

Pleasures and Dangers of Shame

One of the interpretive puzzles of Walt Whitman's "Calamus" poems—the section in *Leaves of Grass* devoted to same-sex affections—is a persistent and conspicuous thematics of shame. From one point of view there should be nothing puzzling about this at all. Sodomy was a crime of infamy, homosexuals entered history wrapped in stigma, and modern sexual culture is structured around a repressive hypothesis for which shame is a practical medium. Whether we follow the progressive narrative, according to which modern gay culture emerges from centuries of repressive shame, or believe with Foucault that the rhetoric of shame has been intensified and redistributed in modern culture, the association of the homoerotic with the rhetoric of shame and disclosure is surely among the least surprising things about "Calamus."

But recent criticism has worked hard against that expectation. It has been said that the poems very often depict the kind of fluid public affection that we see in so many photographs of late nineteenth-century male friends, rather than the secretive and stigmatized eroticism of a deviant sexual minority. Not everything that looks queer to us now, we are reminded, would have looked that way in Whitman's time. "Calamus" was first published in the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, but it did not attract very much attention or controversy until thirty years later, when John Addington Symonds wrote to inquire if it represented Greek love, occasioning Whitman's famous denial. Meanwhile, what demonstrably provoked scandal was what we would call the heterosexual section, "Children of Adam." So we should certainly approach "Calamus" with some attention to the difference between its rhetoric and that which is familiar from gay culture a century later.

Both Jerome Loving and David Reynolds, Whitman's most recent biographers, have taken up a version of a social-constructionist argument as a

way of cautioning against a gay reading of Whitman in general, and "Calamus" in particular. "In the free, easy social atmosphere of pre-Civil War America," Reynolds writes, "overt displays of affection between people of the same sex were common." (This, by the way, from the same David Reynolds who argues that the young Whitman was denounced, tarred and feathered, and driven out of town for sodomy in 1841, when he was teaching school on Long Island. Reynolds even sees evidence of this in "Calamus," especially "Trickle Drops." "Never would the purging of demons cease for Whitman," he writes, somewhat melodramatically.)

For most readers, I suspect, the language of shame that is so salient in "Calamus" will be taken *prima facie* as a sign that something queer is going on. "No longer abash'd," the speaker announces in "In Paths Untrodden," the opening poem of the sequence,

(for in this secluded spot I can respond as I would not dare elsewhere,)
Strong upon me the life that does not exhibit itself, yet contains all the rest,
Resolved to sing no songs to-day but those of manly attachment

....
I proceed for all who are or have been young men,
To tell the secret of my nights and days,
To celebrate the need of comrades.

Given such language, it is not surprising that many readers have found "Calamus" somewhat equivocal. Is there a secret or not? If the theme is just "the need of comrades," why all the hand-wringing about being abashed and secluded? Gay readers have typically read such tensions as evidence of the kind of takes-one-to-know-one double coding typical of closet formations; as Whitman put it in "Among the Multitude," a later poem in the sequence, "I meant that you should discover me so by faint indirections." The poems, in this view, speak secrets to the initiated; only the blind majority will see in them nothing more than "the need of comrades."

The address of these poems is indeed extremely hard to locate. There is a rather conventional irony, for example, in the idea that a published poem will be understood as issuing from a "secluded spot" in which the speaker can dare an admission he would not make elsewhere. One way to understand the deictic gesture of this parenthesis is through the modern conventions of lyric reading, in which lyric speech is understood as an intimate emanation, overheard in an impossible privacy. In hearing this speech, we are recruited into a knowledge environed by shame even as we are told that there is no more need for shame. The speaker, insofar as he seems to address

no one in particular, is on an intimate footing with us, an intimacy that is then broken by the unabashed—and rather unlyric—project of celebrating the need of comrades.

The famously shameless persona of Whitman's poems mounts in these poems a calvary of shame. I quote from "Scented Herbage of My Breast," the second poem in the sequence:

*Grow up taller sweet leaves that I may see! grow up out of my breast!
Spring away from the conceal'd heart there!
Do not fold yourself so in your pink-tinged roots timid leaves!
Do not remain down there so ashamed, herbage of my breast!
Come I am determin'd to unbare this broad breast of mine, I have long enough stifled
and choked;
Emblematic and capricious blades I leave you, now you serve me not,
I will say what I have to say by itself,
I will sound myself and comrades only, I will never again utter a call only their call,
I will raise it with immortal reverberations through the States,
I will give an example to lovers to take permanent shape and will through the States,
Through me shall the words be said to make death exhilarating.*

Here, as in so many Whitman texts, we find what has become familiar as a transgressive impulse. In this case, however, that impulse also involves great care to repudiate his own verse and its symbols—"emblematic and capricious blades" being, of course, leaves of grass. "Emblematic and capricious blades I leave you" is a paradoxical claim, to be sure, in so emblematic and capricious a leaf as this. Such rhetoric can be read as gesturing toward an impossibly free and unshamed speech that has not yet arrived, and perhaps never quite arrives ("I will say what I have to say by itself"); but it can also be read more specifically as commentary on the public persona, already a matter of some notoriety by 1860, when "Calamus" was first introduced into *Leaves of Grass*. A great many of the poems that Whitman added in 1860 have the same gesture of self-revision, notably "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life," where the speaker announces that "before all my arrogant poems the real Me stands yet untouch'd, untold, altogether unreach'd." In that poem as well, you might remember, the speaker is mocked and shamed by the "real Me." But it is in "Calamus" that the speaker of "Song of Myself" is most put in question.

In the "Calamus" poems, differences from the earlier poems are striking in form as well as theme. Where the poems of the 1855 version are loud and expansive, seemingly wanting to go on forever, the "Calamus" poems

are short, some of them a mere three lines. Many of them end with an image of wordless intimacy, closing as rapidly as possible into an image of lovers' touch seen from the outside. Gone is the garrulous rough who sounds his barbaric yawp. In his place is a new Whitman, "charged with untold and untellable wisdom," initiating a chosen few into his mysteries by "faint clues and indirections," terse, reticent, silent. Although the sequence begins with the claim that it will broadcast the new theme of manly love, it continues to invoke an environment of danger and stigma, as in "Here the Frailest Leaves of Me," which I quote entire:

*Here the frailest leaves of me and yet my strongest lasting,
Here I shade and hide my thoughts, I myself do not expose them,
And yet they expose me more than all my other poems.*

The method of these poems cannot be understood apart from the rhetoric of the unspeakable construed as excruciating shame. Do they "shade and hide" something or "expose" it?

Because the play of the poetic enunciation seems to be at stake in such questions, I trust it is not just belaboring the obvious to insist on the centrality of a rhetoric of shame in Whitman's poetics, though I rather suspect that the pose of shamelessness distracts us, as it is meant to do, from the en-framing dialectic.

I also take this problem in Whitman as historically and theoretically significant to queer studies, insofar as a narrative about shame and its overcoming has come to structure the self-understanding of the modern gay movement. In the public mythology of the gay movement, the fundamental political antagonism is not so much between classes of people—heteros and homos, straights and gays, normals and queers—as between affects: shame and pride. This mythology has many unintended effects. In an earlier phase of the movement the destigmatizing project of lesbians and gays imitated that of other social movements: "gay is good" self-consciously mirrored "black is beautiful," for example. Thus the idea of gay pride connoted a clash between systems of value, a whole realignment of judgment, a collective decolonization. Somehow the same rhetoric has come to signify the opposite: the movement of homosexuals individually out of abjection into maturity and, by a homologous movement at the aggregate level (rather than by collective action), out of stigma into acceptance. Cultural conflict has come to seem beside the point. Who, after all, could be against pride? Ironically, the answer can only be: queers.

Gay pride, and much of the movement organized around it, entails a

theory of shame as a thing of the personal and collective past—shame about shame, if you will. For many, this picture has come to seem not only empirically false and subjectively thin, but worse: too safe to be sexy and too dishonest to be safe. A backlash can be seen in many quarters. One hears “post-gay” rhetoric; there is an activist group called “Gay Shame”; ACT UP Paris marched a couple of years ago under the banner “Proud of What?” And in gay studies, there is a renewed attention to the productive force of shame. David Halperin’s book *What Do Gay Men Want?* is the most recent example of a trend that began, if not with Jouhandeau, then at least when Eve Sedgwick observed in an influential 1993 essay that “queer” differed from the rhetoric of gay pride mainly in its naked refusal to repudiate shame.

The dialectical movement over the past few decades has undoubtedly been complex, and it would be a mistake to see the new conditions as a return of queer shame, just as it was a mistake to think of the movement as fundamentally an assertion of gay pride; the historic antagonism of queer struggles has to do with the whole range of the conditions of heteronormativity, of which the affect pairing of shame and pride is a somewhat tendentious metonym. In *The Trouble with Normal* I tried to outline some of the changing conditions in movement politics that lie behind the depoliticizing rhetoric of pride, acceptance, and inclusion. These include material conditions, such as the massive influx of capital into gay organizations and media that began with the 1992 election, and the way it intensified and distorted the stigmaphile/stigmaphobe dynamics of the social movement form. (Briefly: the stigmaphile world is where we find a commonality with those who suffer from stigma and in this alternative space learn to value the very things the rest of the world despises; the stigmaphobe world is the dominant culture, where conformity is ensured through fear of stigma. Political groups that mediate between queers and normals are internally structured by this tension, and because power lies almost exclusively on the normal side, any centralization of money and organization will favor those who resolve their own ambivalence in the stigmaphobe direction.) So I mean to be cautious; there is an inevitable tendency to allegorize when speaking of shame and pride in this context.

And yet the shame/pride affect pairing appears so frequently, and with such powerful effects, and with so many mutations over the past century or two, that we cannot help but wonder why. Many other social movements have agendas of destigmatization, including feminism and anticolonialism. Why did the queer movement come to be defined centrally by the opposition of shame and pride when these other political contexts did not?

Some obvious answers spring to mind. First, the antagonism of the

heterosexual-homosexual relationship emerged out of what was primarily a set of moral injunctions and gender norms, only occasionally elaborated as a social taxonomy. To this day, the sense that sexual orientations identify different classes of persons remains confused by the sense that some of those persons should not exist. The behavior constitutes the class, as the U.S. Supreme Court put it. Shame and guilt therefore continue to resonate in queer politics in a way that has only inexact analogues in most other political formations. Insofar as the behavior (or the desire) constitutes the class, it will remain difficult to specify the constituency in any way that forecloses shame altogether. And because the stigma of a dominated group and the shame of proscribed behavior are overdetermined by the shame attending sexuality in general, it is easy to see that we are dealing with a potent mix. The rhetoric of gay pride plays on each of these levels, and more.

The same line of reflection soon discloses that “shame” is a fairly reductive analytic category. There is a tendency to treat shame as a constant, even in analyses that focus on the different role of shame in different cultures. In the anthropological literature, for example, so much has been said about honor and shame as a defining element of Mediterranean cultures that this is often advanced as a warrant for seeing the Mediterranean in area-studies terms, as a single formation. There is also a familiar if somewhat dubious distinction between shame cultures and guilt cultures, the source of shame being externalized in the former, internalized in the latter. (In a shame culture, the thought goes, people worry about their status in the eyes of others; in a guilt culture, they worry about their status when no one is looking.) A monotheistic god obviously plays a large role in distinguishing one from the other. In these traditions of argument, shame has different roles to play in the organization of different cultures, but the experience of shame is thought to be familiar and explanatory. Shame comes to seem a universal affect—more central to the mechanisms of social control in some cases than in others, sometimes externalized and sometimes internalized, but experientially the same whenever we see it.

Queer studies has been groping toward an alternative suggestion: that there is something distinctive about the queer experience of shame. Is there at least a special way of transmuting shame that the word “queer” connotes? To understand this intuition we will need to discriminate much more finely among the possible contexts and mediations of shame. Obviously, given the way I began with Whitman, I think there is something to this intuition. But I also think that to explore it requires skepticism about universal accounts of the mechanisms of shame, whether psychoanalytic or

ego-psychological. It might in fact be difficult to develop much in the way of a general theory of shame.

As with sex and sexuality, shame involves a complex relationship between rhetoric and physiological reactions; those for whom the latter seem decisive tend to think that it is extracultural.¹ Some corporeal dimensions of affect—blushing, lowering of the head and eyes, a flooding sensation—are so common and widespread as to seem to warrant the sense that shame is a universal human constant. Sylvan Tomkins, for one, argues strongly for the place of shame as an elemental apparatus, hardwired into the human. “Shyness, shame, and guilt,” he says, “are one and the same affect.” “Shame,” he writes elsewhere, “is the affect of indignity, of defeat, of transgression, and of alienation.”²

A suggestive list, to be sure. The clustering of these different meanings suggests why the affect can be so complexly resonant in queer culture. Yet the heterogeneous meanings of the affect also suggest that we are no closer to understanding how it could be special to queer culture if it underlies so many social phenomena.

There are some suggestive themes in Tomkins’s psychology of the self, many of which have been taken up by Eve Sedgwick, Douglas Crimp, and others. Shame is seen by them as foundational to the sense of self, but in a paradoxical way, for it is both individuating and obliterating. It is an essentially social affect—occasioned by the regard of another even if the other is internalized—yet it is fundamentally an experience of the separateness of the self, a broken exchange. It is essentially ambivalent: “In shame I wish to continue to look and to be looked at, but I also do not wish to do so.” It summons elemental, infantile affect, but no one social relationship accounts for it, even the caregiver–child relationship. In fact the appearance of strangers seems to be a crucial trigger: “As soon as the infant learns to differentiate the face of the mother from the face of a stranger (approximately seven months of age), he is vulnerable to the shame response.”³

For reasons I will bring up shortly, I do not believe that this psychological tradition can be a sure guide to the politics of shame, but I do not mean to dismiss this train of reflection out of hand. I find much of it suggestive. Take for example the notion that shame is an affect of defeated reciprocity. This very general pattern has a specifically sexual manifestation that can be overdetermined by the shame of the sexual body. As Tomkins puts it in his disarming way, “If I wish to suck or bite your body and you are reluctant, I can become ashamed.”⁴ This kind of shame is what I believe is called normal experience. But a related form of nonreciprocity-shame must be in-

trinsic to the idea of counternormative desire—not just because such desire is statistically less likely to be returned (an odd thought, supposing one could imagine a random distribution of desired objects), nor because it is expected to be unreturned, nor even because I expect that the object of my desire ought to be reluctant, but because the entire possibility of a willing partner has no place in the imagery and institutions of social belonging. The reproduction of the world is indifferent to such desire; my wish to suck or bite your body is waste, with no place in the motivating structures of reciprocity. In this way some experience of shame might be immanent to counternormative desire, and not just to derivative discourse about such desire.

Shame is a kind of social knowledge, even if only in the infant's discovery of strangers, and the social contextualization of shame is therefore not extrinsic to the affect. But it is infinitely complex, perhaps especially in the Anglophone North Atlantic cultures, where shame encompasses in some sense guilt, degradation, abasement abashedness, bashfulness, shyness, embarrassment, self-consciousness, modesty, dishonor, disgrace, humiliation, mortification, low self-esteem, indignity, ignobility, abjection, and stigma. It's like having thirty-two words for snow: the fine discriminations of the vernacular suggest something like a fascination. Modern culture has created new forms of shame as well as new remediations of shame.

In understanding this we are obviously handicapped by any theory that treats shame principally as an elemental affect, with a "logic" and a physiology. Let me just be tedious for a moment by naming a few of the contexts that make shame especially resonant for Whitman, Jean Genet, and contemporary queer culture—not to systematize a new theory of shame, but to remind us how little we understand simply by calling it shame.

Gender. The scandal of masculine shame is such that we call it feminizing. Drag queens, sissies, and bottoms are virtuosi of shame, in ways that are almost infinitely variable but have in common the background expectation of masculinity as immunity to shame.

Sexual objectification. Shame is an experience of exposure, in which I become suddenly an object through the eyes of another; it thus resonates powerfully in situations of erotic objectification, visibility, and display. This of course also has gendered meanings, and a special resonance in liberal culture, which takes objectification to be an unethical indignity upon the human.

Privatization of affect. When we read that sixteenth-century Frenchmen were in the habit of administering slaps and verbal abuse to the corpses of con-

demned men, we are reminded that practices of public shaming have not always been understood in terms of an affect that is thought to be actually experienced. Modern forms of discipline rely less on the kinds of public degradation that once were such a spectacular armature of shaming; the stocks have been dismantled. Indeed, modern liberal culture defines itself as more moral than other cultures partly because it avoids public rituals of shaming and abjection. The dignity of the human is asserted by screening criminals from public display. Thus we accustom ourselves to the expectation that shame is a problem, that it never has a normative application.

The visibility or invisibility of the racial body as another form of involuntary corporeal exposure through the eyes of the Other. This is in evidence in section 7 of "I Sing the Body Electric," where the speaker dramatizes the indignity of slavery by recoding the exposure of the slave's body as celebration—but where the exposure as "black" of the slave's body and the invisibility of the auctioneer's voice are part of the taken-for-granted frame for the performance.

Erotic idealization. The play of fantasy renders any physical actuality an occasion of unwonted and shameful visibility: fatness, thinness, freckles, baldness, hairiness, asslessness, whatever. In the environment of erotic idealization that is heightened by mass culture, any aspect of the body can be registered as actuality, and shame measures the gap.

Class shame, whether of bourgeois modesty and propriety, or the attendant indignity of working or outlying classes.

Normalization and deviant shame. In modern culture the statistical and demographic imagination has created a new variety of shame. Norms of health and physicality are no longer understood to stem from divine plan, or Platonic ideas, or an ordering of the world established in the time of myth. They are understood to be revealed in their lawfulness by standard distribution; the norms and averages of population disclose the natural laws, teleology, and healthy state of my own body. So I experience shame in the degree of my deviance from this imagined but essentially distributional norm. Queerness can be understood as the constitutive antithesis of the modern demographic imaginary, and therefore in a sense as its unanticipated by-product.

Provincialism. The shame of the rube, the bumpkin in the metropolis, the culture that discovers itself as belated and parochial from the cosmopolitan

vantage. In Whitman's time this was the self-understanding of America in relation to Europe, and among the transmutations of shame he performed most effectively was the invention of shameless provincialism as the rhetoric of American nationalism. Writing apparently artless verse, sounding a barbaric yawp, was part of that transmuting performance.

The liberal language of dignity and its shame theory. We take it for granted that we should not be ashamed. The veil, as an objectification of shamefulness designed to introject modesty, scandalizes this sensibility.

Christian redemption. The narrative movement from shame to pride or dignity has a normative force for modern culture that stems in part from the resources of redemptive culture more generally. The queer embrace of shame thus has to combat—or adapt—the expectation of redemptive narrative.

The revaluing of the passions. During the long eighteenth century, pride and shame were systematically revalued, with the other passions. Pride was rehabilitated, moving from its place at the fount of all sins to a cardinal virtue, while shame was severed from its tight relationship to ethical virtue and the divine perspective.

Authenticity and expressivism. Involuntary corporeal affect acquires a new kind of value when it is recoded as evidence of authentic experience and therefore as a resource for expressivity. The flushed body of shame and the aroused body of sexuality have this in common, and Whitman's performances of shame are often the same passages in which he does so much to invent the modern vision of sexuality as an expressive capacity.

Secular confession. The literature of temperance and addiction has transformed the role of shame in confessional form, from something performed by confession to something overcome through confession.

Pariah parallelism. Insofar as dignity is understood not as a limited resource like honor but as intrinsic to the human, it becomes possible to see an essential homology among the outcasts of shame. Both Whitman and Genet were capable of carrying this into a kind of prophetic politics.

Circulatory norms of discourse. The norms of modernity, and especially the public sphere, include the metadiscursive norms of explicitation and extensive access. Secrecy and explicitation, intimacy and publicity, are very

often overdetermined as shame and pride (as in “The Frailest Leaves”), so that the normative movement from shame to pride is also a rule for the production of discourse. This makes for some very strange and interesting effects in counterpublics, which constitute themselves by circulation among strangers, but also by setting bars to total accessibility and explicitation.

Translation. Shame is very often a recontextualization effect; something that plays invisibly in one context feels shameful when exposed to a more encompassing or powerful view. And the feeling of shame as separation is a discovery of the divided social field. The impulse of mass culture toward the suture of the social field—a mainstream—means that an embrace of shame feels socially perverse. This also is in play for counterpublics.

These last points help us to reevaluate a theme in the general self-psychological account of shame that might bear more particularly on queer life. The shame of the Other can have a peculiar shaming effect, not only because it directly inhibits mutual enjoyment, but also because it poses “an identification threat.” The shame of the Other, insofar as I am interested in the Other, produces in me some shame as an affect of defeated interest, but also as an affect of self-repudiation. This opens onto a problem interestingly taken up in Crimp’s essay on Warhol (this volume). Following Tomkins and Sedgwick, Crimp observes that there is no community in shame. It is an isolating, obliterating affect. In shame my exposure has witnesses (even if imaginary or internalized), but being witnessed separates me, abjects me. And the shame of the Other, as Crimp puts it, might flood me with a shame that I imagine to be analogous, but insofar as I am likely to be ashamed of my shame I repudiate my very identification with the shamed Other. Shame is a poor footing for sympathy. For Crimp, in fact, this is the basis of what he calls an ethical response in shame: a recognition of insuperable Otherness. Facing the shame of the Other, I understand the shame but am at the same time prevented from assimilating it to my own shame. And that’s good.

As I have already indicated, I have misgivings about this argument and its construal of ethical virtue. At the very least, it seems to me to dodge, by the very generality of its phenomenological account of shame, a reckoning of what is queer about queer shame; shame is taken as a constant. And the current vogue for a theory of the ethical as deriving from the Otherness of the Other seems to me to be blind to the most interesting questions about ethical projects that Foucault and others have laid out. But I think Crimp is right to identify a problem in the collectivization of shame, at least as shame

functions in contemporary North Atlantic culture. Persons shamed by the nature of their desires, in what they take to be their innermost privacy, are not drawn into commonality by the witnessing of each other's shame; quite the contrary. (There is an analogue to this insight in Goffman's analysis of stigma: "I'm not that," the stigmatized person says of her image.)⁵ Perhaps the problem here lies in the reflexive layering of shame, the possibility of my not being ashamed of the shame that the shame of the Other provokes in me, a possibility that is very far removed from the idea of pride for either of us.

We might notice, in this connection, that queer preoccupations with shame tend not to be simply about intrasubjective registrations of shaming or its internalization as guilt. There is a distinct pattern or tradition of queer ethical practice in regard to the shame of the Other, an effort of imagination at a commonality not predicated on the erasure of shame. Remember, for example, that Genet's spit-and-roses fantasy is provoked by the sight of schoolboys spitting in another boy's mouth, not his own.⁶ For all the transfixing isolation of shame in Genet's own experience, it is the witnessing of the transitive shaming of another that provokes his fantasy of transmutation. (Sartre, in *Saint Genet*, emphasizes that in such ways Genet differs quite sharply from Jouhandeau; he attributes the difference to Jouhandeau's Catholicism and Genet's secularization of abjection.)⁷

Indeed, in this light we might return briefly to the peculiar use of lyric convention in "Calamus":

*Here I shade and hide my thoughts, I myself do not expose them,
And yet they expose me more than all my other poems.*

"Here," on one reading, is the magnificently capacious and ambiguated deixis of lyric speech. Here we are, mysteriously present at the scene of enunciation, which is the scene both of the speaker's speaking and of our reading (but not of any possible relationship of alterity or address between the two). Here I shade and hide my thoughts. Well, am I here or not? Is this "my thought," or is the speaker's thought something shaded and hidden from me? Do I see him exposed? To imagine him as exposed "here," I must stand back, objectifying the utterance as exposing him to me, rupturing the miraculous immediacy of lyric speech (thus suggesting a less conventional reading in which "here" might really be there on the page, in the form of the book circulated among strangers in real situations of address). I am both inside and outside the scene of speech, both drawn into identification with the speaker (these are, after all, "my thoughts") and forced to recoil from

that identification in order to make literal sense of what he says. And this oscillating movement makes real to me a sense both of shame and of a perversely defeated relationality that is one of the preoccupations of the series as a whole: "Are you the new person drawn toward me?" and so on.

This pattern can, I think, be shown to be fundamental to the distinctive cluster of the Calamus poems. But it leads to some more general recognitions about Whitman; to be attuned to this question is to rethink especially the standard image of Whitman as the poster boy of shamelessness. The "Calamus" lyrics can be taken retrospectively to gloss the famous opening—"I celebrate myself"—as an attempted overcoming of shame. That the perfect circle of happy subjectivity in that line continues to be interesting at all probably has to do with its paradoxes. How is it that "myself" stands in such need of celebrating? And where am I when I do this celebrating? The assumed need for the enunciation of the phrase, the implication in other words that it does not go without saying, makes us wonder whether it can ever felicitously perform—or, by the same token, fail to perform—the celebratory ritual it undertakes. The energy of this "I" contrasts suspiciously with myself, left alone in its mute, inglorious inexplicitness before I began making the noise of celebration. The opening can be taken to frame the work as a whole—all that follows being a specification of the self I purport to celebrate, and an ever-expanding test of my ability to celebrate it. The implied need for the remediation of shame is a metapragmatic gloss on the poetic enunciation itself.

More concretely, Whitman's rhetoric of dignity very often entails quite pointed performances of shamed subjectivity, from the masturbatory raving of section 28 in "Song of Myself" to the "O hot-cheeked and blushing" passage or the slave auction scene in "I Sing the Body Electric" to the confessional section 6 of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry." When these are kept in mind, "Calamus" seems less eccentric, distinct mainly for the explicitness by which it codes itself as speech in a dialectic of shame and dignification of which the closure remains elusive. In describing the procession of the Carolines in Genet, Didier Eribon remarks that they are an incarnation of the poetic gesture, or, more precisely, an allegory of poetry; we could say the same about these displays of shame in Whitman.⁸

Queer culture has practiced in countless ways the complexities not just of shame but of performances of shame, of formally mediated imitations of shame that objectify counternormative experience, of squirm-making disturbances in the social field that bring counterpublics into a kind of public co-presence while also deploying shame to mark a difference from the public. Staging shame as disruptions of relationality, we paradoxically

cally create new relationships insofar as we can school ourselves not to be ashamed of our shame—a project that of course disappears the second we persuade ourselves that not being ashamed of our shame requires us to be proud.

Notes

1. Many recent studies of the emotions insist, however, that the difference between what is physiologically “hardwired” and what is culturally variable is neither sharp nor exclusive. For a good discussion of this point see Jesse Prinz, *Gut Reactions: A Perceptual Theory of Emotions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

2. Sylvan Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 133, 103.

3. *Ibid.*, 140.

4. *Ibid.*, 152.

5. Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963), *passim*.

6. The scene, from Genet's *Miracle of the Rose* (trans. Bernard Frechtman [London: A. Blond, 1965]), is perhaps more familiar from the 1991 Todd Haynes film *Poison*.

7. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: George Braziller, 1963).

8. Didier Eribon, *Une morale du minoritaire: Variations sur un thème de Jean Genet* (Paris: Fayard, 2001), especially 9-11.

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