year of life) begins, Flanagan is in his forty-second year of life—an age far beyond that which any doctor envisioned he would live to see. Flanagan, however, refused to be categorized as just another sufferer of CF. Instead, his life and works were dedicated to the practice and performance of sadomasochism, of which shame was an integral part.

Flanagan’s performance art—and his body, which serves as his canvas—is the embodiment of the “strange” relation to shame which was suggested in my analysis of *The Ice Storm* in Chapter Two. Though masochism is certainly nothing new in Western consciousness and culture—even if it has always existed far outside the periphery of mainstream culture—Flanagan’s work offers a particularly fruitful and exemplary case for analyzing the relation between shame, subjectivity, and the social. For one, Flanagan’s *The Pain Journal*, a chronicle of the last year of his life, represents his own theorizations of his relation to pain and shame, and provides a theoretical framework within which to understand Flanagan’s life and art, and his life as art. Indeed, for Flanagan, there is no means of separating the two; he practices masochism as a means of living, and prolonging, his life. Flanagan outlived his medical prognosis by about three decades, and he attributes this fact to the way he chose to live his life. Flanagan’s case thus presents perhaps the most important example of the positive potential of shame, and his *The Pain Journal* offers invaluable and unprecedented insight into his particular form of masochism.

But Flanagan’s case is also unique because of his particular relation to pain. As *The Pain Journal* makes clear, his every waking moment is marked by physical and emotional pain, and this constant pain functions as a barrier to social connection. Indeed, Flanagan’s case represents
the affective opposite of Moody’s *The Ice Storm*: whereas the Hoods’ connection to the world around them is inhibited by their complete disaffection, Flanagan’s relation to the social is compromised by overaffection: his anguish and distress as a result of his physical pain effectively root him inside his own subjectivity, reminding him of his own boundedness and inhibiting social and, especially, erotic connection. As I intend to demonstrate, and as Flanagan himself suggests, he turns to his form of masochism because it produces shame, which in turn, by directing his attention outside the boundaries of his physical and psychological self and shattering the coherence of his self, opens up the possibility of connection to the social realm. Further, Flanagan’s relations to shame and eroticism are complicated by the fact that, as he makes clear in *The Pain Journal*, the pain which he suffers as a result of his disease estranges him from his own body, an intrasubjective power struggle which is mirrored in the intersubjective dynamic manifest in his relationship to his partner and dominatrix, Sheree Rose. Flanagan’s particular masochism is thus an “embodied masochism” (a concept to which I will return later in this chapter) that allows us to examine the intrasubjective experience of shame, which is all too often subordinated to the more obvious intersubjective dynamic upon which much theorization and practice of masochism focuses.

Finally, despite the differences between experiences of disaffection and overaffection, Flanagan’s *The Pain Journal* allows us to see that, for both Flanagan and the Hoods, an intensified subjectivity leads to an over-awareness of the boundaries between self and other which inhibits social connection. Further, for both Flanagan and the Hoods, it is shame which serves as catalyst for release from an exaggerated subjectivity by momentarily freeing the subject from the confines of his or her self-focus and, in focusing attention on the gaze of an Other and thus producing an awareness of the social existence of the self, allowing for a reconstitution of
its relation to the social realm. Flanagan’s case, though, also allows us to examine more precisely and thoroughly the positive—if “strange”—relation between shame and eroticism, a relation toward which Moody’s novel gestures and which, as we shall see, is crucial to a fuller understanding of shame’s transformative potential.

Because of his CF, however, Flanagan’s relation to shame is complicated by his relation to pain. Indeed, the pervasiveness of his pain is such that, for critics and reviewers of his masochistic performances, his pain—and his replication of it in performances—dominates attempts to make sense of Flanagan’s masochism. One reviewer of *The Pain Journal*, Lisa Carver, notes that, “Born a Catholic with cystic fibrosis, Bob Flanagan was raised confined and tortured—nuns hit him with rulers, nurses tied him to hospital beds so he wouldn’t dislodge the tubes going in and out of his body. He pretty much had to find what was pleasurable and humorous in suffering” (nerve.com); Roger Ebert’s review of Kirby Dick’s documentary *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist* focuses on a brief interview in the film in which Flanagan’s parents recall Flanagan as a child having “pus drained from his lungs by needles” (rogerebert.com). Ebert speculates that “since he felt better afterward, perhaps [Flanagan] identified the pain with relief” (rogerebert.com); Lynda Hart reflects on some of Flanagan’s earliest memories of his ability to transform pain into sexual pleasure, and insists that one of the most “fascinating aspects of Flanagan’s masochism is its extraordinary simplicity, according to the connections he makes himself” (137). Flanagan himself acknowledges (and jokes about) his appropriation of pain, claiming that he is “Fighting sickness with sickness” (*Supermasochist* opening pages), and that “the bondage aspect of my situation (being a prisoner to other forces) was sexualized so I could survive it. In order to not be terrified by it, I sexualized it” (*Supermasochist* 36). Despite Flanagan’s “admissions” here, I suggest that reading his
masochism as a “simple” and essentially inevitable consequence of his disease not only
oversimplifies Flanagan’s relation to pain, but, as we shall soon see, returns us to a rather
reductive understanding of masochistic sexual practices. Though such critics are correct in
noting that Flanagan reconfigures his relation to pain in order to cope with the painfulness of
his disease, in assuming such a “simplistic” connection between his performances and his
disease, and especially in contending, like Carver, that Flanagan “had to find what was
pleasurable and humorous in suffering,” critics often fail to see Flanagan’s decision as a decision
and risk stripping him of his freedom as a desiring subject, denying him agency. In “Interview
One,” Flanagan recalls the ways in which he “was forced to be in the medical world, so [he]
turned that into something [he] could have control over instead of something that was controlling
[him]” (Supermasochist 11). Flanagan’s emphasis on the word “control,” and its contrast against
the word “forced” (whose import is underscored by Flanagan’s use of italics), is telling: he
makes a conscious decision to practice masochism, and his decision is not simply about coping
with his pain. Beyond survival, he seeks control; there is a struggle happening inside his body,
and he seeks to establish himself as an active agent.

Though there is no doubt that Flanagan’s masochism is very much centred on perfecting
the ability to find pleasure in pain, there is certainly more at work here than this derivative
formulation. Indeed, in his prose poem simply entitled “Why,” Flanagan presents no less than
eighty-four possible explanations for his lifestyle choices. This far-from-exhaustive list includes
statements such as “Because it feels good” (Supermasochist 64); “because my parents loved me
even more when I was suffering” (65); “because of Morticia Addams and her black dress with its
octopus legs” (65); “because I can take it like a man” (65); and “because I’m not normal” (65).
Among the sometimes obvious and sometimes bizarre assertions are a few claims Flanagan
decided to emphasize in capital letters, thus giving them the quality of a rallying cry: “because I say FUCK THE SICKNESS” (64); “because my parents said BE WHAT YOU WANT TO BE” (64); “because, as somebody once said, HE’S GOT MORE BALLS THAN I DO” (65); “because NO PAIN, NO GAIN” (65); “because SPARE THE ROD AND SPOIL THE CHILD” (65); and, finally, the statement that concludes the poem (and to which I will return later in this chapter): “because YOU ALWAYS HURT THE ONE YOU LOVE” (65).

Flanagan’s “Why” not only illustrates the complex and complicated nature of masochism by gesturing toward the myriad reasons individuals engage in it, but highlights how much his own form of masochism, with its origins in the diseased body, refuses any simple explanation. Flanagan’s CF serves as a reminder that pain does not always originate from external forces that act against and upon our bodies; his disease attacks the self—it is an attack on the self by the self, and an attack which Flanagan cannot control, regardless of the various and never-ending pain prescriptions. I thus read Flanagan’s version of masochism as, first and foremost, an embodied masochism. In this embodied form of masochism, the sadist or dominant is his body and the masochist is his self. Such a separation of self (consciousness, or mind) from body is, of course, problematic, and I am not suggesting that Flanagan somehow exists fully separate from his body; instead, I am suggesting that Flanagan’s experience of his disease—his interpretation of the relationship between self and body—is often articulated in ways that suggest the antagonistic power play so fundamental to masochism. In his journals as well as in interviews, his body is often represented as some strange or oppressive thing with which he must struggle; for example, he relates, in Supermasochist, “I can’t breathe well or do a lot of things because of the body I was given” (32).
Further, because his CF pre-existed his masochistic practice, this “embodied masochism” in which he struggles against the body which inflicts him with pain is simulated in some of his masochistic practices. In his *Fuck Journal*, for instance, he describes his experience of a performance in which he drives nails through his penis: “It’s a hard thing to do but what a feeling when it’s through! What a sense of control over my own body” (qtd. in *Supermasochist* 49). Afterward, he emphasizes the importance of his double role as producer and sufferer of pain: “That’s why I do this to myself, because if somebody else were doing it, it would just be the pain. Here, because I’m both the dominant and the submissive, I get the best of both worlds” (68). The diseased body does not hold all of the control here: Flanagan struggles against it by both managing the pain it inflicts on him with various medical treatments and painkillers as well as creating new forms of physical and emotional pain that overwhelm the physical pain that stems from his CF. We most see the exchange of control when Flanagan externalizes his masochistic tendencies, engaging in activities that create more pain to distract from the pain that is largely out of his control. In an interview with Deborah Drier (1996), Flanagan talks about how individuals with CF go through several stages growing up: “when you’re a teenager, you go through a phase of hiding the fact that you have this disease. I’m in the phase now where it seems easier to me to reverse that, easier to push it all out and almost make fun of the disease, turning the tables on it, letting people see it, making it an object, something people have to look at” (79). In another interview in *Supermasochist*, Flanagan speaks about a game in which he would impose restrictions on himself and notes that because “fate had dealt me a strange blow which I had to deal with, I countered with an artificial system to checkmate that. I was making a mockery out of something serious that had happened to me, just by making up all these silly rules. And this mirrored the rules I had no choice but to follow” (32). We can read his desire to
“push it all out” and to counter the disease with his own system of self-inflicted pain as his way of asserting some control in this particular (embodied) sadomasochistic relationship.

But Flanagan’s “embodied masochism” is only one facet of his masochism. To read his relationship with his body as entirely antagonistic would be to oversimplify the situation and risk reducing his subjectivity to an alienated victimhood. In the preface to her interview with Flanagan and his mistress, Rose, Drier cites Donna Haraway, who recognizes that “contemporary ‘victims’ of disease are from the medical establishment’s point of view nothing but the unfortunate hosts of whatever agent is going to harm or kill them” (“Rack Talk” 78). Drier’s inclusion of Haraway is meant both to provide context for her concern that the diseased body is not honoured as a “thinking, conscious subject” (78), as well as to introduce her goal for the interview: “to emphasize the value of [the] subjectivity [of the diseased body], the value of this speaking ‘I’” (78). Drier is right to point out the ways in which we are heavily influenced by the language of the medical industry, to the extent that we tend to think of disease as its own life-form (and rightfully so, medically speaking), as an agent assaulting its host: the self becomes separated from the diseased body, a body which the self no longer controls. Attempting to reconnect the diseased body with its status as a subject, Drier describes Flanagan as “an artist who was always more than the disease, cystic fibrosis, that finally killed him” (78). Though her statement in one way threatens to solidify the very opposition that she is attempting to undermine by referring to CF as an agent acting against Flanagan, she complicates such an easy separation between body and subject by recognizing that Flanagan is the diseased body—though he is also “more than” that (78, my emphasis). Flanagan, too, while turning the disease into an object, often simultaneously objectifies himself, making it difficult to collapse the relation between disease and body into a strict subject-object dichotomy. In what follows, I will work with and through
this tension between being a diseased body and being subject to a body attacked by a disease, a tension that Flanagan must continually navigate. And as will become clear, though critics tend to focus entirely on Flanagan’s relation to physical pain (as I demonstrated above), it is shame which is at the heart of Flanagan’s complex masochism. Flanagan turns to shame as a means of bridging the alienating gaps which his pain both produces and intensifies: first, the intrasubjective gap between his self and his self-as-other (that is, the dissonance between his self and the body from which he feels alienated); and second, the intersubjective gap (so often overlooked by critics obsessed with Flanagan’s reproductions of pain) between Flanagan and the social body.

Flanagan’s embodied masochism turns upon two forces, or impulses: first, the power struggle between sadist and masochist, and second, the attempt to dissolve the boundaries between the two. If his production of pain is, in the sense argued above, an attempt to establish his authority in the embodied masochistic relationship, it is also an attempt to eroticize the relationship in order to facilitate an intrasubjective connection. While Flanagan often speaks of himself as being alienated from his body, he also recognizes the connectedness between his disease, his body, and his subjectivity. In “Interview One,” Flanagan makes two important assertions. The first is his assertion that he “wouldn’t be either an artist or a masochist now if it weren’t for being ill” (Supermasochist 81). What we have here is Flanagan’s recognition that although CF might be attacking his body and, as such, bringing about the eventual destruction of the self, at the same time, CF is what constitutes his particular sense of self. Indeed, Flanagan has acknowledged that “Cystic fibrosis has made me the person that I am, and I can’t even imagine how I’d be without it—it’s impossible to think in those terms” (84).
Secondly, and of equal importance, is his articulation of the mechanics of sadomasochism: while people tend to think that the sadist controls the masochist, Flanagan understands that “the masochist is also in control” (81, my emphasis). He insists that “In an S/M relationship, both parties are always exchanging control back and forth, or just playing around with the whole idea of control. The dynamic shifts from moment to moment” (81). This exchanging of control foregrounds what Lynda Hart recognizes (and stresses) in *Between the Body and the Flesh* as the consensual nature of sadomaschistic relationships; she argues that “a crucial component of the masochistic relationship is the contract, an agreement that is often formalized … [and] which presupposes consent, reciprocity, and obligations that do not affect individuals outside its parameters” (69). In Flanagan’s embodied masochism, though, where is the contract? I have already suggested that in this version of masochism, Flanagan’s diseased body acts as the sadist, to which he must submit—and submit he does. However, his submission to the sadism of his disease is mediated by his reproduction of it in his masochistic performances. Of particular importance is his eroticization of pain: by reconfiguring his affective response to pain through his performances, Flanagan makes possible a reconfigured response to the painfulness of his CF. In one sense, this does help him “cope” with the pain, and is a form of survival, as noted by critics like Ebert and Carver. However, there is another, often overlooked element to his masochism. Flanagan’s masochistic performances are enabled by a contract between sadist and masochist that includes two possibilities for conclusion: an “out” clause, that is, some form of “safe word” which immediately terminates the performance when it exceeds established boundaries, or the (often erotic) resolution of the performance, through orgasm or other means of seeing it through to its end. His embodied masochism, though, includes no such “out” clause, save through Flanagan’s death, an “out” that he will eventually and inevitably
succumb to, and one which he does not want to inflict upon himself via suicide. In one way, we can understand Flanagan’s relation to manufactured pain as synecdoche for his relation to always-imminent death—that is, as mini-enactments of the ultimate out clause. Flanagan himself understands his performances in this way:

You can experience these little deaths along the way, and they prepare you for the ‘big death,’ or they release a lot of tensions linked to death. That’s what a lot of SM activity is: these little, planned-out scenarios that are like dying: ‘I’m underwater and I could drown!’ But it’s only for five or ten minutes; it’s only experiential and then it’s over and you walk around and live out your day, relieved. A lot of times after these SM experiences I’ll be totally at peace; I’ll feel great. And I won’t have to think about it anymore; it’s just something I did and got worked up to do. Especially in the early days, these feelings would build and build until I’d have to do it, but once I’d had enough sensation and gone far enough, there was an immediate release afterwards, and I felt peaceful, calm and sharp—like I could do anything. (55)

Flanagan’s notion of the “mini death” as synecdoche for the ultimate object of desire—actual death—calls to mind Freud’s writings on the death drive. Indeed, Freud’s ideas have been taken up by many theorists writing about masochism. Volker Woltersdorff, for instance, notes how the point of masochism is to find enjoyment in self-destruction, thus blurring the lines between the death drive and pleasure principle (133). Flanagan’s continual flirtations with death thus represent, in one sense, his attempts to simulate the out clause in his embodied masochistic contract. His attempts at self-destruction are thus a way of controlling death to the extent that this kind of control is possible.
To think of Flanagan’s tendencies toward self-destruction in these ways allows us to understand that masochism—at least for Flanagan—enables individuals to refigure self-annihilation as self-preservation. However, the highly erotic nature of his performances adds another layer of complexity to his relation to pain. Freud himself recognized the erotic component in masochism, arguing that self-destruction “cannot take place without libidinal satisfaction” (qtd. in Woltersdorff 134), suggesting an inherent link between eroticism and self-annihilation that is certainly born out in Flanagan’s masochism. But what is the significance of the relation between this “self-annihilation” and eroticism? Returning to Bataille, whom I cited at the beginning of this chapter, we remember that eroticism, and especially the orgasm, make possible a temporary “forgetting” of the boundaries of subjectivity which allows for a temporary transcendence of the gap between self and other. In Flanagan’s case, the eroticization of pain is a mechanism by which experiences of pain can trigger a similar “forgetting,” allowing Flanagan to escape the bounds of his intensified subjectivity and reach out to the other. We see this logic of connection in Flanagan’s description, in Supermasochist, of certain productions of pain in relationship with Rose:

> Sometimes the whipping feels awful and I can’t wait for it to stop, but afterwards the fact that I went through it and that she wanted to do it produces a real rush of sexuality and closeness; a feeling of almost being protected; a bonding between the two of us that you never get with any other kind of relationship—never. It’s the knowledge that we both went through this thing together. (36)

The tension here between the subject’s—Flanagan’s—pain and his desire to have it stop, and the other—Rose—who is causing it comes to a head in an erotic resolution that effaces alienation and replaces it with intimacy. If we understand Flanagan’s masochistic relationship with Rose as
in some sense a reproduction of his embodied masochism, then we can imagine the inverse: the production of a bond between himself and the body from which he is alienated born of the experience and the “knowledge that we both went through this thing together.” Flanagan’s desire for self-destruction, then, is a desire for a reconfigured subjectivity that reintegrates him with the source of his pain.

If Flanagan’s engagement with physical pain enables this reconfigured subjectivity, what is the role of humiliation? As he notes, “Why would somebody desire being humiliated when society is so humiliating already?” Because for whatever reason … you’re into it; you get turned on by it” (Supermasochist 68). When asked by Juno what “the embarrassment feel[s] like,” Flanagan responds by telling her that “It’s a rush. SM has its humiliation built into it, and I don’t like the kind of humiliation where somebody’s yelling and calling you names artificially. But humiliation that comes out of maintaining your lifestyle is putting your money where your mouth is: you claim to have this relationship, so be consistent” (41). In order to explain what he means, he draws on a memory of an anniversary party his friends threw for him and Rose, his partner and dominatrix. His friend, Mike Kelley, had read a piece entitled “One Hundred Reasons,” listing different spanking paddles. What Flanagan did not know was that Rose and Mike had decided to humiliate Flanagan by pulling his pants down in front of all of their friends and spanking him with a large fraternity paddle one hundred times while Mike read his piece. Flanagan recalls that it was embarrassing at first. It was like jumping into an ice-cold swimming pool, but I had nowhere else to go. I would have looked like a bigger idiot saying ‘No,’ so I just did it. Every part of me was going, ‘No, I don’t want to do this,’ but then you just say, ‘Do it, because you’ll look like a worse fool not doing it.’ And once you
throw yourself into it, a certain ‘high’ comes out of enduring it. … there’s no way to get away; you just have to surrender. And any time you surrender, there’s a free, floating feeling. (42)

Flanagan emphasizes this affective effect of surrendering to humiliation by insisting that the feeling is “like a floating sensation of freedom” (43). In both assertions is a suggestion of freedom—but freedom from what? Roy F. Baumeister suggests that masochists often seek an escape from what he calls “the burden of selfhood” (“Masochism as Escape from Self” 27). As such, he argues that masochism “represents a systematic attempt to eradicate (temporarily) the main features of the self” (34). As Baumeister recognizes, the self usually seeks to avoid pain, strives for control, and wants to increase self-esteem; masochists seek pain, relinquish control, and desire to be humiliated (34). But why, Baumeister asks, “would anyone in today’s self-seeking society want to escape from self?” (29). To answer this question, he provides a list of possibilities, including: the desire to escape the “requirements of making decisions under pressure or uncertainty, of taking responsibility for actions that may disappoint or harm others, of maintaining a favorable public and private image of self despite all threats and challenges, and of asserting control over a recalcitrant social environment” (29). These possibilities seem to refigure masochism as a turn away from everyday responsibilities, but Baumeister recognizes the erotic nature of this escape. Indeed, because “self-awareness can be detrimental to sexual excitement and pleasure” (47), even a momentary reprieve from self-awareness can lead to sexual pleasure.

Given my discussion, in Chapter Two, of shame’s role in simultaneously shattering and reconfiguring one’s subjectivity, we can thus begin to understand Flanagan’s desire for shame as an attempt to momentarily escape the self, effecting a kind of “death”—be it the “little death” of
orgasm (when “the pain floats off a little, turns sweet” [The Pain Journal 43]) or the “death of
the self” via shame—in order to foster connection, both intrasubjective (between himself and his
body) and intersubjective (between himself and Rose). Shame has the ability to make one feel as
though one’s sense of self has suddenly been made strange, sometimes to the extent that one
cannot recuperate that former self in the process of resubjectification. In such cases, shame can
make possible the constitution of an entirely new self. Flanagan’s desire for shame might then be
read, much like his desire for pain, as an attempt to approximate the experience of actual death.

One of the most interesting examples of Flanagan’s auto-humiliation rituals is transcribed
for us in The Pain Journal and occurs when Rose leaves town for a few days. Flanagan, left to
his own devices, decides to attempt what he calls his “experiment in excrement” (47):

The plan is to handcuff myself with my hands behind my back in the cage with a
plate full of my own shit in front of me. Embedded throughout the shit is a string
of five candy Lifesavers tied together with a fishing line and fed through a hole in
the plate, down and out of the cage, up and over and back down again suspended
over my back. On the end of the line is [sic] the handcuff key and the cage key.
When I finally get my nerve up and eat through the shit I find the Lifesavers and
suck them until they melt, one by one, freeing the fishing line so it pulls through a
hole in the plate, allowing the handcuff key to drop down behind my back to my
waiting hands where I then unlock myself and let myself out of the cage, feeling
thoroughly disgusted with myself, but at the same time turned on and strangely
filled with an overwhelming sense of accomplishment. (44-45)

Affectively speaking, however, auto-humiliation “should” be impossible: shame-humiliation
takes hold of an individual unbidden; the suddenness of its intrusion is what makes shame
capable of inducing such alienating feelings of self-disgust. But Flanagan picks this particular activity precisely because “it’s so disgusting” (44). Flanagan’s assertion that this shit-eating is disgusting is a judgment call, and this judgment alone may be enough for Flanagan to feel humiliated. If he manages to complete the task, he will have completed something that he deems vulgar, and this knowledge is enough to produce the affective reaction he intends. Interestingly, Flanagan still feels humiliation when he fails to go through with eating shit: “No matter how much I fantasize about this ultimate degradation, no matter how much the thought of it gets me hard, I always chicken out at the moment of truth” (45). Flanagan goes on to remember the “couple of times in the past when I’ve done the hidden keys and padlock thing” (45): “I very Houdini-like, managed to escape without a bite, feeling very stupid, very humiliated—as humiliated by what I almost did as I was for not having the guts to do it. But tonight is different. I think I’ve completely outsmarted myself” (45). As it turns out, Flanagan does not wholly succeed in outsmarting himself. He later writes that “All I had to do was push [the shit] aside with my face” (46).

In Supermasochist, Flanagan describes a similar experiment (again, when Rose is away for a few days):

[Rose] had a patio in the backyard, and somehow I arranged to be tied up all night spread-eagled on the cement. I had keys embedded in ice tied above me—I had to wait all night for the ice to melt and drop the keys into my hand. I also had suspended above me a can with my own shit in it and some piss mixed in. This can had weights attached in such a way that it was slowly tilting—at some point it was going to spill all over me and I had no control over it because I was completely tied up. If you’re masturbating and think up this plan, it sounds really
erotic … but the actual reality of doing it makes me go, ‘Oh, this is so sick!’
That’s when I feel the sickest … Whipping and nailing—I’ve stylized that
through doing performances, so the only way I can really humiliate myself is
through using piss, shit and bodily fluids. It’s too absurd to call myself names or
look in the mirror and yell, ‘Douchebag!’ but I can make myself eat shit, or drink
my own pee … and do it in such a way that I go, ‘I don’t want to do this!’ yet I
have to do it. (74)

Most evident in the two lengthier quotations above is Flanagan’s recognition that he needs to
“outsmart” himself in order to feel humiliated; he has to devise elaborate auto-humiliation plans
that will force him to do things he deems disgusting. What Flanagan realizes, then, is the
beneficent potential of the powerlessness that accompanies humiliation, a powerlessness that Leo
Bersani, in Is the Rectum a Grave?, posits can be one of the most intense experiences of pleasure
for an individual. Recognizing the pleasurable possibilities humiliation affords individuals,
Bersani thus advises against devaluing the “radical disintegration and humiliation of the self”
(24). His recognition of the potential inherent in humiliating experiences, following Freud,
centers on the idea that “sexual pleasure occurs whenever a certain threshold of intensity is
reached, when the organization of the self is momentarily disturbed by sensations” (24). This
pleasure “emerges as the jouissance of exploded limits, as the ecstatic suffering into which the
human organism momentarily plunges when it is ‘pressed’ beyond a certain threshold of
endurance” (24). He uses humiliation as a prime example of “self-shattering,” as he calls it, in
which “the self is exuberantly discarded” (25); indeed, Bersani argues that humiliation is
“constitutive of our identity as sexual beings, that it is present, always, not primarily in our
orgasms but rather in the terrifying but also exhilarating instability of human subjectivity” (174).
Similar to Bersani, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that shame is a radical emptying-out of the “content” of the subject: shame, she contends, constitutes the subject precisely “as to-be-constituted” (“Queer Performativity” 14). Shame thus affords particular individuals an emptiness (or emptying-out) that is at once painful and pleasurable, but which also allows the individual to reconstitute that subjectivity and to be in control of that reconstitution.

This process of “emptying-out” is the self-divestiture that accompanies experiences of shame. In being divested of one’s (previous) sense of self, one is forced to suddenly recognize that self. As such, humiliation has the power to effect a turn inward, to focus attention back on the self and away from anything exterior to one’s sense of self (including, here, the diseased and pained body). Significantly, in the above passages, there is no reference to bodily pain (a pain that consumes the pages of The Pain Journal): Flanagan’s focus has shifted entirely to his sense of self, one by which he is simultaneously disgusted and thrilled. Indeed, many forms of pain (physical or emotional) tend to result in a turn inward. Depending on the kind of pain, however, the results and effects are ultimately different. Lynda Hart references Roy F. Baumeister’s argument that “Pain, bondage, blindfolding, and humiliation free the submissive from initiative and choice, allowing him to retreat momentarily from identity to the body and create a new … identity that is often in diametric opposition to the ‘self’ he presents in the everyday world” (61). But what Hart ignores (and perhaps misreads) here are the essential differences between what experiences of pain and humiliation do to one’s sense of self, which is something Baumeister emphasizes. In “Masochism as Escape from Self,” Baumeister draws on Elaine Scarry’s work on pain, noting that pain can remove a broader awareness of self and world: “pain gradually obliterates psychological content, eventually leaving only the awareness of pain” (38). Ultimately, Baumeister argues that physical “pain brings self-awareness down from symbolic
identity to physical body” (39). Humiliation, on the other hand, promotes such extreme self-awareness that it renders “the maintenance of dignity and even identity impossible” (41). This destruction of identity is pleasurable for Flanagan, who, despite feeling “stupid at the sight of my shit covered face in the mirror” (46), wants to “try it again. Keep doing it until I get it right” (46).

Humiliation, however, also comes with risks. In Flanagan’s case, we might also note the possibility that humiliation can relocate or re-establish a self in the wounded body, which is to say that as much as Flanagan is able to effect self-divestiture, the reconstituted self will still be a self placed back in the diseased body—a body that can never overcome the wounding, is always in the process of being wounded, is always to be wounded. As such, we must begin to recognize what might be at stake in inviting experiences of humiliation and the potential for experiences of (desired) humiliation to result in further wounding or trauma.

The “Always Already” and “Always To Be” of Wounding

In “Notes on Trauma and Community,” Kai Erikson notes that

Trauma is generally taken to mean a blow to the tissues of the body—or more frequently now, to the tissues of the mind—that results in injury or some other disturbance. Something alien breaks in on you, smashing through whatever barriers your mind has set up as a line of defense. It invades you, takes you over, becomes a dominating feature of your interior landscape—‘possesses’ you, … and in the process threatens to drain you and leave you empty. (183)

The language used here to define trauma could just as easily be the language used to define a disease that invades the body, or of the sadist, who breaks through one’s barriers or limits, takes over, becomes the Dominant, and “possesses” the masochist. Moreover, this sense of an invading
presence, of a force that “becomes a dominating feature” of one’s interior landscape, conveys the sense that trauma originates from outside of the body and that the body and mind eventually incorporate it to the extent that they are able. Flanagan’s trauma, however, precedes him: he is born with CF, which means that he has always been under attack, is always under attack, will always be under attack. From the moment Flanagan is diagnosed with CF (a diagnosis that does not come until later in his childhood, when the medical community is finally able to explain Flanagan’s condition), he must confront the fact of his mortality, a life bound to be short-lived.

To deal with a kind of perpetual trauma, in the way that Flanagan does with the continual assault on his body by CF, necessitates a rethinking of trauma as an “event”; we must instead consider the possibility of “minor” traumas. Flanagan’s chronic pain asks us to consider trauma not as necessarily momentous or catastrophic, but as potentially ubiquitous, occurring in the everyday. Indeed, Flanagan’s CF might be read as what Berlant has called a “traumatic happening,” or, in other words, a trauma that is in the process of becoming an event, a trauma that is still occurring (Cruel Optimism 79-80). Even as Berlant’s formulation deconstructs what she calls “the authority of Cathy Caruth’s model” (80), this “becoming-event of the happening” (80) still suggests an endpoint—a point at which the “happening” becomes the “event,” which, for Flanagan, does occur, but only in death (the final wound).

However, the experience of shame in the face of perpetual trauma can have positive effects because not only does it remind the individual that there is a self still there (wounded as it might be), that the self has not been completely destroyed by the ongoing trauma, but it also reminds the individual that s/he is always already in relation to that outside world, and that s/he should perhaps not feel so secure all the time; instead, it is a reminder that one is still capable of being affected, and that the self exists in a dynamic relationship both with one’s own body as
well as with the outside world. These realizations can actually help one renegotiate the
boundaries of the self and accept the condition of being affected, such that one is more
“prepared” for future wounds. Because shame is often integral to the process of the destruction
of the self, a desire for shame, particularly for Flanagan, might be understood as a desire to be
wounded or destroyed insofar as that destruction or wound (re)creates a body that is able to
endure, and/or a body that is prepared for what is to come. Indeed, Rose recognizes that “For
Bob, masochism means endurance ... endurance over his own limitations. It’s very much ... a
meditation process where you ‘will’ yourself into another state of consciousness”
(Supermasochist 108). To engage with shame in the ways Flanagan did was very much an
attempt to escape beyond the bounds of selfhood, “willing” himself into another state of
consciousness and pushing the boundaries of his own limitations. This holds true for his
experiences of physical pain as well, but with physical pain, attention is refocused on the body,
whereas with shame, attention is refocused on the self and the possibility of escaping the former
self attached to that particular body (which, for Flanagan, was an especially inviting possibility).
Remembering “the humiliation of medical procedures [he]’d have to endure” as a child (87),
Flanagan notes that there was nothing erotic about those procedures at the time. He goes on to
describe some of the erotic enemas Rose created for him since that time, lending credence to the
notion that he engages in humiliating activities to re-write the shames of his childhood as well as
to meet his former limitations and engage with them in such a way as to extend them or turn
them into something more pleasurable.

Regardless of this beneficent potential of shame, though, implicit in trauma is a sense of
something lost. For Flanagan, we might think of it as the loss of a “normal” life, the loss of “the
good life” (conceived of as a chronic-pain-free life), or the loss of a body he can exert full
control over. The losses might be singular or plural, but at the very least—and especially with genetic disease—one experiences a loss of security. Being born with disease rather than contracting disease during one’s life can have the effect of compromising one’s sense of having protective barriers between one’s body and the potentially harmful world, as the threat, the outside Other, has always already permeated the threshold of the self. Though this might seem, superficially, to undermine my contention that Flanagan’s pain intensifies his subjectivity to the point where he has difficulty forming a relationship with the outside world, the reality of his condition is that this Other, which has always already violated the integrity of his selfhood, is an antagonist. The chronic pain of his condition draws most of his attention to the struggle, within the self, of self and other, which simultaneously dissolves the sense of a discrete separation between self and antagonistic other and reifies the separation between Flanagan’s subjectivity and a non-antagonistic social other with whom he might form a positive connection. Thus we might say that Flanagan’s loss is double: he loses, first, the sense of an integrated, protected self; and second, the possibility of attachment to the social world. In essence, then, CF compromises Flanagan’s relationship to self and other, threatening to take away both (or at least, threatening to prevent him from forming a positive relationship with either).

At the same time, because Flanagan’s experience of CF is a form of perpetual trauma, he experiences loss less as an event than as an interminable series of losses. As an event with discrete beginning and end, loss tends to be accompanied by a grieving process, but what happens when the loss is perpetual? What happens when one wants to orient oneself toward “the good life” but cannot (or continually loses when one tries)? We see this form of “losing” throughout The Pain Journal, when Flanagan continually wonders “where [his] masochism went, [his] love for sensation” (35), and laments the fact that he is “not who or what I used to be.
Nobody misses me more than me” (147). While shame allows him brief reprieves from his painful existence, at times the pain is so overwhelming that it cannot be escaped. Instead, it refocuses attention on his diseased body, disallowing him the ability to create new, differently-pained selves, thus leading him to lament the self he “used to be” (147). In the final months of The Pain Journal, leading up to Flanagan’s death, the physical pain he is experiencing becomes too much to bear, and he laments the loss of even the possibility of a positive relationship with his pain: “Pain pain pain. Odd that what was once the fuel that ignited my soul has become the very thing that dampens my spirit” (158).

Flanagan’s sense of loss also problematizes his relation to shame. Shame is an affect produced by an experience of loss, and thus, when loss is perpetual and traumatic, so, too, is the shame which it produces. In an interview with Lauren Berlant conducted for Cabinet Magazine (Fall 2008), the interviewers, Sina Najafi and David Serlin, reference Silvan Tomkins’s definition of the shamed child, recalling that “the child experiences shame when the object of desire … does not reciprocate and breaks the circuit of attachment” (“The Broken Circuit”). This “broken circuit,” as Berlant calls it, is precisely what Flanagan experiences on a daily basis. Flanagan’s object of desire is life (preferably pain-free): but this desire is unfulfillable, and the (uncontrollable CF) pain he experiences acts as the continual interruption to that life, not only generating a sense of profound disconnection (to his body, to Rose, to the world), but creating the conditions for embarrassment and self-loathing that we see throughout The Pain Journal. For example, Flanagan writes about feeling “So stupid. Like this writing. Not a writer anymore. What else can I do? Physically unable to [sic] anything” (33). While many read these self-deprecating remarks as his form of humour in the face of an inevitable and painful death, I read them as evidence of a different form of shame constantly lurking beneath the surface—a
perpetual shame—which, through the same traumatic mechanisms as his chronic pain, threatens to inhibit a positive relationship to both self and the social world. Though he rearranges his life to centre around his CF, to make his CF “work” for him (both in the sense of keeping him alive, and in the sense of turning it into an integral part of his livelihood as a performance artist), at no point during the last year of his life does he seem to have come to terms with the fact that he never had, nor will ever have, the kind of pain-free life that others take for granted. Flanagan’s failure to locate and obtain the pain-free life for himself can activate a renewed sense of shame. Indeed, as Claire Pajackzkowska and Ivan Ward recognize in Shame and Sexuality: Psychoanalysis and Visual Culture, loss can be experienced as shameful when one aims to “find the missing object and fail[s] to do so” (12). As such, Pajackzkowska and Ward link shame to one of the states one endures in the process of mourning. Flanagan’s shame, conceived of in this way, acts as a version of “losing” and makes it difficult for him to “get over” shame.

Thus, despite the fact that I have been arguing that Flanagan desires shame and employs it as a survival mechanism, the possibility exists that Flanagan experiences other—unwanted, perpetual, and potentially traumatic—forms of shame which complicate his positive relation to shame. But I also argue that, in the same way that he (re)produces pain as an attempt to get over, or at least get through, the pain inflicted on him by his own body, he (re)produces erotic shame to get over or get through the shame of having oriented himself toward “the good life” that can never be achieved, is always interrupted. Indeed, as Joseph Adamson has noted in “Guardian of the ‘Inmost Me’: Hawthorne and Shame,” shame often works in such a way that one attempts to cover one shameful experience with another (58). This covering is natural to the experience of shame, and derives in part from the repetition compulsion at the heart of having experienced something one cannot quite make sense of. The covering of one shame with another is an attempt
to “get over” that first shame, replacing it with something more tolerable to the psyche. Shame becomes, then, a kind of mediating feeling, one that cuts off other (potentially worse) feelings—even if those feelings are just more intense versions of the original feelings.

But Flanagan’s CF also forces us to ask another question: what happens when loss has not happened yet—when loss is a future certainty? In Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, she considers dimensions of political life that have to do “with our exposure to violence and our complicity in it, with our vulnerability to loss and the task of mourning that follows, and with finding a basis for community in these conditions” (19). Butler conceives of loss and mourning in precisely that linear progression: loss, then mourning. Throughout her book, she speaks of loss as only something that occurs in the past, and encapsulates this sense of loss by speaking of it entirely in the past tense: “if we have lost, then it follows that we have had, that we have desired and loved, that we have struggled to find the conditions for our desire” (20). Mourning, she implies, must always follow loss. But what happens when loss is something to come? Indeed, Flanagan’s loss is a future one, a loss of the self, and not in the same way that we are all vulnerable to a death that will eventually come. As articulated in *The Pain Journal*, Flanagan’s future loss is certain, and will come soon. When we conceive of loss as something that will happen in the future, we must also rethink mourning: Flanagan can never “get over” this loss. Butler suggests that “without the capacity to mourn, we los[e] the keener sense of life we need in order to oppose violence” (xviii-xix). What she means by a “keener sense of life” is not clear, nor is it clear why this keener sense of life is a pre-condition for opposing violence. What remains clear, however, is her assertion that if one is unable to mourn, one cannot oppose violence. In a sense, this seems true for Flanagan: if we follow the temporality Butler proposes between loss and mourning, Flanagan is unable to mourn,
and as such, cannot steel himself against violence, embracing it instead. I recognize that Butler is speaking about a particular kind of violence in relation to the event of and events succeeding 9/11, but her discussion of violence in this context does raise interesting questions about the nature of violence, of victimhood, of mourning, and of loss that I want to engage with in regards to Flanagan’s life and work. To be sure, Flanagan’s embracing of violence (of physical pain, of shame) is violence against the self—not something that is projected outwards, harming others. Butler also acknowledges that “for some, mourning can only be resolved through violence” (xix). Again, Butler imagines this violence as something always projected outward, toward an Other, as retaliation or revenge. She warns against this resolution through projection, arguing that “violence only brings on more loss, and the failure to heed the claim of precarious life only leads, again and again, to the dry grief of an endless political rage” (xix). If we consider the possibility that mourning might occur before the loss, as an anticipatory mourning, we might read Flanagan’s masochism as his method of mourning, as his attempt to “get over” his (past and present) loss of a “normal” (chronic-pain-free) life and future loss of self. In Flanagan’s case, then, violence does not bring on more loss: instead, it enables Flanagan to relocate feelings of liveliness, of new life instead of loss. Indeed, Flanagan acknowledges that “When I do these things for myself, as scary as it might be to do them, it’s done for some supreme kind of ecstasy or joy—something that will lead toward a positive emotion, not a negative or dark one. It’s moving toward light rather than darkness” (86). Engaging erotically with pain and shame enables Flanagan to turn them into something positive.
“YOU ALWAYS HURT THE ONE YOU LOVE”: Bob Flanagan’s Narcissistic Shame

By eroticizing the two sources of his perpetual trauma, pain and shame, Flanagan is able to reconfigure his relation to them and, in so doing, also re-establishes himself as an equal agent in the embodied masochism which so problematizes the relationship between his conception of self and his body. But in reproducing the conditions of his perpetual trauma through his masochistic performances, does Flanagan not risk reaffirming the exaggerated subjectivity discussed above, thus exacerbating his alienation from the social? Trauma often effects a withdrawal from the world, re-focusing attention on the self, as the violent or destructive impulses manifest in the reiteration or reliving (or, in Flanagan’s case, reproduction) mirror the effects of trauma, continually re-wounding the mind or body in order to make sense of the trauma. In “‘You your best thing, Sethe’: Trauma’s Narcissism,” Petar Ramadanovic calls this inward turn “the self-centeredness of trauma” (178), drawing on Freud’s contention, in “On Narcissism,” that a person “‘who is tormented by organic pain and discomfort gives up his interest in the things of the external world, in so far as they do not concern his suffering’” (qtd. in Ramadanovic 179). Indeed, after discussing a point in his life where he was “totally convinced that [a relationship he was in] was more important than the SM lifestyle” he was practicing (Supermasochist 24), Flanagan states that, after that relationship ended and he met Rose, who was willing to make sadomasochism her life and to attend to Flanagan’s suffering, every facet of his life became oriented toward his suffering, a kind of self-obsession that we might understand as narcissistic. The term “narcissism,” after all, denotes “the attitude of a person who treats his own body in the same way in which the body of a sexual object is ordinarily treated” (Freud “On Narcissism” 3). Flanagan’s fetishization of his body in his performances certainly seems to fit the definition of narcissism; as he states in The Pain Journal, “now I’m just as turned on by the
sight of me, my own dick, my ass (skinny as it is) and my piss, shit, or whatever. I get hard looking at myself. Can you believe it? Mr. Auto Erotic” (60). Despite his recognition that he is his own sex object, however, Flanagan is adamant that he is not a narcissist, immediately following his description of his self-eroticization with the defensive assertion that “I’m not in love with myself. And it’s not that I think that I’m all that great, it’s just that I see my body for the sexual history it contains—a sexual map—and it gets me going” (60). Whether his erotic response is in relation to his physicality or the history of sex which his body contains, though, his interest is, nevertheless, focused on himself; and though he may not be “in love” with himself, he does treat his body “in the same way in which the body of a sexual object is ordinarily treated.”

But his protestations, though unconvincing, reveal something important: while he has no trouble acknowledging his sexual attraction to his own body, he is afraid that people will think he is narcissistic, and thus misinterpret the significance of his performance art. What this suggests, insofar as we can trust the spirit, if not the logic, of his protestations, is that his masochism, though primarily focused on himself, is about much more than that.

There are multiple instances in The Pain Journal where Flanagan seems to be defending his interest in himself from charges of narcissism. But who is Flanagan trying to convince? As he notes in his final journal entry, the journal is “never meant to be read unedited by anyone but me” (172-173)—it is Rose who publishes the journal following Flanagan’s death. Flanagan’s protestations are thus not attempts to protect his public image; instead, it seems that he is trying to convince himself that he is not a narcissist because he believes that narcissism limits the scope of his subjectivity—which is precisely the opposite of what he is attempting to accomplish.

However, I will argue that Flanagan’s conception of narcissism—which is the general way in which narcissism is understood—is limited, and that, in its inevitability and unavoidability, is not
only necessary for Flanagan but productive. In others words, Flanagan is thoroughly narcissistic, but rather than inhibiting his connection to others, Flanagan’s narcissism works alongside shame as a necessary condition for the subjective reconstitution at the heart of his masochism, enabling him to overcome the intrasubjective conflicts stemming from his embodied masochism in order to turn his gaze outward and forge an intersubjective relationship with the social.

Moreover, in reading Flanagan as narcissistic, I attend to the complexities inherent in thinking of him in this way while understanding his SM activities as an ongoing engagement with and in shame. Shame and narcissism are often conceptualized in diametric opposition; since shame is most commonly felt as self-disgust, narcissism—as self-love, alongside its close relative, pride—is shame’s opposite, structurally speaking. Thus narcissism would seem to make the manifestation of shame impossible. I argue, however, that an erotic engagement in shame can reconcile this opposition, allowing us to see the ways in which narcissism and shame can work together in mutually beneficial ways. Narcissism becomes a way of loving the shameful self that is continually transforming and being reinvented, as well as a method by which Flanagan is able to come into a loving relation with his diseased body. Indeed, because for Flanagan, the wounding comes from within, the fostering of an erotic—and thus narcissistic—attachment to his own body, and to the pain and shame which it inflicts upon him, is the only way he is able to come into a loving relation with his embodied antagonist. Further, in Flanagan’s masochism, we see his desire for shame as an attempt to focus attention away from his body as object, and toward a more integrated sense of self-with-body. The combination of shame and narcissism allows Flanagan to embrace his diseased body, learning to love it as different, thus re-establishing the sense of bodily security he was born without.
Though Flanagan’s assertions that he is not in love with himself should not be entirely ignored, they also serve to demonstrate the ways in which he is in love with himself. In his essay “On Narcissism,” Freud postulates that the object on which narcissists fixate (the object-choice) can take one of several different forms. The narcissist may love the present self, the past self, what the self would like to be (the conditional self), or someone who was once part of the self (20). When Flanagan adamantly insists that he does not love his present self, it does not foreclose the possibility that he loves a past self. Indeed, as noted above, though Flanagan insists that he does not really think of himself as “all that great” (60), he follows it up by saying, “it’s just that I see my body for the sexual history it contains—a sexual map—and it gets me going” (60). It is, then, precisely a past self with whom he is in love—or, more precisely, not a single past self, but his present self as both embodiment and complete archive of past selves. He loves his present self, not because of what it looks like, but because it is testament and/or witness to his erotic experiences, to the pleasure—which, for Flanagan, is also always suffering—that it has experienced and survived. Similarly, his assertions do not preclude the possibility that he loves the self he wishes he could be (the pain-free self). Freud describes this third object-choice as “idealization,” in which the object is “aggrandized and exalted in the subject’s mind,” acting as a substitute for the “lost narcissism of his childhood in which he was his own ideal” (24). Flanagan’s “grandiose self,” as evidenced by the cover image of Bob Flanagan: Supermasochist, is a version of a superhero, whom he terms (as the title suggests) “Supermasochist.”

Flanagan’s narcissistic relationship with himself is enacted time and again in his performances, performances which allow us to see how Flanagan’s narcissism enables him to reconfigure both the intrasubjective relationship between himself and his body, and the intersubjective relations between himself and social Others. When working on what he calls “the
confetti casket” (a yet unrealized installation, often referred to as Dust to Dust), where a coffin-like pine box would be filled with confetti which is composed of thousands of tiny photographs of Flanagan from various stages in his life, Flanagan admits that “some people will look at this as the ultimate in narcissism, but as I know my life is getting shorter I want to gather it all together in the form of these photographs—all the photographs—that have ever been taken of me” (The Pain Journal 59). Once again, in the “but,” we see his refusal to identify himself as a narcissist, yet the impulse to preserve one’s identity even in death—symbolized by the substitution of relatively permanent photographs for a rapidly decaying body—is an undeniably narcissistic impulse, akin to imagining one’s own funeral in order to experience one’s survival in the grieving faces of those who loved one best. Here, too, Flanagan’s love of his body as an archive of his erotic experiences is mirrored in his desire to replace his body with a series of photographs which, collectively, represent an index of Flanagan’s various bodies and, rather than offering a final, coherent (and idealized) image as his final state, allow those who “survive” him to see him in the form which he loves best: diffuse, fragmented, and elusive.

Flanagan’s narcissism thus attaches itself, not to the body qua body, but to a body which contains multitudes, a body which is a signifier of a history of sex and struggle, and of a subjectivity which, in its capacity to make of its body a map to its secrets, thus exceeds it. Flanagan thus spends considerable energy, in his performance art, wounding (and thus marking) the body, making it both artwork and object. The audience, though, often sees the entire process of creation, rather than simply the finished product, and so, with every fresh wound, the map grows, and the body becomes a sign of the subject which rendered it so, the man behind its creation. In so doing, Flanagan in some sense creates the illusion of separation between body as pure object and himself as subject: after all, the audience might think, “he couldn’t truly be doing
this to himself!” In an installation entitled *You Always Hurt the One You Love*, for instance, Flanagan talks calmly and casually with his gathered audience about his CF and his erotic relation to pain. While thus conversing, he begins mutilating his penis, driving a nail through it and fixing it to a stool and then a board. The casual performance of such brutal and aggressive acts of self-mutilation, interspersed with low-key banter, creates the illusion of a separation between the performer and the body being mutilated. The audience thus sees Flanagan’s body as a purely physical, and purely sexualized, object—what Amelia Jones calls “the body as meat” (18)—while being forced to acknowledge the persistence of an agency beyond it, capable of casually conversing while its container is being attacked. Such a discrete separation of subject from body-as-object undermines the social (and clinical) gaze which so often renders sufferers of disease as pure object (as if subjectivity were somehow engulfed by the sheer presence of disease in the body).

But the performance’s title, *You Always Hurt the One You Love*, suggests a more complicated relationship to self than suggested by the above reading. The title also serves as the closing line in his prose poem “Why” (*Supermasochist* 65), which consists of a list of reasons he engages in masochism. Given as an explanation for his masochism, the piece confirms his narcissistic relation to himself: he hurts himself, thus he loves himself. Interestingly, this final statement of the short prose poem is the only statement written in second person, and so it also serves as a simultaneous denial of his narcissism: by refusing the “I” of narcissism, he deflects attention from his own narcissistic behaviour by suggesting exactly the sort of separation between the agent of the pain and its object which my above reading suggested. However, given that this statement follows eighty-three other statements articulated by an “I,” it is difficult not to read the “I” onto the “you,” even as he insists upon their separation, and to read the pronoun as
the universal “you” would serve to reaffirm his narcissism. The phrase thus reflects the troubled relation between “I” and “You,” both intrasubjectively- and intersubjectively-speaking, that is fundamental to Flanagan’s masochism and that is, too, a key component of his narcissism. As Jones notes, in *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, body art “has frequently been condemned (and occasionally exalted) for its narcissism” (46). For Jones, though, this narcissism has “potentially radical implications,” in that it “inexorably leads to an exploration of and implication in the other: the self turns itself inside out, as it were, projecting its internal structures of identification and desire outward. Thus, narcissism interconnects the internal and external self as well as the self and the other” (46).

Flanagan’s narcissism, as we have seen, is a love, not of himself as constituted in any single moment, and not of some idealized image of himself, but of a self made of fragments. This particular form of narcissism causes a desire to continually reproduce the conditions under which he becomes (re)fragmented. Thus, even as he creates the illusion of Cartesian dualism, his physical fragmentation suggests a concordant psychic wound which brings the subject inescapably back into relation with his body. As Jones notes, Flanagan’s performances “bring to the surface basic taboos informing our ongoing desire to transcend our bodies through fantasy, technology, or (in Cartesian terms) ‘pure’ thought” (18). Going back to *You Always Hurt the One You Love*, for instance, even as the laceration and penetration of the body serves to alienate both Flanagan and his audience from his body, it also, as Jones argues, “confirms its [the body’s] ‘thereness,’ and yet opens to question how such thereness signifies in relation to the self (and, by projection, other) who suffers” (231). Flanagan’s wounded body thus refuses an easy semantic resolution by “construct[ing] him as both acting subject and receptive object of violence, merging subjectivity into objectivity for both Flanagan and his audience and thus confusing the
security of either identification” (231). As such, Flanagan’s masochism dramatizes the ways in which the subject is at once the body and more than the body, “enacting the stubborn corporeality of the self while refusing any conception of this corporeality as fixed in its materiality”; by “Turning the body inside out, its reversibility (its coexistence with the flesh of the world) is made evident,” and “the failure of the visual register to comprehend the meaning of the self (its ‘identity’ or ‘identities’) through the appearance of the body is made manifest” (226).

We must note, too, how Flanagan’s acutely “embodied” performances simultaneously repel and interpellate his audience; the audience members, drawn into performances by Flanagan’s engaging and casual demeanor, oscillate between a focus on Flanagan’s body and a reflexive awareness of their own corporeality. As awareness of the woundedness of his body verges on sympathy, the voyeurs are compelled to imagine what such ministrations upon his body might feel like on their own. In Jones’s words, Flanagan’s audiences “consume [his body] as [it] ‘consume[s]’ us,” and, in true narcissistic form, Flanagan shares himself, his suffering, with others, by “projecting his pain outward to produce a ‘body of suffering’ in the spectator: … his agony solicits our deepest bodily/intellectual identification” (229). This oscillating movement between self and other, as one sees oneself in the other, itself suggests a form of narcissistic engagement. Indeed, a key aspect of narcissism is the projection of the self onto the other, a movement which, for critics like Christopher Lasch, enacts a violent effacement of the other (qtd. in Jones 48). Jones, however, aptly notes that such a reading of narcissism requires the assumption of the other’s “stable identity that is thus being obliterated by the narcissist’s specifically performative, but ultimately stabilizing, projections” (49). For Jones, in contrast, narcissistic projection “is, rather, a marker of the instability of both self and other (of their chiasmic intertwining)” (49). This characteristic of narcissism is one that, although Jones does
not suggest as much, imbues narcissism with the same erotic potential as shame, given its ability (like shame) to momentarily dissolve the boundaries between self and other. Flanagan’s narcissistic focus on his own body—and in particular, on the fragmented body—creates a sympathetic narcissistic response in the viewer, and boundaries between self and other, and between subject(s) and object(s), suddenly quiver beneath the “chiasmic” oscillation of the viewer’s attention.

This destabilizing aspect, for Jones, is further invoked by the dramatization of the rendering of the body as a work of art, an object to be viewed and consumed, even as it simultaneously “belongs to” and forms an integral part of a human being: “the narcissism enacted by body artists is fundamentally intersubjective and highlights the psychic dynamic by which self/artist/artwork is constituted in relation to other/interpreter (and vice versa)” (51). This dramatization of the “artifaction” of the body is, at its core, a dramatization of the narcissistic mechanics of all subjectivity, where it is “the very narcissism of the performance of the self that inexorably engages the self in the other: our self-conception, our self-performance can only take place through our phenomenological assumption of subjectivity (or moments of subjective engagement) via others in the world” (51). By performing what Jones calls “the body as flesh of the world, the body as meat, the body as constitutive of self,” and by projecting that performance back toward and onto the audience, Flanagan illustrates Jones’s contention that “the body/self [is] always already enacted in relation to others” (51). If, as Judith Butler and others have pointed out, the subject exists only by virtue of repeated performances of self, subjectivity always already implies an audience, and so the body/self exists, as subject, only in relation to the recognition of others. And indeed, this recognition of the dual narcissistic impulse in being a self “embodied” both intra- and intersubjectively forms the thematic impetus for Flanagan’s final
works. In one of his final installations, *Video Coffin*, Flanagan’s imminent death is foreshadowed by the coffin forming the installation’s centrepiece; viewers walk toward an open casket in a simulated funeral. Inside the coffin, a video screen shows Flanagan’s face; however, as viewers approach the coffin to observe the “body” evacuated of its subjectivity, the video on the screen abruptly changes, and viewers suddenly find themselves staring into their own face on the video screen. At once inside and outside the coffin, the viewer confronts a sort of psychic vertigo.

By directing the viewer’s attention toward the processes by which every subject is materially and socially embodied, Flanagan punctures the Other’s illusion of a coherent self, thereby undermining people’s ability to try to impose coherence upon him (most often via a narrative of disease). We have seen the ways in which the production of eroticized pain helps Flanagan come into a more loving relationship with the body that pains him, and thus with himself as embodied subject (and, by extension, we have come to understand how his erotic relationship to Rose revolves around the reconfigured connection between producer and sufferer of pain). We have also seen how the performance of pain helps Flanagan to reconfigure his social embodiment. Importantly, though, even as the desire for fragmentation is more obviously manifest in his mutilations of his physical body, his desire for, and production of, shame serves as a form of subjective wounding which mirrors the wounding of the body through laceration, puncture, and mutilation. As discussed in Chapter Two, shame is the affect most closely associated with subjective diffusion, since it forcibly disrupts the illusion of the subject’s coherent relationship both with him/herself and with the social. It is thus shame that seems to allow Flanagan to take advantage of his fragmented social embodiment, by freeing him from the confines of his subjectivity and allowing him to come to a more loving relationship with the social Other. Indeed, shame is fundamental to Flanagan’s narcissism; through shame, Flanagan
achieves the fragmented subjectivity which is the focus of his self-love and his erotic connection to the social. Flanagan is not interested in an integrated self because integration forecloses the possibility of reconstitution, which is the source of Flanagan’s erotic connection to both himself and others. In turn, Flanagan’s eroticism is necessary to form a loving relation to the social, because it is the means by which he reaches across the limits of his over-intensified subjectivity. If his eroticization of pain, and his subsequent productions and performances of it, allow him to exist in relation to himself (and for others) as more than a diseased body, as a dynamically embodied subject, shame is that which offers him the possibility of dynamic engagement with the social.

In what follows, I engage with NBC’s  *The Biggest Loser* in order to analyse shame in the context, not of survival and subversiveness (as in Flanagan’s case), but of self-improvement and inscription within mainstream narratives of body, self-image, and subjectivity. I also move from a discussion of attachments to shame for oneself to discussing attachments to, and desires for, *another’s* shame, a relation to shame that falls under the heading of *schadenfreude*. As such, the version of shame in question, and to which viewers attach, is one that we might consider a more “traditional” experience of shame, which is to say: viewers attach to a very painful shame that, although it might have transformative potential for some of the contestants on the show, and although it is something to which many of them willingly submit (even, sometimes, understanding the *necessity* of such submission to achieve their goals), it is, nevertheless, an experience one might otherwise wish to *avoid*. What does a viewer gain from witnessing such experiences of shame? What does this relation to shame reveal about one’s relation to the social and to particular modes of governmentality?
Chapter 4

Schadenfreude and The Biggest Loser

“There was a day last year when I sat in my house and I started watching the show and the first guy pulls up his shirt and he stood up there and I judged him. I’m like ‘good golly, look at that! Look how big he is!’” And he weighed 302 lbs. 302 lbs! 365 [gesturing to himself] and I look at myself … and I started to bawl. I didn’t use to be a baby. I know you wouldn’t believe that. But I’m emotional because I’m going to take it and I’m going to do something about it from here on out. I’m going to be a dad that my kids aren’t ashamed of and I’m going to be a husband that my wife isn’t ashamed of. And I’m going to be a citizen that people are proud of.”

(Justin Pope, The Biggest Loser Season 11 Episode 1)

“Pride is one of the seven deadly sins. I don’t want to see it”

(Bob Harper, The Biggest Loser Season 9 Episode 5)

Having begun Chapters Two and Three with Rick Moody’s The Ice Storm, it seems only fitting that I should return to it here, for Benjamin Hood offers us, yet again, some insight into the relation between desire and shame. Reflecting on his deteriorating appearance, Benjamin remembers a time when

his dreams had been songs. He’d been a balladeer of promise and opportunity.

The corridors of the financial industry were his. Once he had been the filly before the first race, the cadet before the invasion. He had advanced in the direction of his dreams. But by 1973 desire surprised him at inappropriate moments: during television broadcasts of Southeast Asian massacres, during the Frazier/Ali rematch, when Archibald Cox was fired, when Thomas Eagleton admitted to shock-therapy treatments. (6-7)

Here, Benjamin’s desires take a range of surprising forms, quite unlike the ones discussed in Chapters Two and Three. Benjamin derives pleasure in the (wildly disparate and far from equal)
misfortunes that befall others: anonymous Southeast Asian peoples being massacred, black men being pummelled by one another, and two white politicians being differently “massacred.”

Despite their obvious differences, the pleasure Benjamin derives from viewing such misfortunes is a pleasure commonly known as *schadenfreude*. Richard H. Smith writes that *schadenfreude* “comes from the joining of two [German] words, ‘schaden’ meaning ‘harm’ and ‘freude’ meaning ‘joy’” (xi). Taken together, *schadenfreude* ‘refers to the pleasure derived from another person’s misfortune’ (xi).

But the misfortunes by which Benjamin is aroused, here, also function as metonymic representations of larger narratives of national shame. The American population had, by 1973, widely categorized the Vietnam War and the brutal tactics employed by the U.S. military as shameful, generating widespread criticism in the form of an anti-war movement that was itself humiliating for the American government. Thus, the brutal massacres of faceless Southeast Asian peoples function, for many American news consumers like Benjamin, as simply another chapter in the national book of shame. The conflict between Frazier and Ali, too, transcends the personal level, with Muhammad Ali tapping into the nation’s shameful history of race and racial shaming in the lead-up to the fight, branding Frazier “an Uncle Tom” for being chosen as the winner by the white referees and judges in the initial match (Edmonds 109). The Archibald Cox firing also operates metonymically, invoking a second level of political shame. Immediately following Cox’s refusal to accept President Nixon’s proposed compromise regarding the contents of the tapes used to record conversations of Nixon’s political opponents, Nixon ordered Attorney General Elliot Richardson to fire Cox. Richardson refused and resigned, as did his successor William Ruckelshaus, leaving the task to Solicitor General Robert Bork (who similarly threatened resignation but ultimately followed orders). Journalists dubbed the firing and
resignations the “Saturday Night Massacre”—a parodic echo of the brutalities of Vietnam being showcased in Benjamin’s living room—and the incident serves as a distillation of the vast stores of political shame which, at that point in the Nixon era, had grown quite full. Finally, the fourth incident, where Eagleton was “outed” as a sufferer of mental illness who received electro-convulsion therapy to treat his depression, also taps into the narrative of political shame and scandal. Simultaneously, however, it also serves as a reminder of the shameful treatment and stigmatization of mental illness in America, since, when the ECT story broke in the media, Nixon’s opponent, then-Democratic Presidential candidate George McGovern “requested” that Eagleton withdraw his candidacy as Democratic Vice-President nominee. McGovern’s poor handling of the situation generated heavy criticism, particularly from his Republican opponents, and thus contributed, in some part, to his massive defeat by Nixon in the 1972 Presidential elections.

Though Benjamin’s attraction to shame may (no longer) seem surprising, his attraction to the shame of others and the mechanics of this particular form of desire, as characterized by Moody, highlight some of the main concerns of this chapter and thus necessitate some careful consideration. Indeed, the fact that Moody employs an abrupt shift in Benjamin’s status as subject (“He’d been a balladeer,” “he had been the filly,” “He had advanced”) to object (“desire surprised him”) suggests that Benjamin’s experience of schadenfreude is passive and thus that this attachment to shame is, unlike his attachment to it discussed in Chapter Two, not a willful one. Dominant theories of schadenfreude tend to favour this passive understanding, with critics often, like Moody, designating schadenfreude as in some way “inappropriate,” condemning the experience and advocating the avoidance of its expression at all costs. As Clifton Wilcox notes, “schadenfreude research seems to suggest an unspoken agreement … that schadenfreude is a
passive emotional response to misfortune” (29). Plato, one of its earliest theorists, for example, contested that it is always “unjust to be pleased rather than pained to see bad things” happen to others (Philebus 58). By recommending that one (actively) suppress or resist the will to laugh at others as much as possible (58-59), Plato implicitly suggests that schadenfreude itself is a passive experience and that the impulse to laugh is always there. Arthur Schopenhauer similarly designated schadenfreude as “a feeling which is closely akin to cruelty, and differs from it, to say the truth, only as theory from practice” making it “the worst trait in human nature” (“On Human Nature”). For Schopenhauer, “There is no more infallible sign of a thoroughly bad heart and profound moral worthlessness than an inclination to a sheer and undisguised malignant joy of this kind” (On the Basis of Morality 135). His demarcation of schadenfreude as an “impotent cruelty” (162) that inclines one toward an “undisguised” joy indicates his belief in its passive nature, since, for Schopenhauer, one’s capacity for schadenfreude is only that which makes an individual capable of acting on the desire, whether or not s/he ever actually does. Freud characterized schadenfreude in Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious as “an awakening of the infantile” (279) and as that which “touch[es] upon childish nature” (280): given that one of the crucial distinctions between children and healthy adults is that adults are supposed to be able to control the same id-impulses they might have acted upon as children, this also suggests that his issue with schadenfreude has less to do with the feeling itself than with improper (“childish”) behaviour that results from this feeling. Thus we can see that, for these theorists, the feeling itself is less troubling than the individual’s failure to mask its outward markers; the difference, then, between a moral and an immoral person is simply that a moral person acts to disguise his or her (apparently passive) feelings of joy or pleasure.
More recent work on *schadenfreude* demonstrates only minor departures from these earlier conceptions, the most significant departure being a much more forgiving understanding of the experience; as we shall see, however, such understandings are only forgiving because theorists remain committed to the belief that *schadenfreude* is a passive feeling. Indeed, as John Portmann writes in *When Bad Things Happen to Other People*, “To the extent that *schadenfreude* signifies love of justice or repugnance to injustice, this emotion is a virtue” (9). “In *schadenfreude*,” he argues, “we receive a delight that we did not desire, if by ‘desire’ we are to understand any motivational factor that may figure in the explanation of intentional action” (27). He suggests that because “we do not desire *schadenfreude*, we do not work to obtain it: it simply falls into our hands, as a fruit of passivity” (27). Amber Watts, in *Laughing at the World: Schadenfreude, Social Identity, and American Media Culture*, agrees with Portmann’s designation of *schadenfreude* as passive, since it “does not involve the intent or action of causing pain to others” (23). Portmann describes it as “a gift of something for nothing” (26) and Watts suggests that it is “a joy in seeing justice served to individuals who have in some way transgressed social boundaries” (23). Similarly, Colin Wayne Leach, Russell Spears and Antony S. R. Manstead argue in “Situating Schadenfreude in Social Relations” that “schadenfreude is the passive, indirect, and opportunistic observation of adversity caused by some agent other than the self” (214). Aaron Ben-Ze’ev echoes this take on the experience, writing that “Pleasure-in-others’-misfortune is associated with the *passivity* of the agent enjoying the situation” (359), and Clifton Wilcox, too, defines *schadenfreude* as a “passive and indirect pleasure at the misfortune that happenstance causes another” (28). Conceptualizing *schadenfreude* in such passive terms makes Benjamin’s experience of *schadenfreude* “during television broadcasts” (6) seem especially fitting; Watts argues that because “*schadenfreude* relies on this sense of passivity,
broadcast television seems to be a perfect conduit for the emotion. It is a site where people’s transgressions and troubles can be played out for a national audience; all the viewer has to do is watch” (23).

But is this really all the viewer has to do? Even if another’s misfortune surprises the individual, is the continued viewing of such misfortune not a form of active consent and participation? Does it not showcase, at the very least, one’s desire or newfound intention to (continue to) see the other humiliated? Though Immanuel Kant is often cited in accounts of schadenfreude’s passive nature, his (rather forceful!) insistence that schadenfreude is not passive seems generally to be ignored. Indeed, though Kant suggests, much like his contemporaries, that schadenfreude is a “devilish vice” (Lectures on Ethics 197), one that “makes hatred of men visible” (The Metaphysics of Man 207), an assertion that seems at first to indicate that his problem with schadenfreude is simply that it makes hatred of others “visible,” he also suggests that the individual “given to Schadenfreude does not remain a mere spectator of others’ sufferings, but at least participates in them through the glee that he feels at the spectacle” (Lectures on Ethics 424). Thus schadenfreude, for Kant, “involves a participation in the person and state of the other” (421), an argument the above critics too readily discount. Taking my cue from Kant, I suggest in this chapter that the schadenfreude one feels at another’s negative affective experience is not passive; instead, it involves an invested interest in or attachment to that affect, an interest or attachment that recasts the viewer as an active participant in that particular affective economy. To feel schadenfreude at all, to be capable of being initially affected by another’s misfortunes necessitates an investment in the negative affects of others. Individuals who are not given to schadenfreude simply have no interest and/or find no pleasure or personal gain in another’s misfortunes. In what follows, I argue that, especially in the context
of reality television, *schadenfreude* is an active desire, indicating one’s participation in the events one *seems* only to be witnessing. Moreover, one *can* actively invite feelings of *schadenfreude*, especially when one *intends* to watch a show that one *knows* foregrounds the humiliation of others. Being a “fan” of particular reality television shows that rely on the humiliation of others, then, is certainly indicative of an active desire to watch others undergo the process of being humiliated. Understanding *schadenfreude* as an active feeling is not, however, an attempt to deride or be overly critical of the experience; rather, it is an attempt to understand affective investments in others’ shame, especially when those investments do not necessarily stem from or indicate cruelty or malicious intent. Additionally, understanding *schadenfreude* as active can help to expose not only the ways in which individuals *participate* in particular affective economies (and the beliefs that motivate such participation) but the *ubiquity* of such participation in contemporary American culture.

Indeed, the concept of *schadenfreude* is particularly salient in contemporary North American media culture, where reality TV and social media afford us immediate and sustained access to other people’s shame. Here, too, the active nature of *schadenfreude* is more evident, even as we spend more time than ever before sitting in front of our screens and watching other people live. Though this form of sedentary consumption may seem quite passive, individuals, in their *participation* in the modes of governmentality embedded in, for example, reality television (an argument I will return to later in this chapter) play an active role both in their responses to the pain of others as well as in *causing* that pain. In what follows, I analyze the relation between desire and shame in the context of another’s shame—that is, whereas the past two chapters discussed the subject’s desire for his or her own shame, in this chapter, I turn my focus to a desire for other people’s shame. And, though *schadenfreude*, in the context of entertainment and
its specific forms of consumption, can certainly be nefarious, and despite the tendency to pathologize such tendencies, I hope to demonstrate the ways in which we might consider schadenfreude’s usefulness in helping us to understand what shame can offer individuals that seek it out in others, while at the same time addressing important questions about what might be at stake in such seeking. At what point, for instance, does one’s active desire to see another humiliated (without directly causing that humiliation oneself) become cruel or malicious? Such a question reminds us not to discount our involvement in the humiliation of others, even when we may not consider ourselves the humiliators.

Via an analysis of NBC’s The Biggest Loser, I aim to demonstrate not only what another’s shame affords viewers but what individual desires for that shame can tell us about the modes of relationality and mechanisms of power in the societies in which we live. I have narrowed my focus to The Biggest Loser because, of contemporary markers of shame, obesity, or fatness, is arguably the most visible.13 Further, questions of “healthiness” and thus of responsibility (to oneself and others) inevitably arise in any discussion of obesity, especially in today’s health-obsessed mainstream culture, allowing us to further examine the active or participatory nature of taking pleasure in another’s shame. While I intend to focus primarily on

13 While race is not a central focus of this chapter, such an assertion certainly brings to mind the ways in which, historically, skin colour has also been a primary visible marker of shame. As such, it may be useful here to provide some background information on research conducted by others on the subject of race in The Biggest Loser. Indeed, as Amy Erdman Farrell notes, “fat denigration is intricately related to gender as well as racial hierarchies, in particular the historical development of ‘whiteness’” (5). Despite this fact, and as Katherine Sender and Margaret Sullivan point out, few regular Biggest Loser viewers could “remember any discussion of race on the show” (577) even though they recognized that the show “was more racially diverse than … other shows” (577). M. L. Silk, J. Francombe, and F. Bachelor recognize that “TBL never identifies race as a factor for why families are struggling, obfuscating the very structures of racial discrimination that position them there in the first place and offering neoliberal solutions as being equally beneficial to all” (380). They go on to suggest that the show merely demonstrates “tolerance of obesity in black communities, suggesting that such a cultural heritage must be overcome in order to save oneself: a reinstatement of implicitly white norms of size and appearance” (380-81). The show thus ignores the social and health disparities (e.g., poverty, lack of access to healthy foods) that are indicative of racialized disparities since “Othernesses, in this sense racial and ethnic differences, are treated as unremarkable contingencies of social life” (381).
Season 9 of *The Biggest Loser* (which I find to be perhaps the most shameful or shame-filled season, if only because it set a precedent for the public weigh-ins and exposure of the contestants’ obese bodies in subsequent seasons—not to mention its insistence that the contestants, in teams of two, complete a marathon on stationary bikes in the first episode of the season or be eliminated), I will draw on examples from other seasons as well to demonstrate how our understanding of shame’s relation to desire informs and impacts the shifting dynamics of selfhood and moral and cultural values today.

While marketing itself as a positive and inspirational story about men and women determined to change their lives by losing weight, *The Biggest Loser* simultaneously works to expose individual failures and ridicule the obese bodies in question, all to the delight of a national or even international audience of viewers. Unlike most makeover shows, which either introduce a new contestant each episode or include plastic surgery as part of the contestants’ transformation, *The Biggest Loser* follows a number of contestants over a period of months and insists the contestants lose weight “the hard way”—through rigorous dieting and exercise. While the first few episodes of each season tend to be laden with the most amount of shame, shame is still prevalent right up until the season finales; even when contestants have lost incredible amounts of weight, they often still believe themselves to be undeserving of this transformation, perhaps because fatness has come to signify unproductive citizenship, which then serves as a justification for being ostracized from the communities to which one belongs. Amy Erdman Farrell asks, in *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture*, why body size has become “connected to a ‘right to belong,’ a ‘privilege of membership’? What is it, in particular, about *fat* that makes it such a liability?” (3). Farrell provides an historical account of the transition from a pre-nineteenth-century belief that fatness was a sign of “both wealth (meaning
one had sufficient food and physical leisure) and health (meaning one was free of the diseases that wasted away bodily flesh) in order to maintain a hefty body” (27) to a nineteenth-century and post-nineteenth-century adherence to fatness as signifying the “excess of desire, of bodily urges not controlled, of immoral, lazy and sinful habits” (10). The development of fat stigma, she realizes, is “related both to cultural anxieties that emerged during the modern period over consumer excess and, importantly, to prevailing ideas about race, civilization, and evolution” (5). Indeed, by the end of the nineteenth century, fatness “came to represent greedy and corrupt political and economic systems” (30-31), such that the fat person came to “represent something that threatens the United States—monopolies, unbridled capitalism, child labor, political corruption linked to business interests” (31). Embarrassment about the fat body came easily, Farrell notes, primarily because of the ways in which it “literally and figuratively does not fit in with the built environment of chairs, doors, and vehicles, and with the world of other ‘normal-sized’ people” (34). As such, shows like The Biggest Loser have a lot to work with when it comes to humiliating their contestants and demonstrating not only their fat as excess body, but how it has come to represent the “excess of desire” and the detrimental consumption practices that Farrell elaborates. Such contemporary narratives of obesity designate weight gain as “a loss of position, a figurative and literal move down in the social and economic hierarchy. In contrast, the loss of weight marks upward mobility, a gain of stature, a sign of one’s moral, physical and psychological improvement” (Farrell 118).

My particular interest in The Biggest Loser stems from the explicit and socially-sanctioned relation it articulates between shame and fatness. First of all, individuals seem motivated by their shame (for their bodies and their selves) to apply to be contestants. Moreover, the show continues to see thousands of applicants fifteen seasons in even though the applicants
are fully aware of the humiliation that awaits them if they are selected. As such, this show differs from reality shows like *Intervention* or *What Not to Wear* where individuals are unknowingly bombarded by “concerned” friends and family who desperately want the individual to change. The participants on *The Biggest Loser* are there willingly. It is also the only show whose premise is to unabashedly and unambiguously shame its contestants into conforming to social expectations. Though shows such as *Intervention* and *Hoarders* function at least partially by shaming their participants into conformity, their approach is complicated by the ambiguous relation between mental illness and willpower in their subjects’ struggles. Fatness, however, is still generally seen, in mainstream American media, as being a product of excessive consumption and lack of willpower, and so the majority of viewers (and the show’s participants) are able to make explicit assumptions about the role of personal responsibility in the contestants’ struggles. Thus, *The Biggest Loser*, by virtue of its focus on obesity, can make the link between shamefulness and fatness without mediating factors, particularly in the context of a rising concern, in American media, about the “epidemic” of obesity. Further, because the contestants’ shame is directly linked to the shape and condition of their bodies, it is easy for viewers to determine what is shameful and what is not: the more fat that is shed, the more shame is shed. The combination of direct visibility of the markers of shame, the willful consent of its participants in their own shaming, and a socially-legitimized assumption of individual culpability make fatness the most obviously shameful topic in contemporary American reality television. And though there are many other shows about fatness,\textsuperscript{14} I have chosen to focus on *The Biggest Loser* because it is by far the most popular and the most invested in shame, a relation which, as

\textsuperscript{14} To name a few: *Shedding for the Wedding, Thintervention with Jackie Warner, Dance Your A** Off, Heavy, Celebrity Fit Club, I Used to be Fat, Bridal Bootcamp, Extreme Weight Loss, DietTribe, Fat March, I Can Make You Thin, Losing it with Jillian, Shaq’s Big Challenge, and Let’s Just Play Go Healthy Challenge.*
this dissertation argues, is neither coincidental nor surprising. Indeed, as Silk, Francombe, and Bachelor point out, the show’s “inveterate popularity is underscored by the near 1.3 million ‘likes’ on the official TBL Facebook page and its 50,000 followers on Twitter” (375). Furthermore, the show

‘allows’ its contestants, and also the viewing public, to ‘take charge’ of their health and lose weight. Via an established reality television series and comprehensive media convergence … individuals can attend boot camps, post diet blogs, attach pictures to TBL gallery, learn recipes from the new Biggest Loser cookbook, listen to The Biggest Loser workout mixes, join the Biggest Loser club, ‘like’ the Biggest Loser on facebook, ‘follow’ the Biggest Loser on Twitter, access the Biggest Loser meal plan, purchase from the Biggest Loser store, sign up for the Biggest Loser weight loss League, stay at the Biggest Loser ranch and resort spa at Fitness Ridge, Utah, play the Biggest Loser on Wii or Nintendo DS consoles, subscribe to receive weight loss text alerts direct to a mobile phone, or download the Biggest Loser ‘app’ featuring a fitness tracker and healthy recipes. (374)

Upon entering its twelfth series on NBC in the US, the show already had twenty-two adaptations around the world in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, South America, and Australia. It is, in short, the most popular and far-reaching reality television show of its kind.

The first season of The Biggest Loser (2004) sets up a connection between obese bodies and shame that is at once metonymic and synecdochic. For the duration of the show, a fat body part operates as synecdoche for a fat body, and a fat body becomes a metonymic indicator of a shameful or ashamed person. This logic dictates fairly immediately that a fat body part comes to
suggest a state of deep shame, via a mechanism whose twin tropic poles—metonymy and synecdoche—become increasingly imbricated and difficult to differentiate. As a result, the initial associative relation between fatness and shame—where a fat body part is a part of a fat body, and a fat body is associated with a person who is ashamed of his or her body—gives way to an overtly symbolic relation that effaces the associative mechanisms by which it came into being. In their place, the show provides a truth: rather than an association between fatness and shame, we are provided with an equation whereby fat equals shame. As a result, a fat body or body part and the person embodied therein are deprived of their capacity to signify separately or differently, and viewers are conditioned to read them only as symbols of shame, rather than as complex subjects embodied in a large body. Through this lens, the show’s title becomes an obvious and bullying pun: the show’s winner is, of course, the one who loses the most weight, and is thus the biggest “loser,” but the association between “bigness” and social “losers” is unavoidable, and so the show also asks simultaneously, with the mean-spiritedness of its hosts and trainers, “which one of these fat losers will lose the most weight” and “who is the biggest (read, ‘fattest’) from this collection of losers?”

Indeed, this relation between fat and shame is suggested in the opening scene of the pilot episode, which provides us with a series of short video clips of obese bodies working out in a gym. The first two clips focus on the thighs and mid-section of these bodies, accompanied by two women’s voices communicating disgust with these particular areas of their bodies: “I really hate my mid-section,” “I despise my thighs.” The next video clip zooms in on a man’s chest, accompanied by a male voice expressing his hatred of his “upper torso, [his] man-boobs.” Various body parts continue to be named alongside clips of those obese parts until the voices begin overlapping with one another and the clips get shorter and shorter until the screen fades to
black. The presentation of isolated body parts with more or less disembodied voices talking about how ashamed they are of that particular body part creates the immediate impression that, first, these body parts are shameful, and second, in the absence of the complete body, that these “shameful” body parts are synecdoches for the “shameful” body. Further, the juxtaposition of different body parts and disembodied voices (all of which are voicing their shame) creates the impression of a unified, shameful/ashamed consciousness and a corresponding fat corporeality composed of the bodies and souls (or voices) of its various “limbs” and “organs.” The absence of faces as visual markers of individuality also helps create the illusion of a single, fat corporeality and spirit. The increasingly rapid series of cuts suggests a melding of body parts and voices, in much the same way that a cartoon creates the illusion of coherent “life” by the rapid presentation of a series of images; and the fade to blackness stands in for a form of collective rest, or “sleep,” as the contestants—here, yoked into a single, shameful and ashamed consciousness and corporeality—prepare to make the transition from “losers” to “biggest losers.”

The next clip immediately reinforces the illusion of a unified corporeality: as a group of twelve people are shown walking together, a new voice is introduced, that of the show’s narrator, J.D. Roth. While the camera continues to watch the group, Roth states, “These twelve people have one thing in common: they’re fat.” In contrast to the introductory montage and its series of first person confessions of shame, the narrator’s use of the third person serves both to homogenize the twelve individuals’ group identity and to separate the “normal” narrator from the contestants, their fatness, and their shame. Further, the flat simplicity with which he states “they’re fat” leaves little room for other interpretation, and we can read his simple declaration as suggesting both that the contestants all have fat bodies and that, collectively, they are fat, in the sense of being symbols of everything mainstream American media (and culture) thinks and feels
about fatness. Immediately afterward, the scene changes and we are back in the gym. This time, however, we see the same twelve individuals standing in a line wearing nothing but shorts and (for the women) sports bras—clothing which allows us to see as much of their bodies as NBC is able to show. The camera watches them from a distant overhead perspective, providing us with a glimpse of the group’s corporeality, or collective fat; even from this angle, we can see the rolls of fat hanging over their too-tight shorts. To further emphasize this “commonality,” the camera moves in for a close-up of the mid-sections of each of the contestants, as an accompanying narrative voice tells us how much that body weighs. This modification of the opening scene, where the individuals confess their collective shamefulness, becomes a way of informing the viewer exactly how shameful these bodies are. Once again, the faces of these contestants are not included alongside the images of the bodies, reaffirming the impression of group corporeality. Suddenly, however, we see the most obese man of all the contestants in his complete fleshiness: Maurice stands on the scale and we hear his voice tell us that he is four hundred and thirty six pounds. Both corporeally and socially (by the show’s logic) he is the “biggest” loser, and so, like Nixon during the Watergate scandal (the political event around which The Ice Storm revolves and to which I shall return in the remaining two chapters), Maurice becomes the physical and cognitive head of the greater “loser” body.

The process by which The Biggest Loser creates the association between fat and shame is a prime example of what Beverley Skeggs and Helen Wood, in Reacting to Reality Television, call “metonymic morality” (102), a process in which “every aspect of behaviour is subject to scrutiny and evaluation, in order that the (good/bad) part comes to stand in for the whole person
(metonymy)” (102).15 Shaming a contestant for his or her perceived lack of care of self—a lack of care deemed visible on his or her body—thus becomes a sign (in the logic of metonymic morality) that the whole person is morally lacking. The show’s focus on breaking down bodies into their errant parts turn the parts into specific spectacles of shame, which then function as metonymy for any number of “shameful” things easily associated with fatness.

Moreover, though in the opening scenes individuality is subordinated to the group corporeality, after establishing the heuristic relation between fatness and shame the show redeploy individuality as a means of assigning personal responsibility (and thus locating shame in the individual) for the epidemic of obesity (making each individual responsible for all of the problems associated with obesity). The show enhances the metonymic connection between fat bodies and individual failures by creating the very spectacles which many viewers assume to be at the heart of the “obesity” problem. For example, the show’s creators frequently set out copious amounts of food across dining room tables, emphasizing the sheer amount of food these individuals eat. These displays become emblematic of the contestants’ failures to exercise self-discipline or control, to care about their futures, or to recognize the costs of ill health to the nation. In Season 10 Episode 1, for instance, the trainers journey to Detroit, Michigan, in search of contestants for the show, telling us that “obesity could cost the state of Michigan over twelve billion dollars.” Obese individuals are depicted not only as unhealthy but as costly to the state and to the nation. The failures of the individual to recognize the impact of his/her health on the nation is further stressed in Season 3 of The Biggest Loser, which begins with fifty potential contestants, each “representing their home state and an entire nation of overweight Americans”

15 It may be useful to note that, although their general argument is sound, Skegg and Wood tend to conflate metonymy with synecdoche.
(Episode 1). Additionally, the show has seen, to date, four installments of “The Biggest Loser: Couples,” in which applicants apply in teams of two (usually family members, but sometimes friends or spouses). The show takes these particular seasons as prime opportunities to stress the ways in which obesity is not just the individual’s responsibility (even as it simultaneously preaches the necessity of individual focus and care). The show attempts to reinforce the toll obesity takes on one’s friends and family, solidifying the necessity of friends and family to “support” (that is, to monitor and police) the obese individual. As such, the show not only emphasizes the risks obesity poses to the health of the individual, but to the health and well-being of communities, and ultimately, the nation. This “health” of the nation is often expressed in terms of productivity, such that if the individual’s obesity prevents him/her from being a contributing member to the society in which s/he lives, the individual is designated as an unproductive citizen, undeserving of the rights and privileges afforded to other members, and justifying the individual’s ostracism or alienation. Skeggs and Wood argue that the “process of metonymic morality is intensified further by the emphasis that is placed upon the face in the performance of the self” (106). So while these errant body parts come to stand in for immorality, “the face becomes the site where the truth of personhood is told” (106). Indeed, the frequent close-ups on the contestants’ faces make it possible for viewers to judge whether the appropriate emotions are being felt or expressed; as such, viewers can participate in monitoring and policing the contestants, ultimately judging their worth as individuals and citizens, but only against the criteria set up by the logic of the show’s associative structure.

The Biggest Loser’s commitment to highlighting the contestants’ failures emphasizes the process of shaming, thus illustrating an explicit cause/effect relation between exposing one’s shame and achieving success. Indeed, once the host and/or trainers have managed to sufficiently
shame a contestant (often leading to a breakdown in which the contestant is forced to acknowledge the various shameful behaviours or incidents that brought him/her to the ranch), the show depicts the contestant as suddenly reinvigorated, possessing a new outlook on life and newly capable of a more rigorous training schedule in the gym (ultimately leading to more pounds being shed). *The Biggest Loser* thus effectively tries to enforce what Elspeth Probyn suggests in *Blush*: if we acknowledge shame, we are able to move beyond it. When the shame in this show is so intricately connected to fat, the show ultimately suggests that if one is able to acknowledge the shame (and thus the fat), one is able to move beyond the shame (and thus the fat). This is, however, a limited and generalized understanding of shame, which (as we have seen in earlier chapters) is experienced quite differently by different individuals. For some, acknowledging shame can be paralyzing, even traumatic, and to suggest that shame is something that one can (or that one wants) to move beyond is problematic. Even on *The Biggest Loser*, contestants sometimes refuse (or are sometimes unable) to confess their ashamedness, but as we will see, the show has mechanisms in place to eliminate such outliers early on, because it is structurally dependent upon the firm relation between fatness and shame.

In what follows, I first think through why individuals would willingly submit themselves to shame by applying to be a contestant on *The Biggest Loser*. This section further demonstrates what I articulated in Chapter Two—shame’s transformative potential—but stresses the ways in which individuals seem to recognize this fact. I return briefly to the ideas and theories of Chapter Two in order to indicate their accuracy in “real-life” situations. I then return to the question of *schadenfreude* and the attachment to others’ shame in order to investigate what such an attachment can tell us about citizenship, responsibility, empathy and ethics.
The Biggest Loser: Fifteen Minutes of Shame

As discussed above, The Biggest Loser is invested in shaming its contestants into conformity. In Episode 1 of Season 1, Lisa tells the camera that the initial weigh-in “was humiliating. You have everybody out in America … [watching]. I’m so embarrassed.” In the same episode, Gary tells us how “disgusted” he is with himself “for letting [himself] get that way.” Kelly similarly characterizes the weigh-in as “completely embarrassing. Nobody says ‘she’s got muscle’ or anything. They’re just like ‘She’s a fat girl.’” When one contestant in Season 3 Episode 1 weighs in alongside the other 49 potential contestants, each representing a state (and thus, collectively, the country as a whole), she tells us that she “could have just crawled into [her] skin and died of embarrassment.” In most cases, too, supplementing the contestants’ admissions and confessions of “shame,” “humiliation,” and/or “embarrassment,” are their affective responses to the situations they encounter on The Biggest Loser. When Sunshine steps on the scale in front of her friends, family, and community (and the nation via television broadcasting) in Season 9 Episode 1, we watch as she begins to cry. When the number on the scale finally reveals her starting weight, Sunshine glances at it, reddens, and hides her face in her hands, sobbing uncontrollably. The camera spends nearly forty-five seconds watching her mortification, panning occasionally to the faces of her friends and family, looking on as she stands there exposed and unable to do anything about it.

In Chapter Two, I suggested that Moody’s characters’ turns to shame and loneliness may be understood as refusals to continue to orient themselves toward “the good life,” a life which was only presenting them with disappointment and failure. In contrast, The Biggest Loser contestants still very much subscribe to this idea of “the good life” and what it supposedly entails, showcasing their adherence to the belief that their weight is the only thing standing in the
way of happiness, love, community, and so on. At the end of Season 9 Episode 1, for instance, Patti weighs in to see how much weight she has lost in the first week. Seeing how much she has lost, Patti gushes, “I can’t remember the last time I was so happy.” In Episode 17 of the same season, trainer Bob Harper asks Michael what the finale is going to look like for him. Michael responds by saying, “it looks like I’ll be very proud or happy with myself.” The show thus becomes itself a promise of happiness, exemplifying Sara Ahmed’s formula of desiring x for y, where y is happiness. Unlike the characters in The Ice Storm, then, the contestants on the show are not actively seeking shame in and of itself. Instead, they are motivated by the shame they already feel to be on the show and get help for their obesity. So while shame is not necessarily the desired object, the contestants seem to accept it as a necessary condition for getting what they want (“the good life,” which includes an “ideal” body and healthier lifestyle). Indeed, as I demonstrated in Chapter Two, shame is sometimes a necessary obstacle to, or sometimes a condition for, enjoyment or happiness, such that one’s aim for happiness via shame is sometimes an attempt to move beyond the pain that might characterize one’s shame experience. In short, one aims to feel bad momentarily in order to feel better later.

The function of shame as a condition for happiness is demonstrated throughout The Biggest Loser, which underscores shame’s role as a crucial behavioural regulator. The show employs Dr. Robert Huizenga (former team physician for the Los Angeles Raiders) to talk to the contestants about their health conditions. Each season begins (usually in Episode 1 or 2) with the contestants visiting the doctor, either individually or in their designated teams. Dr. Huizenga, though, does more than just present the contestants with the facts about their medical conditions and their unhealthy lifestyles. In Season 10 Episode 2, for instance, he indicates that, for many of the contestants, their meeting with him is going to be “a rude wakeup call.” The inclusion of the
word “rude” in this “wakeup call” is indicative of his approach in these meetings: Dr. Huizenga invites Lisa into his office, telling her to grab a seat “right here,” pointing at an extremely small stool situated in the middle of the room. Lisa asks, “right here?” but the doctor ignores her and launches right into his cataloguing of Lisa’s health risks, leaving Lisa no choice but to take a seat on the stool. The camera shifts its position to the rear of the stool, watching as she squirms around on it, trying to get comfortable despite the fact that her body fat is hanging over the edges and back of the stool. Here, Lisa is subject to two simultaneous objectifying gazes: that of the doctor, representative of the medical establishment, and that of the camera which, in its effect, becomes equivalent to the social gaze. Under these gazes, she is re-constructed as a fat and, according to the show’s logic, shameful object. The doctor’s next gesture nicely encapsulates the ways in which the show makes of its contestants symbols of shame: seemingly oblivious to her discomfort, he shows Lisa a side-profile image of her naked mid-section, which he feels “explains a lot about what’s going on in [her],” thereby reducing her, once again, to an obese body part. Lisa sees the picture and immediately starts to cry, folding her arms across her chest in a protective gesture. There is a prolonged pause as the doctor gives her time to contemplate the image. Finally, he asks, in a tone of exasperation, “did anyone ever tell you your cholesterol is all messed up? You’ve got too little of the good and too much of the bad. You’ve got these inflammatory markers that this fat, this visceral fat [pointing to excesses in the image] are kicking out and that the blood vessels, when we look at them with our fancy scans, already have plaque inside the vessels, at thirty-one.” The camera pans to Lisa’s face, nodding as she takes in what he is telling her. She says, “I knew my cholesterol was high and I just, I don’t know why I didn’t do anything about it but I didn’t for a year—until this.” Apparently unsatisfied with her response thus far, the doctor plunges on: “and then, if that weren’t bad enough, what’s the worst
thing you could do on top of that?” Lisa responds by asking, “smoke?” and hangs her head, tears rolling down her face.

The doctor ignores her obvious distress, telling her that he has combined her family history and personal medical information to predict how long she has left to live—as if all that she is, and all that she signifies, is encapsulated in the combination of her fat body and the medical data he has collected. He shows her that her “real inner age” is sixty-two, double that of her actual age, and again, the camera zooms in on Lisa for several seconds (a significant amount of time in the realm of television), watching while she begins to sob. The doctor, again, says nothing, providing no comfort while he allows this “real inner age” to sink in. The doctor finally says, “we have some of the sickest people in the world come on this show; we don’t have doubling hardly ever. You know, half of that is the fat and half of that is the cigarettes. You have to recognize something and it comes down to, Lisa, do you want to live?” Lisa quickly responds by saying “yes,” but the doctor, throwing his hands up, yells “but you’re not acting like it!” The doctor’s hyperbolic language (“we have some of the sickest people in the world come on this show”), exasperation and chastising remarks (“if that weren’t bad enough”; “but you’re not acting like it!”), and refusal to acknowledge the contestants’ discomfort indicate his attempts to shame them into changing their behaviour. Indeed, by yelling “but you’re not acting like it!” at Lisa, the doctor establishes himself as protector of social norms, judging her previous behaviour and interpreting it in the only way it is allowed to be interpreted: because being obese is dangerous to her health, he concludes that, despite her attempts to assert herself in a different light, she does not demonstrate any real will to live. We see the effects of his shaming moments after this appointment, when Lisa says to the camera, “I have to change my life.” The show is thus structured around the mechanics of shame and its aftermath: shame produces a subjective
shattering of the inadequate subject, and in the aftermath of shaming, the subject is able to reorient him- or herself in relation to social normativity. Unlike the Hoods or Flanagan, the show’s contestants do not seem to desire shame for itself and do not seem to experience any sense of eroticism or initial sense of their relationality as a result of it. Instead, they experience shame as it is traditionally understood, as something that helps bring one back into a “proper” relation with/to the social after one has transgressed its boundaries. The contestants thus derive no pleasure from the shattering itself, and do not wish to remain shattered; instead, they want to re-integrate themselves by leaving shame—and fat—behind.

In order to produce these continual moments of subjective shattering, *The Biggest Loser* yokes together the realms of scientific objectivity (medicine) and the most immediately visible and applicable source of social interpretation: the family. In addition to rendering the subject an object of medical discourse—and a fat, shameful one at that—the show also uses the cold logic of medical science to fix the contestant as a sort of failed limb of the family body. In this sense, the subject becomes a failure of both embodiment and socialization. After the scene with Lisa described above, for example, the doctor tells Rick that he has a 32% (or “1 in 3”) chance of experiencing a “heart catastrophe” in the next five years, establishing his failure as an embodied subject. Next, though, the doctor tells him that he has to talk with his family via “PalTalk” and express to them what the doctor has just told him in order to “make sure it registered.” Rick’s face turns noticeably red as he is forced to tell his family how sorry he is that he put them and himself “in this position.” The use of the word “position” suggests Rick’s internalization of his location directly at the intersection of the scientific and social gaze, and the camera’s focus on his blushing face—one of the show’s most frequently recurring images—once again serves to render him a shameful object. Throughout this chat with his family, he continues to hang his
head in shame, sobbing while his family tells him how proud they are that he is taking steps to get healthier. When the conversation ends, the doctor steps in front of Rick and says, “you have people that love you, huh?” Rick responds only by putting his face in his hands and continuing to sob. And while these PalTalks are seemingly designed to reinforce the contestants’ families’ knowledge about how dire the contestants’ health is, the important thing, for the show’s purposes, is the latter’s consistent affective reactions to the concerned familial gaze. After Rick, Allie is the final contestant to see the doctor in this episode and is told by him that she has “the highest body fat percentage” of all the contestants this season. After she has been forced to speak with her mother and daughter on PalTalk, the doctor tells her that “this is what it takes to turn your life around.” While the doctor does not specify what he means by “this,” given everything we have just witnessed, shame seems an integral part of the pronoun’s referent, whose vagueness seems to encapsulate the entirety of the process by which each particular contestant is constructed as both shameful object and ashamed subject.

I hope I have sufficiently demonstrated by now that, in the context of The Biggest Loser, in order to “turn one’s life around,” as the doctor recommends, one must first be broken—and that shame is often the catalyst for such “productive” brokenness (though this process, as suggested above, is certainly not a desirable or pleasurable one for everyone). Judith Lancioni, in Fix Me Up: Essays on Television Dating and Makeover Shows, recognizes the ways in which the “exultant words uttered at the reveals [of makeover shows …] suggest an obliteration of self” (7). She argues that these types of shows “focus on the relationship between ‘the fragmentation of identity,’ the ‘desire for distinction,’ and the ‘self-constituted, reprogrammable entity’ that is the body” (15). This “obliteration of self” is perhaps most evident in The Biggest Loser season finales’ “big reveals” when contestants must make their way on stage to show the audience their
“new and improved” selves by literally smashing their way through a paper image of their former obese bodies. Though one might look at this as a succinct metaphor for the contestants’ achievements over the course of the show, it is also a literalization of the process by which subjects are repeatedly destroyed via the show’s deployment of shame. Physically, “that” body no longer exists, of course, but the underscoring logic of his or her transformation is that there is a different person inside, as well. As Elizabeth Atwood Gailey recognizes, in her essay on “Self-Made Women: Cosmetic Surgery Shows and the Construction of Female Psychopathology,” in such shows, “before subjects undergo their extreme transformations, they must endure extreme rituals of humiliation and sacrifice, beginning with confessional narratives and—most crucially—public exposure of their (pathological) bodies” (115).

But what *The Biggest Loser* gives us, and what Lancioni fails to acknowledge and Gailey only mentions in passing (without specifying why the subjects must endure this humiliation), is shame’s crucial role in this “obliteration,” “reprogramming,” or “extreme transformation” of the self. *The Biggest Loser*’s “big reveals,” coupled with the “exultant words” Lancioni mentions, are forced recognitions of the contestant’s “former” self, which is to say that, though the contestant’s physical transformation via hard work is important to the show and its viewers, equally important (and, I would argue, even more so) is the complete destruction and reconstitution of the subject via humiliation and punishment which are both socially sanctioned and (in the majority of cases) voluntarily undertaken. Further, by linking the individual’s fatness with his/her failure as a body—that is, an objectified body—and, more importantly, by linking this failure to the shamefulness of his/her failure as both a family member and as a citizen-subject in the larger narrative of healthy American citizenship (a narrative for which the nuclear family has long stood as microcosm), *The Biggest Loser* makes possible a public destruction and
rebuilding of a failed subject-citizen into a socially acceptable embodied subject. Further, the contestants’ willful and conscious acceptance, not only of their failures, but of the necessity of their punishment, is an implicit acceptance of a conservative, normalizing narrative of American culture and citizenship. In Episode 11 of Season 2, for instance, Suzy walks into a room where Bob, her trainer, is waiting for her. After expressing his pride in and awe at her physical transformation, he announces that he wants to introduce her to “someone that [she] used to know.” Bob reveals a life-sized cardboard cut-out of Suzy from the beginning of the season. Suzy sees the image and reacts by laughing at it, groaning in disgust, and covering her face to block it from her view. Reflecting on this moment later, she confesses that “it was hard to look at. I mean, I covered my eyes and I just was overwhelmed. It was gross to me.” Suzy’s intense reaction of disgust and designation of her former body as “gross” underscores the contempt and shame she—and the trainer and the social gaze—feels for this former self. She goes on to say, “That was not me. But it was me.” Her use of “it” and “that” to refer to the image of her obese body may simply be her recognition of the image as image, but it also signifies her abjection of a body and, significantly, a person, that she no longer wants to recognize as her own, as herself, and to whom she refuses to give the personal pronoun. Despite this refusal, Suzy does recognize that the image represents her: “it was me.” Her easy equivocation of the neuter pronoun and the first person pronoun suggests that, for her as for the show’s normalizing gaze, her former self was an object, and it is only in having destroyed “it/me” by rebuilding herself into an acceptable subject-citizen that she has achieved an acceptable selfhood. Her use of past tense also obliterates the connection between the obese body and her present body, an obliteration that is reinforced when Bob asks her to “stand over here” (next to the cardboard cut-out). Approaching the image, Suzy exclaims “sick!” (an invocation of the show’s objectifying medical discourse)
before standing next to it so Bob (and viewers) can see the transformation. Bob tells her, “I can’t even get over it. Look what you did!” Reflecting on the moment later, Bob tells the camera that “Suzy is a changed person in a thinner body,” thus solidifying the symbolic connection between a changed physical appearance and its concomitant (and thus “visible”) internal transformation.

The rhetoric employed by Bob, Suzy, and the show as a whole, solidifies shame’s capacity to effect not only the fragmentation of one’s identity, but its ability to motivate and engender a reprogramming and reconstituting of that identity. Suzy clinches these notions for us when, referring to her experience of being on The Biggest Loser, she says, “this has showed me who I really am inside. Seeing that picture reminds me that I will never be that way again.”

Brenda R. Weber suggests that these kinds of assertions are indicative of the subject’s experience of “a dislocation from identity that involves an alienation from the materiality of their bodies” (226). Weber sees this dislocation as evident in “Before-subjects” (which is to say, before their transformations), but as the above example clearly demonstrates, shame’s effects are powerful. The fact that the contestants often begin their stint on a reality show with the same “this isn’t really me” story attests to the pervasive shame they already feel, most evident in their refusal to lay claim to the body that gets them on the show. The fact that the contestants already articulate such dislocation from their bodies and identities suggests that undergoing further shame on the show is either expected or accepted as a stepping stone to locate the lost self. Samantha Thomas, Jim Hyde, and Paul Komesaroff’s “‘Cheapening the Struggle’: Obese People’s Attitudes Towards The Biggest Loser” relates the results of a study they conducted to assess obese viewers’ reactions to The Biggest Loser. Among those who participated in the study were a few who had actually applied to be on the show. One of these participants said, “I can understand why people would sign themselves up to go on shows like The Biggest Loser. I can understand
how their mind would work to get them there: ‘I’ve tried everything else, what have I got to lose”’ (212).

Indeed, if the cost of obtaining “the good life” (however one conceives of that life) is to be publicly humiliated, contestants seem more than willing to pay the price, especially if they believe the rewards outweigh the pain of being judged and alienated. As Weber points out, because “television participants don’t have to grapple with the real-world expense of cosmetic procedures, style advice, therapeutic assistance, or extensive home renovation” (or, I would add, gym memberships and/or equipment, nutrition advice, personal trainers, or healthy foods), they must pay the price of transformation another way (74). As such, humiliation becomes their “legal tender” or form of “affective currency” (74). Weber sees the “abjection” the contestants undergo as “only a means to an end,” at which point they are rewarded with “heightened happiness and self-esteem” (76). Misha Kavka suggests, however, that there is always an “affective remainder (of bad feeling)” (Reality Television 73). She argues that when one is humiliated, this humiliation “cannot be equivalent to earnings” (73). The Biggest Loser does its best to convince us otherwise, given how intricately the show connects shame to the obese “before” bodies. Thus, just as Suzy is shocked and disgusted with her “before” body in Season 2, so too are the contestants in the other seasons when they are presented with their “before” bodies. These contestants similarly promise viewers that they will “never be that way again.” Instead of forgetting their humiliation—or being allowed to forget it, since they are constantly reminded of their “before” bodies in the form of images, videos, and even holograms—the contestants take hold of humiliation-as-currency and partake in the judgment and humiliation of their former bodies/selves. Having learned and internalized the shaming techniques taught to them by the
show, the contestants seem more than happy to reproduce such techniques in order to refocus viewers’ attention on the new body and self that has shed the fat (and thus the shame).

Helen Powell and Sylvie Prasad argue that “The way in which one is judged by others [has become] integral to a sense of identity” in modern society (60). Many of the contestants on The Biggest Loser seem to recognize that their being judged by others is necessary to their individual transformations. In the season finale of Season 9, for example, Michael stresses that “the only way I could do it was to bare all.” In an interview with Sina Najafi and David Serlin (Fall 2008), Lauren Berlant commented on The Biggest Loser, communicating a similar sentiment, namely that the “people are so shockingly naked on it” (“The Broken Circuit”). Not only are the individuals expected to bare their bodies, but they are expected to bare their emotions in order to come to grips with the poor choices that led them to being obese and unhappy. The show forcibly confronts the contestants with these “poor choices,” often using the gym to, as trainer Jillian Michael asserts, “break down their defense mechanisms until they’re so physically exhausted they can’t hold their feelings back anymore” (Season 9 Episode 2). The show implicitly suggests that if the contestants are able to acknowledge their shameful behaviours by being humiliated in the process, they may be more likely to avoid this “debased” state in the future. As Berlant recognizes, the show is not only “about a culture of shamed appetites,” it is also “about managing people’s feelings of loss” (“The Broken Circuit”). This loss refers not only to the contestants’ weight, but to their (perceived) loss of control, loss of self-esteem, and loss of identity or self. As Weber writes, makeover television conceptualizes “the self-in-absence,” which “allows the makeover to authorize its practices as ‘saving the life’ of makeover participants” (14). She goes on to stress that “Makeover logic insists that feelings of sadness, depression, and even desolation contribute to alienation from an experience of
consummated selfhood, leading to the notion that ‘I am not me’’ (14). Indeed, in Season 15, Episode 1, the eventual (controversial) winner of the season, Rachel Frederickson, discusses her former swimming career, noting how her weight gain contributed to her inability to pursue that career. Rachel felt that she had “lost a huge part of [her] identity” and saw The Biggest Loser as her opportunity to gain control of her weight and give her a “second chance” to be “who I want to be.” These assertions are typical responses of the contestants in the first episode of each season of the show. Contestants repeatedly stress that they no longer “know” themselves. As such, accepting humiliation becomes the primary means through which the contestant is able to locate the lost self. Rachel designates her obesity as shameful, telling the camera that “Wearing this weight I feel like I’m just broadcasting to the world my failure.” Ultimately, however, she tells us that she will “take the pain” in order “to never see this number [her starting weight] again.”

As I articulated in Chapter Three, humiliation effects a turn inward. This turn inward might, in the context of The Biggest Loser, be understood as a forced locating of the lost self. Finding that self and realizing that the shame one is made to feel because of one’s obesity has rendered it unrecognizable motivates the individual to perform the necessary (physical and emotional) work to change that self. As John Portmann recognizes, “People habitually seek meaning in suffering” (60). Given this turn inward, humiliation certainly affords the individual one form of learning experience. We can also, as I will discuss later in this chapter, seek meaning in the suffering of another. We might find joy in another’s shame because of what their experience has taught us; we might learn how to avoid that experience, we might learn more about shame and how it functions, or we might learn what shame affords others. For the individual that seeks shame and suffering for him/herself, shame does not so much “save” the
life of the initial self so much as give new life to a “better” version of that self. This new self, however, is also marketed as a healthier self, creating the illusion that humiliation actually saves lives. This is something Michael seems to recognize in the season premiere of Season 9. The contestants are told that, for the first time in the history of the show, the initial weigh-in will be a public one, taking place in front of their family, friends, and communities in their hometown. Standing on the scale, having just weighed in at 526 lbs, making him the biggest contestant The Biggest Loser has ever had, Michael expresses how “ashamed” he is at the number, but how he wants “to do this right now because it’s saving my life. For other people it’s changing their lives, but this opportunity is saving my life. I need to save my life if I want to live.” The proximity between his expression of shame and his expression that he needs to do “this” to save his life suggests to viewers the necessity of shame for transformation. Weber argues that “the makeover positions itself as a potent cure for the postmodern condition, bringing coherence, solidity, and empowerment to the fractured and schizophrenic state” of the contemporary citizen (14, my emphasis). I suggest, however, that it is not the general category of the makeover that brings the subject into coherence, but shame, since shame itself is what motivates the subject to transform. Indeed, as I argued in Chapter Two by drawing on the works of Butler, Spinoza, Sedgwick, and Agamben, the desubjectification experienced in shame initiates a resubjectification, such that becoming incoherent opens up the possibility of coherence.

Being exposed to others and being forced to confront that exposure is one way of gaining knowledge or accessing the knowledge that others have about us (regardless of whether that knowledge is damaging or not). As Judith Butler writes in Undoing Gender, “‘To intervene in the name of transformation … means precisely to disrupt what has become settled knowledge and knowable reality,’ in turn creating an unreality or a ‘knowing unknowingness’ that can effect
material change” (qtd. in Weber, 18). Shame is one such intervention mechanism, one that powerfully disrupts one’s “settled knowledge” about oneself, and which certainly creates this “knowing unknowingness,” at which point the self becomes both unrecognizable at the same time as it is recognizable as something other, something despised, and thus something in need of transformation. *The Biggest Loser*’s insistence on public exposure of shameful behaviour and characteristics indicates not only its reliance upon the transformative potential of humiliation but the necessity of community in holding individuals accountable and reminding them of their responsibilities to others and, when necessary, mobilizing shame in order to produce desired transformations.

At the same time, as we saw with Wendy in *The Ice Storm*, shame itself can offer an enduring sense of community. Individuals can also be united by shared shame, and indeed, the contestants on *The Biggest Loser* are surrounded by people undergoing the same experience. As the very first episode of the first season demonstrates, the contestants are united by the “one thing they have in common: they’re fat.” But just as collective/shared shame can create community, it can also disintegrate that community, as Season 7 Episode 1 effectively demonstrates: the host, Alison Sweeney, announces that the trainers will pick one team to train with them and that team will pick the next team, and so on. Reflecting on this process later, the orange team notes how everyone in the gym was registering that “one team is going to be last. We’ve all been there, that kid in gym class and now we’re a bunch of fat kids at a really fat gym class and somebody’s going to get picked last.” When the purple team gets selected last, Kristin, one of their members, designates this moment as one “you’ll never forget. When you’re heavy, you’re used to being rejected by certain groups of people. But then to be rejected by your own kind? It hurts.” The purple team actually ends up being rewarded for having to endure the shame
of getting picked last, and are told that they have the power to choose which trainer they would prefer to train with. As such, the show explicitly suggests that shame has its benefits and that individuals can be literally rewarded for suffering through it.

In some cases, this new community also provides the contestants with the opportunity for romantic relationships, further demonstrating what I suggested in Chapter Two: shame need not always be an obstacle to intimacy, but sometimes functions as a condition for intimacy. In Episode 16 of Season 9, Sam gets voted off the show because he has already achieved his goal weight. The show follows up with Sam after his move home, at which point he tells viewers that he found himself a new roommate and he’s “pretty sure you’ll know who she is.” We watch as Sam walks into his new apartment and into Stephanie’s (a former fellow contestant on the show) embrace. Sam tells the camera that “we kind of started our relationship in week three [of the show]. We’ve gone through this transformation together, this huge transformation, where we’ve seen each other at our worst and now coming into our best we are here for each other every day.”

Given the contestants’ ability to, as Sam articulates, get “through this transformation” (which, I argue, is made possible in large part by shame), the show thus suggests that it is possible to master shame. Because of the show’s use of metonymic morality, where the contestants’ bodies become metaphors for sinful excess and loss of control, we are to understand that if the contestant loses the excess weight and gains control, s/he also loses and gains control of shame.

16 It is interesting to note that The Biggest Loser does not show the development of these romantic relationships on the show. The show’s refusal to show these relationships, I suggest, stems from the fact that the contestants begin their stint on the show by articulating the ways in which their obesity prevents them from finding love. If the show aired these romantic developments, it would demonstrate that obesity is not an obstacle to love or connection, and thus not a source of shame for individuals (the antithesis of one of the show’s main arguments).
But the contestants’ shame is, as we will soon see, only one facet of *The Biggest Loser*’s relation to shame. Kavka argues that “TV watching is prone to shame” (*Reality Television* 48) because of the fact “that shame occurs in anticipation of a (negative) response from another. You are probably not ashamed to watch television alone or even in a group (where communal affect holds sway), but may well feel ashamed in the face of admitting to others—whom you assume not to be gripped by television or a particular programme—that you have been watching TV” (47). Kavka asks, “Would it not be shameful to admit, even in the abstract, that you might not be using television as a means of escape or detachment but [rather of] attention, interest?” (46). This is, of course, where we get the phrase “guilty pleasure” (though some are more readily able than others to admit what their “guilty pleasures” are). What Kavka does not ask is why we watch “shameful” television at all, if watching television has the ability to place us in a vulnerable position. In this next section, I return to the question of *schadenfreude*: why are viewers so fascinated by the misfortunes of others? What does engaging in another’s shame afford viewers? What are the ethical implications of taking pleasure in someone’s emotional pain? Is *schadenfreude* ethically or morally wrong? Is finding/taking pleasure in another’s shame always deleterious? What does this pleasure tell us about our understandings of selfhood and the societies in which we live?

**Taking Pleasure in Another’s Shame: Investigating Schadenfreude**

In “Epidemics of Will, Failures of Self-Esteem: Responding to Fat Bodies in *The Biggest Loser* and *What Not to Wear*,” Katherine Sender and Margaret Sullivan note that *The Biggest Loser* “debuted with almost 10 million viewers (Carlin 2004), and drew 13.7 million to the first season’s finale episode” (575). While these numbers have decreased slightly in the show’s ten-
year and fifteen-season run (down to 7.4 million viewers for the Season 15 finale in February, 2014), the show is still “ranked #1 against [its] original drama competition on ABC and CBS” (“Top ‘The Biggest Loser’ Since the Season Premiere on NBC”). Despite (or perhaps because of) the show’s incorporation of merciless humiliation and the potentially contagious nature of affect, *The Biggest Loser* continues to be a fan favourite. Indeed, as Teresa Brennan’s *The Transmission of Affect* reminds us, “our thoughts are not entirely independent; our emotions not entirely our own” (2). Brennan’s theory presupposes that affective transfers occur anywhere the possibility of “a mimetic state of identification” exists (49). Yan Tian and Jin H. Yoo’s “Connecting with *The Biggest Loser*: An Extended Model of Parasocial Interaction and Identification in Health-Related Reality TV Shows,” suggests that reality television creates the conditions for such identification to occur: “reality TV viewers’ emotional contagion is likely to be enhanced with cast members whom they regard as being ‘real’ people similar to themselves” (1). As such, “many viewers internalize the characters’ failures … as their own failures … in a way that reinforces conceptions of self” (1). This internalization occurs when audience members “respond to a media figure in a way similar to the way in which s/he would respond in a typical social relationship” (2). As Kavka notes, however, the camera tends to “spectacularize” the contestants’ private lives and spaces in which they live (*Reality Television* 78). This, coupled with the turning of ordinary people into celebrities by virtue of their being on television makes it

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17 While individuals are certainly capable of connecting with the contestants on reality television shows—regardless of their status as “ordinary” or “celebrity”—thus engendering the possibility of an empathetic response to their being humiliated, I am more interested in the responses of those who do *not* respond with fellow-feeling but with delight. Indeed, individuals might watch a show like *The Biggest Loser* not to feel joy in shame but to locate a community there of individuals who, in their daily lives, are similarly isolated or alienated from real communities. Viewers who find themselves isolated or alienated in their daily lives might also watch this show because it affords them the kind of power they do not generally have access to (of the variety: “I’m so glad that’s not me because I already suffer this on a daily basis”). I should note, too, that I hope to demonstrate in this chapter that *schadenfreude* does not necessarily preclude a sympathetic or empathetic response. Instead, I argue that it may actually function as a condition for these particular responses/feelings.
difficult to recognize the contestants as ordinary and thus as “deserving” of a sympathetic or empathetic response (even as the contestants try to stress their “ordinariness”).

To view a contestant as undeserving of a particular emotional response often stems from a belief that one is witnessing an imbalance of power relations, such that schadenfreude can be indicative of a desire for a more equal distribution of power. In “Celebrity and Schadenfreude: The Cultural Economy of Fame in Freefall,” Steve Cross and Jo Littler argue that schadenfreude represents a negative capacity in socially affective relations, one that desires equality, but is primarily unable to think it as anything other than “leveling through humiliation” (397). Viewed in this way, we might understand schadenfreude as a reaction to someone’s violation of a law or social norm that produces anger and a wish to see the violator brought to justice. Because of schadenfreude’s relation to justice, Watts suggests that it is “a distinctly moral concept. While the emotion itself is not immoral, experiencing it hinges on an evaluation of our own notions of morality, of whether an ethical code has been transgressed in the first place, and whether a punishment fits the crime” (31). To “level through humiliation” might then simply indicate the process by which an individual is rendered ashamed and powerless (which would explain Cross and Littler’s designation of schadenfreude as negative). In the context of The Biggest Loser, however (and as I have already suggested), the contestants are sometimes brought down in order to be brought up again. This is not, of course, to suggest that the humiliating tactics the show employs are excusable; instead, I merely hope to demonstrate why televisual schadenfreude is not always as big a breach of ethical codes or beliefs as it may at first seem. Indeed, as Amber Watts notes, “Individuals who appear on reality television are all, at some level, willing participants” (35). As such, when one “asks to be on television, one is, at some level, complicit with the building of one’s own image, whether positive or negative” (35). If the whole point of a
show like *The Biggest Loser* is to expose and humiliate the contestants in order to change them, “then *asking* to have potential punishment broadcast assuages many ethical concerns” (36). If a contestant does not understand or *cannot* understand the show’s need to humiliate its subjects, and thus does not agree or comply with its operating modes, this is when we witness the clear crossing of an ethical line. In Season 9 Episode 3, for instance, Jillian attempts to break through Migdalia’s “attitude problem” by judging her parenting skills. Migdalia has a young daughter at home who Jillian speculates will follow in her mother’s footsteps and become obese. After several minutes of enduring Jillian’s shaming remarks, Migdalia storms out of the gym and tries to quit the show. When Bob attempts to talk to her, Migdalia tells him, “I’m done. I don’t need nobody to come and tell me that I’m a bad mother, that I don’t know how to take care of my kid. … I came here to get healthy and to learn how to eat. I don’t need nobody to tell me that I’m fucked up in my head.” Migdalia’s mother, Miggy, who is also on the show, steps in, telling Bob that they came on the show “to change our ways, not to change our personality” and to chastise him and Jillian for their negativity in telling Migdalia that her daughter is going to be like her. She says, “you’re talking in a negative way—or that’s the way I interpret it.” Bob does not dignify this with a response; instead, he simply tells her that he is “here to help” them and he asks them to “hug it out” (which they do). Miggy and Migdalia do not seem to understand (or refuse to accept) the show’s need to showcase their shame as *part* of their transformation, and threaten to quit if they are further subjected to such shaming. It comes as little surprise, then, to find that Migdalia is eliminated the following week and that Miggy is eliminated by week 7 of the competition. The show frames these scenarios in such a way that viewers begin to understand that if the contestants are not willing to undergo shame, they do not deserve a spot on the show.
Annette Hill’s *Reality TV: Audiences and Popular Factual Television* explores “how certain types of reality programming, such as health-based reality formats or lifestyle formats, have taken ethical issues concerned with how we live our lives, and about how other people live their lives, and made such issues a central component of the programmes” (108). She states that “An ethics of care is a form of moral reasoning that we use to understand how we ought to care for our home and family” (108). I suggest that *schadenfreude* is, in some ways, what Hill might consider “an ethics of care,” insofar as the feeling stems from a deep-rooted concern with how lives are lived and what constitutes an appropriate way of living. Watching contestants on *The Biggest Loser* be publicly shamed for (what is presented as) their lack of care in how they are living their lives might very well generate feelings of joy, depending on the viewer’s relation to or internalization of particular codes of living. Nietzsche believed “‘that we have been socially conditioned to view the setbacks of other persons in terms of our own well-being. Ever worried that people around us may be flourishing more than we are, we view their suffering as a chance to even the score, as it were’” (qtd. in Portmann 107). Cross and Littler similarly suggest that the “enjoyment of celebrity misfortune or humiliation … offers vicarious pleasure in the witnessing of the powerful being made less powerful; it is an attempt to address or deal with a severe imbalance of power” (399). While this is no doubt true in the context of celebrity misfortune (and there are many reality television shows that cast individuals who are *already* celebrities), in the context of *The Biggest Loser* this statement seems tenuous: the contestants on this show, by virtue of their obesity, are in their daily lives often *denied* the very power that being on the show ironically affords them (granting them, if only for a few short months, celebrity status). On the one hand, the witnessing and enjoyment of their humiliation might be understood as recognition that they are becoming celebrities for something that “should” have denied them celebrity status.
and “should” have maintained their invisibility and powerlessness. Cross and Littler, drawing on Ian Connell’s “Personalities in the Popular Media,” realize that schadenfreude is not necessarily a reaction “against privileges being granted” but a form of anger that these privileges “have been granted to the wrong people” (Connell, qtd. in Cross and Littler 411, their emphasis). Thus schadenfreude expresses a belief that these individuals “have got ‘above’ their station” (Cross and Littler 404) by being cast on the show, necessitating the shaming tactics to remind them that, until they become the biggest loser by losing the most weight and becoming healthy, productive citizens, they will remain (as the show’s title simultaneously suggests), the biggest loser. On the other hand, enjoying the misfortunes and humiliations of the contestants on The Biggest Loser might be understood as a “necessary evil” in the path from powerlessness to power, an initiation ritual that deems the individual worthy of the power s/he has gained. In short, schadenfreude, in this context, may simply signal the viewers’ recognition of the value and necessity of shame in helping the contestant get what s/he desires. Once the contestant undergoes the ritual of punishment, humiliation, and reconstruction and emerges reformed on the other side, s/he finally deserves the recognition and celebrity which, until this point, seemed at once a curse and an undeserved boon.

But how does The Biggest Loser convince us of the necessity of humiliation? How does it convince us that these individuals deserve to be treated in these ways, and/or that the privileges afforded to them have, as Cross and Littler suggest, “been granted to the wrong people?” To encourage schadenfreude in viewers, reality television must convince us that the contestants are in need of improvement; in order for the show to be successful, then, it depends on viewers’ capacity to mock or pity the contestants. Shame thus becomes the primary mechanism through which reality television is able to create the conditions for schadenfreude. The show employs a
variety of techniques to not only encourage viewers to peer and gawk at the contestants but to manipulate viewers’ reactions and responses to the show’s narrative. These techniques are what Watts describes as “postproduction schadenfreude:” “those moments when some audio or visual postproduction process creates a character’s humiliation. Editing incongruous moments together … is perhaps the most frequent manifestation, but cruel subtitles as well as music or sound effects to cue the audience to unpleasant character traits also commonly occur” (75). In *The Biggest Loser*, the camera not only focuses, as discussed earlier, on contestants’ body fat (which is emphasized by the fact that they are dressed in too-tight spandex outfits)\(^{18}\) but the postproduction team edits in sound effects and exaggerated camera movements to reinforce the notion of excess. In Season 9 Episode 1, as we watch Michael walk up to the scale for the first time, the show calls attention to his fat body by adding a stomping sound and a shaking effect to the camera every time he takes a step. When Ashley falls off the treadmill in the same episode, the camera shakes again to suggest that the floor of the gym actually *moves* when she hits the ground. Because Ashley and Michael both make it to the final three, these clips are replayed over and over again throughout the season as a way to reinforce the contrast between Michael and Ashley’s old, obese bodies and their newer bodies that are getting thinner (and thus, we are meant to believe, healthier) by the week. These techniques are also a form of reflexive hyperbole which functions as a cinematic wink shared between viewer and the show’s production crew, creating a clear boundary between the contestants, as shameful Others, and the normative social gaze embodied in the connection between camera, crew, and viewer. In this role, the production

\(^{18}\) Interestingly, when the contestants reach a “healthier” (thinner) body, they are suddenly no longer required to weigh-in without shirts on (for the men) or in sports bras (for the women). In the final few episodes and the season finale, without the show indicating why or drawing attention to it, the contestants suddenly have new shirts to weigh in with. The show is seemingly trying to hide the excess fat left on their bodies by the drastic weight loss in such a short amount of time, thus rendering it able to continue to present the illusion of these newly thin bodies.
crew becomes the smirking adolescent elbowing his friend in the ribs and aping social outcasts more or less behind their back. Later, when the contestants emerge on the other side, they can look back and join in on the laughter which had heretofore been directed at them.

Of all the filmic techniques, the close-up is of particular significance in *The Biggest Loser*, functioning as the method by which affective responses and emotional intensities—especially ones indicating crisis—are recorded and displayed to viewers. Given that these moments of crisis are almost always followed by contestants’ assertions that they want/need to change and, at the end of the episode, by the joy that accompanies pounds shed, viewers—affected first by the contestants’ pain and then their joy—come to understand, if not believe, that the contestants *must* undergo the humiliation to get to the joy. Additionally, viewers are continually subjected to scenes in which contestants express how undeserving they are, inviting us to accept such confessions both as truth and as invitations to judge contestants similarly. In Episode 1 of Season 9, Koli tearfully tells the other contestants and the camera that “nobody could ever, seriously, love a 400-lb man.” In Episode 13, after Jillian yells at Vicky in the gym, telling her that she is “not doing a very good job,” Vicky reveals to us her belief that she is not a “good enough” friend or daughter. Again, the show replays these clips over and over again; through their repetition, viewers are meant to internalize the contestants’ lack of self-worth as fundamental to the show’s logic, if not as objectively truthful, and the contestants’ inability to articulate anything but their own shameful/ashamedness intensifies their (shameful) symbolic resonance. Further, in some cases, viewers are manipulated into believing a contestant is undeserving of the “help” the show offers him/her. In season 9, Melissa is depicted as the only contestant truly and consistently committed to “playing the game.” In the context of *The Biggest Loser*, “playing the game” entails taking advantage of challenge wins that grant the contestant
immunity from that week’s vote. The contestant might refuse to lose much weight that week in order to lose more weight the following week, ensuring his/her continued appearance on the show. Despite my awareness of the show’s manipulative techniques, I found the contestants’ intense dislike for Melissa in Season 9 infectious and was surprised to find myself hoping she would be voted off. In Episode 2, Melissa, faced with the trainer’s anger and disapproval when she gains a pound at that week’s weigh-in, eventually admits to “playing the game,” since she had immunity and recognized that the more weight she loses one week, the harder it would be to lose more the next week. The following week, she earns immunity again, and loses only one pound, though she argues this time that she is no longer “playing the game” and has actively tried to lose weight. In disbelief, Jillian confronts her and calls her a liar on national television, telling the camera that there is “not a shadow of a doubt she threw the weigh-in. And I bet you that she will lose a lot of weight this week.” Indeed, Melissa loses eleven pounds that week and the damage is done: her fellow contestants are angry with her for not trying as hard as they are and for “playing the game.” In the context of the show’s narrative, such behaviour comes off as lazy and distasteful; it represents, in fact, exactly the sort of behaviour (read through the show’s logic as a personal failing deeply imbricated with lapsed morality) that the show works hard to blame for the contestants’ plight in the first place. Viewers are also encouraged to feel this anger, given the amount of time the show invests in the other contestants who are actually working hard to lose their weight whether or not they have immunity. In Episode 6, both contestants and viewers get their wish: Melissa is voted off and sent home, thereby upholding the show’s—and the viewers’—moral narrative.

At the same time, the episode with Melissa highlights the extent to which the need to punish—and to have a scapegoat to serve as focal point for offended moral sensibility— informs
the show’s identificatory dynamics. In Episode 11, much to everyone’s dismay, Melissa wins a competition and earns a spot back on the show, and viewers and the other contestants, equally outraged, suddenly find themselves united in their opposition to a force that threatens the logic upon which *The Biggest Loser* is constructed. The very next episode, despite (or perhaps because of) Melissa’s unpopularity with viewers, focuses intensely on her strategy of “game play.”

Understanding her precarious standing, Melissa tries to convince her fellow contestants to similarly “game play” in order to keep herself there by ganging up on Andrea, who is a much bigger threat to the other contestants than Melissa. However, while everything she tells them is true, their sense of her as a threat to the show’s moral structure overcomes their self-interest as contestants, and they decide to protect Andrea by voting Melissa off yet again. Here, *The Biggest Loser* diverges from shows such as *Survivor*, where the game is of paramount importance and generally trumps moral or ethical concerns, and where “playing the game” often gains players as many admirers as haters, regardless of the reprehensibility of their behaviour. *The Biggest Loser* thus functions as a form of surveillance, whereby viewers watch, judge, and police the actions and behaviours of the contestants to ensure that they are properly committed to the show’s—and viewers’—moral vision. If a contestant does not seem to be performing the right kind of (or enough) physical or emotional labour required of him or her, viewers are meant to feel as though that individual no longer deserves a spot on the show.

This form of moral surveillance is a crucial aspect of the show’s mechanics of shame and is predicated upon the show’s chief strategy of characterization, which asks the viewer to remember that, *The Biggest Loser*’s contestants are not contributing subjects in the society in which they live. They thus constantly labour under the fact that they are the “wrong people” to whom celebrity has been granted, and that they had better do something to earn that celebrity.
Beverley Skeggs suggests that we are more likely to invest our interest in what she calls “subjects of capitalism” (qtd. in Cross and Littler 297), or subjects of value. Because of metonymic morality, the body has come to stand in for the subject, and thus it is the primary mechanism through which individuals are capable of becoming “subjects of capitalism” by performing the right kinds of physical and emotional labour. As a form of capital, the body is now integral to one’s ability to access “the good life” (wealth, success, beauty ideals, etc.). The body-as-capital is perhaps best demonstrated in Season 9 Episode 2, when Lance and Melissa (husband and wife on the red team) are taken aside and shown the “true cost of being overweight.” Dr. Huizenga tells the couple about the “hundreds of billions of dollars of excess health care costs across this country [America] due to these increasing diseases associated with obesity.” The doctor immediately asks Lance what he does for a living, to which Lance responds “I was a commercial diver.” The doctor questions Lance’s use of the word “was,” and Lance explains that he “can’t pass the diving fit school anymore because I’m obese.” It becomes clear to viewers that the doctor already knew this information, since he has already calculated the amount of money the couple has been “literally throwing away” because of the choices they have made and because of Lance’s inability to work due to his obesity. A truck pulls up to where Lance and Melissa are standing with the doctor and the doctor opens the back of it to show them stacks of money totaling “over three million dollars” that could have been theirs if only they had made different choices. Once again, the contestants’ physical flaws serve as metonymy for their failures as citizen-subjects or subjects of capitalism, and their physical goals are linked with the larger goal of constructing a more acceptable individual by first breaking him or her down via shame, then rebuilding him or her with “better,” less shameful parts.
The doctor in this instance (and in the scenes indicated in the earlier section of this chapter) participates in what Michel Foucault calls “governmentality,” a term that refers to the ways in which “the type of power that we can call ‘government’ … has led to the development of a series of specific governmental apparatuses (appareils) on the one hand, and, on the other, to the development of a series of knowledges (savoirs)” (Security, Territory, Population 144).

Drawing on this definition, Laurie Ouellette and James Hay explain that “governmentality” refers “to the processes through which individuals shape and guide their own conduct—and that of others—with certain aims and objectives in mind” (33). Ouellette and Hay demonstrate the ways in which reality television (especially the “life intervention” shows) engages in such processes of “governmentality” to shape good, productive citizens. Silk, Francombe, and Bachelor similarly discuss the ways in which reality television—and specifically, The Biggest Loser—participates in the work of government agencies by encouraging “a focus on issues of personal responsibility and self-discipline” and by instilling individuals “with a willing acquiescence to surveillance and self-monitoring” (371).

Drawing on such arguments, I suggest that reality television employs shame in order to encourage schadenfreude as one such technique of governmentality. Indeed, the ways in which reality television, and particularly The Biggest Loser, manipulates its viewers (viewers already affectively invested in narratives of shame) into celebrating or feeling pleasure in the punishment of contestants’ deviant behaviours and actions demonstrate how successful it is in the discursive production of particular kinds of citizens. The contestants themselves participate in regulating each others’ behaviours, which both further persuades viewers of the legitimacy and necessity of the practices of judging and shaming and also condones viewers’ attachments to others’ shame.

In Episode 4 of Season 9, Koli and Sam win that week’s challenge, giving them the power to
distribute disadvantages to the other teams. They decide to give the white team (Michael and his mother, Maria) a disadvantage at that week’s weigh-in and ask that they be allowed to explain why. Given the opportunity to say their piece, Koli says to Michael,

You haven’t done much in the last three weeks. You haven’t shown why you want to be here. And it pains me. And it pains Sam [his cousin and teammate] because there are so many people who deserve to be here, and we were the lucky twenty-four. We were so lucky. … But you don’t take advantage of it. I’m not hoping you fall below the yellow line. I just want to let you know that it’s time to work.

By stressing how “lucky” he feels they all are for being chosen as contestants on Season 9 of *The Biggest Loser*, Koli demonstrates to viewers the extent to which he has internalized the show’s initial designation of these bodies as somehow inadequate simply because they are obese. Their opportunity is pure chance, and their failure to take advantage of that opportunity not only puts them in jeopardy of losing their spots on the show (and thus remaining “losers,” as the show’s title suggests), but renders them incapable of demonstrating their worthiness as people. Further, Koli’s choice also demonstrates, like the Melissa episodes discussed earlier, that in *The Biggest Loser*, moral concern often trumps individuals’ desire to win the contest, since Michael and Maria are not, at this point, great threats to the contestants as contestants. Koli and Sam already feel the need to police Michael’s behaviour when his weight loss will not affect their own results or their chances to win the prize money (in fact, selecting Michael and Maria, rather than a better-performing team, is likely to hurt their chances at victory at this point in the contest). That Koli and Sam feel responsible for the moral performance of fellow contestants (and, I might add, to the individuals who had auditioned to be on the show, given Koli and Sam’s recognition that
they were chosen over all the other “people who deserve to be here”) is demonstrative of how the show represents what Ouellette and Hay call “the ‘reinvention’ of government” (31) and produces “a self-sufficient citizenry” (40). Indeed, these contestants not only accept being shamed as a condition for being on the show, but participate in shaming the other contestants and even themselves, thus taking part in the regulating mechanisms that will help transform and reform their “aberrant” or “deviant” bodies/selves.

As I mentioned earlier, we might understand one’s ability to feel pleasure in another’s misfortune as one’s recognition that the misfortunate individual is failing to play his/her part as a productive citizen. Seeing Koli and Sam police Michael’s unproductive behaviour encourages viewers to feel as though Michael deserves their chastising remarks. Schadenfreude is thus not a simple feeling of pleasure in another’s pain, but a structure of feeling capable of judging the worth and value of the subject-in-pain, deciphering whether the individual deserves the pain s/he is suffering. Indeed, as Watts notes, schadenfreude “is therefore a means of evaluating social codes and mores, not just expressing them” (21). This evaluative characteristic of schadenfreude is indicative of the ways in which we are constantly evaluating our own identities against others as well as our relation to others. The pleasure such evaluations afford us tends to stem from being rewarded with the knowledge that we are successful where others have failed, that we have knowledge that others lack, and that our adherence to particular modes and codes of living has rendered us in some way “superior.” As such, schadenfreude becomes a state of joy in the uneven landscape of power, where the viewer is made more powerful without having to do much to obtain or deserve that power, in an inverse reflection of the way in which s/he sees that power as having been just as randomly and undeservedly denied to him or her.
This policing of an individual’s ability to self-manage is, as Kavka suggests, what makes reality television “didactic, because by teaching participants self-management they also address viewers as citizens who can learn how to do things better for their family and community” (135). Drawing on *The Biggest Loser*, Kavka notes that this show uses “participants and trainers as mouthpieces for public information messages about the impact of obesity on life expectancy, family stability and national healthcare costs” (*Reality TV* 136). Reality television thus becomes a strategy of governance, “a biopolitical apparatus” (141), or, as Foucault might call it, a “‘technology of biopower’” (qtd. in Kavka 137), which organizes “populations to live and prosper in the interests of the state” (137). It is fitting then that one of shame’s primary functions is to regulate individual behavior in the interests of both communities and the state. Viewers are able to take pleasure in a contestant’s shame because it reminds them of the responsibilities individuals have to one another and of what happens when someone refuses or does not live up to that responsibility. In short, taking pleasure in another’s shame is a form of satisfaction that one has been put back in one’s place (if we can imagine that place as being an orientation toward “the good life”). As I emphasized in Chapter Two, those who refuse to orient themselves toward the “right” objects are judged and shamed (though sometimes shame is precisely what they are looking for). For contestants on *The Biggest Loser*, who by their very appearance on the show have submitted themselves to the pursuit, via shame and punishment, of the “right” objects, any form of refusal of such objects (health, the ideal body, exercise) or the necessary conditions by which they are achieved (or deserved) is met with judgment and shaming to reorient the contestants and teach them anew what such “right” objects guarantee them (happiness, beauty, love). Indeed, the show goes to great lengths to prove these guarantees by following up with past contestants in special bonus episodes to see if they managed to keep the weight off. These
episodes are designed to show audiences the difference the former contestants’ weight loss afforded them: many have new and better jobs, have found love, and generally promote a happy demeanour.

Because individual responsibilities are monitored by communities, states, and nations, shows like *The Biggest Loser* are also capable of creating community amongst viewers. Kavka understands this creation of community as most recognizable in the “my god, did you see that” response to reality television (*Reality Television* 19). She labels this response as the “demand for assurance that we all saw the same thing from the same perspective and hence belong, however temporarily, to the same community” (19). *The Biggest Loser* most notably generated this form of community following the finale of Season 15 when Rachel Frederickson was crowned The Biggest Loser, but her “big reveal” revealed a “too thin” body. Beginning the show with a weight of 260 lbs, Rachel’s “big reveal” in the finale of the season showed a 155 lb weight loss, putting her at a total of 105 lbs. According to the trainers on the show, this is more weight than was deemed “healthy” for her to lose, and amounted to a nearly 60% loss of total body fat. Viewers took immediately to social media, discussing her dramatic weight loss. Taking their cue from the shocked faces of the trainers (who were similarly seeing Rachel for the first time since the regular season episodes finished), viewers began to shame Rachel for now being “too thin.” This communal reaction to Rachel’s weight loss made possible the kind of (unfortunate and uncritical) community (and version of “belonging”) that Kavka suggests, one that is created out of viewers’ similar belief systems about what constitutes “the right body.” Thus while collective shame can unite individuals, so too can collective *shaming*.

At the same time, the creation of collective shame does not work only one way on this show. Indeed, as Watts notes, “*The Biggest Loser* ... in going so far to make the overweight body
an object of disgust and derision, turns the televisual 360º mirror on the viewers themselves, showing them what they actually look like and potentially making them want to change” (121). This is done rather explicitly, especially in Season 7, which begins with the trainers, Bob and Jillian, yelling at the camera (and thus viewers), “You at home, I am talking to you. America, we’re the fattest country in the world.” Bob goes on to tell the “at home” viewers that none of what they do on the show “means anything if you’re going to sit there and eat ice cream watching our show.” To any viewer that feels as though s/he might stand to lose a few pounds, this “motivation” from the trainers certainly comes off as shaming, and threatens them with the same excision from the “proper” social body which plagues the show’s contestants. If such a viewer feels vulnerable because of alienation or isolation from real communities, s/he might form a sense of community with the contestants via a shared sense of inadequacy and shame. Such a viewer may find pleasure in such shaming, if s/he is so inclined (like the Hoods, or like Flanagan), or may find motivation in the achievements of their perceived community. On the other hand, if s/he refuses such identification (“after all, I’m certainly not that fat”), s/he might find pleasure in watching the contestants humiliated because watching such scenes provides a sense of power and superiority that might be denied to them on a daily basis, strengthening their sense of connection to the real communities represented by the show’s trainers, the camera, and the viewership by allowing them to participate in the creation of socially acceptable bodies. Reality television thus becomes what Kavka calls “a technology of intimacy, a machine that functions by drawing viewers close” (Reality Television 5). Television, she argues, can serve as “a point of contact to others” and, indeed, “may intensify rather than falsify feeling” (10). Most theorists writing about reality television focus on how real reality television really is. This is not a question I am particularly invested in. Despite the manipulative tendencies of reality television
(some of which I have documented in this chapter), despite the ways in which the show preconfigures the contestants’ environment, despite our knowledge of the ways in which individuals perform when placed in front of a camera, and even despite the contestants’ confessions that what we see at home on our television screens is only a fraction of what the contestants are actually experiencing (and potentially a false or skewed representation of what they actually experience), the show, I argue, depicts such intensity of emotion that it is hard to argue that a contestant’s affective and/or emotional response is not authentic. Setting aside everything else that happens on a show like The Biggest Loser, to be shamed, humiliated, and/or mortified on national television, I argue, will inevitably be read as genuine; how shame reads matters more than anything. If viewers believe that what they are seeing is real emotion and are affected by or respond to that emotion in very real ways (whether it be sympathy, empathy, or schadenfreude—or, indeed, any other affective or emotional response), then we need not concern ourselves with how “real” reality television is. This is to say that, if shameful stimuli are accompanied by the physiological/behavioural markers that are associated with the affective experience of shame, viewers are likely to believe the shame is real, since our brains are conditioned to read affects heuristically. What happens, though, when an individual’s body does not communicate shame in the ways with which we are familiar? What happens when our reliance on how shame “should” read—a reading we have come to depend on in order to affectively communicate with others—deceives us? Shows like The Biggest Loser convince spectators of the merits of a particular kind of shame by focusing on the moments that produce that shame—moments that elicit the physiological markers that we know and recognize as shame. But when one’s relation to shame differs from the more “traditional” forms this chapter investigates, shame can seem to masquerade as shamelessness. The next chapter, via analysis of
Steve McQueen’s two most recent films, *Shame* and *Twelve Years a Slave*, questions our reliance on the physiological markers of shame and on the naïve semiotic reliability of affect theory, more generally. What does one’s attachment to shame’s traditional roles and manifestations tell us about one’s relation to shame? What does it mean to impose a narrative of shame or shamelessness on an individual and, importantly, what is *at stake* in that imposition?
Chapter 5
Shame, Shamelessness, and the (Un)Reliability of Affects in Steve McQueen’s

_Shame and 12 Years a Slave_

When asked in an interview with Rob Ribera (October 16, 2013) why President Richard Nixon “figures so prominently in both the novel and the film” for _The Ice Storm_, Rick Moody responds by saying,

_The Ice Storm_ is really about hypocrisy, about saying one thing and doing something else entirely. And no hypocrisy is more emblematic than the hypocrisy of Richard Nixon, political dirty tricks expert and simulated patriot. Watergate was _the_ political awakening for me. … I don’t even believe in the politicians I vote for. Nixon gave me that. In that sense, the Hoods, and their sexual acting out, amount to a sort of trickle down from Tricky Dick. As goes the leadership, so goes the rank and file.

Nixon, being the only president in the history of the United States to resign, told the nation in his resignation speech that, due to the lack of “support of the Congress that I would consider necessary to back the very difficult decisions and carry out the duties of this office in the way the interests of the Nation would require … I shall resign the Presidency effective at noon tomorrow [August 9, 1974]” (“Nixon’s Resignation Speech”). Leaving office before his term was finished, he insisted, was “abhorrent to every instinct in [his] body,” but such leaving was necessary without “a strong enough political base in Congress” (“Nixon’s Resignation Speech”). One significant impression that arises from Nixon’s resignation speech is the degree to which he was
unwilling, or unable, to accept responsibility for the scandal of Watergate, compounding his political failure with a more personal failure as an individual. If, as Gerald Ford suggested, Nixon “‘had been shamed and disgraced by [his] resignation’” (qtd. in Campbell and Jamieson 131), it seems that shame—or the possibility of further shaming—prevented him from accepting his role in the scandal. Indeed, as Stanley I. Kutler writes, in *The Wars of Watergate: The Last Crisis of Richard Nixon*, Nixon “simply could not couple the shame of resignation with the obscurity that public penance might bring” (ch. xxiii), and as a result, “failed to offer any note of contrition, refusing to ‘take that final step’” in his resignation speech (ch. xxiii). Though nobody knew or knows exactly what Nixon was feeling at the time, there was little ambiguity in people’s interpretation of his behaviour and of its significance. As Ford’s speech indicates, Nixon was subject to repeated shaming in the media, powerful enough to compel his resignation. Further, when coupled with other less than desirable political circumstances (especially the interminable and, for many, inexplicable Vietnam War), the Watergate scandal contributed to a deepening sense of national shame. If we return to Moody’s novel, then, we can see that its focus on the relation between public and private behaviour reflects what he sees as a pervasive and troubled relation to shame in 1970s America.

I begin this final chapter with *The Ice Storm’s* reminder of Nixon’s “shameful” role in Watergate and his subsequent resignation because of the ways in which such events stand in stark contrast to more recent political scandals. Indeed, following Toronto mayor Rob Ford’s response in the form of a confession to allegations that he has a history of smoking crack-cocaine, being intoxicated in public, and drinking and driving, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation aired a segment entitled “The Death of Shame,” questioning the extent to which society’s de-stigmatizing of much previously taboo behaviour has effectively erased shame
entirely. While Nixon’s “dirty tricks” led to his resignation in shame, Ford responded to his own shameful behaviour with an adamant refusal to resign. Even as many of his mayoral powers were stripped from him and granted to Deputy Mayor Norm Kelly, Ford remained in office and even promised his constituents to run for re-election. While a detailed discussion of Nixon or Ford’s antics and decisions to resign or remain in office, respectively, are beyond the scope of this dissertation, shame’s role in each provides a nice segue into the main arguments of this chapter.

For Nixon, shame functioned as one might expect: it regulated his behaviour and socio-political mobility. As evident in his resignation speech, Nixon realized that the Watergate scandal had marked him in a way that, should he continue as President, he would be an ineffectual one, distrusted by the nation. Rob Ford’s refusal to resign, on the other hand, bespoke a shamelessness that generated the following questions in the CBC segment on “The Death of Shame”: “does [shame] still exist? Is there any value in it?” The show’s host, Rita Celli, introduced guest Barry McLoughlin, President of McLoughlin Media and expert in Crisis Counselling, who recognized the role shame traditionally plays “in governing behaviour in society.” McLoughlin suggested that individuals today are so immersed in a culture of social media in which they share even the most private of details with the public world that shame and its proximal concepts (embarrassment, shyness) are seldom taken into account. As a result, he suggests, shame no longer has the power to regulate social mobility.

Functioning as a conversational debate, the segment does not come to any particular conclusions about “the death of shame,” but the very phrasing of this concept—a phrasing that has gained considerable popularity on the internet—is curious. A simple Google search of the above phrase consistently returns no less than 311,000 hits. One of the top hits includes a BBC News article, written by Nick Bryant, on the sex scandals of Anthony Weiner and Eliot Spitzer—
two politicians who, like Rob Ford, similarly refused to leave office after “evidence of dirty deeds” came to light (“Anthony Weiner, Eliot Spitzer, and the Death of Shame”). In each case, the absence of the markers of shame—both physiological and behavioural—prompts the observer to declare the affect itself to be absent; and since, according to the traditional mechanics of shame, the individual’s behaviour should have produced shame (a common refrain in the media), observers feel compelled to account for its absence. The catchphrase “death of shame” thus functions as a placeholder, a means of encapsulating situations in which shame is either not felt or is unrecognizable in its failure to produce expected reactions. One of the problems with the phrase, however, is that its hyperbolic resonance allows for an easy elision of the semantic gap between absence and unrecognizability, thus equating the singularity of a subject’s affective and emotional experience with the interpretations of social others. At the same time, to label individuals “shameless” when their behaviour and physiological responses do not match one’s expectations in relation to traditionally shameful stimuli suggests not only the failure of shame, but that this failure is the fault of such “shameless” individuals, foreclosing the possibility that their ambiguous behaviour is also an effect, rather than a cause, of larger shifts in socio-cultural currents. By reducing the affective experience of shame to an unmalleable set of behavioural criteria, one essentially declares that feelings are only real if they produce the expected results, a troubling mindset which, once again, reduces complex subjects to their place in the social narrative.

Thus it is that, of those paying attention to the so-called “death of shame,” the vast majority occupy reactionary positions, deploying “shamelessness” as a derogatory concomitant in an attempt to bait the absent or unrecognizable shame into showing its face. James Twitchell, for instance, in *For Shame: The Loss of Common Decency in American Culture*, documents
hundreds of examples of shamelessness across four decades of American life and culture. Beginning, interestingly enough, with Nixon, whom Twitchell labels a “shameless miscreant” (5), Twitchell analyzes (I use the term loosely) individual cases like those of Spitzer, Weiner, and Ford—such as that of Marion Barry, a “former videotaped cracksmoker … reelected as mayor of Washington” (5)—in order to conclude (or more appropriately, lament) that Americans, having lost their “receptiveness to shame,” are “living in shameless times” (1). Twitchell’s book does not use the precise phrasing “death of shame,” but in his contention that shame is absent because Americans have lost their “receptiveness” to it, we see the same logic at work: shame is only real if it is socially useful, if it produces the acceptable markers and, most importantly, if it properly regulates individual behaviour. Unsurprisingly, given the title of his book, Twitchell views shamelessness as “a cultural toxin,” lamenting all the energy he believes Americans have spent “trying to ‘get out from under shame’” (x). Similarly, Stuart Schneiderman, in Saving Face: America and the Politics of Shame, laments what he sees as America’s current “interest in self-esteem” (48), an interest that he believes has had the effect of abolishing shame (49). For Schneiderman, American society’s focus on the recognition and development of individuals has hindered the mechanisms by which shame operates. Here, too, shame’s failure to properly regulate behaviour is interpreted as its absence, and a complex emotional experience is reduced to a moral mechanism. Schneiderman goes as far as to imply that shame is the only means of ensuring social cohesion, arguing that, because of shame’s “abolishment,” “No one learns what it means to have a place in society, to function as part of a harmonious group, to perform at a certain level of competence” (47).

As my preceding chapters have shown, however, the experience of shame is far too singular and complex to be collapsed beneath such easy binaries as shame/shameless, or to be
understood simply as the means by which society enforces its limits. While it is true that shame *can* function as a social regulator, it also frequently does not. Similarly, the fact that someone does not *seem* to be experiencing shame does not mean that s/he is not actually experiencing it. In previous chapters, I have discussed cases where shame is definitively present, but is accompanied by unexpected or unconventional responses and/or behaviours. In this chapter, I intend to explore the ambiguities of shame, to analyze the semiotic gaps between subjects that make the reading of shame—and affects more generally—a sometimes tricky proposition. I will explore the neglected relation between shame and shamelessness, questioning what it means to designate someone as *shameless*. Does this designation mean that shame is not felt? Or might it mean that we sometimes do not recognize shame in the ways with which we are familiar? If we lament shame’s supposed “death,” does this lamentation *only* signal our recognition of shame’s value in policing and strengthening moral boundaries? Or does it tell us something more about our relation to shame—and our desire for it—that goes beyond social conservatism into the deeper structural recesses of identity formation? And is shame truly “dead,” or is it simply taking on different meanings which make it more difficult to identify? Is that the same thing as being “shameless”?

To begin answering such questions, I look to Steve McQueen’s film *Shame* (2011), a film that, I argue, delineates not only an addiction to sex but an addiction to shame. I suggest that the film can be read as emblematic of a historical moment in which we seem to be witnessing the proliferation of shame at the same time as we are, paradoxically, witnessing an era of shamelessness. This simultaneous “life” and “death” of shame is evident in *Shame*, both in the narrative itself as well as in spectators’ and critics’ reactions to the film, in part because shame does not always present itself in the ways we might expect. To this point, the texts I have
analyzed have articulated shame unambiguously, even if the ways in which it operates are not always what one might expect. In moving to an analysis of *Shame*, however, this chapter looks at a film that gives us the word in its title but suggests that the relation between the word and the affect may not be so easy to decipher. McQueen’s film raises questions as to what, exactly, “shame” as a signifier points to, suggesting that the affective marker understood when one refers to shame is, at best, ambiguous, and perhaps even inadequate. As I will argue, the film demonstrates that, not only is it difficult to identify what is meant when it is said that someone is experiencing shame, but it is difficult to even determine whether shame is present at all, even in the moment of its articulation. Using McQueen’s film as touchstone, I suggest that one can understand shame—and affects more generally—as a placeholder, whose meaning is dependent on its proximity to other objects and feelings. Because of the ease with which we often misdiagnose affects as well as the difficulties associated with easily locating shame in *Shame*, I suggest that any attempt to read shame into the film is both demonstrative of our recognition of shame’s value as well as evidence of a (sometimes anticipatory) melancholic attachment to shame. Indeed, to lament shame’s “death” or absence when one believes it should be present, or to call something shame when it may not be shame at all, indicates a refusal to “let go” of shame, at least in its traditional manifestations.

I shall also contend, however, that the “death” of shame is an inadequate term for understanding shame, shamelessness, and their manifestations in contemporary culture. Shame still exists, is still felt, and still does, to some extent, what it is generally expected to do. But, I will argue, it also does more, and is also more, or different, than is traditionally understood. As we shall see with Brandon in *Shame*, shame does not *always* serve to regulate our behaviour, but that does not mean it is not felt; instead, as I argued in previous chapters, shame can function as
the fuel that drives one onward (sometimes, like the Hoods and Flanagan, into further shame). In such guises (which may, for reasons I will discuss later, be more visible in contemporary American culture), shame is often less readily identifiable than in others, because its structures of feeling, its attachments, and its physiological markers are unexpected. Of course, this does raise the question: is it still shame? And, if shame is not always easy to identify, how do we begin to tell the difference between shame and shamelessness? I will argue that this very inability to locate shame/lessness often produces an anxiety that one might attempt to resolve by converting shame into a loss and lamenting its “death,” refusing to let go of it by creating the conditions under which it can, once again, be felt. Moreover, I propose that this overlap between shame and shamelessness allows us to understand shame (and affects more generally) as always already placeholders for the affects and emotions that we may not fully recognize, may never fully know.

By way of concluding this chapter, I will look at McQueen’s more recent film, *12 Years a Slave* (2013), in order to more thoroughly investigate what is at stake when one’s attachment to particular narratives of shame implicates and/or harms an/other by imposing shame upon those who may not feel it. By focusing on the brutal realities of slavery and its relation to humiliation and punishment, *12 Years a Slave* tempts us to look for shame, to read it into a number of situations, characters, and relationships. My original impulse was to assume that shame was present; however, after comparing the film with its corresponding narrative, I found myself facing interesting questions about the limits of affects and interpretation. I was forced to interrogate my own heuristic processes and to ask whether my own understanding of—and attachment to—shame might guide my reading of the film and harm the characters and people from the narrative for whom—or perhaps in place of whom—certain versions of history have all too often spoken. It has not, to be sure, escaped my attention that the majority of texts I analyze
in this dissertation centre around white, middle-class (often male) individuals or characters.\footnote{While an analysis of the relation between gender and shame is outside the scope of this dissertation, given that shaming or experiences of shame are often organized around gender and any associated privileges, it is worth noting some observations that have arisen in the writing process. While I do not want to risk generalizations about how men and women experience shame, nor to suggest or assume that attachments to shame might be more readily available to men instead of women, the assumptions that might arise from this dissertation’s focus on male characters/individuals could suggest that men are more readily able to engage with or attach to shame and its promises given the privileges and entitlements often afforded to them. Indeed, attaching to shame often indicates freedom in one’s attachments, reminding us that certain individuals can afford to choose and/or orient themselves toward particular feelings and/or objects. Despite the privilege seemingly associated with such attachments, however, we must not forget the ways in which less privileged individuals who seem caught in a circuit of shame might find ways of repurposing their relation to it, thus injecting an element of choice where they otherwise might feel as though they have little agency. Moreover, attaching to shame, as I have argued over the course of this dissertation, often involves the relinquishing of one’s sense of self (and thus all the privileges and entitlements that sense of self affords the individual). Attachments to shame also often involve recognition of failed interpersonal relationships and/or the need for better socialities. If, for example, men are engaging with shame in order to reinvent themselves or reposition themselves in more positive or fulfilling relations to social others, this could, on the one hand, signal a revival of patriarchal power (for men might be willing to suffer shame in order to generate a new, more powerfully social self, with new privileges and entitlements); on the other hand, it might also signal dissatisfaction with current gendered norms and the problems men encounter in attempting to live up to those norms. If shame can be mobilized in such ways for men, it might also—as perhaps \textit{The Ice Storm’s} Wendy and Elena help demonstrate—afford women the same opportunities to rethink and reorganize gendered relations to the social.} Comparing McQueen’s two films, I am also confronted with questions of what is at stake when reading into, and onto, others in attempting to pinpoint their feelings and narrativizing their experiences. Ultimately, I hope to show how these films complicate easy understandings of shame by questioning what its role is, how it relates to individuals and their experiences, and how individuals can begin to negotiate or understand the curious place between shame and shamelessness. In so doing, the films also suggest that reading affect, though necessary to navigating our social worlds, is a difficult proposition, and as such, should be undertaken with attention to the reader, the object, and the semantic exchanges that connect them across the gulf of singularity.
Shame in McQueen’s Shame

_Shame_ revolves around Brandon (Michael Fassbender), an attractive and successful New Yorker incapable of fostering intimate connections with others, largely due to his addiction to sex. His compulsive behaviour and meticulous lifestyle are interrupted and upended when his sister, Sissy (Carey Mulligan), unexpectedly moves into his apartment, claiming she has “nowhere else to go.” Besides the film’s prescriptive title, however, the word “shame” is not uttered even once over the course of the film. In fact, there is very little dialogue at all, leaving us few verbal clues regarding the feelings or emotional states of the characters. As such, it is up to viewers to decipher the film’s “affectmosphere,” locating the moments to which the title may or may not refer. Despite one reviewer’s insistence that Fassbender is so effective an actor “that he needs no dialogue” because “we simply watch his face and know what’s going on inside” (Butler), critics of the film remain largely divided on what the characters are feeling and when. Indeed, browsing through the multitudes of reviews of _Shame_, I was struck by the obsessiveness with which critics took to the task of locating shame in the film. Two major trajectories emerged in the reviews I read: critics either found it easy to locate shame in the movie (even as, interestingly, its locations differed drastically from one review to another), or they found it incredibly difficult. Referring to the opening subway scene, for example, Peter Bradshaw designates the “attractive woman” smiling “back at Brandon’s lethally, telepathically sexual gaze” as at first “turned on,” then “embarrassed, then horrified.” Bradshaw characterizes Brandon as “an embarrassed wing man” to his boss, Dave, and as someone who feels “ashamed on [Dave and Sissy’s] behalf” when Dave manages to seduce Brandon’s sister. Bradshaw contends that the whole (albeit brief) affair between Dave and Sissy would be “sitcomishly funny if it weren’t so clenched with humiliation,” ultimately suggesting that “the point” of the film is
that “shame lies deeply buried under all of this.” Philip French similarly views the narrative of 
*Shame* as leading toward “the shame of the title, a horrendous journey to the end of a night of 
degradation, self-destruction and punishment.” French suggests that, in the end, “nothing is 
resolved, and after the scars on his cheeks fade away, another cycle of hope and shame begins.” 
Roger Ebert reads Brandon’s shame as “masked in privacy,” a shame that McQueen and 
Fassbender have managed to put on display, “unalloyed by audience-pleasing techniques” 
(“Shame”). Ebert argues that “Brandon can’t even be said to visibly suffer. He is compelled to 
repeat the same behavior over and over, and all he gets from it is self-loathing. ‘Shame’ is the 
correct title” (“Shame”). But if Brandon does not seem to “visibly suffer,” how do we know that 
“shame” is the correct title? Such arguments simply assume that viewers will all read Brandon’s 
behaviour as shameful, even though Brandon does not often seem to exhibit the characteristic 
markers of shame. For these reviewers that are able to locate shame in the film, there is no 
discussion of why they believe shame to be there; it would seem that shame, for them, is simply 
self-evident.

A. O. Scott, on the other hand, asks whether “‘Shame’ is the name of something Brandon 
does feel, or of something the filmmakers think he should feel.” Mark Fisher argues that, 
although the film is called *Shame*, “shame is conspicuously lacking from its emotional palette,” 
and concludes that “*Shame* is dominated by such an overwhelming sense of affectlessness that it 
could be about depression as much as sex addiction.” As such, he reads the movie as a 
“staggeringly clichéd failure,” arguing that, at its best, *Shame* “isn’t ‘saying nothing’ so much as 
it is telling something *about* nothing.” Dana Stevens’s review of the film communicates much 
the same as Fisher’s, seeing Brandon as having settled into “a joyless but comfortable rut of—
well, rutting,” and contending that the film “isn’t above using narrative opaqueness as a cover for not really knowing what it’s trying to say.”

Common to most reviews of the film that I have come across, however (regardless of their (in)ability to locate shame), is the need to find the shame of the title. If the critic is able to find it, more often than not, the film is labeled a success. If the critic is unable to find it, the film is often labelled a failure in its inability to convey what the critic believes the film purports to be about. In some way, then, these critics are all trying to find the shame to which the title refers: is it Brandon’s shame, and if so, which moments? Is it Sissy’s? Is it their collective shame? All of the above? Is it the shame of sex addiction? Or could it be the extradiegetic shame that viewers might feel when their response to the film is either pleasurable and voyeuristic or unpleasurable and shame-filled, given affect’s contagious potential? Some critics are especially attentive to the possibility of this extradiegetic narrative: Rene Rodriguez, for example, insists that “You don’t just watch Shame. You feel it, too,” while David Voigt playfully suggests that “It’s time to feel ‘Shame.’” But what I find so fascinating about these (in)abilities to locate shame is what they say about our (in)abilities to recognize shame. How do we locate shame? If shame, as Tomkins contends, has highly specific physiological markers, how is it possible to misrecognize it? And yet, as the many reviews of the film demonstrate, our abilities to locate shame in the film differ drastically from one critic to the next. How do we—how can we—know shame? This deceptively simple title turns the film into a kind of puzzle: to whom does the title’s shame refer? And how can we possibly know?

Indeed, we cannot, and yet Affect Theory’s naïve assumption of semiotic reliability—the promise of the resolute relation between signs, signifiers, and signified, of the steadfast and
unbreakable relation between words and feelings—suggests otherwise. Leo Bersani recognizes this when he suggests that

Shame, by virtue of its heightening the face’s visibility, nearly has the status of the ideal emotion for Affect Theory. In shame, [Tomkins] writes in volume 2 of *Affect Imagery Consciousness* (1963), the eyes turn away from the object and are, so to speak, directed back to the subject’s own face: full of ambivalence, he looks at himself being looked at. Tomkins’s work monumentally celebrates the visibility of the human subject’s depths. Affect Theory is a catalogue of the expressive vicissitudes of intersubjectivity. (*Is the Rectum a Grave* 67)

Indeed, if we see someone blush, we automatically assume the individual feels embarrassed or ashamed, but what if this blush signals something else? In *Ugly Feelings*, Sianne Ngai gestures toward this possibility when she questions that which lies outside the primary affects. She wonders whether confusion “about what one is feeling … in the affective sense of bewilderment” is actually “an affective state in its own right?” (14). This is to ask: what are we to do with the interstices and nuances of feelings, with the un- or misdiagnosed affective intensities? Perhaps more specifically, what are we to do either when the physiological markers that once signalled a particular feeling or emotion no longer signify that feeling or emotion, or when one’s body simply does not respond in the “typical” affective fashion? Ahmed makes an important point in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* when she notes that “If we were to assume that we could all see shame in the redness of blushing skin, we would of course be assuming that only white bodies feel shame” (120). Ahmed reflects on the fact that while she, herself, experiences shame in the burning of my skin, I do not blush. I take some comfort in that others, who might look for the blush as a sign of shame, might overlook my
shame, and allow me to pass and move away. At other times, the invisibility of shame experiences in the unavailability of the blush can lead to some people being seen as shameless, and hence as being unaffected by bad deeds. (120)

Despite our inability to truly and easily decipher or diagnose how another is feeling, we remain attached to the belief that we can read others based on general physiological responses and judge them accordingly. What McQueen’s *Shame* demonstrates, I argue, is the fact that this process of diagnosing feelings (especially another’s) is inadequate for truly understanding one’s affective or emotional state. The reviews of the film, above, delineate the ways in which the semiotics of affect are broken—perhaps are always already broken. To simply call something shame is not to guarantee its presence, just as someone saying “shame on you” does not force the individual to whom this statement is uttered to feel shame. Performative utterances do not always work, in the same way that signifiers do not always guarantee the presence of their signifieds.

As I perform my own readings of the film, it will become clear that I inevitably fall into the same trap as the critics above: despite my awareness of the impossibility of conclusively finding and *knowing* shame, my readings do occasionally locate shame/lessness throughout the film. In some ways, then, my reading of the film merely confirms the ways in which we are attached to a sense of affective reliability, even as, by engaging with a film about affect, I inevitably encounter the constant threat of that unbearable question (for academics, at least): *but what if I’m wrong?* While interpreting affect opens us up to the unavoidable possibility of “being wrong,” such possibility also informs our understanding of the system that is Affect Theory. This indeterminacy of meaning is true, of course, in all systems, something Jacques Derrida recognizes in “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences.” He argues that all systems (or “structures”) have “no center, that the center would not be thought in the form of
a being-present, that the center ha[s] no natural locus, that it [is] not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of non-locus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions [come] into play” (225). This center, he posits, is one that “[is] never itself, which [is] always already … transported outside itself” (225). That is, by talking about a system or conceiving of a system, we must assume there is a center or a governing locus of that system, and this is exactly what we assume when we attempt to engage with Affect Theory as well as affects themselves. This center, we assume, is not subject to the laws of the structure, in which free-play is always at work; instead, the center must be an immovable force or origin. If this center is not subject to the rules of the system, then it is always already outside of the system and so the center is always already absent, and as such, cannot be accounted for with the rules of the structure. Thus even when we have unpacked the rules of signification, we still cannot know any more about the center. In order to talk about a system like Affect Theory, then, we must invent a center—a center that guarantees the observable relation between physiological markers and shared or understandable experiences—all the while knowing that our attempts to talk about it are inevitably fraught with uncertainties.

Affect Theory is the process by which we try to make sense of how people feel; because the center of Affect Theory is always already inadequate or lacking (and as such, the system itself is never complete or stable), we must allow for free-play in how we think about affect. As Derrida recognizes, there are two ways to respond to the infinite substitutions and reconfigurations of which free-play is made up: the first response is to nostalgically yearn for the time when there was a center and to attempt to find the absolute truth of that center. We see this happening when critics of the film see the word “shame” in the title and feel the need to collapse the film’s events into their understandings of shame; their inability to do so, however, is
symptomatic of the inadequacy of their rigid structures of affective understanding. On the other hand, the second response is to simply embrace the free-play and change with it (and this is, in large part, what this dissertation is attempting to do). At the same time, in order to say anything meaningful about shame and/or individual relations to shame, I must remain plugged into the same system and cultural framework as the critics of the film; as such, my readings similarly attempt to locate shame and shamelessness in the film. It is my hope, however, that my locating of shame/lessness in the film does more than simply convince readers that shame does or does not exist in the film. Instead, I intend to demonstrate that the point of the film is to produce an awareness of our need or desire for affective certainty, our need or desire to resolve affective ambiguities, and to question this need or desire in relation to shame. As such, I do not necessarily disagree with either the critics who can locate shame in the film or the ones who cannot, as I believe such responses to the film collectively direct us toward some interesting questions about shame and about Affect Theory more generally. The critics who are able to locate shame in the film often do so with an ease that raises questions about the “self-evidence” of shame and the ways in which certain events or behaviours have come to be automatically associated with it, regardless of the presence of shame’s indicators. At the same time, the critics who cannot locate shame and who are thus confused by the film’s message, given its title, implicitly reveal (in their search for a message) that the film not only asks us to try to locate the titular shame, but asks us to locate ourselves in this process. From where does this need for shame come? What is our relation to shame? What might it mean to see shame where others do not? Indeed, if the film is, as I suggest, asking us to question any easy relation to affective markers, then the ambiguity of the film’s “message” seems fitting: we can only decipher its message if we decipher the affect. The fact that McQueen makes this a difficult task, however, does not mean the film is saying
nothing (or saying something about nothing), as Fisher and Stevens suggest. Instead, I argue that the film is saying quite a lot about the unreliability of affective interpretation and of the difficulties that arise when one tries to read ambiguous markers.

Given the film’s focus on sex addiction, *Shame* begins in perhaps the most fitting place: the bedroom; and, from its opening scene, the film impels viewers to locate its titular affect. The camera looks down from above at Brandon, who is lying on his bed, staring up at the ceiling (though not directly at the camera). He is naked, but for a blue sheet covering only his thighs and groin. His left hand rests just above his pelvis, a subtle hint at the sexual content to follow. The camera watches him in this position for a full forty seconds before he finally sits up, pulls the sheets off and gets out of bed. The camera does not shift from its position, however, to follow Brandon. Instead, it remains focused on the bed and the rumpled sheets left behind. Brandon, off-screen, opens the blinds, flooding the room with sunlight, which illuminates the bed and exposes the title of the movie, *Shame*, now superimposed on the bed in capital letters. This exposing—or superimposing—of the title on the bed sheets is the only real concrete connection we have between the content of the movie and the title, and already, its ambiguous origins—which is to say, the gap between exposure and superimposition—serves as metaphor for the film’s concern with the “fixing” of shame.

Significantly, too, the title is not inscribed on Brandon’s body, for he has just left the bed. Rather, it is written onto the rumpled sheets (an obvious metonymy for sex in this film), the only tangible reminder of the activities of the night before (activities to which we shall be momentarily privy). Shame is not directly tied to Brandon or his body, but only indirectly, via the sheets and what may or may not have occurred there. As such, the shame that is printed onto the sheets is left as a residue present only for those reading it after the fact (viewers of the film),
rather than for Brandon, who just gets up and leaves. Indeed, because Brandon has just left the bed onto which SHAME is spelled out, or in which shame is contained, we might read this as indicative of his leaving shame behind, and thus, potentially, of his shamelessness. On the other hand, these are Brandon’s sheets, where Brandon engages in activities that (given the title’s location) we are encouraged to view as shameful. At the same time, Brandon’s attachment to these activities—which occur between the sheets (as well as his initial positioning, tangled up in these sheets)—attaches him to shame. The film’s opening scene thus wastes no time in presenting us with the ambiguous role of shame in the film, revealing the difficulty inherent in clearly deciphering that to which shame is attached.

This opening scene also presents us with the possibility that the titular shame might be attached to our own voyeuristic tendencies, since we are (quite literally) seeing SHAME in this opening scene, and we are not turning away. In the first few minutes of the film, then, we are confronted with a desire to attach shame to something, to locate it in a particular act or person, and this process of attachment is not meant to be an easy one. The fact that the camera focuses on Brandon’s impassive and unreadable face as he lies in his bed, unblinking and unmoving for a full forty seconds, is just a small taste of what is to come. Such impassiveness and unreadability characterizes much of the film and much of Brandon’s “affect,” complicating attempts to attach shame to him. Additionally, the sometimes excruciatingly lengthy looks at a human face which offers no indication of what it is feeling serve to put intensified pressure upon the reader/viewer to read, interpret, and understand. The viewer’s inability to stop looking at Brandon’s blank face—the sheer amount of time the camera spends showing it to us—allows ample time for uncertainty to creep in to the active brain. In prompting the mind to continually re-evaluate its readings of affect which, in general, are done instantaneously and often at a pre-conscious level,
the camera necessitates an additional level of cognition which threatens to become, in the viewer, an awareness of the process of affective interpretation. Suddenly, what was once a certainty, or at least what had not entered the realm of conscious thought as anything but a certainty, verges on becoming simply an idea, one possibility among others. Brandon’s sustained unreadability thus casts him as a kind of blank canvas encouraging us to project our diagnoses onto him, and the potential ambiguities of this process are compounded by Brandon’s inability to effectively locate himself. After all, shame is predicated upon a dislocation of the subject, and so one must first have an idea of his or her original location in order to determine the degree to which the subject has been made strange.

The film also makes it hard to locate shame because of the ways in which it makes us complicit in Brandon’s (and other characters’) “shame.” While this does not mean shame is not there, it does make it difficult to easily judge his behaviour or to view it as different from our own. Laura Mulvey reminds us of the scopophilic nature of film-watching, arguing that spectators’ “curiosity and the wish to look intermingle with a fascination with likeness and recognition” (60), so that there is always the possibility that “the image recognized is conceived as the reflected body of [the spectator]” (60). This seems particularly true of Shame, whereby Brandon’s scopophilia mirrors our own. Thus when critics like Rodriguez and Voigt (cited above) participate in the film’s ostensible foisting of shame from screen to viewer in their contentions that Shame is not just about the characters’ shame, we are reminded that viewers, by virtue of their voyeuristic engagement with Brandon’s behaviour, might very well share in his shame. The film positions viewers as at once voyeurs and participants, a move which draws them into a sympathetic relationship with Brandon’s actions even as it inhibits their capacity for passive enjoyment by continually facing them with the responsibility of making the judgments
necessary for locating shame. Further, while the film’s focus on intimate moments often makes viewers acutely aware of their status as viewers (or, perhaps more appropriately, voyeurs), McQueen creates the illusion of a shared gaze by shifting the camera to Brandon’s point of view, thereby implicating viewers in Brandon’s behaviour. This technique, as Tarja Laine notes, “catches out the spectators by their own looking, inviting the spectators to see themselves seeing, saying ‘You want to peek at other people’s lives? Well, here’s intimacy for you!’” (38). By thus yoking together the acts of intimacy depicted on the screen and the viewer’s voyeuristic gaze, McQueen reminds us that our watching the film is not that different from the characters’ actions. When it comes time to locate shame, if viewers are to judge Brandon’s (and the others’) behaviour as shameful, they are also reminded of their own proximity to his behaviour, and find the moral gaze directed inward.

One example of this manipulation of the gaze occurs when Sissy sits down at the kitchen table in front of Brandon’s computer and looks at the screen. We hear a seductive female voice coming from the screen, asking, “Hey, where’s Brandon? Are you Brandon’s girlfriend? Do you want to play?” Sissy does not respond. In fact, she seems wholly unfazed by what she is witnessing. The camera shifts to her line of sight and we see a half-naked woman, rubbing her breasts, asking, “Do you want to play with my tits? I know Brandon would really like it, and I know exactly what Brandon likes.” We watch, sharing Sissy’s gaze, as the woman slowly moves her hand down her body, touching herself, seducing (or at least attempting to seduce) her viewer(s). As with Brandon before, this sharing creates a voyeuristic connection between viewer and character that, as Laine argues, via Sartre, “creates intimacy between the seer and the seen: the voyeur forgets himself and ‘fuses’ with the object of his look” (50). Kaja Silverman has referred to this “fusion” of viewers with characters and their gazes as the “operation of suture”:

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“cinematic organization depends on the subject’s willingness to become absent to itself by permitting a fictional character to ‘stand in’ for it, or by allowing a particular point of view to define what it sees. The operation of suture is successful at the moment that the viewing subject says, ‘Yes, that’s me,’ or ‘That’s what I see’” (205). Crucial to the process of identification, too, is our desire to see more, to have our own curiosities satisfied through the satisfaction of the characters’; Silverman observes that it is “not merely that the camera is incapable of showing us everything at once, but that it does not wish to do so. We must be shown only enough to know that there is more, and to want that ‘more’ to be disclosed” (205). This desire to see “more,” particularly in the context of watching sexual activity, creates an erotic connection between viewers, characters, and the object of their shared gaze. Here, by impelling the viewer’s identification—“yes, that’s me watching porn” or “porn is what I see—please show me more”—McQueen also positions us between Sissy and the possibility of shame. In her discussion of “voyeuristic shame,” Laine draws attention to the possibilities that arise from “positioning the spectator in between shame and intimacy with the Other”: films can “take advantage of the voyeuristic look of the spectators … and turn it back onto the spectators themselves” (49). Here, our fusing with Sissy as the voyeur in the film reminds us of our own status as voyeurs, thus preventing us, particularly if we feel in any way seduced or titillated, from fully judging Sissy for surreptitiously watching her brother’s porn. Moreover, our interest in the scene also implicates us in Brandon’s addictive behaviour, inhibiting our capacity to see Brandon’s porn fetish as shameful.

Simultaneously, though, even as he manipulates the viewer into sharing the film’s erotic (and potentially shameful) gaze, McQueen offsets the illusion of shared intimacy by continually dislocating the viewer from the scenes, inhibiting their ability to “share” in the characters’
intimacies. These dislocations often serve to forcibly sever the connection between the viewer and, especially, Brandon by confronting the viewer with behaviour which, by virtue of its being too far beyond the pale of comfortable eroticism, impels the viewer to judge Brandon’s exceeding of social boundaries. In so doing, the viewer must distance him or herself from the shared gaze which, moments earlier, suggested a shared enjoyment and, potentially, a shared shame. By impelling the viewer to say, “Oh, no, too far, Brandon, too far—you (we) can’t do that,” McQueen inhibits the viewer from fully sharing in whatever shame s/he locates in Brandon’s behaviour. The best example of this push and play of location and dislocation occurs in one of the film’s earliest scenes, as Brandon sits on the subway, staring blankly at the floor. Looking up and around at his surroundings, he notices an attractive woman sitting across from him and stares intently at her until she turns her head and catches his gaze. The camera slowly switches between Brandon’s unwavering stare and the woman’s coy smile; it is clear she enjoys the attention, but she simultaneously communicates shyness when she averts her eyes, evidently embarrassed to discover she is the object of this stranger’s interest. After several cuts back and forth (glancing at her face, then Brandon’s, then hers again), we watch as Brandon’s gaze shifts from her face to her lower body. We then suddenly find ourselves seeing what Brandon sees, signalled by the camera’s shift to the objects of Brandon’s gaze. We are now also looking at her legs, and we watch as she slowly crosses them, a movement that pulls on her jacket, exposing her upper thigh. We pan slowly up her body and back to her face to find her, again, staring back at Brandon. For these several seconds, we see exactly what Brandon sees. As Silverman has argued, this “shot/reverse shot” is what anchors us “to a fictional gaze” (206), thereby creating an identification; in short, we share both his gaze and—if only momentarily—his lust for this woman.
Yet as easily as the camera’s movements are able to manipulate viewers into experiencing Brandon’s desires, it just as easily separates us from those desires, casting us out of the shared gaze and back into the position of voyeurs who watch and judge. The woman’s facial expression begins to register discomfort: she averts her gaze, her brow furrows ever so slightly, and she begins blinking in rapid succession before turning away and moving toward the subway door, all traces of a smile or of the previous flirtation gone from her face. Brandon sees the engagement and wedding rings on her left hand as she grasps the subway pole, yet he still gets up and stands close behind her, his hand resting just above hers on the pole. The woman’s eyes begin darting back and forth, indicating a slight panic. As soon as the subway comes to a halt, she rushes out the door. Despite her hurried exit, Brandon pursues her, a decision that erases the erotic pull that existed just moments before. Brandon’s persistence, a persistence that is clearly unwanted and uninvited, is now charged with aggression. The film suggests that he is crossing a clear line—made evident by the camera’s focus on the woman’s wedding and engagement rings and the woman’s eagerness to flee the scene (perhaps ashamed of her own participation in the flirtation)—a line which we, as viewers, are encouraged not to cross. By ultimately preventing us from fully participating in Brandon’s intimacies, such dislocations complicate any attempt to assume a perfect correlation between whatever shame we see in Brandon, and our own, as viewer-voyeurs. In this scene, the camera’s shift from allowing us to share Brandon’s gaze and potentially feeling the desire he feels to casting us out of that gaze and watching him do something we are invited to judge is characteristic of the film’s constant push and pull, first reminding us of the dangers and excitement of desire before exposing the ease with which we are capable of judging that very desire we may have shared moments before. This push and pull has the effect of reinforcing the shame that is attached both to that desire as well as to that judgment,
while simultaneously making it difficult to determine whose shame is whose, and where, exactly, responsibility rests, resulting in a rather uncomfortable position for viewers. While the film certainly manipulates us into viewing Brandon’s actions and behaviours as shameful, ascribing shame to Brandon requires us to pass judgment on him—a difficult task, given the film’s own inscription of putatively shameful spectacle within a work always on the verge of the pornographic. McQueen’s repeated dislocations of viewers from Brandon’s—and their own—erotic gaze makes it hard to designate their prurient voyeurism as completely shameful, even as their desire to see a film about sex addiction—which can certainly induce feelings of, at the very least, titillation—makes it difficult to categorize Brandon’s behaviour as any worse or different than their own.

Such categorization, of course, depends entirely on the viewer. Because shame is such a subjective feeling, tied to personal histories and experiences, one viewer might designate sex addiction as shameful, while another may simply view it as excessive behaviour, unattached to shame. Indeed, shame is the most social of the affects, and the ways we understand it depends largely on the ways in which we have learned shame. Attaching shame (or not attaching shame, as the case may be) to particular acts and behaviours exposes personal beliefs and values to which one subscribes. I argue that McQueen’s Shame reflects this variability in its ambiguous portrayal of Brandon’s attachment/relation to shame/lessness, thus asking viewers to reflect on the (un)ease with which they are (un)able to locate shame and what this process might suggest about their own understandings of, attachments to, and/or relations to shame.

Compounding the difficulty of locating shame in Shame, too, is that, even when it seems to be present, its effects and function are rarely consistent. In some cases, it functions as a deterrent, particularly for Brandon. The most notable example of this occurs when Sissy walks in
on Brandon masturbating in the bathroom. Brandon is flustered at being caught, but his initial shame is masked by fury, a fury he unleashes on Sissy in the form of both a physical and verbal attack (attempting to transfer the shame he feels onto her, Brandon calls Sissy a “fucking slut”). Back in the bathroom afterwards, however, Brandon—clearly distressed—slams his palm into the door before slumping against it and sinking to the floor. His retreat to the bathroom—and to behind closed doors—is certainly indicative of the “flight” response in shame. However, later that day, we are witness to the scene described previously, where Sissy finds Brandon’s web browser displaying the live pornographic video chat. While Sissy (and the viewer) watches, potentially fascinated and/or enticed, Brandon suddenly appears in the corner of the screen and shuts the computer in front of Sissy’s gaze, thereby severing both her—and our—visual connection to the naked woman. Brandon then takes the computer away, saying nothing. Significantly, we do not see Brandon’s face in this scene. As such, we do not have access to his reaction to being caught by his sister visiting live porn websites. Here, too, we do not have the same intense or angry reaction of the previous scene. Not having access to Brandon’s face makes his reaction seem oddly calm, especially when juxtaposed with the previous scene, and thus Brandon’s reaction here seems rather shameless. The camera, however, cuts to Brandon, sitting on a black chair in the corner of his very white room (a subtle indication of the ways in which Brandon’s addiction relegates him to the dark recesses or corners of his otherwise meticulously clean and controlled lifestyle), hugging his knees to his chest. We watch as Brandon sits motionless for several seconds before he finally gets up, finds a garbage bag and begins to purge his apartment of his (very large) pornography collection. After dumping several large garbage bags out on the curb, the camera cuts back to the apartment, where we find Brandon slouched on the floor against the wall, his head hanging.
Brandon’s pornography purge here is certainly significant, especially with regards to deciphering markers of shame. Given the scene progression, I suggest that we read Brandon’s purge as coming from a place of frustration at being caught, frustration at being surrounded by temptations in his apartment that make it possible for him to be continuously in the position of getting caught. In “Rhétorique de la drogue,” Derrida suggests that the very thing “we hold against the drug addict” is the way in which “he cuts himself off from the world, in exile from reality, far from the objective reality and the real life of the city and the community; that he escapes into a world of simulacrum and fiction” (25). Indeed, Brandon’s purge reads like an attempt to rid himself of such simulacrum and fictions. The next day at the office, Brandon continues this attempt to return to reality, to rejoin “the real life of the city.” Despite the seeming failure of his first date with his colleague, Maryanne, Brandon walks briskly up to her in the office, grabs her arm and pulls her around a corner to kiss her. The two leave the office and get a hotel room in which they attempt to have sex. However, Brandon is unable to perform, sexually, and the moment he realizes he will not be able to “get it up,” he pulls away from Maryanne, sits on the edge of the bed and hangs his head in his hands. She moves toward him to comfort him, but he gets up and moves to the corner of the room, his body turned away from her and us. When Maryanne refuses Brandon’s invitation to walk her down to the street, he closes his eyes and clenches his fist. Visible here, I argue, is the same combination of shame and anger we witnessed earlier when Sissy catches him masturbating. But while the shame we witness in the previous scenes functions mostly as a deterrent or behaviour regulator, here, the shame Brandon feels at being incapable of performing or successfully escaping from his world of “simulacrum and fiction” functions as fuel to return to that world.
The difference between the shames Brandon feels in each world has to do with shame’s relation to intimacy and pleasure. When Brandon experiences shame in his fantasy world, it is always preceded by pleasure and erotic connection; however, in the “real” world, his shame is often a result of the inability to experience pleasure or connection. When Brandon seeks the company of prostitutes, he also seeks the guarantee of anonymity and a particular feeling of shame that is always associated with pleasure, given its proximity to the orgasm. In an interview with Nick James, Fassbender relays the findings of his and McQueen’s interviews with sex addicts as research for the film: “It’s the whole thing of Shame as the title. Talking to people that suffer from the illness, shame comes immediately after ejaculation. You get your rocks off and the first thing that hits you is this disgust with yourself. Your body is making the decisions for you” (37). Seen as such, Brandon’s attachment to shame here refigures Ahmed’s formula for happiness I drew on in Chapter Two: Brandon desires x (sex) for y (pleasure) but is well aware of the fact that, considering the frequency of his attempts to fulfil these desires, the end result is always z (shame). Brandon’s behaviour raises the possibility that he desires x for z, indicating that his addiction is not only to sex but to the shame that such an addiction inevitably produces. Shame in this formula is always preceded by pleasure. But Brandon’s inability to derive pleasure from his and Maryanne’s attempt to have sex results in a feeling of shame entirely unattached to pleasure and attached entirely to the feeling of being judged (regardless of whether or not Maryanne is actually judging him) and to his inability to “properly” function. Thus, Brandon’s desire is attached—like Flanagan’s, as I discussed in Chapter Three—to experiences of pleasure which bring about shame in direct correlation to his having done something he wanted to do, rather than to the uncontrolled shame which overcomes him as a result of his inability to do what he wants. This uncontrolled version of shame does function as a deterrent, as it puts an end to his
attempt at being “normal” and pursuing a more “healthy” and intimate relationship and catapults him back into his addiction and the shame he recognizes and can—at least to some extent—control.

Indeed, after Maryanne’s departure, Brandon calls a prostitute to fulfill his need for sex. This immediate return to the addiction can certainly be read as shamelessness, for Brandon’s anxiety and frustration at being unable to perform with Maryanne does seem rather short-lived. But as Ahmed argues in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, anxiety comes from “the taking away of that which secures the subject’s relation to the world” (67); if we imagine that shame is the very thing that secures Brandon’s relation to the world, then Brandon’s decision to call the prostitute immediately following Maryanne’s departure might be understood as his attempt to reassert his relation to a version of shame he recognizes and with which he feels comfortable. Seen in this light, shame becomes an oddly comfortable, comforting place for Brandon: shame marks, for him, not the possibility of being undone or the possibility of reinventing himself, but the ability to remain constant and connected to something. When Brandon’s relation to shame is altered in a way that erases pleasure from the equation, the connection he has to shame becomes strange and/or nonexistent, isolating him further by removing the one thing to which he might feel connected from his control.

While shame often serves as the antithesis to intimacy, it can also, as we saw with the Hoods and Flanagan, help foster intimacy for individuals whose capacity for so-called normative intimacies is, for whatever reason, inhibited. Indeed, Brandon’s connection to shame reveals that shame allows him intimacy not with others but with himself, and while this may not be a self with which Brandon feels content or confident, it is still a self to which he feels connected, a self he knows. Furthermore, given shame’s proximity to the orgasm (that “little death” I discussed in
Chapter Three), we might understand Brandon’s relation to shame as a form of coming back to life after the pleasurable death of the orgasm. This “coming back to life” may not always be a pleasurable one, but, again, it allows Brandon to become a self again. We must also consider that, in this kind of repetition compulsion, this self-in-shame might be recognizable, and that there may be a kind of comfort in knowing that shameful self, of finding a reliable (if unlikable) version of oneself to return to (which, again, is also a kind of control that Brandon seeks and cultivates). Attaching to an object for the comfort and knowledge it brings is part of why we attach to objects in the first place. As Lauren Berlant contends, attachments are made not by will, after all, but by an intelligence after which we are always running. (It’s not just ‘Hey, you!’ but ‘Wait up!’) This lagging and sagging relation to attachment threatens to make us feel vertiginous and formless, except that normative conventions and our own creative repetitions are there along the way to help quell the panic we might feel at the prospect of becoming exhausted or dead before we can make sense of ourselves. (Cruel Optimism 125)

Brandon is continuously running after the shame of sex addiction because it connects him to a stable form of subjectivity.

Thus, even as shame is a rupturing force, it can, paradoxically, as we saw with Flanagan, help subjects maintain a comfortable—or familiar—relation to the world and to themselves. In Shame, when shame’s paradoxically stabilizing presence is unavailable or inaccessible to him, Brandon often seems to experience subjective vertigo at the prospect of his own formlessness. This formlessness is hinted at throughout the film in McQueen’s usage of blurred perspective. In the scene with the married woman on the subway, for example, as Brandon stares intently at the woman who is about to get off the subway, Brandon is rendered somewhat indecipherable.
scene becomes so blurred that, although we know we are looking at Brandon, he is out of focus to the point of being formless. We might read this formlessness, retrospectively, as an indication of what Brandon might feel should he refuse to chase after shame (which, as we find out, is not what he decides in this particular scene; instead, the scene ends with images of his unmistakably aggressive pursuing of the woman). Brandon’s attachment to shame and sex generates a kind of comfort that quells the anxiety of being formless or of being a person without the addiction and the shame that has characterized who he is for so long. Indeed, in an uncharacteristically revealing moment in the film (for as much as the film “exposes,” it gives us very little in terms of the characters’ pasts), we hear Sissy tell Brandon, on a voicemail, “we’re not bad people; we just come from a bad place.” This “bad place” seems, in this film, to indicate a shameful past, a past that very much accounts for Sissy and Brandon’s current behaviours.

As much as Brandon might understand his habits and behaviour as shameful, his engagement in them harmonizes with a particular knowledge about himself: they allow him to know himself. We might understand his engagement in such acts, then, as a more comfortable or comforting alternative to the refusal to engage, by which he might find himself lost and unrecognizable. Because we are always chasing after our desires, seeking fulfillment, it comes as no surprise that such feelings of unfulfillment can make us feel formless, lost, incapable of, as Berlant suggests, “mak[ing] sense of ourselves.” Referring to Snediker’s meditations on shame in Chapter Two, I discussed the ways in which living without shame is tantamount to living without the ability to reinvent oneself. In Brandon’s case, his relation to the world and to himself is constituted so entirely in and through shame that to relinquish his attachment to it would not be giving up the ability to reinvent himself so much as it would be his relinquishing the ability to be himself. Indeed, this anxiety of being without shame—which we might also think of as an
The anxiety of being without the possibility of a future self—makes an individual “teachable” in the sense that one realizes shame’s importance in and to his or her life and to the society in which s/he lives. The anxiety regarding shame’s absence makes us recognize the ways in which individuals are often running after it—a running that includes the “lags” and “sags” of which Berlant speaks as they (re)negotiate their relation to it.

The discomfort or anxiety we witness in *Shame* when Brandon’s relation to the feeling is disrupted or altered mirrors, in many ways, the anxiety and discomfort we feel when our relation to shame is disrupted or altered—when we cannot find shame when we *should* be able to or believe others do not feel shame when they *should*. The very phrasing of “the death of shame,” as discussed earlier in this chapter, illustrates our discomfort with shame’s slippage or refusal to “stick” to the objects it has either traditionally stuck to, or the objects to which we want it to stick. But how do certain actions or behaviours get “stuck” to shame in the first place? In *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, Ahmed argues that affects become associated with certain behaviours and responses—that is, these behaviours and responses “stick” to the affective labels—not because of any inherent relation, but because of convention and familiarity. As Ahmed writes, “what sticks ‘shows us’ where the object [or affect] has travelled through what it has gathered onto its surface” (91). Thus, by analyzing what “sticks,” one can learn a lot about the object or, in this case, affect, particularly about its past and present value or usage. Further, Ahmed argues, things become “sticky,” as one might expect, “through repetition” (91), and so behaviours and responses which are often associated with certain affects become more closely associated with them. Ahmed uses the word “Paki” to demonstrate how, “when a word is used in a certain way, again and again, then that ‘use’ becomes intrinsic …. The repetition has a binding effect” (91). Ahmed’s argument suggests that, with enough repetition, the relation between an
affect and the markers and behaviours which are generally associated with it, becomes so automatic, so entrenched, that we no longer see it as relational. As such, when we think of the behaviours or markers, we instantly think of the affect, and when we think of the affect, we instantly think of the markers and behaviours that produce it. This metonymic relation explains why there is a sense of loss when either the affect or the things that have “stuck” to it occur in the absence of their concomitant: the severing feels unnatural, like a rupture, and we experience a sort of cognitive phantom pain.

In this light, Ahmed’s use of the word “binding” seems doubly significant in its suggestion, not only of connection, but of a form of responsibility. For some objects (or affects), there is some ambiguity as to their meaning or value, and so their absence is not felt as a loss. But when something which has long been associated with very specific and unambiguous behaviours and actions fails to present itself at the expected time and place, there is a sense that some kind of “binding” agreement or contract has been violated. In the case of shame, this sense of an obligatory relation is exacerbated by shame’s traditional role in the policing of social boundaries, and so its absence produces not just cognitive dissonance, but sorrow and rage, lament and outcry. Further, Ahmed argues, this “‘binding’ effect … is also a ‘blockage’: it stops the word moving or acquiring new value” (92), thereby ensuring a comfortable and reliable relation between affect and its markers which can come to suggest exclusivity. When shame, for instance, stops moving or acquiring new value, one knows what to avoid in order to avoid shame; in short, if shame stops moving, one’s relation to it becomes fixed and one knows how to act. In this way, the illusion of exclusivity is useful, but it also causes problems when an object’s meaning and value begins to change. But while Ahmed’s arguments are sound, I would add that the “blockage” is not permanent or insurmountable. Indeed, the process by which a bond is
created between affect and markers can also work in reverse: things can also become less sticky through repetition, such that the more one engages in/with previously determined shameful behaviour, the less shameful that behaviour has the potential of becoming. Its “stickiness,” as it were, has the potential to wear off—or even, potentially, to begin to accumulate new associations.

Because of shame’s refusal to “stick,” our relation to it has become a rather tenuous one, generating considerable anxiety regarding shame’s usefulness—anxiety that is evident in the very phrase “the death of shame,” for if we were not concerned about the things to which shame is or was attached, the whole question of shame’s whereabouts or supposed “death” would be similarly unconcerning. Our uneasiness with shame’s departure from its “shoulds,” however, suggests that we have converted this absence into loss. Dominick LaCapra argues in Writing History, Writing Trauma that we initiate this conversion in order to give “anxiety an identifiable object—the lost object—[generating] the hope that anxiety may be eliminated or overcome” (57). To think of shame as dead or lost instead of merely absent in particular situations can certainly assuage our fear or anxiety that shame might still be lurking somewhere, ready to surprise us or catch us off guard. When shame is most threatening, it is because we do not know from where it comes (and “where” here indicates not just the not-knowing of who will do the shaming—the place from which it comes—but also the inexplicable: the reason one is made to feel so vulnerable and worthless). To proclaim the death of shame, to convert its absence into a loss, is to rid oneself of the fear and anxiety associated with its absence at the same time as such proclamation communicates a lamentation of that loss—a lamentation that demonstrates one’s recognition of shame’s value.
But how does one mourn affects, feelings, or emotions? After all, to recognize something as lost, and to care about that loss is to institute the process of mourning. Even as this “death” of shame suggests a loss, thus indicating our conversion of shame’s absence to loss, this “death” is not a real one. Shame is, of course, still felt. It may not be felt in the ways some believe it should be or when it should be, but it has not disappeared entirely. Moreover, repeated lamentations of its “death” communicate not mourning, but melancholia, for we have not really let go of shame. As Ahmed notes, “The classic point of reference” for understanding mourning and melancholia “is Freud’s essay on ‘Mourning and Melancholia’” (*The Promise of Happiness* 138):

In this essay, Freud describes mourning as the relatively healthy process of grieving for a lost object: the aim of this grief is to let go of the object, or to let the object go. The subject ‘moves on’ and is free to form new attachments, which in turn mean a kind of return to life, or a way of staying alive: ‘just as mourning impels the ego to renounce the object by declaring its death, and offers the ego the reward of staying alive, each individual battle of ambivalence loosens the fixation of the libido upon the object, by devaluing, disparaging, and, so to speak, even killing it.’ (138-39)

So while the “death of shame” suggests a “devaluing, disparaging, and … even killing” of shame, the concern with which such a “death” is articulated indicates, instead, a refusal to accept this “death.” As a result, the phrase “death of shame” paradoxically indicates both the killing of shame and the melancholic’s willful “holding on” to the lost object.

LaCapra argues that one way in which the melancholic “holds on” to the lost object is by “acting out”: “In acting out, the past is performatively regenerated or relived as if it were fully present rather than represented in memory and inscription” (70). Throughout *Shame*, though we
do not know the original events that generated Brandon’s curious relation to shame, we can certainly see evidence of this “acting out,” an acting out that signals Brandon’s refusal to “let go” of shame, thus making it fully present, capable of being relived again and again. The film itself participates in such “acting out,” at least in the ways in which certain scenes and phrases are repeated. The most notable example of this occurs when the film ends with one of the same scenes with which it began. At the beginning of the film, in a scene I have discussed twice before, Brandon stares at an attractive woman on the subway, a woman who eventually communicates discomfort with his attention and escapes Brandon’s gaze and contact. The final scene in the film repeats this scene, though with subtle differences: as Brandon sits on the subway, he once again looks up to find the same woman sitting across from him. This time, however, she is staring directly at Brandon, inviting the same attention from him that she dismissed in the first scene. The scene (and movie) ends before we know how Brandon responds—whether he, once again, gets up to follow her off the subway—but such repetition is certainly indicative of a pattern or cycle within which Brandon is trapped. While we cannot know whether Brandon embraces the opportunity in this final scene or breaks the cycle, he certainly performs such “acting out” at many other points throughout the film in order to “relive” the past and maintain his relation to shame.

I recognize that one might argue that, because melancholia is generally experienced in regards to loss, and since it would seem that Brandon has not really lost shame, what he is experiencing is not melancholy. However, I want to think about Brandon’s attachment to shame as an anticipatory melancholy: his fear of losing his connection to a shame that he understands and with which he feels comfortable is part of what fuels his behaviour. Brandon’s “acting out,” then, might be understood as a refusal to let go of the object before it is gone, or before his
relation to it alters. Such “acting out” in order to maintain one’s relation to shame tends to read like shamelessness, generating an overlap between the two affective concepts, making it hard to decipher which is being felt and when, especially in others. Brandon’s “acting out,” driven by his anticipation of losing his relation to shame, dramatizes this overlap between shame and shamelessness which, in a broader sense, mirrors the simultaneously shameful and shameless impulse to “act out” in contemporary American culture, an impulse toward which the “death of shame” rallying cry directs itself. But what shame’s proximity to—and overlap with—shamelessness actually suggests is that neither concept provides an adequate interpretation of the affective situation. That is, if shame is still present even when we think it is not—or vice versa—then “shame” and “shamelessness” as affective labels function simply as placeholders for something different, something with which we are not yet fully prepared (able or willing) to directly engage. In what follows, I analyze two scenes in Shame to demonstrate how ambiguous affective interpretations can create a semantic gulf between self and other, or observer and actor. This semantic gulf, in turn, tempts or impels the observer to bridge it by fixing a familiar affective label onto a situation which cannot properly “stick” to it, even as the use of an affect as placeholder ensures a fundamental misrecognition that prevents understanding. The two scenes I have chosen from Shame make visible this perplexing overlap between shame and shamelessness and the ways in which it relates to affective misrecognition. The first scene shows how our (mis)readings can generate an overlap between shame and shamelessness that may or may not be felt by the object of our gaze; the second scene, in contrast, reveals the ways in which an overlap might inevitably exist between shame and shamelessness regardless of our readings.

In the first scene, Brandon sits on the couch, watching cartoons. Sissy enters the apartment while on the phone, leaving a message for Brandon’s (married) boss whom she slept
with earlier in the film. Sissy sits down next to Brandon and asks him to give her a hug. He puts his arm around her and she cuddles up to him. Several seconds go by while the two of them watch the cartoons, until Brandon says: “he’s not going to screw you again. You left a message, didn’t you? You can’t help yourself. It’s disgusting.” Taken aback, Sissy looks up at him and asks, “Why are you so fucking angry?” and the two begin to argue. Sissy responds to Brandon’s accusation that she is nothing more than a “dependency,” a “parasite,” with the accusation that he does not “have anybody. You don’t have anybody. You have me and your fucking pervert boss.” His boss, of course, is the same boss Sissy slept with earlier in the film, which is precisely what Brandon points out: “You slept with that fucking pervert boss. What does that make you?” Sissy is not, however, disconcerted by this. She merely responds by saying, “Don’t talk to me about sex life, Brandon, not from you.” Several seconds of silence follow before Brandon finally turns away from her, says “whatever,” and gets up to leave. We might argue that Brandon’s leaving is, again, a version of the “flight” response common in experiences of shame. Sissy’s remarks to Brandon call into question not only his issues with intimacy and sex, but his ability and/or suitability to be her brother. The camera’s refusal to follow Brandon, remaining instead focused on Sissy, might be read as further demonstrative of an ashamed response, one that remains hidden and private. Sissy and Brandon’s verbal attacks are certainly meant as attempts to shame one another into submission. As such, Brandon’s escape from the camera might be read as his attempt to hide his shame from his sister (and viewers). On the other hand, Brandon’s often impassive features are rarely hidden from the camera in/after his various exploits. As such, one might just as easily approach this scene by viewing Brandon’s reaction as simply one of frustration or indifference, given his refusal to engage, his “whatever” response and expressionless stare during the seconds of silence following Sissy’s final remark. Viewers might
even understand the camera’s focus on Sissy once Brandon leaves as an attempt to show the toll Brandon’s shamelessness and indifference is taking on his sister.

What I find most fascinating about this particular scene is McQueen’s decision to play black and white cartoons in the background, a decision that links not only a sense of childishness but Brandon and Sissy’s childhood to the issues of which they speak. The fighting and cereal-eating in front of the cartoons starkly contrasts with the majority of the film’s content, presenting the siblings to us as nothing more than grown-up children. As such, the cartoons reveal the disconnect between what it means to be an adult and actually being an adult. Brandon, of course, sees himself as possessing the necessary material goods (“I’ve got my own fucking apartment”) and independence characteristic of “responsible” adulthood. Our knowledge of his extracurricular activities—and his inability to partake in them with any level of moderation—however, complicates our reading of Brandon as a responsible adult (something Sissy clearly understands, given her scoffing at his claims of independence). The cartoons, then, add yet another layer of indeterminacy when it comes to locating shame: are we to read this bizarre scene of sibling rivalry and cartoon-watching as any more embarrassing than the alternative, which, for Brandon, seems to be porn, alcohol, and/or drugs? The cartoons, moreover, are in black and white, suggesting a level of simplicity inherent in this scene (as well as a distance between the black and white—simplistic—past and the coloured—complicated—present), a simplicity that indicates that what we are witnessing is, in fact, black and white: easily differentiable, categorical, unambiguous. This simplicity, however, is not only ironic, given our inability to decipher the deeper significance of their conversation due to our lack of knowledge of their backgrounds, but is undermined by the fact that the cartoons remain out of focus for the entire scene; they are difficult to read, similar to the emotional palette of the film. This blurring is one
of many instances in which the film plays with our perception of scenes or images, calling attention not only to the act of watching (voyeurism), as I discussed above, and to the viewer’s unstable ethical position within that dynamic, but to the difficulties inherent in the very act of watching. As the cartoon ends, so, too, does the scene, the endings united in a fuzzy, “vortex” transition which, though it occurs in the cartoon playing on Brandon’s TV, opens us up not to the next scene of the cartoon, but to the next scene of *Shame*.

The carryover of the cartoon’s sound effects into the film’s next scene reinforces the thematic connection between the out-of-focus cartoon and the film’s blurred affective optics, a striking visual simile which becomes fully integrated when the first shot of Brandon in the new scene is itself out of focus. We see him only through his reflection in the subway window—a window marked by graffiti—and while windows tend to be symbols or markers of clarity, the fact that this window is unclear reminds us that even that which should present us with a clear reflection or image is often incapable of actually doing such. That our access to Brandon is often barred, blurred, or off-centred, indicates that the lenses through which we interpret or locate shame might always already be inadequate, and so, even as the barriers to our vision prevent easy identification with characters and their gazes—Silverman’s successful “suture”—and thereby open the characters to our judgment and shaming, they also undermine our capacity to believe in our ability to see—and judge—clearly. In so doing, they make visible the gulf of indeterminacy that inevitably exists between individuals attempting to read each other’s affective responses.

While affect is our bodies’ first biological response to happenings and thus our base reaction to things, it is more important to *others*, who must rely on our ability to *affectively* communicate in order to “properly” interact with us. To be unable to interpret Brandon is a source of frustration and anxiety, for it complicates any meaningful relation or connection to
him. Even when the camera shifts and we are given a clear view of Brandon on the subway, it is a side-profile of his face, now marked with bruises and a cut on his cheekbone—a face that communicates its usual impassiveness, which, for many critics, reads as shamelessness. Such off-centred shots achieve the same effect as the blurring and (un)focusing techniques employed elsewhere in the film. This refusal to present us with clear and straight images or lines of sight mirrors our relation to affective intensities: we are, after all, continually subjected to blurred sensations of feelings that are accompanied by uncertainties in reading them. Even when we feel sure of our diagnoses, there exists that nagging suspicion that they are merely approximations of what we have learned and not necessarily original interpretations of how we really feel. For Silverman, such “blocked shots,” particularly when they block our view of intimate situations, suggest not only the “technical impossibility” of the shot, but also the “‘moral’ impossibility” of the shot, “since the shot in question effects a startling breach of privacy” (206). In McQueen’s film, though, it is not simply the “moral impossibility” of intruding on these intimate moments, but the moral impossibility of believing in the clearness of our vision, that is being called into question.

The scene in the subway is a prime example of the ways in which—even when we feel sure of our diagnosis of Brandon’s feelings or emotions, when we feel as though we have successfully located shame or shamelessness in a given scene—the film almost immediately calls that location or diagnosis into question. This scene is also the second scene in which the overlap between shame and shamelessness becomes particularly evident, in part because it is marked by a series of flashbacks that are integrated so haphazardly and chaotically that they tend to read like the flashbacks characteristic of trauma. Indeed, Brandon’s memories of the night’s events present themselves in a non-linear fashion, the same images repeating or the words of one
memory overlapping with the image of another, bleeding into other memories, making them indecipherable from one another and suggesting Brandon’s inability to control their remembrance or reoccurrence. Common to the memories is their depiction of the shameless desperation with which Brandon seeks out his next sexual conquest or tryst. The first flashback depicts Brandon sitting at a bar, having a drink. A woman walks up to the bar where Brandon is sitting, looks at Brandon, smiles, and flirtingly says “hey.” Brandon returns the greeting. The scene is presented to us piecemeal, frequently interrupted by other memories of the evening. One memory in particular shows us Brandon walking the streets of New York, hood up and smoking a cigarette. That the other memories are repeatedly interrupted by this particular memory of wandering is significant: not only is Brandon hooded, a fact that immediately brings to mind the Hoods of Moody’s *The Ice Storm* and the necessity of covering and uncovering in experiences of shame, but Brandon’s wandering reminds us of the film’s preoccupation with locatability. As such, we are also reminded of the locating and dislocating of the self in shame and can thus read Brandon’s wandering as a reaction to such (dis)locating.

Eventually, we return to the scene in the bar, where Brandon follows his greeting to the woman by brazenly asking, “You want to get out of here?” Brandon is smiling at the woman, who is smiling back. By way of response, the woman slowly glances over her shoulder at the men playing pool behind them. Brandon follows her gaze, asking, “What, are you with someone? Does he go down on you? I do. It’s what I like to do.” The woman’s smile fades and is replaced by a look of both arousal and disbelief. Brandon reaches downward and under her skirt. The woman allows herself to be drawn slightly closer, gasping quietly at Brandon’s move. Brandon, now inches away from the woman, tells her, “I like the way you feel. I like the way it’s just me. I want to taste you. I want to slip my tongue inside you just as you come.” He raises his fingers to
his lips and tastes them, still staring at her intently. The camera begins to slowly circle the pair as Brandon continues: “Want me to make you come? I can do that. Want me to do that?” He reaches out and touches her chin gently just as the woman’s boyfriend walks up to them, asking “what’s up?” The woman moves away from Brandon, tells her boyfriend she was “just getting some drinks.” Brandon looks away from the pair, grinning, and raises his drink to his lips. Brandon’s brash behaviour, however, does not end here. Instead, he tells the woman’s boyfriend, “I was just telling your pretty girlfriend here that I’d like to fuck her in that tight pussy of hers.” He glances briefly down at his drink and then back at the boyfriend’s face, expectantly. Instead of waiting for a reaction or response, however, Brandon continues by telling the boyfriend, “I mean bone her real hard until she’s clawing at my back.” The boyfriend laughs in disbelief as the woman tries to tell him that Brandon is “kidding.” Brandon shows no sign of “kidding” as he continues to divulge his explicit fantasies to the boyfriend: “after I fuck her hard up the ass, I’ll put my balls in her mouth and I’ll come on her face.” The boyfriend, now seething in disbelief, encourages Brandon to persist, recognizing that Brandon is “fuckin’ loving this.” In response to this encouragement, Brandon merely raises his fingers to the boyfriend’s nose, exclaiming, “Smell this!” Brandon erupts in laughter as the boyfriend pushes him off and walks away in anger. Turning back to his drink, Brandon’s smile lingers as the scene fades into another.

This scene is arguably the most shameless scene in the entire film, as Brandon exhibits none of the markers of shame. Instead, Brandon quite clearly feels some level of joy or elation at the results of his performance. Even his exit from the bar is undertaken in no hurry, such that it is easy for the boyfriend to catch up to him, assault him (thus explaining the cuts and bruises on Brandon’s face) and spit on him. Despite the fact that Brandon does not communicate any of the markers of shame, and thus comes across as entirely shameless, we are reminded of Benjamin
Hood’s experience of joy in shame that I discussed in Chapter Two, and thus of the possibility that Brandon experiences the same here. Such joy in shame inevitably reads as shamelessness and thus is, in part, where the overlap between shame and shamelessness begins, for as much as one might feel shameless or ashamed, to be viewed as shameful in one’s shamelessness or shameless in one’s shame alters one’s relation to shame. Even if one does not “take on” the shamelessness or shame that others project, such a label must be acknowledged, and in that acknowledgement, one’s relation to shame/lessness changes. The overlap, I argue, becomes even clearer when we think through Brandon’s act of remembering these events. For although Brandon may have initially felt shameless in his desperation, this shamelessness, in the act of remembering, can morph into shame: it does so in a way that does not alter it entirely, for Brandon’s advances in the bar read as perhaps the most shameless in the entire film. Instead, the memory of feeling shameless can generate a feeling of shame, colouring one’s perception of the earlier event. The event then becomes both shameless and shameful.

But how can we characterize this event as both shameless and shameful? Does one not simply replace the other? Lauren Berlant sheds some light on this paradox when she writes about her mother’s death on her research blog, *Supervalent Thought*. Discussing loss, Berlant suggests that it “is actually loss whatever else it is—even if it’s also a relief, a victory, an occasion for sentimental self-encountering, or a thud, almost nothing.” Loss (like all objects) is not replaceable, Berlant argues, but “it changes when it’s close to other things,” which is precisely what makes loss capable of also being relief, a victory, and so on. Berlant advocates seeing all objects (or affects), as with loss, “as placeholders for the encounter with the world.” Once one sees them in this way,
as organizing the process of moving through the situation of the ordinary life, they become enigmas alongside of the ways they gain specificity through use, over time. You can rely on them and have curiosity about them, and not only be scared of the way you don’t understand them. The fact that a thing is an enigmatic relation means not that the thing is replaceable, because it isn’t: but that it changes when it’s close to other things.

Berlant reminds us that labels are capable of shifting the implications of objects, such that, for example, if loss is experienced as a victory, we begin to understand loss differently, even as loss is still loss. Like loss, then, shame holds the possibility of always being shame, even when shame is shamelessness. Shame’s proximity to other things can alter shame’s appearance and the ways in which it is perceived, but this does not mean it loses its status as shame. We can begin to understand, then, how shame—and affects more generally—can exist as a placeholder such that our experience of it and relation to it is always capable of changing. This is why, for instance, one can experience something as embarrassing or shameful in the company of particular people, but in the company of others—friends or family, perhaps—one finds one is able to tell the story without re-experiencing the embarrassment or shame one initially felt. The story might become a humorous one, which is not to say that the initial embarrassment or shame is erased—or, to use Berlant’s word, replaceable; rather, the proximity of the feeling to someone or something else alters the feeling or one’s relation to it. In Shame, Brandon’s unwilling remembrance of the night’s events alters his (and our) perception of the events, colouring them with shame. In my introductory chapter, I drew on Sedgwick’s argument regarding Henry James’s The Art of the Novel, in which James reflects on a younger, ashamed self. This looking back, for James, does not merely recall the painful shame he once felt; instead, James glamorizes his earlier stories,
attributing to them an “impudence that bespeaks not the absence of shame … but rather its pleasurable recirculated afterglow” (10). Just as James’s relation to shame changes through remembrance, so, too, does Brandon’s. For Brandon, however, there is no glamorizing of the earlier events; instead, recalling the events attributes to them a regret that bespeaks not the presence of shame, but shamelessness’ unpleasurable recirculation. This is evident in Shame not only in the ways in which the film’s representation of the night’s earlier events is suggestive of trauma, but in Brandon’s body language as he sits in the subway, waiting and remembering. Indeed, almost every flashback ends with the return to the subway, where we find an increasingly agitated Brandon, whose physiological reactions to the memories are indicative of shame. We watch as Brandon is refused entry into a club he evidently frequents (the bouncer bars Brandon from entering, saying, “whoa, not tonight, buddy”); we watch as he follows a man into a gay bar and allows the man to fellate him; we watch as he seeks the company of two prostitutes, engaging in a graphic threesome. Each time we return to the subway, we find Brandon slouched farther forward, his brows more and more furrowed, his head often hung as he fidgets with his hands. As much as Brandon’s earlier behaviour communicates shamelessness, his subway ride back home suggests that another affect may be slowly taking its place, or that the events are being remembered in a way that strips them of some of the earlier shamelessness that may have initially accompanied them.

My earlier proposal that we think of affects as placeholders allows us to understand affect in a way that both releases us from the constraints of Affect Theory and does away with the anxiety that surrounds misrecognition. Indeed, the very concept of “placeholder” suggests, of course, that something is holding the place of something else. If we conceive of affects as placeholders that govern our relation to the world, we can begin to understand affects as simply
mediating our relation to the world in such a way that we are not bound to those relations. Instead, such relations continue to hold the possibility of development and change as we ourselves develop and change. This is not to say that our memory of the ways in which we initially experienced a particular event is forever altered; rather, we begin to understand the event differently as another affect colours our experience of the earlier event. In some ways, placeholders can act as temporary (sometimes indefinite) barriers to our encounters with the world by distracting us, if only momentarily, from the object that might soon take its place. In Brandon’s case, we might understand his initial shamelessness as a placeholder that governs his relation to sex, allowing him the prideful joy we witness in the bar. Later, however, the shamelessness of the moment begins to dissipate as he experiences the event again via flashbacks. From a different perspective, removed from the thrill of the chase, Brandon’s relation to or understanding of the event becomes tinged with shame.

Timothy Bewes’s discussion of the unknowability of shame in The Event of Postcolonial Shame indirectly designates shame as a placeholder, given shame’s resistance to being defined and truly understood. Bewes writes that “shame is a material entity; it characterizes the attempt to speak our experience, the impossibility of doing so, and is unknowable outside any such attempts” (60). Even as shame is uttered or attached to an embodied response that we might understand as indicative of what we know as shame, shame continues to resist definition and, as such, forever holds the possibility of being or becoming something else. This is true, I suggest, of all affects; the language and definitions available for understanding our relation to our bodies, feelings, and emotions are inadequate for encapsulating our experiences or for allowing us to understand the experiences of others. In what follows, I turn to McQueen’s most recent film, 12 Years a Slave, a film that, in juxtaposition with the narrative on which it is based, asks us to
question what is at stake in our reliance on affective markers as well as the imposition of narratives of shame/humiliation on others.

**Steve McQueen’s 12 Years a Slave and the Imposition of Shame**

Based on Solomon Northup’s slave narrative, *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New-York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and Rescued in 1853* (hereafter referred to as *Twelve Years*), Steve McQueen’s film adaptation *12 Years a Slave* (hereafter referred to as *12 Years*) depicts the ways in which Northup is lured out of Saratoga, New York, where he lives as a free man with his wife and two children, and invited to Washington under false pretences. In Washington, he is abducted and sold to a slave owner in Louisiana and forced to take on and answer to the name “Platt.” Northup spends the next twelve years working on plantations, first as a slave to William Ford (Benedict Cumberbatch), then to Edwin Epps (Michael Fassbender). Eventually, Northup meets Bass (Brad Pitt), a white man who believes “that there is no justice or righteousness in slavery” (*12 Years*). Convincing Bass to mail a letter on his behalf, Northup finally manages to secure his freedom and return home.

Because of its subject matter, which is to say, the institution of slavery, *12 Years* confronts its viewers with questions of shame (though whose shame, as I will soon discuss, is unclear). As David Leverenz writes in *Honor Bound: Race and Shame in America*, historically, “light-skinned people” have used “shaming and humiliation to make race feel like shame” (3). Slave owners employed racial shaming in order to make slaves conscious of their blackness and of its meaning in a white-dominated world, attempting to instill the impossibility of fleeing from that shame. After all, shame is most debilitating when it is both unavoidable and inescapable; recalling Levinas, Agamben reminds us that “shame is grounded in our being’s incapacity to
move away and break from itself” (104-105). In shame, Agamben continues, “we are consigned to something from which we cannot in any way distance ourselves” (105). While Agamben’s account derives from his analysis of Primo Levi’s experience in Auschwitz during the Holocaust, a similar principle applies in narratives of slavery: despite their differences, the goal in slavery, as well as in the Holocaust, was to create and internalize in non-whites and Jewish people, respectively, the very narrative of otherness, by treating those viewed as other as a different species, unworthy of being called human. McQueen’s film, as Thomas Doherty recognizes, is faithful to this understanding of the mechanics of slavery, “depict[ing] slavery for what it was, a system that treated people not as a subaltern class but as a different species” (8). Epps, a slaveowner, articulates exactly this understanding of slavery in the film when, responding to Bass’s recognition that Epps and other men like him “will have to answer for” having refused human beings the ability “to climb higher than brute animals,” he justifies his poor treatment of his slaves by saying that baboons “look just as much like any nigger I got.” Knowing that, theoretically speaking, shame is most keenly felt when one undergoes this process of dehumanization at the very heart of the “peculiar institution” of slavery, one might expect shame to permeate Northup’s narrative and its filmic adaptation.

Certainly, in both forms of the narrative, we bear witness to such attempts to dehumanize Northup and the other slaves. The first instance occurs when he awakes after a night of drinking in Washington to find himself bound by chains. Upon encountering his jailors, Northup informs them of his name and status: “My name is Solomon Northup. I’m a free man, a resident of Saratoga, New York, the residence of my wife and children, who are equally free, and you have no right whatsoever to detain me” (12 Years). In response to this self-assertion, one jailor simply tells Northup, “You’re not any free man.” The jailor’s attempt to force Northup into rethinking
his identity, which is, in large part, rooted in the fact of his freedom, is certainly an attempt to degrade him by shaming him. Northup, undeterred, promises the jailor that “upon my liberation, I will have satisfaction for this wrong.” Moving a step closer, the jailor again states, “you’re no free man, and you ain’t from Saratoga. You’re from Georgia.” Taking another step closer to Northup, he repeats, “You ain’t a free man. You’re nothing but a Georgia runaway. You’re just a runaway nigger from Georgia.” The repetitiveness with which the jailor proclaims Northup’s new identity is meant to instill in Northup a sense of the risk he takes in claiming a different identity, one premised on his freedom. Northup, however, does not respond, and so to drive the point home, the other jailor pulls on Northup’s chains, dragging him to the ground. Forcing him onto all fours, the jailors attempt to beat Northup into submission with a wooden paddle, yelling “you’re a slave!” with each blow. Northup’s position on all fours, alongside the beatings that effectively strip him of intelligible language (he is capable, in this moment, only of screams of pain), effectively illustrates the dehumanization process, the attempt to bring Northup down to the level of a “brute animal” in order to get him to internalize this new identity as other.

When the beatings pause long enough for Northup to catch his breath, the first jailor asks, “Are you a slave?” Refusing to concede his dignity and identity, Northup manages to gasp out the word “no,” at which point the jailor resumes the beatings with a whip. Understanding the goal of the jailor’s beating, when I first viewed this scene, I assumed that the goal was achieved, that, although Northup himself exhibits no evidence of shame, the absence of its markers does not preclude the possibility that shame is felt. However, after comparing this scene with its description in Northup’s autobiographical narrative, I was forced to reconsider, confronting my assumptions born of my reliance on general narratives of shame and the ways in which it is produced and felt. Despite the jailers’ attempts to dehumanize him, Northup’s description of the
beating makes no mention of shame or humiliation; instead, Northup simply recounts the “cruel labor” of the jailor, labor that missed its intended mark because it “could not force from my lips the foul lie that I was a slave” (45).

Indeed, for a narrative about a man’s experience in a system predicated upon forcing shame upon those subject to it, Northup’s text is striking in the complete absence of feelings of shame or humiliation in his descriptions of his experience. In an analysis of Primo Levi’s account of surviving the Holocaust, Elspeth Probyn notes that one of the most “striking aspects” of his writing is

the seeming lack of affect with which he takes us through the experiences of the camp. The scarce mention of affect or emotion suggests that being captured within the closed space of camp did not allow for that degree of reflexivity. Levi shows the suppression of emotion in a realm where people are stripped of their humanity. For instance, no mention of shame is made in his account of being inside. (“Writing Shame” 88)

When reading Northup’s Twelve Years, I often found myself wondering if the absence of shame (and, occasionally, of affect more generally) in his narrative derives from similar reasons. Probyn argues that Levi’s “lack of affect in his examples is also, at times, very precise—a lacuna of feeling that structures the text. He makes us feel the emptiness of that affectless state, how inhuman it is. When he turns to describing the slow return of humanity following the liberation, we see the different emotions that emerge as from a deep freeze” (89). Unlike Levi’s account, however, Northup’s account of “being captured” is not characterized by the “scarce mention of affect or emotion”; instead, Northup’s account, as we will see, does include the ascription of shame to others. Indeed, Northup continually characterizes Eliza Berry, a woman he meets
shortly after the beating scene described above, as having descended into “wretchedness” (53, 63, 160), a word often used synonymously with “shame.” Though Northup’s account does effect our recognition of “man’s inhumanity to man” (Twelve Years 48), the fact that he never employs the word shame (or its variants) in regards to himself, but attributes it to others, must inform any reading of affect in McQueen’s film adaptation.

Many of the film’s viewers, however, seem to have made the same assumption as I initially did. When I typed the words/phrases “McQueen,” “12 Years a Slave,” and “humiliated” together into Google, I was referred to 767,000 sites, and while some of the links led to viewers who used the term “humiliated” in regards to Mistress Epps or Tibbeats, the majority of the sites I reviewed suggest that Northup is (repeatedly) humiliated (many suggested Patsey as well). The top hits on the first two pages of Google included the following responses to 12 Years:
“McQueen’s film is certainly harrowing: people are thrown into carts like objects, and they are beaten, lashed and ceaselessly humiliated” (Cox); “Regularly whipped, humiliated, and forced to work the cotton fields of Louisiana, Northup struggles to stay alive as he searches for a means of escape” (Stevens, Matt); “Humiliated and treated like meat, the joys of Solomon’s former life are quickly stripped away” (Lyles); Northup “is beaten and whipped, humiliated, and mentally and physically tormented” (“Review: 12 Years a Slave”); “The true saga of Solomon Northup (Ejiofor) allows McQueen to tell one man’s extraordinary story, but also expose, as Solomon is passed from owner to owner … the workings of the slavery machine and the myriad ways in which blacks were subjugated and humiliated” (Concannon); “Solomon is humiliated and brutalised … and there are constant reminders of his precarious position” (Sawtell); Northup lives “in the worst conditions and [is] tortured and humiliated each time he protests” (Khilnani). Again, though, Northup’s narrative gives the lie to such readings. For example, in his description
of his abuse at the hands of Tibeats, he writes that, despite the fact that he felt he was “faithful” to Tibeats, earning “him large wages every day … [Northup] went to [his] cabin nightly, loaded with abuse and stinging epithets” (107). Tibeats, jealous of Ford’s reliance on and respect for Northup, assigns Northup a task but continually questions the quality of Northup’s work. Northup describes how he initially deals with the abuse, complying with Tibeats’s demands, but when it becomes clear that the fault Tibeats continually finds lies not in Northup’s work but in his very being, Northup refuses to continue placating Tibeats. Tibeats takes Northup’s “insolence” as an opportunity to whip him and demands that Northup strip. Northup relates in his narrative that he “had been faithful—that [he] was guilty of no wrong whatever, and deserved commendation rather than punishment” (110), and as such, he meets Tibeats’s demand with resistance. Tibeats then physically attacks Northup, but Northup gains the upper hand and overpowers Tibeats. In his reading of the film, John Stauffer argues that Northup’s overpowering of Tibeats illustrates the ways in which Northup’s “anger has replaced fear, dignity has trumped humiliation” (319). Stauffer even proposes that this scene is “a visual counterpart to the book, in which Northup says: ‘My fear changed to anger, and before [Tibeats] reached me I had made up my mind fully not to be whipped, let the result be life or death’” (319). But while Northup’s narrative undeniably supports Stauffer’s contention that anger has replaced fear, it makes no mention of “dignity [having] trumped humiliation.” Northup does not give any indication here or, as I previously stated, at any other point in the entirety of his narrative that humiliation is something he feels.

Stauffer’s claim, of course, relies mainly on his reading of the film and so it is to the film that we must turn to locate the humiliation of which he speaks. Again, however, there is no evidence to support this reading; on the contrary, the scenes leading up to the one Stauffer
describes actually indicate that Northup has *not* lost his sense of dignity. Indeed, Northup’s intellect is part of what allows him to thrive on Ford’s plantation and earn Ford’s respect. Northup is treated well enough by Ford for Northup to designate him “a decent man … under the circumstances.” This designation is one Eliza scoffs at in the scene immediately before Northup’s first encounter with Tibeats; Eliza reminds Northup that, to Ford, Northup is “no better than prized livestock,” questioning whether Northup has “settled into [his] role as Platt, then?” Northup lashes out in anger at this supposition, reminding Eliza that his “back is thick with scars for protesting [his] freedom” and telling her that, though he has not forgotten his wife or children, he does whatever he can to “survive. I will not fall into despair. I will offer up my talents to Master Ford. I will keep myself hardy until freedom is opportune.” Rather than suggesting a pervasive and overwhelming sense of humiliation, these scenes indicate that Northup is resilient, and will do everything in his power to stay strong until he is able to regain his freedom.

Even the film’s initial scene in which Tibeats criticizes Northup’s work does not suggest that Northup feels humiliated. Northup speaks to Tibeats in a calm voice, countering his criticisms with logical explanations. The fact that Northup feels comfortable enough to voice opposition suggests that Tibeats’s attempts to humiliate Northup are unsuccessful, which, of course, infuriates Tibeats, who attempts to both degrade and instill fear in Northup by asking, “Are you calling me a liar, boy?” As Leverenz notes, “black men’s bodies became the main target for shaming and fear. Slavery and subservience enforced shameful unmanliness. To assert daily supremacy, whites complacently called any black man ‘boy’” (17). Leverenz reminds us that humiliation “enforces abjection; it makes you feel dirty and degraded and terrorized. You’re afraid of asserting anything” (23). But Northup, in this scene, is *not* afraid of asserting anything.
Indeed, Northup simply responds by telling Tibeats that “it’s all a matter of perspective, sir. I simply ask that you use all your senses before rendering judgment.”

Since neither the film nor Northup’s text suggests that Northup is experiencing humiliation at this point, Stauffer seems to be simply making an assumption based on his understanding of shame and slavery. Northup describes how, after having whipped Tibeats, “feelings of unutterable agony overwhelmed [him]” (Twelve Years 113) as the potential consequences of his actions dawned on him. The closest Northup comes to disclosing a feeling akin to shame occurs when he later notes that his “extreme ebullition of anger” was followed by “the most painful sensations of regret” (113). Despite regret’s close association with guilt and thus shame, Northup makes clear that his regret stems not from his perception of himself but from having done something that might jeopardize his ability to return home to his family and to the children “God had given [him] … to love and live for” (125).

The scene which most consistently causes critics to read shame onto Northup, though, occurs when Tibeats, having fled after Northup overpowered him, returns with two friends to lynch Northup by hanging him from a tree. In her analysis of the scene, Valerie Smith suggests that “Any vindication Northup may feel is short-lived” when Tibeats and his friends “restrain Northup, bind his hands, and prepare to lynch him—making a public example of him by hanging him in a central location between the slave quarters and the main house” (362). Though Tibeats and his companions are stopped by Chapin before they can complete the lynching, Chapin leaves Northup suspended from the tree with only his tiptoes preventing him from strangling, causing him, as Northup writes, to “remain in agony the whole weary day” (Twelve Years 119). Salamishah Tillet cites McQueen’s description of this scene “as embodying ‘the physical and psychological aspects of slavery in one frame’” (357); similarly, Smith argues that the near-
lynching “is meant not only to punish and humiliate him, but also to police his fellow slaves by reminding them of the consequences of self-assertion” (362). Though, as Smith notes, the quasi-lynching “is meant … to punish and humiliate him” (362, my emphasis), once again, neither Northup’s narrative nor McQueen’s film give any indication that Northup feels humiliated. Instead, he describes the “discomfort of [his] situation” (119), the physical pain he suffered, how he was “groaning with pain” and “growing faint from pain, and thirst, and hunger” (120). Aside from pain, the only other feelings Northup describes (once Ford cuts him down) are fear and dread: “The excessive pain that I suffered, and the dread of some impending danger, prevented any rest whatsoever” (124). Though much of this giving voice to his feelings during the quasi-lynching is absent from the film, (McQueen’s) Northup’s response to the quasi-lynching similarly indicates the absence of humiliation. While (this) Northup is—quite literally—balancing between life and death, clearly in pain and clearly dehydrated, the horrifying balancing act indicates that his focus is most likely on bodily pain and the will to survive. Moreover, the quasi-lynching seems instead to have strengthened his resolve to regain his freedom, driving him to finally assert his real identity to Ford. It would then seem that, once again, anger has replaced the fear that previously prevented him from seeking Ford’s assistance in regaining his freedom.

Despite Stauffer’s reading, then, and the many others which read shame onto Northup’s character, Northup’s text makes clear that the racial shaming he undergoes does not actually produce shame. Indeed, as Leverenz suggests, “racial shaming often produces anger, not shame” (3). Leverenz notes that “Typically, shaming black people acts to reconsolidate white power rather than to make black targets feel ashamed. Some do, but many feel helpless anger” (9). And though Leverenz does argue, via the slave narratives of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, that such racial shaming did often produce the intended results (36), reading Northup’s narrative
in the same way in the absence of evidence simply (re)produces a generalized narrative about individual experiences under slavery.

In the film, though it does not cause Northup to feel shame, the quasi-lynching does mark a turning point in the way Northup is visually represented. To this point, he has not shown any of the physiological markers associated with shame. After Ford cuts Northup down, he recognizes that he will not be able to protect him from Tibeats and his friends, and so he sells him to Epps, a man characterized in both the film and narrative as a “nigger breaker.” Under his ownership, we see Northup begin to adopt the markers of shame in his body language. One of the most telling examples occurs during the “inspection” scene, when the slaves are lined up, waiting to be told how much cotton they picked that day; if their total does not at least match that of the day before, they are taken out to be whipped. As Epps walks around the slaves, celebrating or shaming them based on how much cotton they picked, the camera zooms in on their faces, and we see downcast and averted eyes and heads turned aside and hanging downwards. Such markers of shame become even more evident when juxtaposed with another inspection scene later in the film which includes a white cotton-picker, Armsby. While the faces of the black men and women remain hung, their eyes averted and focused on the floor, Armsby glances around the room as the slaves’ names are called. When Epps reveals that Armsby has managed to pick only sixty-four pounds, by far the lowest total, Armsby steps forward, expecting to receive the same treatment as the others. In spite of this expectation, however, Armsby looks directly at Epps as Epps tells him that “it takes effort” to “develop as a picker,” and verbally responds to him (“yes, sir”), contrasting the silences that characterize the slaves’ responses. The two scenes thus work to throw into relief the differing physiological markers exhibited by the black and white characters across the exact same situation.
In this scene, Northup and the others’ physiological markers suggest that they are experiencing shame. However, a return to Northup’s narrative again suggests that the actual case is more complicated. When Northup is finally granted his freedom, he recalls how, for “Ten years I was compelled to address [Edwin Epps] with down-cast eyes and uncovered head—in the attitude and language of a slave” (183). As elsewhere in the narrative, Northup disassociates himself from his role as a slave, noting the ways in which he was compelled to take on the “down-cast eyes and uncovered head” that characterize “the attitude and language of a slave.” Here, Northup refuses the first person pronoun in articulating his relation to slavery, while his description of his behaviour suggests that the markers of shame which he exhibits are conscious affectations adopted in order to “play” a more convincing slave. Furthermore, Northup states, “standing on the soil of the free State where I was born, thanks be to Heaven, I can raise my head once more among men. I can speak of the wrongs I have suffered, and of those who inflicted them, with upraised eyes” (183, my emphases). Implicit in Northup’s assertions here is his recognition of the necessity of adopting the physiological markers of shame—the down-cast eyes, the uncovered (exposed face) and lowered head. Northup’s performance of shame reveals the extent to which he must wear shame as a mask in order to survive; such performance not only signals to Epps Northup’s “acceptance” of his “inferior” status but also his “acceptance” of Epps’s status as master. In the narrative and in the film, the markers of shame are so pervasive and ubiquitous that it becomes difficult—even impossible—to separate them from the instances that might actually produce them and thus to distinguish between the performance and the experience of shame. As such, readers and viewers are forced to question the reliability of any efforts to locate shame in or on others and to confront the possibility that finding shame in another’s behaviour does not guarantee its presence as a felt experience.
The possibility of a gap between the performance of shame and the experience of shame brings us to my sole criticism of McQueen’s film (and thus also of John Ridley’s screenplay, upon which McQueen’s adaptation is also based): despite McQueen and Ridley’s general faithfulness to Northup’s narrative, their failure to indicate that Northup is simply performing the expected markers of shame serves to perpetuate and reaffirm a particular understanding of the affective experience of slavery which does not seem to resonate with Northup’s own. In the absence of Northup’s conscious understanding of his performance of shame, spectators are more likely to interpret the markers of shame in the film as truly indicative of a state of deep shame, thereby reading onto Northup’s narrative and body an affective experience that does not reflect his experiences as a slave. Thus, when a critic like Stauffer asserts that the “depictions of violence and suffering in the film” ultimately “enable viewers to empathize with the plight of slaves, offering access into their emotional and psychological states” (319), at least in Northup’s case, he is referring to a generalized psychological and emotional state that, in being written onto Northup’s narrative, grants more power to racial shaming than is evident in Northup’s narrative and prompts viewers to understand Northup’s dignity as having been lost, rather than consciously concealed. Such a misreading, or misrecognition, of Northup’s experience unfortunately risks contributing to a long history of speaking for enslaved individuals by assuming a uniformity of experience that threatens to erase particulars.

A similar rewriting of individuals’ relation to shame in the film occurs in the characterization of Patsey. In Northup’s narrative, Patsey is described as a woman who “glories in the fact that she is the offspring of a ‘Guinea nigger,’ brought over to Cuba in a slave ship” (186, my emphasis). Northup makes clear that Patsey is not ashamed of her past or lineage; rather, she glories in it, undermining attempts to read her history of enslavement as shameful
(that is, of causing Patsey shame). Northup states that “There was an air of loftiness in [Patsey’s] movement, that neither labor, or weariness, nor punishment could destroy” (188), and characterizes her as “a joyous creature, a laughing, light-hearted girl, rejoicing in the mere sense of existence” (189). Despite these characterizations, though, Northup is clear that her existence on Epps’s plantation is not unmarked by troubles, stating that Patsey “wept oftener, and suffered more, than any of her companions. She had been literally excoriated. Her back bore the scars of a thousand stripes; not because she was backward in her work, nor because she was of an unmindful and rebellious spirit, but because it had fallen to her lot to be the slave of a licentious master and a jealous mistress” (189). As a result, he writes, Patsey “shrank before the lustful eye of the one, and was in danger even of her life at the hands of the other” (189).

In the film, Patsey’s characterization is vastly different. McQueen does a thorough job of depicting her brutalization at the hands of Epps and his wife as described in Northup’s narrative and in demonstrating the terrible impact such treatment has on her body and mind. However, the resilient lightheartedness that Northup attributes to her is nowhere to be found. Her experience in the film is told via a series of brutalizations (whippings, assaults, a rape), and whatever lightness she may or may not possess is soon stamped out of her, to the point where she asks Northup to drown her in the river to give her release from a life that, in her words, offers her “no comfort.” In contrast, in Northup’s narrative, it is Mistress Epps who makes this request: “when Epps had refused to sell her, [Mistress Epps] tempted me with bribes to put her secretly to death, and bury her body in some lonely place in the margin of the swamp” (189). In having Patsey voice these lines, in having her admit that she has nothing left, the film adaptation denies her the resilience, the “loftiness” that, Northup writes, “neither labor, or weariness, nor punishment could destroy.” We might read this alteration as Ridley and McQueen’s attempts to afford Patsey some agency
to, as Doherty suggests, seek “her own escape” (7). Then again, perhaps Ridley and McQueen are merely trying to demonstrate that Patsey did, in fact, suffer “more than any of her companions” (Twelve Years 189). However, the fact that this scene closely follows the scene in which Epps rapes Patsey (an event which, in the narrative itself, though perhaps suggested in Northup’s recognition of Epps’s “lust” for Patsey, is never explicitly rendered or even mentioned) encourages viewers to establish a direct cause-and-effect relation between the two, and to read Patsey as having been completely stripped of hope and dignity. Indeed, Stephanie Li reads Patsey’s request to Northup in the film as one that “aligns her with [Toni] Morrison’s Sethe [in Beloved] who attempts to kill her four children rather than have them bear the violence and humiliation she has endured” (329). Li’s reading makes clear that the affect which she sees as most characterizing 12 Years’s depiction of Patsey is humiliation, despite the more balanced portrait Northup gives in his narrative, and so the film strips Patsey of her more complicated relation to shame in the same way as it does Northup. And though Stauffer reads Patsey’s “death-wish” as a necessary departure from the book “in order to dramatize the psychology of slavery” (320), his assumption that there is only one “psychology of slavery,” and that it is the one critics like himself expect to see, rather than the description Northup gives us, begs the question: whose psychology? I cannot help but think about what is at stake in such “departures” or “dramatizations,” particularly given my own initial readings of the film; for whom, after all, are they “necessary”? To assume that Ridley and McQueen—and the film’s critics—know more about the psychology of slavery than Northup himself belies an all-too-familiar historiographical arrogance.

There are two further scenes McQueen includes in the film which are not present in Northup’s narrative and which contribute to the imposition of shame on Northup’s narrative.
First, McQueen’s film adheres to John Ridley’s use of the word “shame” in the screenplay as a descriptive feature of an encounter between Northup and another slave, Anna, especially in the aftermath of the encounter. The film’s screenplay states that Anna’s desperation for human contact, her desire “to feel alive and like a person rather than an animal” (Ridley 82), leads her to “engage Solomon” in a way that leaves her feeling only “regret” and “shame” (82). McQueen’s depiction of this encounter is faithful to Ridley’s description, putting such emotions “on display as Anna turns away from Solomon” (82). In the film, Northup’s interactions with other slaves are consistently centered around despair and humiliation (his futile scheming with Clemens and Robert, Patsey’s desperate request for him to kill her), and this scene, where Anna’s attempts to forge a moment of intimacy between herself and Northup are couched in the language of impropriety and shame (the scene terminates when the two turn away from each other and Anna begins to weep), reinforces the impression that racial shaming has been successful. In the film’s final scene, which is similarly faithful to Ridley’s screenplay, this sense of shame seems to have followed Northup into freedom. As he enters his home, seeing his family for the first time since his kidnapping, the first words from his mouth, which are nowhere to be found in Northup’s narrative, are “I apologize for my appearance. But I have had a difficult time these past several years.” In dramatic terms, the scene effectively condenses Northup’s journey into a single statement whose understatement (“I have had a difficult time”) voices the inarticulability of his experience. But by framing the articulation as an apology, Ridley and McQueen inject an element of culpability, of guilt, that is absent from Northup’s narrative. When Northup later chokes out a near-indecipherable “forgive me” (once again, a fictional detail, though his wife assures him that “there is nothing to forgive”), the suggestion is that Northup believes there is something for which he should be forgiven, reinforcing the narrative of guilt/shame that is absent
from *Twelve Years*. While such a narrative *is* felt by many survivors of traumatic experiences, the fact that both Ridley and McQueen attribute this narrative to Northup in spite of its absence in his autobiography again suggests their adherence to a more general category of slave narratives, an adherence that dangerously elides the particularities of Northup’s own experience.

This adherence also reminds us of the ways in which individuals cling to certain understandings of definitions of shame—the “should” of shame from which this dissertation attempts to depart. Indeed, as *Shame* and *12 Years* both demonstrate, particular understandings of shame and of its markers can fail us, signaling a larger failure of affective or embodied communication. Moreover, via *12 Years*, we can begin to see the potentially harmful implications of adhering to such understandings. To assume that another *is* feeling shame (in a particular way) and/or to believe that another *should* be feeling shame (in a particular way) imposes a particular narrative on the individual that may not speak to his/her experience; instead, such imposition might refigure the individual’s experience in a way that Others, alienates, even further shames.

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20 Though it might surely be the case that Northup does feel guilty about having made the decision to leave for Washington in the first place, the fact that Northup’s “forgive me” is couched in ambiguity leaves viewers wondering for what, exactly, Northup should be forgiven. That Ridley and McQueen leave this “for what?” of “forgive me” open to interpretation allows viewers (such as the ones cited above who are all too eager to read shame/humiliation into Northup’s experience) to draw their own conclusions, thus further opening up Northup’s story to the kind of re-writing already set in motion by Ridley’s screenplay and McQueen’s filmic adaptation.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

Shamelessness: Affective Currencies in America’s Emotional Economy

“But there’s one more thing we need, the one thing that Americans respect more than anything else: public humiliation.”
(“Gryzzlbox,” Parks and Recreation).

“We show off our different scarlet letters— / trust me, mine is better”
(Taylor Swift, “New Romantics”)

This dissertation, as I mentioned in my introduction, began with Moody’s The Ice Storm, in which the characters’ attachments to shame, while fascinating in their own right, are set against the political backdrop of Nixon’s presidency, the recently-ended Vietnam War, and the Watergate scandal. At first, I chalked up Moody’s choice of setting to his personal feelings about a socio-political atmosphere which, as he stated in interviews (Ryan; Ribera), permanently altered his faith in American politicians. When I began to delve further into the relationship between shame and American culture, however, it became clear to me that the Vietnam War, Watergate, and Nixon’s subsequent resignation, collectively, marked something of a turning point for Americans’ relations to shame and the role of shame in American society. Though I cannot hope to do justice to historicizing shame’s role in American history in this concluding chapter, I do suggest here that the Vietnam War and its surrounding political climate played a vital role in altering individual relations to shame in the decades that would follow. Specifically, I contend that shame, prior to the Vietnam-Watergate crisis, operated more or less predictably in the greater national and political sphere of America. When the nation was faced with shame, it responded in a way that made possible a reconfiguration of its relation to the source of its shame, a redemptive move which had the effect, over the long term, of strengthening the special sense of
moral righteousness and democracy so fundamental to the American sense of self. Faced with the shame of slavery, for instance, the Union, feeling it represented the true spirit of the United States of America and thus had a duty to uphold its sociopolitical ideals, sought (very belatedly) to abolish it. In so doing, it accepted responsibility for the shameful behaviour of the Confederate states and responded to shame in the traditional way: by changing the conditions responsible for producing it. Thus, though slavery was (and is) unquestionably a shameful and traumatic fact in American history, the (eventual) American response to it served to strengthen the idea of America as it was articulated in the Declaration of Independence, and there remained a belief (albeit naïve) that, once the wound had healed (between North and South, black and white), America would once again be united, moving in the right direction. From Vietnam onward, however, the national relation to shame changed. As political leaders began, more and more, like Nixon, to refuse responsibility for the sources of, or conditions for, national shame, the shame became diffuse, permeating the national consciousness and leaving no obvious path to redemption. Thus unable to manage their shame by changing the conditions of its existence, Americans were impelled to find ways of living with it, ways which threatened to destabilize the American imago and which left many mainstream Americans feeling, for the first time in a long time (or, perhaps, ever), powerless, and thus unable to act like Americans.  

21 The effects of this altered relation between sociopolitical leadership and shame are visible today, in responses to the widespread racial violence in contemporary American society. President Obama, for instance, gave the following response to the June 17, 2015 Charleston shootings: “I’ve had to make statements like this too many times. … Communities have had to endure tragedies like this too many times. Once again, innocent people were killed in part because someone who wanted to inflict harm had no trouble getting their hands on a gun. … We as a country will have to reckon with the fact that this type of mass violence does not happen in other advanced countries.” Obama continued, “And at some point it’s going to be important for the American people to come to grips with it, and for us to be able to shift how we think about the issue of gun violence collectively” (The White House). While much of Obama’s response to this most recent American trauma has been admirable, even inspirational, the vagueness of his future tense rhetoric (“At some point it’s going to be important for the American people . . . to be able to shift how we think”; “We as a country will have to reckon with”) suggests both a recognition of the need for a solution to the
Throughout this concluding chapter, I turn to Stuart Schneiderman’s *Saving Face: America and the Politics of Shame*, which focuses on American responses to the Vietnam War, in order to illustrate what happens when a society refuses to express or acknowledge shame for wrongdoing. Schneiderman’s discussion of shame is useful for understanding the ways in which shame began to operate during the Vietnam years. I engage with his arguments to help demonstrate what it was, precisely, about Vietnam that initiated different relations to and with shame in American culture. Schneiderman’s conclusions regarding America’s ever-increasing movement toward moral decay, however, buy into the “death of shame” narrative that I have aimed to deconstruct in previous chapters and, as such, oversimplify America’s current relation to shame. To this end, I bring in John Limon’s argument in “The Shame of Abu Ghraib,” one that proposes a much more complex and realistic model for understanding how shame and shamelessness currently operate in the United States. Indeed, though Limon’s focus is on George W. Bush’s sanctioning of torture in Abu Ghraib and thus does not touch on the Vietnam War years, his analysis complicates Schneiderman’s easy conclusions when he suggests that “America is engaged in the dispensation of shame, which requires at least an intuition of what it means for the United States … to be a shame culture” (546). In this shame culture, Limon argues, shame and shamelessness are not opposites, but part of a sophisticated system of shame problem and a debilitating inability to accept responsibility for seeking it out. This state of paralysis, coupled with the reality that he is making the same speech over and over again (“too many times”; “once again”), ultimately leaves the impression of powerlessness and a sense that we will be listening to the same speech again and again, until the unspecified point in the future when “we” spontaneously and collectively realize that it is time to act. Perhaps this is why Jon Stewart’s impassioned monologue on June 18, 2015 regarding the Charleston shootings—in which his empathetic helplessness leads him to liken the situation to America’s staring repeatedly into a void, aware of what needs to be done, yet permanently unable to act—resonated with so many people around the world. The fact that the president could offer no more tangible movement toward a solution than a late-night television host certainly makes one wonder: who, exactly, is going to make something happen? What if Lincoln had responded to the slavery crisis by saying, “at some point, we will have to think about doing something about this”? Perhaps the most significant difference between the two responses to shame, then, is that one galvanizes and prompts its subjects to action, while the other paralyzes, creating a chronic condition in place of a trauma.
in which a lack of shame does not necessarily indicate its absence but its disavowal (a disavowal that is often key to wielding and maintaining power, especially in the American political sphere). Building on Limon’s argument, I provide some additional possibilities for understanding the complex ways in which shame and shamelessness interact and circulate in contemporary American culture, ultimately suggesting that American culture thrives on shame, which is pervasive precisely because it now circulates as a form of affective currency.

What was it about the Vietnam War that generated such a drastic change in how many Americans felt and responded to shame? For many, Vietnam complicated Americans’ relation to their exceptionality, one of the fundamental tenets of their national identity. As William V. Spanos notes, American exceptionalism “had its origins in the American Puritans’ divinely ordained ‘errand in the wilderness’ to build ‘a City on a Hill,’ as John Winthrop put it in his sermon on board The Arabella in 1620” (66). Having become naturalized as the very essence or truth of American identity, American exceptionalism, argues Spanos, was “rendered problematic during the Vietnam War” (67) because, for the first time, and on a very public stage, the sense of moral righteousness accompanying American military intervention was not supported by a concomitant vanquishment of the enemy. As Spanos writes, “Vietnam ‘ended’ in the defeat of the ‘invincible American war machine’ by an infinitely less powerful Other that … refused to be answerable to its powerful opponent’s ontological, cultural, military, and political rules” (xv). Unable to survey the conquered field and give thanks to God for his righteous and omnipotent guidance, the American politico-military machine, and many of the people whose interests it ostensibly protected, found themselves forsaken in an unfamiliar wilderness.

Moreover, the longer the war dragged on without an American victory, the more cracks appeared in the veneer of exceptionalism; and as the frustrated American military resorted to
increasingly brutal tactics, an obverse motivation gradually bled through and became perceptible to ever-increasing portions of the population. As Spanos argues, “America’s inordinately violent conduct of the war made visible the polyvalent global imperial will to power that, under normal conditions, strategically remains invisible in the … ‘free world’” (14). In terms of the great national allegory, the world’s chosen people were forced to ask themselves not only whether and why God had forsaken them, but whether it had been someone else’s hand altogether leading them into Vietnam.

That America might not only have been wrong to enter Vietnam but also have done so for the wrong reasons sparked a sort of national cognitive dissonance, which deepened as the war dragged on and as it lost any clear sense of purpose or meaning in the national (and international) consciousness. As the gap widened between the nation’s political reality and its idea of itself as a defender of truth and righteousness, America found itself—and many of its citizens—gripped by an unprecedented form of national shame, which would come to a head during the Nixon administration, with the Watergate scandal and the president’s concomitant resignation. Indeed, Nixon soon became—and remains today—a figurehead for American hypocrisy and shame. For though American involvement in Vietnam began under Dwight D. Eisenhower and continued under John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, Nixon, according to Schneiderman, having “inherited an impossible situation” (63) when he was elected in 1968, soon made the war “his own. After prosecuting the war for four years, at the cost of some twenty thousand American lives, he achieved a peace treaty that no one really believed” (70). Moreover, despite being unable to bring the war to a decisive or even satisfactory conclusion, Nixon followed in the footsteps of his predecessors and “not only refused to accept responsibility for the American humiliation in Vietnam; he declared himself to have succeeded” (70 my emphasis).
Indeed, it is precisely this refusal to accept responsibility for what Schneiderman calls “one of the greatest foreign policy failures in American history” (63) which proved to be most shameful for the nation and its citizens. Above and beyond the ambiguity over the war’s origins or meaning and the “humiliating fact” that the American military juggernaut could be bested by what was perceived as “a ragtag bunch of guerrillas and a Third World army” (Schneiderman 68), no one in presidential circles was willing to admit either defeat or error, let alone take personal responsibility for the situation. And thus unable to take comfort in having been wrong and later admitting it, and unable to locate or place blame for the ongoing debacle, the nation found responsibility “shift[ing] from the commanders to the troops and, finally, to the American people” (Schneiderman 70). As Schneiderman argues, “If a failure [of this magnitude] is not someone’s mistake, it reveals a basic flaw about the nation” (17), and as such, the Vietnam War called into question American identity at its most fundamental level.

It is thus unsurprising that Nixon, more than any other before (or after) him, has become integrally associated with a legacy of national shame. Watergate, as the first major political scandal of the modern media age in American politics, not only (and inevitably) became the first point of comparison for any subsequent scandal, but has also come to be seen as the origin of public scandal in America. As Twitchell notes, it “gave birth to a seemingly never-ending series of scandals that are called ‘gates’” (176), the most recent of which being “Deflategate,” a shorthand term for the controversy over allegations that the New England Patriots, an elite NFL team, had been illegally deflating game-day footballs in order to give them an advantage over their opponents. Even if the “gate” suffix often operates as a tongue-in-cheek shorthand for scandals of varying degrees of national significance, its use still suggests the lingering presence of that original shame in the national consciousness, supporting James Twitchell’s contention
that “once shame gets settled on a nation, it can linger for generations” (21). Indeed, providing a brief survey of American history, Limon observes that “in contemporary America everyday Americans seem capable of living normal life in a state of perpetual shame: the shame of Abu Ghraib, the shame of New Orleans, the shame of our racist history, or other less sweetly intentioned shames. Possibly it is the case that being normal in America now means living with perpetual shame” (566).

It is thus quite appropriate that, in addition to a culture of shame, Watergate also seems to have bequeathed unto America what Schneiderman calls “a new class of leaders” (82), whose behaviour, both as political figures and as private citizens, has foregrounded shame in the American consciousness (and in its international representations). Bill Clinton, regardless of his political actions, will forever be associated with the Monica Lewinsky affair, his Nixon-like defiance in insisting that he “did not have relations with that woman,” and his flirtations with impeachment echoing in more contemporary scandals such as Eliot Spitzer’s, Anthony Weiner’s, and Dennis Hastert’s. Vietnam, too, has had its echoes, with George W. Bush providing a baffling and embarrassingly long sequel to his father’s original (and relatively successful) foray into the Gulf, dragging the American people through eight years of violence, ambiguity, and frustration. Bush also became notorious for his sanctioning of torture at Abu Ghraib, subjecting the nation and its citizens to its heaviest international criticism, and its most significant internal discord in relation to political practices, since Vietnam. Indeed, for Limon, Bush is the prime example of the sort of politician birthed by the Nixon era, one whose actions, though publicly opposed by many Americans, nonetheless stand as representative, and as such, produce a deep sense of shame. For though Americans “did not raise President Bush,” Limon argues,
they helped raise him to his current position of prestige and power. He represents them because they raised him in this sense. He not only represents them he reveals them (we are said to get the leaders we deserve), as children may reveal their parents. For such Americans, it may not matter that they did not vote for him, just as parents may be humiliated by a child’s vehemently unendorsed but revelatory behaviour. (551)

Limon’s parental metaphor here nicely illuminates the sense of frustration and impotence felt by a nation whose leader not only makes mistakes, but defiantly refuses to acknowledge them, thereby betraying the trust of the people whose wishes and desires have “raised” him.

But if shame has been a consistent presence in the national psyche since Vietnam and Watergate, rather than something arising temporarily, if traumatically, in response to particular events or phenomena, how has this affected the way people respond to it? What, exactly, does it mean to live with perpetual shame? Is it the same thing as living in perpetual shame? And has living in relation to such “perpetual shame” altered America’s relation to it? Schneiderman argues that one of the most important cultural manifestations of America’s “loss of face” following Vietnam and Watergate “was the production of what was called a counterculture as part of the antiwar protest movement. The counterculture promoted a life of fun with sex and drugs; if the nation had lost its sense of shame, why not enjoy it?” (111). This same complex reflection of political shame is manifest in the personal lives of American citizens in Moody’s The Ice Storm, where public scandals operate as the backdrop against which the characters often seek out or embrace very personal forms of shame. Rather than suffer beneath the national shame, many Americans chose, like Benjamin and Wendy Hood, to embrace it on a personal level—to become, ostensibly, shameless.
But did Americans really lose their sense of shame? Or were they merely, following the example of Nixon and other political leaders, renegotiating their relation to it in order to preserve a sense of pride in spite of the shame (or a sense of pride in shame as an attempt to recuperate/revive their now-tainted American identities)? For Limon, it is the latter: the shamelessness of sex, drugs, and rock’n’roll are simply a personalized reflection of the (shameful) shamelessness manifest in the behaviour of American politicians. In the case of George W. Bush’s sanctioning of torture, for instance, Limon believes “that the torturing is a display of shamelessness … [, that] it is meant to display American shamelessness, the shamelessness, in particular, of powerful Americans” (555). Nixon, Clinton, and Bush, for Limon, are all avatars (of greater or lesser degree) for an America grown so powerful, and so obsessed with its own power, that it can proclaim itself free from the consequences of its own behaviour, and in so proclaiming, make it so. Reflecting upon the American government’s stubborn refusal even today to take responsibility or even admit error in relation to Vietnam, Schneiderman states:

Instead of hearing a shamefaced apology for the conduct of the Vietnam War, we have often heard self-righteously defiant claims for the correctness of the policy. And strangely, those who prosecuted the war declared that they did what they did in order to maintain American prestige. But if they all had such a well-developed sense of shame, why did they not accept the fact that the nation had lost face in the jungles of Southeast Asia? (70)

The political equivalent of the child caught with his hand in the cookie jar, face littered with crumbs, loudly protesting his innocence, Nixon’s bold-faced denial of wrongdoing and willful recasting of shame as success represented precisely the sort of shamelessness-in-shame that
Limon identifies (and which fuels the “death of shame” discourse in contemporary American society). Indeed, having recast what many recognized as America’s loss of face in the jungles of Vietnam as a success—while convincing exactly no one—Nixon played a major part in the rebranding of shame in American culture as we know it today.

At this point of “rebranding,” a crucial question arises: if one is not ashamed of one’s shame or of one’s engagement in/with shame, that is, if one is shameless, if one takes pride in one’s shame, can we still call it shame? The Vietnam War and American people’s responses to it, Watergate, and Nixon’s resignation collectively muddled perceptions of and distinctions between shame and shamelessness, such that people no longer could easily see the difference, a situation which has been exacerbated by the widespread digitization of lives via social media, and by the constant stream of shame in which today’s media saturates us. Indeed, the advent of reality TV and the proliferation of instant shame-celebrities like the Kardashians and others who have ridden the wave of sex tape notoriety to fame, suggest the existence of a new affective economy to rival the “self-improvement” *zeitgeist* of the early-to-mid twentieth century; this one, however, rather than marketing happiness, trades primarily in shame. In this new social economy, shame seems either to disappear the moment it is located or to become something else entirely, a kind of commodity to be bought and sold, consumed and traded, invested in and speculated upon, yet never quite understood.

Crucial to understanding this new economy is the relation between shame and shamelessness which I discussed in Chapter Five, the strange ambiguity of which is nicely encapsulated in Limon’s apt conceptualization of the United States as “a shame society of which shamelessness is a sign” (548). Limon’s pithy summation renders strikingly superficial the semantic tension so deeply imbedded in America’s shame economy: shame is everywhere but
impossible to locate. Limon’s oxymoronic placement of shame’s absence at its signifying core—which is also the displacement of its traditional affective signifiers—also beautifully mirrors, on a semantic level, the cognitive jolt that often accompanies ambiguous or “improper” reactions to shameful events or behaviour. In his analysis of Abu Ghraib, Limon articulates this strange relationship between shame and shamelessness in terms of power, reading the events and discourse surrounding Abu Ghraib as indicative of a system which, “from the (shamefully) shamelessly ruthless at the top to the (shamelessly) shamefully exposed at the bottom, can foster a theory of shame, a theory whose timeliness is that it exposes the particular meaning and current configuration of American shame culture” (556). Limon’s anti-metabolic oxymoron here serves to highlight the inverted social positions of those whose position at the top enables them to exercise their power without consideration for those below them, and those who are simply positioned at the bottom, subject to exposure by those above. The inversion of the terms is thus a syntactic representation of the workings of social power in an economy of shame: shame, in both cases, arises from the actions of the powerful, but is felt only by those who are subject to them.

The use of parentheses, however, (not so) subtly bracketing off shame from its absence, suggests the necessary presence of an arbitrator or judging faculty whose role is to locate shame and assign it where “shamelessness” seems boldly to resist. If, as Limon observes, “shamelessness is itself a sign of shame and inaugurates its circulation” (546), this can only be true for the arbitrating faculty, represented, in this case, by “those American citizens who are shamed by the shamelessness of torture” (546).

22 For a detailed discussion of the troubling effects of unfamiliar affective markers, see Chapter Five.
What Limon’s analysis implicitly points out is that shame can be, and in fact is, simultaneously absent and present in contemporary American culture. As I discussed in my analysis of McQueen’s *Shame* and *12 Years a Slave*, affects are ambiguous concepts because of the interpretive gap that separates the perceiver from the perceived. In this context, “shamelessness” denotes less the complete absence of shame than the failure of individuals to properly (according to the arbitrating faculty) recognize its presence and subject themselves to its authority even as their actions and behaviour conjure it in the eyes and mouths of arbitrating others. In relation to what he sees as the growing discordance between shame and its traditional objects, Limon quotes from Salman Rushdie’s novel *Shame*, asking via Rushdie, “‘Where do you imagine they go?—I mean emotions that should have been felt, but were not—such as regret for a harsh word, guilt for a crime, embarrassment, propriety, shame? … what happens to all that unfelt shame?’ (qtd. in Limon 556). In one sense, the answer seems to be that it does not disappear, but “spills,” as Rushdie suggests, “spreading in a frothy lake across the floor” (*Shame* 125). As it settles on the surface of things (or, as things settle on its surface), it accrues new and various meanings born of the ever-shifting *zeitgeist*. At the same time, when large communities of people, bound together by their shared emotional or affective response to an event or phenomenon, sense their worldview being threatened by that feeling’s failure to stick—to use Ahmed’s term—to its traditional objects, a need for responsibility for *that* failure often arises. After Watergate, for instance, when Nixon was perceived by the majority of Americans as shameless, the president of America positioned himself outside the ethical limits of the popular idea of America. When America’s leader failed to properly represent the nation’s moral sense, the shame he *should* have felt descended upon the American population. Instead of allowing shame to debilitate them, however, Americans began to mobilize it; and it was precisely the
tension between shame and shamelessness, and the struggle for meaning in their gap, that made America a “shame” culture. Moreover, shame’s elusiveness, or the difficulty of consistently locating it or of assigning it meaning, soon made of shame a particularly attractive form of social, cultural, and economic currency, or at least an increasingly topical object of production, consumption, and exchange.

Indeed, the more shame began to circulate, the more affective value it began to accumulate. Ahmed has written at length about the ways in which “emotions work as a form of capital” (“Affective Economies” 120); borrowing “from the Marxian critique of the logic of capital,” she relates

\[ M - C - M \]

how the movement of commodities and money, in the formula \( M-C-M \) (money to commodity to money), creates surplus value. That is, through circulation and exchange \( M \) acquires more value. Or as [Marx] puts it, ‘The value originally advanced, therefore, not only remains intact while in circulation, but increases its magnitude, adds to itself a surplus-value or is valorised. And this movement converts it into capital.’ (120)

For Ahmed, some signs “increase in affective value as an effect of the movement between signs: the more they circulate, the more affective they become, and the more they appear to ‘contain’ affect” (120). Thus, the more the “sign” of shame (which, as Limon points out, is today often shamelessness) circulates, the more it appears to “contain” shame—and the more affective capital it generates (conceptualized, if not exactly quantified, by measuring attention, via “likes,” shares, “retweets,” increased viewership, and so on, all of which can themselves be converted into actual capital). In an analysis of the economy of hate, for instance, Ahmed argues that “The impossibility of reducing hate to a particular body allows hate to circulate in an economic
In other words, the fact that hate does not reside within particular objects and bodies, but arises in the perceptual gap between objects, bodies, and events, is what allows it the freedom to circulate, forming communities of people bonded by their shared experience of—and investment in—hate in response to particular events. As a result, vast markets exist within which hate can be traded in and upon, and as it circulates between individuals, objects, and events, it increases in affective potency, and thus in market value. I argue that the same is true for shame: the impossibility of reducing the shame of Vietnam, of Watergate, to one particular body, one particular figure, one particular person responsible, or even to Vietnam itself, allows shame to circulate in the same way; and the stubborn industry of shamelessness and its signs, rather than signalling the “death” of shame, instead becomes the guarantee of its market and of its circulatory strength.

Today’s America sees shame at the pinnacle of its value as commodity and currency. And though the struggle over shame and its relation to its traditional objects is nothing very new (since shame, after all, is the feeling most associated with the policing of social boundaries), what seems different today is a particular intensification of concern with shame itself, and more particularly with its signification, the traumatic collision between shame and a very visible, very powerful shamelessness born somewhere along the Vietnam-Nixon-Watergate timeline replicating itself in image, on TV and on the internet, indiscriminately, from the very highest to the very lowest levels of the social order. Whether or not people are engaging in more traditionally shameful behaviours, it is simply easier to “get caught”—particularly when, by getting caught, by being “outed” engaging in/with shame, one often ensures a form of attention or connection whose effects (social, psychological, economic) are far different from more traditionally punitive understandings of shame.
In a very real way, Marshall McLuhan’s conception of a “global village” is coming to fruition: the internet and, particularly, social media creating a “global gaze” which has had the effect of magnifying the consequences and feelings of shame, uniting diverse bodies of individuals within communal practices of “shaming,” while simultaneously dulling shame’s force and complicating its relationship to classic narratives of transgression, confession, and redemption. Thus, even as shame’s value has never been higher, its meaning—perhaps correlatively—is more ambiguous than ever. Many of our lives have become mediatised to such an extent that, acutely aware of a watching Other, and of the threatening imminence of our own outing-in-shame, we have perhaps adapted accordingly: we either carefully select what we allow others to see (and others are always seeing, so we must self-police all of the time), or we live in defiance of what others believe to be shameful, creating or maintaining our own definitions of shame.

It is, of course, this latter phenomenon which presents the most evident threat to traditional understandings of shame. For Schneiderman, such an attitude can be traced back to the era of Vietnam and Watergate, where American citizens, confronted with the shameful shamelessness (to steal Limon’s phrase) of their government, decided, via what he calls the American Cultural Revolution, that “losing face was not such a bad thing” (194). Schneiderman recalls Christopher Lasch’s argument that this period of rebelliousness and widespread embracing of individual freedoms was the genesis of a “culture of narcissism” evidenced by ostensibly “shameless” indulgence in “the un-holy trinity of sex, drugs, and rock’n’roll, in revolutionary yearnings for a new social order, in reactionary attacks on the excesses of the

\[23\] See McLuhan’s *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* (1964) for his detailed explanation of this term.
young, and finally in the dislocations caused by a transformation of the American work force from well-ordered hierarchies into self-serving disorder” (99). One can easily recognize, in the quick slip from hedonistic indulgences to the complete collapse of social democracy in Schneiderman’s summary of Lasch’s short concatenation of post-1960s American history, the outraged anxiety underlying the “death of shame” discourse. But Lasch’s use of the term “narcissism” calls to mind my own questions, in Chapter Three, about Bob Flanagan’s narcissistic relation to shame. As I argued in that chapter, narcissism does not preclude the experience of shame; however, Flanagan’s relation to shame was radically different than what is traditionally envisioned or understood when talking about shame. Rather than chastening Flanagan and regulating his behaviour, shame served as a means of fostering connection and intimacy for a subject in an estranged relation from the social order, to the point where he sought out shame as the constituting force of his own “strange” subjectivity. Indeed, all of my chapters lead, inevitably, to the question of different forms, or faces, of shame: if shame no longer chastens and regulates, can it still be meaningfully be called shame?

In many ways, it is precisely this question which drives the market for shame. Much of the discourse surrounding shame (and thus much of its value as a commodity and currency) derives from responses to its failure to stick to its traditional objects and markers, and some of the most powerful forms of its deployment have come in instances where large communities of people come together to ensure that shame sticks where it “should,” often with devastating consequences for the individual or object at the focal point of the attention. Lindsey Stone, for instance, lost her job after being internet-shamed for posting a picture on Facebook in which she is flipping the bird and shouting in front of a sign at the national cemetery in Arlington calling...
for “Respect and Silence”; this is just one among the many stories of people whose lives have been devastated by tens or hundreds of thousands of strangers whose collective investment in “proper” behaviour has rallied them around instances of “shamelessness” in need of addressing. At the same time, critical movements have arisen in response to the potential violence of particular forms of shaming (“slut-shaming” and “fat-shaming” being two of the most visible targets), and have themselves generated plenty of investment in the marketplace. And the speed with which such communities (or markets) can form via social media is what separates today’s America from Nixon’s, or even Clinton’s.

At the same time, the new media have also made alternate forms and experiences of shame more visible (and accessible) to the public, and have created greater opportunity for a public discourse about the positive potential of shame which I spent the majority of this project analyzing. In Chapter Two, I discussed the ways in which the Hoods, in Moody’s *The Ice Storm*,

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24 For more details on the event and its consequences for Stone, see Joshua Barrie’s article for *Business Insider*, “This woman’s life was destroyed after she posted one dumb photo on Facebook.”

25 Such instances seem to distinctly echo the humiliation-rituals of the New England Puritans. However, in *So You’ve Been Publicly Shamed*, Jon Ronson notes that early documents of these rituals reveal that they were highly structured processes rather than the kind of “free-for-all” evident in contemporary U.S. society (53). Ronson relates how, in the 1800s, particular punishments were assigned for particular crimes. For example, if an individual is “found guilty of ‘lying or publishing false news’” he or she “would have been ‘fined, placed in the stocks for a period not exceeding four hours, or publicly whipped with not more than forty stripes’” (53). Ronson writes that “The common assumption is that public punishments died out in the new great metropolises because they’d been judged useless” (54); he finds, however, that public punishments “didn’t fizzle out because they were ineffective. They were stopped because they were far too brutal” (54). Despite such concerns over brutality, contemporary shaming practices, though seemingly less (physically) brutal, often seem more brutal given their focus on symbolic shame and its often more devastating (and global) consequences. Why, as Donald Nathanson asks in *Shame and Pride*, do we still insist on doing such things to people (464)? Though the answer to this question probably has much to do with the development of internet technologies and the anonymity afforded to shamers in contemporary society, it also has much to do with the fact that, historically, as Nathanson argued in 1992, “nearly everybody needs an inferior” (464). Nathanson suggests, however, that we are now seeing something of a shift with regards to who is considered “inferior:” for instance, speaking of the (at the time, recent) phenomenon of “‘politically correct’ belief,” he notes that anyone “who dares suggest that the old values have intrinsic validity is accused of unconscious or inherent bigotry” (467); as such, the “very movement that seeks to redress the wrongs done to minority groups through a century or more of chronic humiliation now uses the tactics and techniques of the oppressors it disavows” (467). Thus, while contemporary public humiliations often give voice to the previously voiceless, the shamefully shameless in Limon’s formulation, they also simultaneously perpetuate patterns of oppression by rendering such individuals the shamelessly shameful.
use shame as a means of forming a connection with a world from which they have become affectively alienated. The self-shattering which many of the characters invite upon themselves by engaging in acts that produce shame allows them to reinvent themselves and/or reposition themselves in a more intimate relation to the social body. Similarly, in Chapter Three, I argued that shame is central to Bob Flanagan’s sadomasochism and embodied masochism because it enables him to move beyond the limits of his over-affected interiority and thereby to form erotic (and thus intimate) connections to himself and to social others. In Chapter Four, I showed how The Biggest Loser’s contestants willingly submit themselves to more traditional experiences of shame in order to reintegrate themselves into the social body. Further, I demonstrated that the show’s viewers actively participate in the process of shaming, and in so doing, strengthen their ties to the social body via a shared, safe and socially-sanctioned schadenfreude. The show’s participants and viewers engage with shame as a means of strengthening traditional social norms and their positions in relation to them. Finally, in Chapter Five, I showed how McQueen’s Brandon engages in traditionally “shameful” acts in order to stabilize his subject-position in a world which, outside of these acts, offers him no feeling of connection. At the same time, I suggested that Shame and 12 Years a Slave highlight the unreliability of affective interpretation by foregrounding the perceptive gap that exists between self, other, and image. In so doing, I argued that McQueen’s Shame offers a critique of the affective industry, showcasing both the difficulty of locating affect in, or on, an object or person, while 12 Years calls attention to the violence lurking in such acts of affective assignation.

Collectively, my chapters showcase individuals who are somehow cut off from others, and whose engagement with/in shame serves as a means of fostering (re)connection to themselves and/or to social others. In some way, then, each of these individuals serves as a
microcosm for a world of inhibited social connections; and as McQueen’s films suggest, the more images or devices of mediation that come between ourselves and social others, the more significant the gap between self and other. The reality of our contemporary era, with the popularity of social media and the internet, is that our relationships with/to others have changed drastically; with the widespread mediatisation of people’s lives and the layers of images which now mediate our relationships, pictures now stand in for the faces and bodies of others, digitized moments stand as flat symbols of layered and complex lives, and “tweets” and “likes” often replace more sustained forms of intimacy. If, as I—among many others—have argued, shame is the most social of affects, often necessitating a relationship with/to others (imagined or real), it makes sense that relations to shame would change if our relationships with/to others have changed. If we are becoming more and more disconnected from others even as we become more superficially connected, and if, as I have argued, shame reminds us (in the very moment of its disconnecting) of how very connected we are (or were!), it makes sense that individuals—like the Hoods, like Flanagan, like the contestants on The Biggest Loser, like Brandon, and like the millions of Kardashians-in-waiting—would begin to seek out shame. Today, even as psychoanalysts like Schneiderman argue that “No one embraces shame willingly” (28), one can see evidence everywhere of just the opposite.

Indeed, more than ever before, America and its cultural kin are witness to the widespread manufacturing of shame, in both its traditional and less traditional forms. From reality TV to the burgeoning industry of parodic shaming (dog shaming and grad student shaming, for example) to (sometimes deadly) serious manifestations of internet shaming, people are being inundated with shame. Perhaps it is the case that, as Kavka suggests, people today are “faced with the loss of authentic affect due to its mediatisation” (Reality Television 5-6), and thus, disaffected (or
differently affected), are driven to create the conditions under which they might feel the things they used to feel, or “should” be feeling. Perhaps, too, it has simply become so difficult to be heard through the digital noise that people have turned to shame as that affective currency still most likely to draw, and hopefully hold, attention, if only to guarantee that they will be recognized, if only for an instant, as an individual existing in relation to the social body. Or perhaps, as many of the “death-of-shame” proponents have suggested, the digital documenting of our widespread (if generally mundane) depravity and our consenting to it as a condition of entry into the world of new media simply showcase the fact that we are now mostly shameless; in this case, the pervasiveness of shame and our continual performances of it (or our desire to see it performed or captured) might indicate a kind of recognition that shame is what we should be feeling but are not. Each act of shaming thus becomes a projective act, a self-shaming which, in obliterating even the fantasy of our recognition of otherness in images, reflects the breathtaking depths of our own narcissism.

For if we are continually experiencing mediated realities, our contact with others is similarly being mediated, perhaps dulled, such that the gaze of others (the simultaneous condition and guarantee of shame) is not as effective, not as frightening, because all these words on the screen, all these images, can be collapsed within the larger narratives of self which each of us are weaving. Of course, the opposite is just as likely: the very real (and relatively uncontrollable) possibility that we might be judged or shamed on our public profiles could force us to face the possibility of our lack of control over our own narratives and our unstable positions within them, rendering us simply another image as unreal to ourselves as all the others, continually in danger of being “outed” by a single moment and rendered, flat and ugly, as
something we are (or were) not. And maybe the secret of our desire for shame is that we so casually, so willingly, allowed it to happen.

Or perhaps none of this is true. More likely, all of it is, to some degree, for most. Though I could not possibly say for sure, what has become clear, over the course of this project, is this: as images have become America’s primary form of engagement with the world (what began with photos and cinema, continued with the advent of television, and erupted with the internet and social media), shame has become its primary mode of affective engagement. At the same time, there has been a visible shift in the way many individuals experience—and respond to—shame, even as its more traditional forms remain, often galvanizing around specific objects or individuals who serve as unfortunate synecdoches for the moral depravity of the world at large. Scandals disappear as quickly as they are outed, shock and indignation turn to indifference in an instant, and shame sometimes leaves power, wealth, dignity, even happiness in its wake. I do not believe the correlation between the development of image-producing media and the rise of shame culture in America is a coincidence. What I can suggest, however, given my analyses over the course of this project, is that, for those who are disaffected, alienated, or disconnected from the world, and who are suffering because of it, shame might offer more than we might, at first, assume. For people like the characters and personalities I analyze here, seeking certain forms of shame might offer individuals productive and transformative opportunities, fostering the kinds of reinvention, connection, and intimacy that make possible a loving relation with/to self and other.
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