True Confessions:  
Uncovering the Hidden Culture of Shame in English Studies

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In recent years, more and more people in the English profession have begun to talk openly about the emotional troubles plaguing our profession. Remarking on this phenomenon, Elaine Showalter comments that unlike the 1970s and 1980s when "personal voices in academia were often muted in the interests of theoretical analysis," beginning in the 1990s, there was a "massive return of the emotional repressed" as academic writers began to discuss "much more honestly and wrenchingly the spiritual malaise within even successful university careers" ("Regeneration" 321). As such personal accounts reveal, these are emotionally trying times for those of us in English studies: a time of continued tensions between various warring factions within the profession (and often locally within individual departments), even as there is declining support for literary studies and the humanities in the academy; a time of increasing stratification not only among so-called superstar academics and token professionals but also among tenured and nontenured faculty; and a time when, as the job market is collapsing and tenure is being slowly eroded, the Ph.D. degree is becoming an emblem not of intellectual pride but of failure for those forced into the dismal world of the adjunct instructor. If as intellectuals we have an emotional investment in our ideal image of the profession and look to the profession to enhance our feelings of self-respect and pride, many of us also inhabit an academic culture of shame.

A "multidimensional, multilayered experience," shame is an "individual phenomenon experienced in some form and to some degree by every person," and it is also a "cultural phenomenon" in which "each
culture has its own distinct sources as well as targets of shame," as shame theorist Gershen Kaufman explains (191). Psychologists who study shame often remark on how "hidden" shame is in our American culture, even though we are, in fact, a shame-based culture in which the intense focus on competition and success leads to a pervasive fear of failure. Just as shame is largely hidden in the general culture, so it is largely hidden in the academic culture. But as scholars have begun to talk more and more openly about the profession, the shame that sometimes acts as the dark twin of our intellectual pride has become increasingly evident, in particular in accounts of the emotional costs suffered by those who become targets of the scholarly attack; or those with tenure who suffer shame anxieties as they climb the tenure ladder or fear the disrespect of their academic colleagues; or those like token professionals and adjunct instructors who become subject to the class-shame system in the academy and, treated as objects of contempt, are induced to feel like failures as they internalize professional biases against them. Drawing on Kaufman's observation that "scenes of shame are reenacted" in every social group (202), my aim is to uncover, in the larger public conversation concerning the profession in recent years, the hidden shaming that goes on in academic culture and thus to expose the high human and emotional price exacted by our overly competitive and adversarial, and increasingly stratified, profession.

**Scholarly Attacks as Scenes of Shame**

Many in English studies, including recent presidents of the Modern Language Association—Linda Hutcheon, Elaine Showalter, and Herbert Lindenberger—have voiced their concern about the increasing incivility within the profession. These accounts make for depressing reading as author after author speaks of our inability to get along with each other: a competitive breed, we quarrel with each other, and all too often viciously attack and deride each other in an ongoing, and seemingly interminable, war of words.2 "Why is it that rhetoric and competition seem to go together so well in our current academic context?" asks Linda Hutcheon, who voices her dismay at her sense that higher education is becoming "wolfish" ("Rhetoric" 42, 43). In telling detail, Hutcheon describes how the academic classroom and conference have become "sites of combat
and one-upmanship” and how education itself has become more and more an “adversarial process.” “The academy rightly values critical thinking, but increasingly we seem to define that quality in terms of the wolfish belittling and even demolishing of opposing positions. . . . Need enmity enter into the question at all?” (43). In a similar way, Elaine Showalter expresses concern about the “decline in civility” in academic life, remarking that we need “to consult rather than to insult” (“Taming”). And Herbert Lindenberger laments the creation of a “warlike atmosphere” in the profession as scholars openly “demonize” each other (3).

Compelling evidence of the decline of civility in the profession is found in personal accounts of the scholarly attack culture by Jane Tompkins and Nellie McKay, who attest to the kinds of damage we inflict on others through our warlike quarreling and wolfish belittling of our opponents. Describing a woman giving a paper at an academic conference, Tompkins writes:

It is an attack on another woman’s recent book; the entire paper is devoted to demolishing it, and the speaker is doing a superb job. The audience has begun to catch the spirit of the paper, which is witty, elegant, pellucid, and razor sharp; they appreciate the deftness, the brilliance, the grace, with which the assassination is being conducted; the speaker’s intelligence flatters their intelligence, her taste becomes their taste, her principles their principles. They start to laugh at the jokes. They are inside the paper now, pulling with the speaker, seeing her victim in the same way she does, as the enemy, as someone whose example should be held up to scorn because her work is pernicious and damaging to the cause. (587)

Feeling, after the paper is over, that she has been “present at a ritual execution of some sort,” Tompkins remembers “similar executions” she has witnessed in critical essays she has read, recalling the times she has seen “someone’s diction ridiculed, or their unhappy choice of metaphor derided” or “the absurd consequences of the victim’s arguments . . . displayed for all to see” (588). Behind such verbally assaultive behavior, Tompkins finds a kind of scholarly violence: “Violence takes place in the conference rooms at scholarly meetings and in the pages of professional journals; and although it’s not the same thing to savage a person’s book
as it is to kill them with a machine gun, I suspect that the nature of the feelings that motivate both acts is qualitatively the same" (589).

Like Tompkins, McKay provides a firsthand account of the “violence” of intellectual disputes, but from the vantage point of those being attacked. She recalls a conversation she had years ago with an eminent male scholar at an MLA meeting, in which she, in naming some of the professors she had worked with as a graduate student, learned that some twenty-five years before her mentor had served as a respondent to the scholar’s paper at an MLA meeting:

The story he told me has stayed with me, not just because it made me uncomfortable then but mostly because the scenario is one with which I have become familiar, and that familiarity has not decreased my initial discomfiture. . . . As he told it to me that day, my mentor savagely attacked his paper, and he had not forgotten the episode. Not only did he recall the encounter, but as these things go, it obviously still caused him sharp pain. It mattered not whether the respondent to his paper had intended it so, but he understood the attack as one not on his paper but on his person, an impugning of his qualifications as a scholar. The perceived attack had inflicted a wound to some vital part of him, and in spite of his subsequent illustrious career, a quarter of a century later that wound had not healed. (Hutcheon, “She Do” 526)

Such encounters, McKay remarks, “continue to occur among us and to inflict wounds that do not easily heal on hapless victims. We seem to take it for granted that we stand taller, feel stronger, and are more brilliant when we make others feel smaller, weaker, and less intelligent than ourselves.” For McKay, “our words are instruments of intellectual violence” when we see ourselves as “combatants, at war with those with whom we disagree and with whom we can settle our differences only violently.” She asks, “Is it necessary for us to wound our colleagues and to claim we are more knowing than they are? Must we always be in competition with one another? And if there is another way, one in which working together promotes positive critical expression that helps instead of seeking to shame, how and where do we find it?” (Hutcheon, “She Do” 527). Like Tompkins, McKay calls attention to the verbal and intellectual
violence" of the academic argument culture. But what drives such behavior, as McKay suggests, is not only the desire to attack and have power over but also to shame one's opponents into submission. Indeed, the accounts offered by Tompkins and McKay read like classic scenes of shame.

When Tompkins and McKay describe how the person being attacked is held up to public ridicule and scorn, becoming the target of the attacker's withering sarcasm, they are documenting the public shaming of the hapless "victim" being targeted. That the "deliberate shaming" of an individual can be used as a "severe punishment" is evident in psychological accounts of the shame experience (Lewis, Introduction 1-2). Often called the "master emotion," shame derives from the shame sufferer's "own vicarious experience of the other's scorn," and, indeed, central to the shame experience is the "self-in-the-eyes-of-the-other" (Lewis, Introduction 15). Experiencing an "accentuated and disturbing sense of self-consciousness" (Goldberg 65), shame sufferers may feel inhibited, inferior, incompetent, or defective as they internalize the other's scorn. An "acutely painful and disorganizing experience," shame can leave individuals feeling "not in control," "overwhelmed," and "small, helpless, and childish." In describing their feelings, shamed individuals often voice common shame fantasies: that they could "'crawl through a hole' or 'sink through the floor' or 'die' with shame" (Lewis, Introduction 1, 19). Shame is not only a "quickly spreading and flooding affect," but it also can engender feelings of "shame about shame" (Wurmser, Mask 55) or it can lead to the shame-rage "feeling trap," a self-perpetuating chain of emotions in which unacknowledged shame leads to anger which, in turn, results in further shame (Scheff and Retzinger 104-05). If shame commonly induces a hiding or concealing response, it also can lead individuals to cover their shame through open displays of arrogance and contempt or to angrily attack others in an attempt to defend against their shame by relocating it on others.

"[A] phenomenon suffered by individuals or groups," shame is "an involuntary response to an awareness that one has lost status and is devalued" (Gilbert 29, 30). To shame an individual scholar in a public attack is to inflict "a wound to some vital part" of the intended victim's identity as a scholar and person, as McKay avows. Public shaming is also
used as a weapon by opposing groups in academic disputes. “When we hear the intellectual project of an opposed group reduced to terms such as ‘politicizing literature’ or ‘practicing an empty formalism,’” observes Lindenberger, “we recognize that a group’s work, indeed the whole value system with which it has been identified, has, for the sake of a quotable and also distorting phrase, been dismissed once and for all.” And such “demonizing on one side quickly invites reprisals: thus, those who characterize the work of colleagues as ‘trendy’ or ‘incomprehensible’ are likely to have their own called ‘old-fashioned,’ sometimes even ‘simple-minded’ in return” (3). In his account, Lindenberger calls attention to the annihilating force of contempt in academic conflicts. Referred to as “a ‘cold’ affect” by shame theorist Léon Wurmser, contempt is a “global type of aggression” that wants to “eliminate the other being” (Mask 81, 80). In effect, “Contempt says: ‘You should disappear as such a being as you have shown yourself to be—failing, weak, flawed’ . . . . To disappear into nothing is the punishment for such failure” (“Shame” 67). Invoking a classic contempt-disappear scenario, Lindenberger describes what he finds behind the verbally assaultive behavior of professionals who demonize others: the wish that their opponents would “somehow disappear” either from their “immediate department or from professional life as a whole” (3). Just as contempt can breed countercontempt and the desire to retaliate by “turning the tables”—a shame-reversing attack other script in which the humiliator is, in turn, humiliated, treated as an object of contempt (Nathanson 362-63)—so in academia where individuals are often openly contemptuous of their rivals and enemies, scholarly rituals of public shaming can breed counterattacks as opposing groups demonize their opponents and so humiliate their humiliators. This, in turn, can lead to interminable conflicts as warring parties get caught up in a kind of collective form of the shame-rage “feeling trap”—a spiral of shame and rage both between and within those individuals involved in a conflict—an emotional impasse observable in recent years in the acrimonious debates between various factions in the adversarial climate of the academy.

Even as these conflicts perpetuate themselves in departmental battles where the prospect of a new hire can expose “the intractable intellectual, generational, and sometimes ideological fault lines within the faculty”
(Kolodny 157), we now confront the unfolding “crisis of the humanities,” a phrase that “gestures toward a real condition,” as John Guillory observes: “the chronic institutional disadvantage of humanities disciplines in relation to the natural and social sciences” (28).5 “Few observers of higher education would deny that support for the humanities today is declining,” write Cathy Davidson and David Goldberg. “In an environment in which universities are increasingly ordered according to the material interests, conditions, and designs of the sciences, technology, and the professions, the future of the university would seem to render the humanities increasingly marginal, if not invisible” (42–43). If members of the English studies profession, in a contempt-disappear scenario, sometimes treat their opponents as enemies and wish they would simply disappear, we all, collectively, seem to find ourselves in an evolving contempt-disappear scenario, living, as we do, in a time when support for the humanities is “declining” and the “future of the university would seem to render the humanities increasingly marginal, if not invisible.”

The Pride/Shame Culture in English Studies
It is telling that “issues of vulnerability, dignity, and respect are so sotto voce, so tacit and hidden in the institutional culture of the academy that they tend to be expressed and visible only when an institutional transformation seems to be emerging” (Berlant 108). Our desire to win the respect of others and our fear of their disrespect call attention not only to our deep—and, it would appear, collective—shame vulnerability, but also to the shame/pride culture we inhabit in the academy. “Shame and pride seem to be an almost continuous part of human existence not only in crises but also in the slightest of social contacts,” according to shame theorist Thomas Scheff(51). In daily social interactions, states of shame and pride “almost always depend on the level of deference accorded a person: pride arises from deferential treatment by others (‘respect’), and shame from lack of deference (‘disrespect’). Gestures that imply respect or disrespect, together with the emotional response they generate, make up the deference/emotion system, which exerts a powerful influence on human behavior” (Scheff, Retzinger, Ryan 184–85).

Within the deference/emotion system of the academy, tenure, as Jeffrey Williams remarks, “stands as a shorthand for the lived experience
of working in an academic department—the social relations there and their hierarchy, the power and control we exercise or are subject to, the imaginary public worth of what we do, and our difference from those with ordinary jobs.” Encapsulating the “distinctive affective conditions of our professional position,” tenure can connote “our pride of professional position” and also “the anxiety of the profession, both internally (the death threat of publish or perish . . . ) and externally (our nervous claim for public value)” (230). As the “enduring code of power relations among academic workers, incorporating those who judge as well as those judged,” tenure is “a conspicuous and constant marker of status for both those with it and those without it” (233). Extending “beyond the initiatory threshold of tenure to the full range of positions and ranks in an academic department,” the “tenure affect,” apparent, for example, in the responses of faculty who are either granted or denied promotion, continues to govern the self-image of faculty and incorporate them in its affective—and shame-pride—dynamic (233–34). Tenure, then, even as it “confers pride and satisfaction” and “asserts our class distinction and prestige” (Williams 235) does not necessarily protect us from shame as we attempt to move up the professional ladder.

In his personal account of life “beyond the tenure track,” James Phelan describes the tenure anxiety experienced by those coming up through the tenure ranks, recounting the reaction of an associate professor in his department who was denied promotion to full professor. Behind the man’s manifest anger at being rejected—his shame—rage—Phelan sensed that he was “deeply wounded,” and suspected that though he would “heal,” he would still “carry the scars from this decision for a long time” (159). Phelan also recalls how, when he ended up on a short list for an endowed appointment at Trinity College, he found it “ego-gratifying” only to suffer the “sting” of rejection when he was not offered the appointment (170, 207). Realizing that in his involvement with Trinity, he was “seeking the validation of ascending to the next rung on the ladder,” Phelan came to see that the search for external validation infects the profession just as it infects our culture “with its repeated message that your worth is defined by your salary and your position” (214, 215).

Like Phelan, other scholars have begun to talk candidly about the shame-vulnerabilities—the fear of failure or rejection or anxiety about
losing one’s academic reputation or the respect of one’s colleagues—that haunt many of those working within academic departments. “We learn to be professionals as assistant professors, when we are institutionally at our weakest; we figure out institutional cultures and imitate those whom we like or who we think have institutional savvy; we follow our survival instincts; we figure out how not to feel constantly threatened by the possible disrespect of colleagues and students and how to read the meaning of their respect, . . .” writes Lauren Berlant. “Our dignity often seems to be on the line, but no one ever talks about institutional life as a debilitating collective nightmare, which it so often is” (108). Lennard Davis, who observes that in academe “honor, prestige, and reputation” are perhaps as important as, if not more important than, intellect, describes how competition can breed shame. In a profession where “[f]ame and honor are seen as the spoils of a zero-sum game in which there is not enough reward to go around,” individuals feel diminished at the success of others. “If my colleague gets an award, I have been robbed of something. If someone publishes a book with a prestigious house, somehow all my books lose a bit of their luster. If another professor gets an offer from Harvard, then my remaining at a less prestigious institution now doubly stigmatizes me.” Even for those who have tenure, academe “is a place of shifting sands and uncertain reputations. Those who live by reputations die by them.” In the shame/pride culture of the profession, scholars can also feel pressured to conform to a group identity to avoid being shamed. In a poignant account of how debilitating such an academic environment can be, Lisa Ruddick discusses the shame paralysis she experienced after finishing her first book. Feeling that she had to abide by intellectual rules she found limiting but was unable to challenge without “courting disgrace,” she had to “hide or smuggle in” her convictions in her work, always fearing attack by others in a profession that is “intellectually cliquish, arrogant, and competitive” and that threatens those who break “disciplinary taboos” with “ostracism by the group”—a classic shame punishment.7

In their personal and frank accounts, scholars point to the hidden emotional costs of our current competitive pride/shame culture in the English profession. “[T] is . . . important to remember that ‘stellar’ achievements can also bring enormous anxieties concerning one’s ability
to build on those achievements," observes Donald Hall in *The Academic Self: An Owner's Manual* (11). "Unless we find ways of taking our successes as well as our failures as less than fully accurate indicators of the sum total of our fundamental worth in this world, we will be forever driven by a fear of failure. . . . Careerism in its anxious and voracious need for continuing, quantifiable achievement—a certain number of books or articles published, a certain hierarchical ranking of affiliated institutions and presses, a certain salary increase—is never satisfied or satisfiable" (11–12). If those who succeed can still be vulnerable to shame in the emotion/deference system of the academy, even worse is the plight of those who lose out in the status wars in a time when the star system idolizes and idealizes some few scholars while most others, even those with tenure, are dismissed as token professionals, and still others, because of the overproduction of Ph.D.s and the diminishing number of tenured positions available, are pushed to the periphery of the profession as nontenure-track faculty, becoming "failed"—that is, shamed—professionals. 8

The Class-Shame System within the Academy: The Plight of Token Professionals and Adjuncts

"[I]t is the affect of contempt which partitions the inferior from the superior," observes shame theorist Gershen Kaufman in his description of how, in hierarchical systems, particular individuals or classes of individuals are "looked down upon, found inferior, considered beneath contempt" (241, 202). In an American culture that has been described as "shame phobic"—for it places value on "achievement, competition, power, and dominance"—contempt scripts reinforce the hierarchical division of people into superior and inferior groups (Goldberg 78). This script also operates in the culture of the academy where the win-lose mentality of competition fuels the hierarchical divisions between various groups within our ranks, and where, as each group enacts its scripted part, those designated as inferior come to carry the unwanted shame of the superior group.

James Sosnoski, in his analysis of the phenomenon of token professionals—that is, professors who teach in mainstream universities but spend more time in teaching and service work than in researching—
points to the hidden emotional costs of such a class-shame system within the academy. "No statistics on matters of humiliation exist, so individual experiences are the only testimony to them," writes Sosnoski. "At the same time, accurate descriptions of painful experiences reveal powerful emotions which traditionally have been excluded from academic discourse" (xxvi). Belonging to a "disadvantaged 'lower' academic 'class,'" token professionals are "teachers whose careers will never actually match the exemplary type of which they are the token but by which template they are nonetheless evaluated." Accepting standards that ensure their failure, they are university teachers "of whom exemplary productivity is demanded but to whom adequate research time is not made available" (4). Yet, despite their lower-class status as token members of the professoriate, they aspire to become ideal professors, comparing themselves, in a comparison-making script, to what Sosnoski calls the Magister Implicatus, a configuration of the ideal professor that represents "the institutional construction of intellectuality" (86). As Sosnoski explains, "The configuration Magister names a common experience—the perception that someone is 'greater' than we are, that someone can do things 'better' than we can, that someone is stronger, more powerful, smarter. This person has the 'mastery' we desire." The Magister also "configures an academic conscience that regulates professional conduct. His is the voice in the background that says, you 'ought to.' His voice resonates within us because its pronouncements are prescribed by the institution of criticism we profess" (82). Unable to embody the self-ideal of the Magister, token professionals accept their "lowly place in the university hierarchy" but at the cost of their self-esteem (85). In his account of token professionals, Sosnoski refers to a common shame script in which the failure to live up to an internalized ideal—in the English profession an idealized image of intellectual mastery and pride—leads to shame: that is, to "feelings about the whole self in failure" or as "inferior in competition or in comparison with others" (Morrison, Shame 12).

"It's one thing to speak of hierarchy," states Terry Caesar. "It's another thing to speak of class. And it's a third thing to try to speak of each of these things in quite personal terms from within the peculiar context of academic life, where the first is widely taken for granted, while the second is largely suppressed" (9). The letters Caesar received after publication
of his notorious essay, "On Teaching at a Second-Rate University," disclose the emotional angst of those who inhabit a lowly place in the university hierarchy. "For most of us, it was over long ago," confesses one woman. "In a profession obsessed with elitism and correct sympathies, most of us are buried by the pretensions of the nouveau elite research schools. . . . The few who are successful in the academy fear that failure is contagious and they do their best to smother us" (28). Another woman concedes that she has "slipped well below" Caesar's second-rate university category; another correspondent comments to Caesar, "You are not the only one out in the academic Gulag"; still another acknowledges, "We're losers, all (and we know it?)"; and yet another says, "Where did we find it necessary to construct institutional non-being (or slums, I suppose)?" (32, 34, 35). Within the profession, observes Caesar, "Nobody likes to consider the hegemony of first-rate universities or even to characterize the subjugated status of second-rate ones" (62). Thus, "what 'everybody knows' about the politics of institutional affiliation in the profession has scarcely begun to be articulated, and publicly barely at all" (61). What it is like to be affiliated with a second- or even third-rate institution is recounted by Joseph Urgo, who once taught at Bryant College, a small business college, and experienced first-hand the "affiliation blues" of token professionals. "The roots of the affiliation blues are in the fixing of identity," writes Urgo. "At conferences, colleagues at larger universities respond bemusedly. A business college? There will be the assumption that you settled, at worst, for something less than academic genuineness, or that there is something hanging in your intellectual closet that remains hidden to the casual eye. . . . A flash of doubt about your capabilities, your integrity, and your intelligence passes over you—does it originate in your interlocutor or is it self-inflicted? The seeds of paranoia are sown" (21). To be affiliated with a business college is to be stigmatized, Urgo learns, for such an affiliation is like having a "facial scar." "My experience is that this affiliation indeed may be considered professionally disfiguring but can also become, like a Hawthornesque birthmark, a gauge by which one sees how standards are perpetuated. I stand before my colleagues, at national conferences, as a listing on an editorial board, as a candidate before a selection committee, as a marked
sholar” (28). Shame, as Léon Wurmser comments, entails not only the “fear of disgrace” but also the feeling one has when one is looked at with contempt: it is “the affect of contempt directed against the self—by others or by one’s own conscience” (“Shame” 67). To yield to the affiliation is to internalize the contemptuous gaze of others and thus feel self-contempt. “In the hinterland of academia, at places like Bryant, yielding to the affiliation means internalizing the gaze of those in positions of status, accepting the taint perceived by those who refuse to be simply grateful for their good fortune but must instead locate self-worth in the degradation of others, like you” (UrGo 30). That those in inferior positions are assigned to carry the unwelcome emotions of members of the superior group, who manage their own shame by fostering it in others, is evident in UrGo’s account.

UrGo, like Caesar and Sosnoski, calls attention to the shaming effects of yielding to and internalizing professional biases against those who teach at second- or third-tier institutions. Those who feel like failures or losers in the academic hierarchy, as these authors reveal, have, in effect, internalized a sense of their own second- or third-ratedness or inferiority—their learned cultural shame. Even worse is the situation of underemployed Ph.D.s relegated to part-time and adjunct teaching. Again and again, career adjuncts, in recounting their lived experiences, disclose their poor treatment at the hands of many tenured faculty, describing themselves, in a typical example, as belonging to the class of faculty who are “smiled at with pity, or sneered at with contempt” (Swift 1). In the deference/emotion system of the academy, adjunct faculty are not given respect; indeed, they often are treated with contempt, making them feel, in a common contempt-disappear scenario, as if they were invisible. “I want to be treated with the respect the other class of faculty who do the same work as me receive,” writes one adjunct faculty member (Swift 7). “I have watched my self-esteem drop, drop, drop from doing work that is, theoretically, enhancing the self-esteem of my students . . . . I have heard other adjunct laments. ‘I feel like a ghost here’ . . . . ‘I feel like such a failure’ . . . .” (Swift 9). Calling herself a “freeway flyer,” another adjunct remarks, “No matter how much you write, . . . . if you are an adjunct, nobody notices. Full-time teachers don’t see you as fully human . . . . They don’t see you at all”: indeed, they want adjuncts “to stay invisible” (Gale
"In the end," she acknowledges, "you don’t really exist" (15). Because adjuncts are paid less, states another adjunct faculty member, they are judged to be "worth less," which translates into "worthless" in the minds of many tenured faculty (Hahn 68). Yet another comments that despite the large number of courses they teach, adjuncts—the "workhorse faculty"—remain "invisible" (Brady 149).

Acutely aware of the plight of underemployed Ph.D.s, many graduate students fear that they face a similar shameful plight in today’s depressed job market. And indeed at a time when the overproduction of Ph.D.s has led to a "cheapening [of] the commodity of the new Ph.D." (Nelson 124), those graduate students who are still choosing to pursue the Ph.D. risk a future of exploitation and disappointment—one of "working in academe’s salt mines until middle age or thereabouts, whereupon they will find they are the owners of a postgraduate degree that is practically useless" (Bérubé, Employment 82). Even as we continue to overproduce Ph.D.s,11 consigning many of those who continue in the profession to a bleak future in today’s depressed job market, all too often we treat those at the bottom of the two-tiered system of tenured and nontenure-track faculty with contempt.12 In a profession obsessed with academic pedigree and affiliation, the Ph.D. degree for some has become a badge, not of intellectual pride, but of shame.

Getting Our Affective House in Order

"[W]ithin education, as in the wider culture, emotions are a site of social control," writes Megan Boler in Feeling Power: Emotions and Education (xvii). Yet, as Boler observes, we live in a culture in which emotions are all too often viewed not as a "site of hegemony" but as private problems (129). Intent in her "politics of emotion" on countering what she calls the "privatization and pathologizing" of emotions, Boler calls attention to the political and cultural forces that shape emotions—in particular, how individuals internalize and enact emotional rules that are designed to enforce acceptance of existing social stratifications and power relations (xiv). In a related way, Gershen Kaufman remarks on the politics of emotion as he underscores the link between shame and power in the work setting: "There is an inverse relation between shame and power: to the degree that one is powerless in any work environment, one is most
vulnerable to shame," states Kaufman. Moreover, individuals need to feel "valued and respected," and when these needs are not provided for, "shame will inevitably ensue" (201). In our hierarchical academic culture, which fosters fierce competition and rewards a privileged few while devaluing the contributions of many others who are relegated to token professional or adjunct status, shame is a predictable outcome. And yet while the personal accounts of the profession we have investigated reveal the ways in which our profession reflects and amplifies the larger shame/pride culture we inhabit, it is not uncommon for such accounts to be dismissed as examples of individual griping rather than as evidence of the collective emotional experiences shared by many of those who are devalued, and often disenfranchised, in the profession. Living as we do in a culture where shame is under taboo—indeed, there is shame about shame—it is not surprising that some deny or ignore the political thrust of such accounts, which call attention to the relationship between shame and issues of status and power in the profession and reveal the learned cultural shame of those who inhabit a lowly place in the academic hierarchy.

"Where else but in literature departments could you find hundreds—nay, thousands—of genuinely smart and well-meaning people who have managed to deconstruct every hierarchy and revalorize every kind of stigmatized and degraded cultural practice, while somehow remaining enthralled and ensnared by every form of institutional snobbery?" remarks Michael Bérubé ("Working" 37-38). Indeed, it seems a sad irony that while so many of us have moved to upend and dismantle shaming social hierarchies in our critical practice, in our professional lives we work in an increasingly competitive and academically stratified world where the success and pride of a limited few exacts a heavy price on many others and where those in superior positions manage their own unwanted shame by fostering it in others. Clearly, there is no easy remedy for our plight in the deeply entrenched class-shame system of the academy, where those with power and authority who benefit from the current system have a vested—and affective—interest in maintaining the status quo. After all, one cannot mandate that in our intellectual debates we agree to respect the arguments of our opponents; or that we treat our colleagues, tenured and nontenured alike, with respect in our daily
dealings with each other; or that we value the professional lives not only of those at research institutions but also those at teaching institutions; or that we collectively pay heed to and seek ways to remedy the deepening job crisis and slow erosion of the tenure system; or that we renew our commitment to collegiality and cooperation within departments and within the profession as a whole.

But I think it is imperative that we continue to engage openly in a discussion of the personal and emotional costs of our highly competitive and stratified academic culture, as the many scholars I have quoted here have begun to do. And more than ever, we need to begin the process of owning up to and using moral suasion to help promote changes in our professional attitudes and behaviors in the deference/emotion system of the academy we inhabit. We need to become aware of the hidden shaming that goes on in our midst and work to end it. For if within the profession we sometimes devalue our colleagues or treat them with open contempt, collectively we are all becoming potential targets of contempt in the public sphere where year after year journalists ridicule teachers in the modern languages by writing humiliating stories about the annual MLA convention; where voices are raised against our profession, claiming that undergraduates are being cheated out of a genuine education in literary studies and the humanities; and where university bashing is a popular sport and there is a new public contempt for scholarship in the humanities. At a time when there is declining support for the humanities and when we are becoming increasingly marginalized, even invisible, within the university, we need to get our affective house in order and become aware of the corrosive effects of our prestige- and shame-driven system if we are to get along as professionals and act in a collegially responsible way, and if we are to present a united public face—and attempt to save face—before those who would seek to bring us down.

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Notes

1. See, for example, Gershen Kaufman who remarks that although America is a “shame-based” society, there is “shame about shame and so it remains under strict taboo” (32). It is suggestive that shame, which induces secrecy and a hiding
response, is an "only recently rediscovered feeling state" (Miller xi), and that the study of shame has, until recent times, been largely neglected. Since 1971, "there has been a rapid increase in the literature on the psychology of shame, thus redressing a long-standing neglect of the subject" writes shame theorist Helen Block Lewis. "Once clinicians' attention is called to shame, it becomes apparent that, although it is easily ignored, shame is ubiquitous" ("Preface" xi). While traditionally shame has had a "stigma" attached to it so that "there has been a shame about studying shame in the psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic fields" (Goldberg x), shame has, in recent years, become the subject of psychoanalytic scrutiny, most notably in the work of affect and shame theorists like Silvan Tomkins, Helen Block Lewis, Donald Nathanson, Andrew Morrison, Gershen Kaufman, Michael Lewis, and Léon Wurmser.

2. In analyzing the roots of this acrimonious behavior, commentators variously point to the hyperindividualism and competitiveness fostered by the academic culture and the academy's participation in the contemporary "argument culture" of American society. In We Scholars: Changing the Culture of the University, David Damrosch argues that the institutional arrangement of academic work in isolated disciplines and specialized fields within disciplines has fostered and rewarded "alienation and aggression at all levels of academic life" (6) and bred an academic personality of aggressive individualism. "[O]urs are clubs of the unclubbable, societies of the unsociable," writes Damrosch (87). "No doubt there are campuses on which genuine community exists, and I know of a few fields in which scholars are more concerned to work together than to upstage each other; but I believe that such campuses and such fields are the exception rather than the norm" (104).

Deborah Tannen, in her book The Argument Culture: Stopping America's War of Words, finds the roots of America's "argument culture" in the adversarial culture of the academy. "Our schools and universities, our ways of . . . approaching knowledge, are deeply agonistic," writes Tannen. "We all pass through our country's educational system, and it is there that the seeds of our adversarial culture are planted" (257). The belief that "challenge and attack are the best modes of scholarly inquiry is pervasive" in the argument culture of academia where intellectual exchange is conceived as "a metaphorical battle" (266, 267).

3. See, for example, Scheff, Bloody Revenge 53–54.

4. When an individual has emotional reactions to his or her own emotions
and to those of another person, as Thomas Scheff and Suzanne Retzinger explain, both individuals can become mired in a feeling trap—"a triple spiral of shame and rage *between* and *within* interactants" which, in turn, can lead to the emotional impasse of an interminable conflict. "Shame-rage spirals may be brief, lasting a matter of minutes, or they can last for hours, days, or a lifetime, as bitter hatred or resentment" (*Emotions* 126, 127).

5. Barbara Herrnstein Smith's account of the "mutual ignorance and disdain" that characterize the relations between the sciences and the humanities in the academy today reads like a classic shame drama in which contempt breeds countercontempt in an unending cycle. "[I]t is currently believed by many faculty members in the natural sciences that teaching and scholarship in the humanities consists of idle opinion mongering and that humanities students—whose heads (I have been assured) are 'accustomed to mush'—are incapable of the hard work and rigorous thinking required to do 'real science.' At the same time, it is widely believed by students in the humanities that the aims and operations of the natural sciences are intrinsically alien to them intellectually ('mechanical,' 'numerical,' 'reductive,' and so forth) and likely to be personally alienating as well (aggressively patriarchal, homophobic, complicit with imperialism and racism, dehumanizing, and so forth)" (20). In this "two-cultures ideology," as Smith observes, the differences between the sciences and the humanities are "cast as superior and inferior, proper and improper, admirable and contemptible" (20, 21).

6. Shame theorist Gershen Kaufman, in his analysis of the roots of shame in American culture, describes a shame-generating script that grows out of the success ethic. Enjoined by the success ethic to "compete for success" and to seek "advantage over others through competition," individuals view achievement as the "measure" of their "intrinsic worth or adequacy." But the push for success "can breed anxiety in the form of fear of failure" because success is never totally within the control of individuals. "When success by any external standard becomes the measure of self-validation, then competition is inevitably fostered, generating hostility and fear. Failure to attain these goals produces loss of self-esteem and feelings of inferiority. This is shame," writes Kaufman. "Failing at any new enterprise will now activate shame. Simply being average must seem a curse" (31–32).

7. The pressure to conform is even more pronounced in the lives of young scholars entering the profession. In an ever tightening job market, as Peter
Herman remarks, the fierce competition for jobs “hardly encourages bold departures from the norm, as the next generation depends far too much upon the good will of our teachers and superiors to risk much in the way of critical disagreement. Even the common adoption of the language of contestation constitutes a bow toward our elders, as they more or less invented this language” (3). As young scholars are pressured to write not what they “feel” but what they think they “ought to say,” writes Herman, “a certain sameness starts to creep into scholarship, a certain predictability about conclusions, a certain reticence toward taking positions that might either lead to rejection at journals with considerable professional capital . . . or alienating influential people and hiring committees” (4). Describing how the current “[t]ime to degree, job placement, and the tenure rate virtually guarantee a culture of conformity,” Louis Menand remarks, “The profession is not reproducing itself so much as cloning itself. One sign that this is happening is that there appears to be little change in dissertation topics in the last ten years. Everyone seems to be writing the same dissertation, and with a tool kit that has not altered much since around 1990” (13).

8. See Shumway (“Star”) for a discussion of how the star system has become “a new form of intellectual authority and professional status, which has rendered our knowledge dependent on the names and personalities of Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, Spivak, Butler, Fish, etc.” (“Disciplinary” 92). “The star system in literary studies, like that of the studio era, involves identification with a person who represents an ideal. Most academics, however, cannot hope to follow the stars’ career paths; in fact, the current trend toward reduced funding for higher education suggests that opportunities for even an ordinary career in research are increasingly limited. James Sosnoski has aptly named those who occupy the extreme range of careers in literary studies ‘token professionals’ and ‘master critics.’ The care and feeding of stars has exacerbated these disparities” (“Star” 94).

Randall Collins, in his sociological analysis of the limited attention space in the academy, explains how such a star system can breed intellectual rivalry and acrimony. “Many of us start with dreams of glory, emulating the intellectual heroes whose books we first read or whose ideas and personalities were held out to us as exemplars when we were young,” writes Collins (54). But because of the “law of small numbers,” some individuals near the “center of intellectual action” will be “squeezed out of the attention space.” “[I]gnored and disappointed,” they may display the kind of acrimony Collins calls “the bitterness of the supernumer-
aries” (53). In the intellectual world, individuals who have “aimed the highest” and held on to that aim “the longest,” are likely to be “the most acrimonious in attacking their successful rivals. . . . We all know the carper, the type of intellectual who disagrees with everyone, who never has anything good to say about anyone’s newly published work. Most likely the carper is someone who once had a promising start, the object of much praise during youth, but who never could make it even at the top of some specialty and hangs doggedly on the periphery of the intellectual world” (55).

In another common scenario that breeds intellectual rivalry and acrimony, the younger generation of scholars, in establishing their own independent reputations, may attack their teachers. “It is a typical pattern, in intellectual networks, for the major figures of each new generation to be pupils of the major figures of the previous generation, but what such pupils get from their teachers cannot be simply their ideas. What pupils learn . . . is the stance of being at the center of intellectual action . . .” (56). In yet another common scenario, when there are “seismic shifts of intellectual life,” there may also be “a tidal wave of denigration of the products of the old system”; moreover, when “one mode of production displaces another, all is not sweetness and light within the victorious camp; they have a full attention space to divide up” (63, 64). Thus, “The solidarity of the battle line is generally followed by an upsurge of contentiousness among allies, and this makes for some retrospective romanticization of the days when the allies were united in the face of a common enemy—the war is portrayed as a honeymoon when compared to the peace” (64). As intellectuals, then, as Collins suggests, we are shaped not only by our predecessors and successors but also by our “maneuvering around rivals with whom we divide up a limited field of attention” (70).

9. In describing her sense that others fear that failure is contagious, the writer is describing the well-known phenomenon of shame contagion. “Shame, by its nature, is contagious,” writes Helen Block Lewis. “Moreover, just as shame has an intrinsic tendency to encourage hiding, so there is a tendency for the observer of another’s shame to turn away from it” (Shame 15–16).

10. “Judging oneself a loser suggests a competition—or even a state of war—in which there is always a more powerful opponent; it is another way of expressing the experience of failure,” writes Andrew Morrison. “It is also a global self-indictment in which the area of failure is blown up to such proportions that it becomes [one’s] total identity” (Culture 30–31).
11. As the job crisis continues unabated, graduate students have become increasingly vocal about their painful—and shame-provoking—situations as they are sometimes counseled by faculty pessimistic about the job situation "to lower their expectations and to prepare for a future as temporary and part-time instructors doing the scut work on the margins of a field that ... is becoming ever more proletarianized through downsizing" (Curren 58). But if "[t]eaching adjunct courses for fifteen thousand dollars a year is the fear that haunts every graduate student" (McEwan 51), all too often those who leave their graduate programs or those Ph.D.s who seek nonacademic careers are looked at as failures. Describing the response of faculty to students who decided to leave the graduate program at her university, one woman writes: "The message was rarely stated explicitly but it was clear nonetheless: They couldn't hack it, they lacked drive, they failed" (Evans). Another woman states that "the elitism that suggests a Ph.D. recipient is only as good as her professorship fosters a crippling sense of shame when we are forced to discuss what are whisperingly referred to as 'alternatives' to academic careers." Questioning an academic system that teaches Ph.D.s to think that they are "not proper intellectuals" unless they have academic jobs, she asks, "Why should my colleagues and I be ashamed to take our considerable knowledge and work as writers, designers, administrators, researchers, and teachers outside academia? Why should our worth as scholars be measured in tenure tracks?" (Newitz). Describing the plight of the Ph.D. hired in a nonacademic position within academia, yet another woman remarks on the "stigma of failure that is attached—subtly but unmistakably by people within the professoriate—to those who earn a Ph.D. and don't get a tenure-track job." She asks, "In an environment dominated by research agendas that often seek to right historic wrongs, question power, undermine hierarchy, and give voice to the voiceless, why are intellectual status and respect given so grudgingly to smart and engaged people who have jumped off the tenure track?" (Henderson C4).

12. A newly tenured member of the profession remarks on his "survivor's guilt" at receiving tenure in the current job market where no one "deserves" tenure. As he reflects on what it means to have tenure, he also pointedly remarks that tenure "does not give you the right to mouth off about things you know nothing about, or to shame and downgrade people whose political and religious beliefs are different from yours. It does not give you the right to behave like a prima donna or ancien régime aristocrat, treating students and junior colleagues like permanent inferiors. It does not give you the right to assume that you really
deserve all of your privileges, while you ride on the shoulders of the growing numbers of adjuncts and teaching assistants. What are you doing to provide and preserve tenure for others as worthy as you?” (Benton C4).

Works Cited


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