TRAUMATIC SHAME

TONI MORRISON, TELEVISUAL CULTURE, AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF THE EMOTIONS

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One Saturday afternoon after my five-year-old daughter and I had walked home from the drugstore and I was hanging up her fall jacket, I found an unexpected Tootsie Roll in one of the pockets. Where did that come from? I wondered silently, then instantly understood. Of course. She had lifted it from the store.

After a stern but short period of interrogation, she admitted that in truth she hadn't found the candy on the street as she had at first vociferously maintained. For my part I insisted that she return the candy along with an apology and marched her back to the store in the hope that the pharmacist would be appropriately judicial—grave about her infraction but ultimately understanding, dispensing forgiveness at the end of a brief lecture in addition to the caution that she should never do it again. (My daughter was hysterical at the prospect of returning to the scene of her crime, for she was convinced that it was, indeed, a crime, terrified that she would be put in jail, a fear that she nonetheless must have mastered since this was not to be the last time that year that this scenario was repeated, albeit in different locations.) I thought the return trip to the drugstore was a good strategy. She would have to face the person she had wronged and make restitution, and someone else in addition to myself would have the responsibility for reading her the law. What parental wisdom did I summon up in my confrontation with her when the moment of confession arrived? "Shame on you," I said, underlining the word "shame." Although I don't remember exactly, I probably pointed my finger at her as I pronounced this sentence, so acutely was I feeling myself to be playing a predestined part in an age-old morality play.

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I tell this little story because for me it points to a pervasive, indeed dominant cultural attitude about shame—in particular in terms of its relation to guilt. Shame and guilt are almost invariably paired together and differentiated each from the other. We have been taught by anthropologists that there are shame cultures (Japan is given as the prime example) and guilt cultures, of which we are told that we are one. Moreover, in the West, shame and guilt are linked in a chronological order. Notice that I did not say, "You should feel guilty"; five years old is considered far too young for such a weighty emotion. As our cultural narratives about shame and guilt insist, shame should yield to guilt in the course of moral development—both on the level of cultural history and on the level of the individual. In terms of the extended arc of Western civilization, for example, the Greeks of Homeric culture have long been viewed as motivated by the need to preserve honor and to avoid the public disgrace of shame, not by the presumably more mature objective to adjudicate internalized convictions of right and wrong that, it is argued, developed later, along with notions of personal responsibility and agency. Analogously, Freud theorized that guilt is based on the internalization of values as opposed to shame, which is based on external disapproval or reproval by others and is experienced earlier. All in all, Freud did not contribute much to the analysis of shame, and guilt, I argue elsewhere, is his preferred emotion theoretically.[1] Thus of the two emotions, shame is regarded as the more "primitive" or "infantile" emotion, one that in the normal course of things should be eclipsed by the more complex emotion of guilt. As the less "mature" emotion, shame has implicitly been understood to be less worthy of study and has consequently received scant attention in the academy, at least here in the United States.

In recent years, however, there has been an explosion of interest in the emotion of shame across a wide variety of disciplines in what I take to be a general effort to reassess the uses of shame.[2] In the process shame is being decoupled from guilt and put to all kinds of cultural uses. In this essay I too focus on shame and leave guilt behind. I am interested in the cultural politics of shame, especially in the way in which shame is being circulated in literary culture and in mass culture. In what follows I consider Toni Morrison's superb novel *The Bluest Eye*, published in 1970, as a text from which we can

learn much about this process. If shame cannot be said to have a cognitive dimension for the black characters in the novel who suffer trauma for a multitude of reasons, shame, I argue, can move Morrison's white readers to an understanding of racism and thus to insight that is ultimately moral; a cultural poetics is at work as well as a cultural politics of the emotions.

I conclude with some brief observations about the mass-mediation of shame that today seems virtually to saturate everyday life in the United States, circulating vertiginously everywhere. Mass-mediated shame takes, of course, many forms. One of the most ubiquitous is the performance of shame on the stage of celebrity culture; indeed celebrity itself is automatically if most often fleetingly conferred simply by having one's image circulated on television. In the process shame is converted into a peculiar form of pride, one that is antithetical to an ethical pride in one's ideals. People who have done something for which they should be ashamed are used by the various enterprises of mass culture—press tabloids, television talk shows—to feed an insatiable appetite for news; they are publicly shamed. In turn, some of these people use mass culture itself (or try to) to reestablish themselves in the eyes of a mass public; it is as if simply appearing on television talk shows, for example, offers a magical form of rehabilitation. The mass media (live television being the prime example) also perform their own acts of shaming that can take unsuspecting people by surprise, resulting in trauma from which they cannot escape. One of the prime tactics of trash TV and hate TV is the ambush, the entrapment of people in shameful situations that masquerade as entertainment. The traumatic shaming of innocent individuals can also be the effect of broadcast and print news, as is so clearly demonstrated by the case of Richard Jewell, the man who was mistakenly turned overnight from a hero into a suspect in the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games bombing. In such cases, as we will see, Morrison's understanding of racial shame is illuminating.

But here I must add a cautionary note. I do not want to be understood as extolling the virtues of literature and lamenting the superficialities of mass culture. My examples are meant to be illustrative and thought provoking, not paradigmatic or representative. My point is that shame needs to be understood as a social emotion, one that is not only interiorized psychologically but also circulates widely in contemporary culture. My point is that shame persists beyond childhood and that there are many models of shame.[3]

To underscore this I first turn to two classic texts from the history of twentieth-century thought that present us with completely different scenarios of shame—Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* and Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. One of my central concerns is how they envision the relationship between emotion and knowledge, or what I call the cognitive edge of the emotions. In effect I trace a genealogy of models of shame. I do not mean to imply that the second model supersedes the first, although it is the case that Woolf's model serves as a critique of Sartre's (and thus I begin with Sartre, whose *Being and Nothingness* was published long after *A Room of One's Own*). On the contrary, my point is that the relationship between shame and knowledge varies radically according to context, with age being an important factor along with race, gender, and sexual orientation. Thus, as we will see, neither Sartre's model nor Woolf's model "work" in the world of Morrison's *Bluest Eye*. My ultimate focus is on traumatic shame, on shame that cannot be transformed into knowledge.

In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre elaborates a theoretical model of how we are made conscious of ourselves, and in particular of our acts, so that ultimately we can judge them and thus ourselves on the historical stage. It is through the mental act of assuming the position of an Other who is contemplating us, Sartre concludes, that we are struck into consciousness of ourselves in time and space. Importantly, central to the hypothetical scenario Sartre offers to illustrate this process is the emotion of shame. "Let us imagine," Sartre writes, "that moved by jealousy, curiosity, or vice I have just glued my ear to the door and looked through a keyhole" (259). It is only when this person realizes that he himself is being watched that he is struck into consciousness, which is to say, into shame. "Somebody was there and has seen me. Suddenly I realize the vulgarity of my gesture, and I am ashamed" (221).

Several points are salient here. First, as feminist philosophers have taught us, the "I" in Sartre's account is implicitly gendered male and is understood to be a moral agent, indeed, the subject of the discourse of moral philosophy itself. For the existentialist Sartre, this is

a philosophy that places a great stress on freedom of choice and on the responsibility of the individual for his actions, or on what today some would call moral agency, if not autonomy. Second, Sartre's model is dramaturgical. There is a clearly defined structure and plot to the etiology of shame. It arises suddenly, theatrically, as if it were a flammable material, a flash point inherent in the implicit doubled-over structure of the unseen spectator. It is as if at the moment when the secretive spectator knows himself to be seen by yet a third person, that shame bursts spontaneously into combustion. Third, Sartre suggests that the "I" has indeed done wrong and is right to feel shame; that is, that shame in this case is an appropriate emotion, a self-evaluating, ethical emotion. Notice, for instance, that Sartre is careful to say that this "I" is motivated to peek through the keyhole by "jealousy, curiosity, or vice," scarcely noble intentions (259). The "I" is sneaking a peek, as it were, undertaking illegal surveillance.

Sartre is primarily concerned in this long chapter in *Being and Nothingness* with what it means to be struck into being philosophically, to achieve what he refers to as a "transcendental" point of view to which he can "refer his acts so as to qualify them," that is to say, to judge them (259). But importantly for my purposes, his model also contains a theory of shame as a highly dramatized emotion that accords one an intensely embodied sense of being. The "I" feels "vulnerable," the "I" "has a body which can be hurt" (259). This sense of embodiment is the ground for the achievement of the transcendental perspective necessary for judging one's actions. Ultimately, however, for Sartre the emotion of shame is not of essential interest. Indeed emotion itself is not of essential interest. His mode is that of philosophical reason, one that, in the end, reinforces the divide between the abstract and the emotional in Western philosophy, a divide deplored by Barbara Christian in her influential essay "The Race for Theory."

A strikingly different model of shame and its relation to knowledge is presented to us in Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. My focus is on the brilliant passage in which we find the writer conducting research for her invited lecture on women and fiction in the large reading room of the British Museum. Daunted by the sheer amount written on women by men and confused by the contradictory nature of their content—"It was distressing, it was bewildering, it was

humiliating" (38–39)—she responds, unconsciously at first, to one particular book entitled *The Mental, Moral, and Physical Inferiority of Women* by a Professor von X. While waiting idly for other books to be brought to her desk, she doodles absently in her notebook, drawing in anger. And what is she drawing? She realizes with a start that she is drawing *his* angry face, which she then defaces with pleasure:

> Anger had snatched my pencil while I dreamt. But what was anger doing there? Interest, confusion, amusement, boredom—all these emotions I could trace and name as they succeeded each other throughout the morning. Had anger, the black snake, been lurking among them? Yes, said the sketch, anger had. It referred me unmistakably to the one book, to the one phrase, which had roused the demon; it was the professor's statement about the mental, moral and physical inferiority of women. My heart had leapt. My cheeks had burnt. I had flushed with anger. There was nothing specially remarkable, however foolish, in that. One does not like to be told that one is naturally the inferior of a little man. (41)

This fictional scene explicitly identifies the emotion of anger as central to its hypothetical drama. But I want to suggest that critical to it as well is the unnamed emotion of shame. The words of the pompous professor are insulting. They serve to pronounce their reader's exorbitant inferiority in every conceivable respect. They shame her as a *woman*, a shame that is keenly felt. "My heart had leapt. My cheeks had burnt." Shame, I suggest, is first. It is rapidly succeeded by anger.

In Woolf's account the etiology of anger is shame. Anger is the boiling point of shame. Her analysis of anger, and by implication her analysis of shame, leads to knowledge.[4] It is crucial that both shame and anger be expressed and acknowledged. Anger serves the function of appropriate self-defense and of retaliation—in this case, imaginative. Anger is burned away in the process, leaving the possibility of the power of reflection in its wake. As Woolf marvelously puts it, describing her counterattack, she "began drawing cart-wheels and circles over the angry professor's face til he looked like a burning bush or a flaming comet—anyhow, an apparition without human semblance or significance. The professor was nothing now but a faggot burning on the top of Hampstead Heath" (41). Once these heated emotions subside, she reflects on them. She does not have "a surplus of anger," in Elizabeth Abel's phrase (*Woolf* 86). She uses these

emotions as touchstones to probe their causes, and she arrives at an analysis of the unequal relations of power in patriarchy. "Soon my anger was explained and done with; but curiosity remained. How explain the anger of the professors?" Woolf's anger, like Sartre's shame, is a self-regarding emotion. Importantly, it is an other-regarding emotion as well.

As opposed to Sartre's male "I" peering through a keyhole, here we have shame gendered female, shame ascribed to others by those in power—men—not on the basis of what one *does*, but rather on the basis of what one *is*. Thus she quotes Trevelyan who in his *History of England* writes that wife beating "was a recognized right of man, and was practiced without shame by high as well as low" (54), and she notes the headline in the daily paper heralding the pronouncements of a divorce court judge on the "Shamelessness of Women"(43). Woolf astutely concludes that in the emotional economy of patriarchy men are not expected to feel shame when they do something for which they should feel ashamed—beating a wife is her clear example—while women are unfairly denounced as "shameless" for behavior that is routinely accepted in men. There is, she understands, a double standard when it comes to shame.

Thus in Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* shame is not presented as an ethical emotion in the way in which it is in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. There it is clearly suggested that the male "I" had indeed done something for which he rightly should feel shame. Here, on the other hand, it is the acknowledgment and analysis of shame and anger that lead to an evaluation of the larger system of the relations of power in which women are enmeshed. Shame is brought to consciousness through the medium of anger; the treatment of women, which results in the feeling of shame, is understood to be unjust. Woolf concludes that the attribution of inferiority to women, which is by imputation a condition of shame, serves to maintain male superiority. In this manner Woolf prefigures contemporary work by feminist philosophers who insist on the cognitive dimension of the emotions. A prime example is Alison Jaggar's seminal essay "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology" in which she argues that the emotions in general have an important epistemological dimension (the two emotions she discusses are love and anger); she also argues that the emotions of those who are in a position of oppression

should be accorded special privilege epistemologically, an instance of which is wonderfully dramatized in Woolf's narrative.

In addition, I want to call attention to the fact that, in *A Room of One's Own*, shame is not considered in terms of its relation to guilt, but in terms of its relation to anger. At stake is a cultural politics of the emotions. Shame is infantilizing, but ultimately it is not an infantile emotion. Further, I want to underscore that the emotional sequencing of shame and anger is crucial here: anger follows shame. It corresponds to what Thomas Scheff and Suzanne Retzinger elaborate in *Emotions and Violence* where they argue that shame is the "master emotion" (ix). Drawing on a wide range of work on shame ranging from philosophy and psychoanalysis to history and sociology, they show that unacknowledged shame leads to anger and often rage. They insist that if shame is not appropriately understood and acknowledged, it results in aggression. By understanding the consequences of the escalation of shame and anger into violence, their important goal is to develop "an objective theory of violence without sacrificing a sense of agency" (xvii–iii). Scheff and Retzinger, however, stress the negative consequences of the emotional sequence of shame and anger on the interpersonal or international level, whereas in *A Room of One's Own* anger is appropriately self-righteous.

As I turn to Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, it will be important to keep in mind the question of moral agency. For in the novel the spectatorial model of shame that we find in Sartre does not result in a transcendental point of view from which the characters can judge their acts freely. Nor, as in the self-reflexive model of shame and anger narrated in Woolf, does the experience of shame and anger ultimately yield the characters of *The Bluest Eye* an understanding of their position in society in terms of power. Instead, shame leads either to lacerating violence or to debilitating depression. Instead, shame swells to fill the space of the steel mill town in which the main action of the novel takes place in the autumn of 1941, spreading its fatal stain everywhere and suffocating its residents. Unlike my daughter's fleeting shame, in *The Bluest Eye* shame takes on the intense form of racial humiliation or the numbing form of pervasive daily racism, resulting either in trauma or chronic discrimination, neither of which can be overcome.

Morrison tells us the story of a black community rent by multiple experiences of shame, some of them volatile, some deadening, some sobering. Not only are the sites of potential shame seemingly everywhere, shame is also passed on from one generation to the next. Central to the novel is the story of the eleven-year-old Pecola who is raped by her father and bears his child. The baby is sickly and dies shortly after its premature birth. Pecola sinks into madness, touched by the deluded notion that she has magically been granted her wish to have blue eyes and that she is now exquisitely beautiful in the eyes of white America. A living reminder of the shameful failure of her community to protect her, she grows older as the years pass by. But she will never grow up. She has been irreparably stunted. We are given to understand that she will live out her life wandering on the edge of town until she dies, a pariah sifting through garbage.

The nine-year-old Claudia serves Morrison as a narrator of the story, as a baffled but sensitive witness to Pecola's drama. This is a brilliant choice on Morrison's part because Claudia (along with her ten-year-old sister Frieda) is simply too young to understand why all this is happening. She is, however, acutely aware of the emotional currents into which they are all cast. As Morrison puts it, speaking through Claudia, "the edge, the curl, the thrust, of their emotions is always clear to Frieda and me. We do not, cannot, know the meanings of all their words for we are nine and ten years old" (16). The point is that the girls are attuned to the moods and emotions that envelope them, but because of their young age they do not understand the "meanings" of shame. The same holds true for Pecola's mother and father, both of whom, as Morrison makes clear in the course of the narrative, also experienced a defining shame as children.

At the very beginning of the novel we are told that Pecola was raped by her father and thus, as readers, we are primed to hold little sympathy for him. Yet Morrison astutely backs into the generational history of this family, telling us some two-thirds of the way through the novel things crucial to our understanding of what is a narrative of inherited and paralyzing shame in this black family born into racist America. We come to know her father as a child, and as a child he is immensely appealing. We come to understand how he could have done this to his daughter, tearing apart his family. Especially significant is a searing event in her father's early adolescence, a scene of shame so brutal that it assumes the proportions of humiliation and marks him for life. That it is linked by Morrison with an altogether daily occurrence of shame that has nothing to do with racism serves to underscore the overwhelmingly different effects of different kinds of shame. The two events are telescoped into a single and intensely emotionally charged day. Importantly it is the day of the funeral of his aged great aunt, the woman who had raised him from birth (Cholly's mother had abandoned him). Cholly couldn't have been more than thirteen years old.

The first event will be familiar to all of us. It is momentary and harmless, what I would call a passing adolescent shame. It is somewhat similar to the shame experienced by my young daughter, although it does not have to do with right and wrong, but rather with competence. It is shame that from the vantage point of adulthood would perhaps be described as an embarrassment, recounted when one is older with sympathetic humor for oneself. In contrast, the second scene of shame changes Cholly forever; it is an experience from whose humiliating shadow he never escapes and never fully understands. Both serve as rites of passage—the first into adolescent male bonding and what today we call peer pressure, the second into sexuality and racial violence in America.

After the funeral service is over, Cholly, whom Morrison has presented to us as a sensitive child drawn to music and the protective company of adults, finds himself attracted to the unfamiliar world of his older cousins—in particular to a boy named Jake who initiates him into the teenage world of smoking:

> The fifteen-year-old Jake offered Cholly a rolled-up cigarette. Cholly took it, but when he held the cigarette at arm's length and stuck the tip of it into the match flame, instead of putting it in his mouth and drawing on it, they laughed at him. Shamefaced, he threw the cigarette down. (114)

Here, shame does not have to do with the moral register of right or wrong or with one's essential inferiority in relation to a standard unfairly imposed, but rather with a lack of a certain ability or knowledge that is exposed in the presence of one's social superiors. In relation to Cholly these boys are older, more worldly. This is a minor shame, a momentarily painful embarrassment. Understandably,

Cholly seeks immediately to recover his social balance, to reassert himself as an equal in their eyes. That here he does so easily is significant given what comes next. When Jake asks Cholly "if he knew any girls," the inexperienced Cholly replies, "Sure" (114). But he is in truth scared when the girls do respond to him.

Within a page of the narration of this incident, we find young Cholly with a girl named Darlene in a beckoning vineyard of wild grapes on the edge of a pine forest. Night has fallen, and the moon has risen. It is Darlene who encourages their sexual intimacy and guides his body toward hers. At first, Cholly takes their roughhousing for child's play. He is consistently presented as holding feelings for Darlene that are considerate and tender. Morrison, in other words, makes it absolutely clear that her character Cholly is the kind of boy who would not do anything against Darlene's wishes or do anything to harm her. The scene, narrated from his point of view, is sweetly awkward, and then turns brutal:

> Their bodies began to make sense to him, and it was not as difficult as he had thought it would be. . . . Just as he felt an explosion threaten, Darlene froze and cried out. He thought he had hurt her, but when he looked at her face, she was staring wildly at something over his shoulder. He jerked around.
>
> There stood two white men. One with a spirit lamp, the other with a flashlight. (116)

Structurally this scene is similar to the scenario of shame offered by Sartre. It is dramaturgical. The "I" is surprised into shame, caught in the act by another person who pronounces, as it were, a verdict. The economy is visual, underscored by the flashlight that is pointed by the white men at their will. There is also a doubled-over scene of spectatorship: two men watch him looking at her. But with this the similarities end.

Although Cholly was not doing anything wrong, he nevertheless does not challenge their authority in any way, either physically or in his mind's eye, as Woolf's retaliating woman writer in the British Museum is able to do. As a young boy, he is "helpless." More precisely, as a young black boy held at gun's point by white men he is defenseless in every respect. He cannot embody the moral agent of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. He does not reassert himself as the

equal of these men, as he was able to do earlier in the day when he felt ashamed before the older and more experienced boys. Worse, he turns the obscene violence of these men not back against them in self-defense and retaliation, but against Darlene. The white men brutally force Cholly to continue—and he does. He is compelled to see her through their voyeuristic eyes. In his eyes, she is now reduced to a sexual object, degraded to a body to be raped—even less, to a body to be feared, to a body that is no longer female and alluring, but abjectly animal. As is he. About Darlene we learn little. She is not central to Morrison's story. But as with Cholly at first, her instinctive reaction is to hide her eyes as a way of shielding herself from the shaming eyes of others. It is as if she cannot see anything, then perhaps she herself cannot be seen:

> There was no place for Cholly's eyes to go. They slid about furtively searching for shelter, while his body remained paralyzed. The flashlight man lifted his gun down from his shoulder, and Cholly heard the clop of metal. He dropped back to his knees. Darlene had her head averted, her eyes staring out of the lamplight into the surrounding darkness and looking almost unconcerned, as though they had no part in the drama taking place around them. With a violence born of total helplessness, he pulled her dress up, lowered his trousers and underwear. . . .
>
> Cholly, moving faster, looked at Darlene. He hated her. He almost wished he could do it—hard, long, and painfully, he hated her so much. The flashlight wormed its way into his guts and turned the sweet taste of muscadine into rotten fetid bile. He stared at Darlene's hands, covering her face in the moon and lamplight. They looked like baby claws. (117)

In this scene the sequencing of emotions is not shame-guilt but shame-anger or shame-rage, the chain of emotions identified by Scheff and Retzinger as the primary emotional chain constitutive of violence. If in Woolf shame leads ultimately to an analysis of the reasons underlying anger, in Morrison shame spirals into a cold hatred against the woman who, as Morrison puts it, "bore witness to his failure, his impotence" (119). Cholly cannot use his anger to help him understand the situation. Cholly thrusts his anger, which hardens into hate, into her. Moreover, he nurtures his hatred, deliberately causing it to grow. I imagine him replaying the event over and over in his mind even as he later avoids having *her* see him. "Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters," Morrison writes.

"Such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were big, whi armed men. He was small, black, helpless" (119). Morrison takes ca also to underscore that Cholly never reveals his shame to any one. I does not acknowledge it. He does not speak it. He does not conf it. He flees the town. He is forever changed by what happened th day, stunted in some horrible way, never able to piece the parts of h life together in a way that brings a measure of understanding. Th will also be the fate of his daughter.

If in the world of *The Bluest Eye* racial shame can yield an explo sive violence, it is also always present in the most mundane transa tions of everyday life. This is perhaps nowhere clearer than in a scen early in the novel when his daughter Pecola, a girl who longs for th blue eyes of white America, goes to the store to buy some candy. Wit her three pennies she decides to purchase nine Mary Janes, the penny candy with the picture of a blonde, blue-eyed girl on its wrapper. But the dehumanizing exchange with the store's owner, a Mr. Yacobow- ski (who himself has blue eyes), rattles her anticipation, confusing her and the sources of her happiness:

> Slowly, like Indian summer moving imperceptibly toward fall, he looks toward her. Somewhere between retina and object, between vision and view, his eyes draw back, hesitate, and hover. At some fixed point in time and space he senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance. He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see. How can a fifty-two-year-old white immigrant storekeeper with the taste of potatoes and beer in his mouth, his mind honed on the doe-eyed Virgin Mary, his sensibilities blunted by a permanent awareness of loss, *see* a little black girl? (41–42)

Here Pecola's *not being seen*—that is, not being acknowledged as a member of a community—produces shame just as did Cholly's *being seen*. Paradoxically it comes to the same thing. Pecola and Cholly are both invisible and hypervisible at the same time. It is not a matter of what one *does* but what one *is*: black in white America. The eleven-year-old Pecola senses the store owner's distaste for her. She grasps that he does not even want to touch her hand because it is black. But she does not understand why she should feel shame. Her shame is to her "inexplicable" (43). In a few paragraphs Morrison brilliantly traces the rapid sequence of Pecola's feelings upon leaving the store.

Inexplicable shame ebbs, replaced by anger: "Anger is better. There is a sense of being in anger. A reality and a presence" (43). But the anger just as rapidly subsides, and shame again takes its place. What will forestall her tears? Just as Cholly both internalizes the base contempt of the white men and projects it on and into a black woman, so Pecola internalizes the values of white America. She eats the Mary Janes. She swallows her shame. It is a total confusion—that is to say, identification—of happiness with shame.

Why could Pecola not sustain the anger that gave her a sense of presence—of reality—even as the store owner denied it? Morrison suggests that it is because of her age, because Pecola is too young. Her anger is like a "puppy"; it is too quickly satisfied, exhausted. But what of Cholly? He was not much older than Pecola is here when he was forced to turn his lovemaking into rape. Morrison portrays him as cultivating his hatred, clinging to it as an acrid animating force that serves to preempt his shame, effacing it from his consciousness. Anger turned to hatred thus serves him as an impenetrable screen emotion for humiliation. Unlike Pecola's anger, his hatred does not dissipate quickly; yet his subsistence on this angry hatred over a long period of time in no way implies that he is able to comprehend the personal meanings for him of this all-determining traumatic event.

This opens up an entire series of fascinating questions. What does it mean that one's anger is "young"? What is the relation between one's age and one's ability to understand the social dynamics of one's emotions? At what age is one able to reflect on one's emotions so as to politicize them, as does the narrator of *A Room of One's Own*? To what extent does the duration of an emotion make a difference? As parents and teachers of young children, we remark every day that their emotional life is intense, their emotions short-lived. On the one hand, Morrison's story suggests that it is not because Pecola's anger is too brief that she accepts a position grounded in shame, but rather because her powers of analysis are not sufficiently developed. This is primarily a function of her age. Of course, it will be objected that there are any number of children this age who seem to be able to analyze with astonishing astuteness their anger, say, at a teacher or a parent for unfair treatment. Perhaps the question to be posed is: how do gender, race, and age intersect so as to blunt the cognitive power of the emotions?

It is the racial structure of shame in the world of *The Bluest E*
that makes shame virtually impossible to overcome.[5] Here the wo
of the feminist philosopher Sandra Bartky is enormously helpful. I
"Shame and Gender: Contribution to a Phenomenology of Oppre
sion," Bartky offers an alternative model to that of Sartre's, one tha
is based not on the shame that may result from a discrete occurrence
as is his, but on what she calls, following Heidegger, "a pervasiv
affective attunement, a mode of Being-in-the-world" (16). For Bartky
shame is not so much identifiable as a particular emotion as it is vir
tually inherent in the way that one responds to the social world o
everyday life as well as to dramatic events. It is an effect of one's sub-
ordination in society, a way of perceiving and being in the world that
is reinforced at every turn. Bartky's understanding of the relation
between shame and gender in patriarchy thus echoes Woolf's. But
her analysis of the phenomenology of the emotion of shame is radi-
cally different. Moreover Bartky writes as a philosopher, not as an
essayist. In Woolf the emotions of shame and anger make themselves
felt and thus are available to analysis. But Bartky calls attention to
the pervasive practice of shaming, so pervasive that it recedes, as it
were, into the hum of the background and is therefore not recognized
as something sufficiently dramatic to be considered a threat. Unlike
Woolf's narrator in *A Room of One's Own*, women, Bartky concludes,
cannot so easily draw on their emotions as cognitive touchstones, in
part because shame, in her example, is not registered as an identifi-
able and felt emotion. Rather shame is the condition in which they
live and, as such, it is virtually unremarked, unfelt, unseen.

She writes, "This shame is manifest in a pervasive sense of personal inadequacy that, like the shame of embodiment, is profoundly disempowering" (3). What is so interesting about Bartky's analysis is her insistence that although what is consistently revealed is precisely one's inferiority, one generally does not understand or comprehend one's situation. In my view this is the crux of the matter. As she puts it, "paradoxically what is *disclosed* fails, in the typical case to be understood" (16). Why is this so? Bartky stresses that in the situations that concern her there is a disjunction between what one feels and what one believes. Women may feel or sense that something about themselves is adequate, for example, without *believing* themselves to be inadequate. The result, as Bartky concludes, is "a confused and divided

consciousness" (13). This is key. As Bartky points out, the moral agent of moral psychology and of moral philosophy is theorized as "lucid" (15). Although Bartky does not develop this point, central to an analysis of the phenomenology of shame in terms of oppression is *confusion* itself. Confusion, we recall, was explicitly named by the narrator of *A Room of One's Own* as one of the emotions that she experienced while reading the words of the disdainful—and contemptible—Professor von X. What Bartky theorizes about the constitutive oppression of women can apply equally, if not with greater force, to racial oppression. This helps us understand how Morrison has presented the tragedy that Cholly and Pecola are destined to live out. In a sense, neither character believes him or herself to be inadequate. Pecola, after all, believes that she has finally been granted her wish of blue eyes. Yet at the same time, both know that they are inadequate in the eyes of white America.

Like a low-grade fever, this kind of confusion permeates everyday life in the world of *The Bluest Eye*. In trauma, psychic confusion is at its most intense. As the psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas has argued in *Being a Character*, "Psychic confusion is part of the full effect of trauma because, unable to narrate the event in the first place, the person now re-experiences isolation, this time brought on by the loneness of mental confusion" (67). As a young teen Cholly was forced to rape a black woman. As a preteen Pecola is raped by her father. Neither of these characters can narrate these events; both remain tragically isolated. The psychoanalyst Michael Lewis has observed that shame disrupts ongoing activity, resulting in confusion, an inability to think clearly or to act clearly. In the scenes that I have invoked from *The Bluest Eye*, the confusion entailed in shame is, thus, not only emotional, but cognitive as well. "Shame" and "mortification" are given as synonyms for "confusion" in *The Random House College Dictionary* (1975). "Bewilderment" is noted as one of its meanings. Confusion is unintelligibility, a lack of clarity, of lucidity. Both the everyday shame of racism and the traumatic shame, or humiliation, which Morrison presents in the world of *The Bluest Eye*, result in a paralysis of analysis on the part of the characters.

If we combine this understanding of shame as psychic confusion—an inability to narrate what has happened—with the fact that Morrison underscores the young age at which her characters are

subjected to racist behavior, we can see why they are not able to surmount their shame. They remain locked in it. One of the stunning achievements of *The Bluest Eye* is the way in which Morrison presents shame as dramaturgical and traumatic, born of brutalizing violence, and shame as chronic and dispositional, pervasive in everyday life in this racist small American town in 1941. These particularly insidious and potent varieties of shame cannot be transformed by its characters, as shame is in both Sartre or Woolf, into ethical and political reflection of either a dispassionate or passionate nature.

With *The Bluest Eye* in mind, then, to what extent can we draw on Jaggar's model of the cognitive dimension of the emotions? Rather than Jaggar's model illuminating the novel, I would say that, on the contrary, the novel suggests the limits of the model. As I mentioned earlier, Jaggar gives two emotions as examples of how the cognitive dimension of emotions function: anger and love. But in *The Bluest Eye* shame does not operate as a cognitive touchstone in the instances to which I have referred (and there are many more, similar in structure, to which I could point). In addition, Jaggar underscores the epistemological privilege associated with the emotions of the oppressed. But in *The Bluest Eye*, racial shame cannot be transformed into knowledge; racial shame—whether traumatic or chronic—casts the characters into psychic confusion, not cognition. In the case of Pecola (if, for a moment, we may think of the novel as a "case"), shame is not converted into knowledge but into depression figured as madness. And in the case of the young Cholly, shame is converted into blind anger that hardens into a hatred against someone who has even less defenses than himself.[6] In the narrative world of *The Bluest Eye*, shame does not have a cognitive edge; the characters have no possibility of personal control.

In an essay on shame and queer performativity, Eve Sedgwick argues that shame can have transformational power. Shame, she suggests, can have particularly powerful consequences for the formation of identity when one is younger and gay and living in a homophobic society. It is because the stigma is so profound, "the childhood scene of shame" so traumatic, that shame is a potentially endless source of possible energy, "a near-exhaustible source of transformational energy" (4).[7] We could make a similar argument regarding race. But if we reflect on *The Bluest Eye*, we see immediately that not all shame

can be "transformational," although some varieties of shame may carry that charge. More important, to argue that the affect of shame is—or can be—transformational is misleading. It is not the affect itself—or by itself—that carries the potential for transformation, although it may serve as the catalyst for it.

For me the final question, then, is one that has haunted the critical reception of Morrison's work. Does *The Bluest Eye* hold out the possibility for change?[8] There are two answers to this question—no and yes. Within the action of the story itself shame cannot be transformed into knowledge. Here shame is, to borrow the phrase of the psychoanalyst Helen Lewis, a "feeling trap." Here, shame remains shame or is disguised as something else (it is covered up by another emotion or another emotion is substituted for it). Moreover, it is recursive. It loops back upon itself. Shame is inherited, passed on from one generation to the next. Within the world of the novel there is no way out of shame's enclosing circle. Here the answer is definitively no.

But the answer is also yes. *The Bluest Eye* is not philosophy. It does not present an argument. It thematizes a cultural politics of the emotions, presenting a novelistic world in which shame cannot be transformed into knowledge. But the novel also functions aesthetically on the level of a cultural poetics of the emotions. Morrison's vision in *The Bluest Eye* is intensely moral. In the final pages of the novel Morrison creates a literary mood, one that mixes shame with grief in an elegiac mode. The final paragraph of the novel shifts to the present. We have already learned that Pecola's father—his full name is Cholly Breedlove—has died. We have learned that Pecola's baby has died. We have learned that Pecola's mother continues to work for white families. But we are not told what year it is or even what decade it is. And this is precisely the point. It is time immemorial. Morrison's conviction is both that the black community failed its own and that there was nothing that could have been done to avoid such tragedy in white America. It is, Morrison writes eloquently in the narrative voice of Claudia, who is now older, too late.

Yet paradoxically it is precisely the poignancy of the final pages of the novel that offers hope for the future. This elegiac sense of an ending is paradoxically generative of hope, of a vision of a more just world in the future. Importantly, these final pages are written from the perspective of an older voice who at times assumes the burden of

her shame, confessing it to us, acknowledging it, understanding the unthinkable tragedy of these broken lives—Pecola, Cholly, Darlene, the mother. Older now, Claudia understands that she and her sister had failed Pecola—as inevitably they would have at that age. Claudia confesses, "We tried to see her without looking at her, and never, never went near.... Not because she was absurd, or repulsive, or because we were frightened, but because we had failed her" (158). Claudia is convinced that she was at fault; that the flowers didn't grow from the seeds she had planted because she had planted them too deeply. And, in fact, everyone in the novel does inevitably fail Pecola.

There is, nevertheless, a generative tension between what ideally should have been done and what could never have been done. These are the last lines of the novel:

> And now ... I talk about how I did *not* plant the seeds too deeply, how it was the fault of the earth, the land, of our town. I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter. It's too late. At least on the edge of my town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, it's much, much, much too late. (160)

Claudia, even older now, believes that there was nothing that they in fact could have done. She insists to herself that it was not her fault—that she did not, in fact, plant the seeds too deeply—and that it is the historical foundation of America, its very land, that killed her people. Thus, within the action of the story itself, racial shame—both traumatic and chronic—cannot be transformed into knowledge. It cannot be transcended. Within *The Bluest Eye*, the black characters feel shame in the land of white America, a space they cannot escape. Yet the narrative voice of Morrison's Claudia grants a profound measure of understanding, one that is complex and contradictory.

Furthermore, as readers who are not part of the drama, we are literary witnesses to that shame. Here lies the possibility of the circulation of shame as a literary experience. It is not that as readers we necessarily "identify" with the characters, although some of us might.

It is not that we need to feel the specific emotion of shame, although, again, some of us might. Instead, I would say that the elegiac mood of the last pages—it is complex but not confused, it conveys a deep sense of perspective—creates a cognitive emotional space where shame might be understood differently: as our collective failure in this country to live up to our ideals, or at least what should be our ideals.[9]

In an important essay published in *Feminist Studies*, Berenice Fisher redefines shame, carefully separating guilt from shame and encouraging feminists to recast our goals in our own image, making shame our own. Her purpose is to help us find a way to put our feelings of inevitable failure in relation to the Women's movement to good and thoughtful use rather than to allow them to divide us from each other and to disable us in terms of action. As with Bartky, we may call on her formulation in the context of race as well. Fisher insists that we must choose and establish our own ideals; when we do not live up to them, we feel shame. Importantly, she understands shame "not as a mark of our inadequacy but as a sign of our commitment to act, as a mark of the tension between the present and the future, as a touchstone for understanding what we expect to achieve and how" (118). I would suggest that it is also in this sense that shame circulates in *The Bluest Eye*, shifting to the reader who, in Morrison's hands, is not made to feel personally responsible for what happened. The reader is not aggressively indicted or made to feel guilty. *The Bluest Eye* is set in the past. But all of the readers of the novel live in the present and will live into the future, one where the literary emotion of shame can be understood, to echo Fisher, as a touchstone for understanding what we expect to achieve.[10]

Fisher's understanding of shame thus adds a public dimension to Sartre's model of shame. At the heart of her essay is the hope that this shame will be acknowledged and brought into public discourse, not in the mode of psychologized interiority, but in the mode of carefully assessing one's ability to live up to chosen ideals. She reintroduces the important dimension of moral agency into the discussion of shame. Yet unlike Sartre's account in *Being and Nothingness*, her model casts shame in relation to an ideal rather than a wrongdoing. What I find so invigorating about her account is that in her hands shame is recast as a potentially reflective, mature emotion, not as

an infantile emotion associated with cowering or aversive behavior. Fisher proposes that shame be worn differently—in public and with dignity.[11]

If, paradoxically, the private experience of reading Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* can underwrite a sense of shame that is intensely moral, a shame associated with civic responsibility and thus with dignity, a shame that carries the promise of a public sphere, what can we say of the mass mediation of shame, of shame that is played out on the omnipresent screen of televisual culture, often amplified beyond the bearable?

The sociologist Norbert Elias has persuasively argued that over the long arc of human history what he calls "the civilizing process" has been accompanied by "spurts" and "advances" in the "shame-threshold" (293). The increasing complexity of society—the progressive specialization and differentiation of social organization—has required increasing strictures on behavior that are codified as emotion rules. What was once not considered shameful behavior, for example, in Elizabethan England (the making of all kinds of body noises at the table at court) would now be considered most embarrassing or shameful in what we would call polite company. Thus Elias offers us, much as does Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, a model of the development of civilization as entailing a necessary and concomitant repression. But where Freud emphasizes the development of a repressive psychological structure ruled by the internalized emotion of guilt, Elias privileges the role of shame, that quintessentially social emotion.

Freud's analysis leads him to conclude that at some point the degree of repression exacted may be so implacably oppressive that on the level of a culture it will produce not "civilization" but rather "pathology" (91). I want to suggest that with shame we might be said to have reached that limit. Perhaps the threshold of shame to which Elias refers has advanced to an intolerable point, to the very point where shameful behavior is, on the contrary, being produced, not curtailed, where shame is exhibited on our cultural screens for everyone to see. I am not referring here to the academic explosion of interest in shame. Rather, I am thinking of the selling of the spectacle of shame that we see at every turn today when we glance at a tabloid

or flip from one television channel to another. Many people appear to be reveling in their own shame, making as much money off it as they can in a market characterized by active, not to say frenzied, trading. For where there are sellers there are also buyers, the seekers of shame who in turn sell it to us.

Here I will point to only three examples from the relatively recent past, bypassing the mass marketing of shame in what has been known erroneously from the start as the Monica Lewinsky story (Juliet Flower MacCannell writes of the Lewinsky-Clinton story in her essay in this issue). One is tawdry, the other grievously tragic.

First, consider the case of the "talent agent" who scouts for shame. I'm thinking of Sherri Spillane (she clearly trades on the name of her ex-husband, Mickey Spillane), whose work consists of marketing people like Tonya Harding and Joey Buttafuoca, Heidi Fleiss and John Wayne Bobbitt, getting them gigs on talk shows and pushing their work-out videos. Where does Spillane do much of her sleuthing for shame? She spends hours reading such publications as the *National Enquirer*, looking for people whose shame can be sold up a notch or two. And where did I find out about Spillane? In the *International Herald Tribune*, a highbrow newspaper jointly published by the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. The *Herald* devoted a full half-page to Spillane's business, featuring a large Hollywoodish photo of Spillane and her partner Ruth Webb lounging on their brass bed, cuddling their stuffed animals and cats. The tone of the article, written by Jennifer Steinhauer, is light and bemused, concluding with this absurd—and dismaying—possibility: "Spillane mentions another promising performer, Bakker." She is referring, of course, to Tammy Faye Bakker. "'We have *Hello Dolly* in mind for her,' she said."

As we see so clearly in this example, the commercialization of shame—the retailing of the emotions—has penetrated all levels of mass culture, moving from low to high, as though shame were contagious, as in fact some theorists of shame have pointed out. Here, however, the familiar dynamics of shame are reversed. One does not draw on one's feeling of shame to evaluate one's actions, as in Sartre's model. Nor, as with Morrison's Darlene, does one want to hide from the view of others even though one's having been brutally shamed is unjust. In this version of shame, those who should be ashamed do not want to avoid the eye of the public. They desire to be seen. Turned

into commodities on the mass culture market, they hope to profit by it in turn, making money off their now notorious shame, creating a spin to their past, in the process transforming their shame into a peculiar form of pride and entering the visual circuit of celebrity where actions carry less weight than one's image. Here shame is not so much acknowledged or confessed—as Scheff and Retzinger insist that it must be in order to be understood and escalating violence to be avoided—rather it is both paraded and willfully ignored at the same time.[12] In the process do they cast off their shame *onto* those who look at them? Are those who are looking at them taking shameful pleasure in the spectacle? Or can we even say that the spectators are ashamed of themselves? Shame, even as it is paraded and exhibited, ostentatiously performed as pride, seems to have altogether vanished, leaving only a crass and sordid taste in its wake. Here, shame is reduced to what Jean Baudrillard has called fascination, the numbing of both reflection and emotion in inert sensation. Perhaps shame has crumbled into boredom.[13]

Second, consider the phenomenon of television talk shows staging shame. In one extreme instance, what was presumably intended as a fleeting and harmless embarrassment resulted, instead, in humiliation, a shame so painful that it led to the murder of one man and the shattering of the life of another man, who has since been sentenced to prison. A shame so intense that it was traumatic. Here trauma resulted from the mass-mediated production of shame, and that shame in turn ignited murder. A twenty-four-year-old man—Jonathan Schmitz—agreed to participate in March 1995 in a segment on secret admirers on *The Jenny Jones Show*. It was taped in front of a studio audience and slated to be aired nationally shortly afterward. On the show, Schmitz was stunned to learn that the person who was secretly attracted to him was not a woman but a man, Scott Amedure, who revealed that he had sexual fantasies about Schmitz involving whipped cream, strawberries, and champagne. Schmitz later confessed that he was "humiliated and angered" (French).

Schmitz's humiliation was played out in front of a live audience to entertainment TV and was scheduled to be shown later to millions of viewers. Like Sartre's "I," Schmitz was surprised into shame. The spectators to his shame were as much unseen as seen. But Schmitz had done nothing wrong. Three days after the taping of the show he discovered a romantic note from his no-longer secret admirer. He bought a shotgun and some ammunition and drove to the home of Scott Amedure. Schmitz shot Amedure twice, killing him instantly. Schmitz reported to a sheriff that he was "embarrassed, humiliated—that he had handled it as well as he could on national television because he didn't want to make a scene," but that his experience, he told one of the police moments after the shooting, had "eaten away at him" ("Television Talk Shows"). Much as Morrison's Cholly turns his humiliation at the hands of white men into the rape of Darlene, a person even more helpless than himself, Schmitz did not confront the vast system of the televisual mass media. How could he? Instead, he tragically turned his shame into aggression against a gay male. His shame and the resulting anger, no doubt rage, could not be turned into knowledge. In such a case, we can surmise that shame, turning to rage, is the precipitate of trauma. In such a case, affect blocks thought. In such a case, what is called an "affect storm" leads to violence. In such a case, there was not a context for a self-reflexive sequencing of the emotions. In 1996 Jonathan Schmitz was sentenced to twenty-five to fifty years in prison for the second-degree murder of Scott Amedure. That conviction was overturned in 1998, and a new trial was ordered. On September 15, 1999, Schmitz was again sentenced to twenty-five to fifty years in prison. The tape was never aired on national television.

Predictably, those responsible for the show declared neither wrongdoing nor liability. But the family of Amedure filed a civil suit against Telepictures Productions and Warner Brothers Television Distribution, the syndicator of *The Jenny Jones Show*. It was argued that the show set the stage for the murder of their son. In 1999, the show was found negligent, and the family was awarded twenty-five million dollars.

Third, consider the case of Richard Jewell, whom I referred to at the beginning of this essay. The July 27, 1996, bombing in Atlanta's Centennial Olympic Park killed two people and injured over one hundred others. Although he was initially praised in the media as a hero, Jewell, a security guard at the Olympics, almost instantly became a suspect in the crime. He was dogged by FBI agents for months and later revealed to be innocent. In 1997, Louis Freeh, the director of the FBI, admitted that in the eighty-eight days that Jewell

was subjected to federal scrutiny, his constitutional rights were violated. Jewell was also, of course, relentlessly pursued by the press. His purported shame was made public—over and over and over again. Might we not conclude that in such a situation, the constant replaying of one's image on television, the incessant repetition of the story on the radio and in the newspapers and news magazines, mimics the psychological mechanism of debilitating and ultimately traumatic shame? That the continual coverage produces traumatic shame, amplifying it, blowing it up in public? Creating shame where there was none? As psychologists of shame have observed, we will often obsessively recite a shameful incident in our minds, repeating it endlessly, rehearsing it again and again in our imagination, and this very repetition is itself a sign of our being unable to resolve it or to leave it behind or to overcome it. Analogously, televisual culture, with its proliferating news and entertainment shows, replays over and over and over again scenes that not only present the emotions and represent the emotions. They also produce them. Richard Jewell was sought out by the media. Images of him, first imagined as a hero and then as a criminal, produced scenes of shame. In an instance such as this, shame, as well as guilt, I would suggest, is sold to the public.[14] The retailing of the emotions in crudely packaged and promoted form, so often at the expense of an individual—whether it is in the tabloids, in the print of highbrow culture, or on daytime, prime-time, and late-night television—is part and parcel of our market economy.

This phenomenon is, in my view, shameless and shameful. What can we do? We can understand it. We can refuse to participate in it as a reader or as a spectator. We can, in other words, make a moral judgment. We can offer our judgments publicly, as did Richard Jewell when he testified before the Crime Subcommittee of the House Judiciary Committee in Washington in July 1997.[15] And, as in the tragic case of the killing of Amedure, our courts can offer judgments as well.

"One cannot find the truth, and the horrible thing is that shamelessness is spilling over our society. The absence of conscience and honesty is the air of our society." These are not the words of a conservative U.S. Republican. These are the words of Alexander Solzhenitsyn who now has his own talk show in Russia. It is taped in his apartment and principally features his own views, forcefully stated, along with those of his guests.

Solzhenitsyn comes from another culture and another generation, one marked by dissidence understood within a fiercely moral framework. He openly uses the word "shame," and he pronounces the shame of others. With regard to the coverage of the *Jenny Jones* incident, the fact that the word "humiliation" and not the word "shame" was persistently used—although humiliation was clearly employed as a synonym of intense shame—underscores the extent to which shame is, indeed, *experienced* at all ages. The word itself, however, is proscribed in our culture at large. It is as though shame is still associated with and reserved only for childhood experiences, a point that takes me back to the opening of this essay. I want to insist that shame is experienced at all ages and that it takes many different forms. Scheff and Retzinger make a similar point. They argue that shame is everywhere used as a form of social control in contemporary culture, but it is not acknowledged as such. I would argue that this accounts in part for the fact that we do not as adults use the word "shame" to describe many of our experiences. Instead we will say that we have been "humiliated" or that we are "embarrassed" or "mortified." "Shame may be the most social of emotions," Scheff and Retzinger write, "since it functions as a threat to the social bond" (5).

I began this essay in what I regard as a light and affectionate tone. I was trying to teach an elementary sense of responsibility through shame to my five-year-old daughter. I do not disavow that use of shame, which has not so much a relation to an ideal as to simple social rules for concord and cooperation; here shame serves to seal the social bond. I want to add as well that there is a coda to this story. A few years ago my daughter, no longer five years old but a teenager, saw me writing this anecdote about her. She reacted with indignation. It did not seem at all amusing to her, and, more seriously, she did not want me telling it to people, shaming her in academic public, an audience she values highly. She protested to me. But she did more than that. She erased the story on my computer.

Shame, as I have tried to show in this essay, comes in many forms. My daughter was not only able to tell her story; she eliminated it from the record (although I put it back). But in *The Bluest Eye* Cholly and Pecola cannot narrate what happens to them. The psychoanalyst André Green, in his book *On Private Madness*, theorizes the relation between affect and meaning, or knowledge, in terms of the binding of

affect into chains. I would call them narrative chains. On the one hand, he writes, there is "affect with a semantic function as an element in the chain of signifiers"; on the other hand, there is "affect overflowing the concatenation and spreading as it breaks the links in a chain" (208). In Cholly's case, the chain of affect explodes. The breaking of the chain is itself constituent of traumatic affect that results in paralysis or in compulsive activity or both.[16] But if traumatic shame in *The Bluest Eye* is marked by the characters' inability to narrate what has happened to them, in televisual culture it would seem that traumatic shame is characterized by the incessant if not obsessive narration of someone's story by the media itself. There is no lack of meaningful narration, but rather an excess of meaningless narration. In such cases, shame does not carry the transformational charge of a "free radical," in Sedgwick's term, but is the sign of a catastrophic psychic wound and a devastating rupture of the social bond.

Notes

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1. See my essay "From Anger ... to Anger: Freud and Feminism."

2. For important work on shame, see philosopher Bernard Williams's *Shame and Necessity*; psychologist Silvan Tomkins's work on shame in a collection of his work entitled *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, edited by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank Sedgwick; literary critic William Ian Miller's *Humiliation: And Other Essays on Honor, Social Discomfort, and Violence*; psychoanalyst Serge Tisseron's *La Honte: Psychoanalyse d'un lien social*; and historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown's *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South*. See also *Edith Wharton's Prisoners of Shame: A New Perspective on Her Neglected Fiction* by Lev Raphael, who argues that "shame is a touchstone for understanding Wharton herself" (2); and Andrew Gordon's "Shame and Saul Bellow's 'Something to Remember Me By.'"

3. Basic to the models of shame that I consider in this essay is a visual structure (explicit or implicit) in which one person, who embodies the values of dominant culture, judges the actions or very being of another person as shameful. There are, however, also situations in which shame is mutual, where the visual structure of the look involves everyone in shame, although I do not discuss that here.

4. William Ian Miller also elaborates a model wherein shame is succeeded by anger, but his is altogether different from the one narrated in Woolf. He presents shame as a strong, not debilitating emotion, associating it with the heroic culture of the Icelandic sagas, grounded in an honor-based society. He argues that shame as the West once knew it has virtually disappeared today. For Miller the emotion of what I call heroic shame was almost instantaneously "reprocessed as anger" and led to action in one form or another. In this model, shame is not an emotion to be puzzled over; it is not one that, when analyzed, will yield knowledge of the sort that Woolf explores. The reason for this is clear: the world of the Icelandic sagas required membership in "a community of people sharing norms of right action and caring deeply about what others in their community think of them" (84, 118). As we will see, in the literary world of *The Bluest Eye* there is no community of equals. See my "Global Cooling and Academic Warming" for more commentary on Miller.

5. There are exceptions to this rule, the most significant being the three women—China, Poland, and Marie—who live in the apartment right above the Breedloves. These worldly, smart women, who work as prostitutes, allow no one to intimidate them. They are described with admiration by Morrison as women who "hated men, without shame, apology, or discrimination" (47).

6. In the case of Pecola and Cholly, shame is gendered along predictable lines. Here the work of the psychoanalyst Michael Lewis on emotional substitution in terms of gender is helpful. He argues that shame, when it is not acknowledged, is likely to find expression as depression in women, but as anger and rage in men.

7. Sedgwick rightly insists that different cultures legislate different regimes of shame. The emphasis in her essay, which takes as its context the stigma of homosexual shame, is on liberation *from* shame and the liberation *of* shame, where shame turns into pride in one's identity, a pride that is markedly different from the pride that I touch on in the last part of this essay. In the context of gay experience, shame is a "free radical," one that "attaches to and permanently intensifies or alters the meaning of—almost anything: a zone of the body, a sensory system, a prohibited or indeed a permitted behavior, another affect such as anger or arousal, a named identity, a script for interpreting other people's behavior toward oneself" (12).

8. See, for example, Linda Dittmar on the politics of form in *The Bluest Eye*.

9. Morrison's achievement in *The Bluest Eye* is all the more stunning when the novel is compared with Ernest Gaines's *A Lesson before Dying*. The plot of *A Lesson before Dying* affirms the possibility of the transformation of black shame into dignity. I would argue, however, that the effect of the book is precisely the opposite. The very bluntness and unvarying nature of the language itself, so

unlike the eloquence of Morrison's prose, does not contain a promise of transformation or of affirmation through its own beauty. Moreover, even on the level of plot it is not clear how the young black man named Jefferson, so wrongly accused of the murder of a white man, goes to the electric chair in peace. But what I do find powerful in *A Lesson before Dying* is that Jefferson himself repeats, over and over, what was for him the most damaging and shameful moment of the trial, incarnating his metaphorical humiliation: his lawyer refers to him as a "hog."

10. In "Black Writing, White Reading: Race and the Politics of Feminist Interpretation," Elizabeth Abel correctly cautions white feminists to be self-conscious and self-critical in relation to reading African-American texts and to African-American criticism of them. What is the fantasy, if there is one, that is played out in my essay? I would say it is the fantasy of understanding, one that underwrites what is generally understood, and often vilified as a liberal politics.

11. Fisher draws on the work of the psychoanalyst Helen Merrell Lynd who argues that if shame—a shame that one should feel—is faced fully, it "may become not primarily something to be covered, but a positive experience of revelation" (20).

12. The infamous Dick Morris, a long-time political advisor to Bill Clinton and known for hard-ball politics, is a prime case in point. Morris was an election strategist who relied heavily on polling in the 1996 presidential campaign. On the very evening that Clinton addressed the Democratic Convention, it was revealed that Morris had been having a relationship with a sex worker with whom he discussed the details of the campaign. But if Morris resigned in disgrace, shamed in public, he has since made a spectacular comeback with the help of the mass media. He is not only the author of two books, both of which have received a great detail of attention and in one of which he ironically calls for idealism (it should be made clear, however, that he understands idealism as a strategy), he is also under contract to Fox television as a political commentator and appears frequently on news talk shows.

13. Elsewhere I suggest that there is a postmodern structure of feeling characterized by an oscillation between boredom and what I call statistical panic. See Woodward, "Statistical Panic."

14. See Patricia Mellencamp's brilliant essay on how television works both to produce and allay anxiety in the coverage of catastrophe.

15. The ACLU praised Jewell's testimony as powerful. See "ACLU Joins with Richard Jewell."

16. Green argues that the doubling of anxiety—of separation anxiety and intrusion anxiety (a doubling that clearly characterizes the case of Cholly)—can take on torturing forms, blocking the formation of thought. He writes: "the invasion, the impotence, the distress, all give rise to an internal panic which drives the subject to exceed the limits of psychic space by various mechanisms: confusion—which is in fact a dissemination and dilution of conflicting tensions; carthartic action operative like a massive affect storm ... or the overcathexis of external perception which monopolizes all psychic attention" (208).

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