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Review: *Writing Shame: Contemporary Literature, Gender and Negative Affect* by Kaye Mitchell, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020 296 pp., ISBN 9787016229397, h/bk £80.00, p/bk £24.99, e-book £90.00.

Denise Wong, QMUL, UK, denise.wong@qmul.ac.uk



While feminism and shame may feel like well-worn topics, recent events are testimony to enduring paradoxical attitudes towards women. In the week bookended by International Woman's Day and Mother's Day, the disappearance and suspected murder of 33-year-old Sarah Everard by a Met officer in London has reinvigorated conversations about women's rights and safety. From victim testimonies to the way girls have been raised and socialised, those identified and identifying as women are questioning why the focus has, historically, been on whether or not *women* have exercised caution or vigilance. But isn't this just another form of victim-shaming? Why, then, might public discourse be so prone to shaming women and what could this reveal about the gendered nature of shame? All of these questions are pertinent to Kaye Mitchell's third monograph, *Writing Shame: Contemporary Literature, Gender and Negative Affect* (2020), which illuminates the contemporary situation with nuance and sensitivity. Mitchell, who is Senior Lecturer in Contemporary Literature and Co-Director of the Centre for New Writing at the University of Manchester, surveys a diverse corpus ranging from theoretical, literary, lesbian pulp and autofiction published (and *re*-published) since 1990 to explore the triangulation of shame, gender and writing. Having written extensively on literary intention, contemporary literature and experimental women's writing, Mitchell's arsenal is well-equipped for making several crucial interventions: *Writing Shame* sets out to establish shame's 'originary role in the production and shaping of femininity and female subjectivity' (20). Despite longstanding philosophical interests in the phenomenology of shame evinced by the works of Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Paul Sartre and, more recently, Giorgio Agamben, Mitchell sets out to redress the glaring blind spot of their accounts—that shame is constitutive of femininity from inculcation. Where the vast majority of current scholarship tends to thematic or character-based studies of shame, Mitchell's study undertakes a uniquely narratological examination of the ways shame is structurally embedded into writing itself as an aspect of form. Lastly, following Timothy Bewes' work in *The Event of Postcolonial Shame* (2011), *Writing Shame* resists any straightforwardly positive figuring of the writing of shame. The view that shame can be overcome is, not only largely incongruous with Mitchell's argument that shame is constitutive of femininity, but also disregards shame's remarkable transmissibility—more often *shared* than fully resolved or displaced.

The introduction of *Writing Shame* presents a comprehensive guide through the imbrication of shame, gender and writing that run through the book. It begins by contextualising the recent cultural preoccupation with shame and deftly summarises the cross-disciplinary developments in shame studies. With stakes in psychology, ethics, Holocaust studies, political theory, feminism and literary studies, Mitchell maps out coordinates that witness shame as a culturally pervasive affect. Though

shame has always figured in philosophical and literary writing dating back to antiquity, modern day distinctions between shame and guilt did not emerge until the early sixties. As Mitchell notes, critic Ruth Leys observes a ‘major paradigm shift’ in the West from a culture focused on guilt and wrongdoing to one based on shame and flawed selfhood (1-2). Shame is now broadly understood as that which concerns the sense of a deficient or inadequate self, while guilt is related to the individual’s self-perception of having committed a transgression (2). Although the argument is informed by the aforementioned established philosophical accounts of shame and ontology, Mitchell reminds us that such universalising accounts of shame crucially ignore gender. By interweaving the contributions of Silvan Tomkins, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Sandra Bartky amidst a host of varied voices, Mitchell’s expansive framework argues for a more relational understanding of selfhood.

Each of the following four chapters return to the triumvirate of shame, gender and writing and extends its reach in illuminating ways. Chapter 1 opens with an analysis of the problems and possibilities of shame in queer theory’s recent shift towards negative affect. Mitchell recounts the structural forgetting that preceded the recent recuperation of 1950s lesbian pulp fiction, a ‘formerly shameful sub-genre’ with ‘politically dubious, self-hating content and connotations’ (31 and 54). The study’s conviction that shame cannot be simply forgotten or overcome is strengthened by Mitchell’s account of shame being both the reason for lesbian pulp fiction’s exclusion from the canon and the reason for its renewed popularity in the twenty-first century. In the second half of the chapter, Mitchell reads Anne Bannon’s *Women in the Shadows* (1959/2002) and Della Martin’s *Twilight Girl* (1961/2006) as case studies, which both feature racialised characters against conventional practice in pulp fiction at the time of their original publication. Mitchell offers an insightful reading of how race in these two texts ‘becomes a site of both fascination and shame’ while serving ‘as both an intensifier of queer shame and a mirror of, or analogy for, that shame, in a troubling case of shame appropriation’ (75). In Martin’s *Twilight Girl*, Mitchell expounds with aplomb how the character Mavis’s blackness is ‘written into her very movements’ and characterisation as ‘both lure and otherness’ (76); whilst Bannon’s *Women in Shadows* highlights the way Tris’s brown skin is fetishised by her admirer, alongside the narrative’s withholding of her racial identity until the novel’s close.

Many of the authors and texts featured in Mitchell’s corpus turn tired notions of sexual propriety on its head in deliberately unsettling ways. Mitchell’s study is perhaps at its most daring when it reads A. M. Homes’ *The End of Alice* (1996) and Mary Gaitskill’s *Two Girls, Fat and Thin* (1991) in Chapter 2. In *The End of Alice*, Homes’ narrator is an imprisoned pedophile and murderer whose eloquence is reminiscent of *Lolita*’s Humbert

Humbert as a literary predecessor (110). Without lapsing into moralistic indictments, Mitchell analyses deeply disturbing passages of Homes' text, which become imperative for her argument precisely because they illustrate how shame infects and affects the reader (118). By alerting readers to shame's transmissibility, Mitchell thus builds upon what Barry Sheils and Julie Walsh describe in *Shame and Modern Writing* (2018) as 'an economy of affective transfer between writer, reader and text, operating in excess of representation' (quoted in Mitchell, 1-2). The ambivalence of the shame response in *The End of Alice* manifests not only in transgressive character development and the figure of the unreliable narrator, but also the ways in which the reader is implicated as 'the pleasure of reading partakes of the ambivalent pleasure of shame' (108). In her reading of Gaitskill's *Two Girls, Fat and Thin*, Mitchell considers the impact of alternating narration for the two protagonists, whose 'stories intersect imaginatively in the mind of the reader', despite only three brief encounters in the whole of the novel (119). Returning to shame's transmissibility, Mitchell describes how 'the contagion of shame allows for the affective coming together of these two characters', while simultaneously 'magnif[ying] their isolation, their separation from everyone around them, and from each other' (130). In one of the book's most interesting extrapolations of theory, Mitchell reads how the 'dynamic of identification and disidentification' in Heather Love's concept of 'identity ambivalence' operates in both texts to illustrate 'the particular queerness of shame and its double-edged relationship with femininity (of which it is both constitutive and disruptive)' (105-106). Though the section is not particularly lengthy, it clearly evokes an earlier observation Mitchell makes of the kind of ambivalent reflexivity that characterises even scholarly writing on shame (42-3).

This troubling contagion of shame is further developed in Chapter 3 which compares the autofictional writings of Chris Kraus and Marie Calloway. The chapter concludes by turning to a reading of Katherine Angel's *Unmastered* (2012) to 'raise further questions concerning the shame-producing tensions between apparently discordant desires' (153). Since femininity and shame are inextricable and resist redemption in writing, Mitchell examines the efficacy of 'self-humiliation' as a perverse strategy of empowerment in three texts authored by women in the contemporary. She reads Kraus's *I Love Dick* (1997) alongside Calloway's *what purpose did i serve in your life* (2013) as examples of writing in which the autobiographical narrating *I* is 'both constituted and undone by a shame that [...] refuse the consolations of coherence and linearity' (153). Mitchell asks what happens to women writers who are audacious enough to be shameless in their narration of female desire and discovers, unsurprisingly, shame seeping into the reception of all three texts with criticisms of narcissism and moral depravity. For Mitchell, Kraus's use of this autobiographical narrating *I* transcends

beyond terms like ‘trite’ and ‘neurotic’, which inevitably ‘imply[...] the non-serious nature of women’s first-person narrative and the pathological nature of personal confession’, and succeeds in ‘rework[ing] her vulnerability into a position of strength and agency through the innovative revisioning’ (173). Calloway, on the other hand, shifts to a depersonalised and disempowered third-person narration at a crucial moment, thereby illustrating ‘at the level of form her frequent slippage from subject (narrator, agent, observer) to object (passive, objectified, abused)’ (174). Mitchell’s reading of pronouns and narrative voice in relation to agency and passivity in autofictional women’s writing effectively recasts shame as an aspect of narrative form.

In order to parse further the gendered nature of shame, Mitchell addresses the representation of masculine shame in writing. Synthesising Gilles Deleuze and Steve Connor, Chapter 4 begins by thinking about whether writing might ‘facilitate an escape from the shame of “being a man”’, as Deleuze suggests, or if ‘[w]riting might also be a way of meeting with shame, a coming in to male shamefulness’ as Connor contends (199). None of Mitchell’s primary texts conform to either view. Instead, they complicate and enrich readers’ understanding of the dynamics of masculine shame in contemporary writing. While Philip Roth’s *The Dying Animal* (2001) and Martin Amis’s *The Pregnant Widow* (2010) provide examples of novels which use writing as a means of displacing masculine shame onto female bodies, the legacy of Karl Ove’s Knausgaard’s six-book series *My Struggle* (particularly the second, *A Man in Love* [2009/2013]) reveals something singular. Mitchell distinctively takes her argument beyond the typical binary-understanding of Knausgaard’s ‘struggle’ as a struggle with authenticity/inauthenticity—a view which ‘has been central to the eulogising reception of the series in the Anglo-American literary scene’ (222). Within the struggle for authenticity, Mitchell reads Knausgaard’s attempts to write masculine shame as an endeavour inevitably ‘presented and received as an heroic “struggle” for authenticity’; in essence, Knausgaard’s ‘resistance to feminisation’ perpetuates ‘a (romantic) conception of authorship that is both hyperbolically feted and doggedly masculine’ (235–36). This is in part because failure is represented as an inherent feature of masculinity, entangled with ‘the implicit or explicit denigration of femininity in the cultural rhetoric around shame and shaming’ (222–23). Masculine shame in Knausgaard, acutely experienced in fatherhood, seems ubiquitously an experience of feminisation. Mitchell observes Knausgaard’s ‘decidedly derogatory’ rhetoric ‘as he describes “men sinking everywhere into the thralls of softness and intimacy”—the action of “sinking” implies both passivity and descent, signalling their disempowerment’ as well as their loss of sexual desirability (225). At the same time, the reception to *My Struggle* is indicative of shame’s inextricability from heroism in Mitchell’s understanding of masculinity: the

‘painful solipsism’ of Knausgaard’s self-reflexivity is also what evokes identification in readers (233). From narrative discourse to reader reception, readers of *Writing Shame* journey with it through the various ways shame becomes embodied in and through writing. Finally, Mitchell’s conclusion cites a number of contemporary publications that evince the cross-cultural and cross-genre transcendence of shame. Though Mitchell acknowledges the limitations of her discussion on the intersections of race, non-binary gender identities and shame, *Writing Shame* lays the groundwork for future scholarship and raises crucial questions about work that has not yet been done. What else can be gleaned about the narrativisation of shame if we widen the scope and turn to less canonical texts and authors?

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

