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Encountering Shame and Sex: Storied Assemblages

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Abstract

This inquiry came to life when I found myself embroiled in a fiery encounter with shame through writing into the aftermath of sexual assault. Sensing shame's urgency, I embarked on an autoethnographic project yet found myself in an echo chamber. I became interested in speaking with others, hopeful that our joining together could carve out spaces for shame and sex stories. Right in the middle of a global pandemic with no public 'private' meeting spaces, a shame-sex assemblage emerged. Each encounter was full of co-constituent forces including myself and others, our environments, histories of sex and shame, discourses, parents, physical sensations, sounds and feelings, past lovers, one-night stands and abusers, and so on. In alignment with the Deleuzoguattarian logic of assemblage (1987), these multiplicities of human and nonhuman force work together in this thesis to produce unique tellings of shame and sex. While encountering 'data,' the stories from my history blur with and (re) inform others' stories. Uncertain about personal exposure and vulnerability in a project that apparently centres others, I engage with Barad's intra-action, particularly their notion of 'spacetime-matterings' (2014), to better understand how stories of self and other are implicated in and woven through one another. Through the writing process, encounters come alive and 'hotspots' (MacLure, 2013) of shame's affective intensity make themselves known. Puzzling over these peculiarities, I think with a cross-disciplinary literature to better understand how shame and other material-discursive forces plug into assemblages to produce possibilities for sexual subjectivities and bodies. Bringing this project to a tentative and somewhat artificial close, I discuss the 'emergencies' (Murray, 2020) of inquiring about shame and sex, the lessons gleaned from putting assemblage into practice, and where this work might take us.

Lay summary

I was initially drawn to shame and sex when writing about experiences of sexual abuse and their aftermath. Sensing more urgency in the yet-to-be felt and understood shame and sex stories, I embarked on an autoethnographic master's project yet found myself stuck in an echo chamber. I became interested in speaking with others, hopeful that our conversations would help generate safer spaces to speak about shame and sex. Right in the middle of a global pandemic with no public 'private' meeting spaces, a shame-sex assemblage emerged. Each encounter was full of co-constituent forces including myself and others, our environments, histories of sex and shame, discourses, parents, physical sensations, sounds and feelings, past lovers, one-night stands and abusers, and so on. In alignment with French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) logic of assemblage, where human and nonhuman affective forces emerge in cross-pollinating multiplicities, the stories from my history blur with and (re) inform others' stories. Uncertain about personal exposure and vulnerability in a project that apparently centres others, I engage with quantum physicist Barad's concept of intra-action, which conceives of self/other and time/space (in)separability through 'spacetimematterings' (2014), to understand how stories of self and other are implicated in and woven through one another. During the writing process, encounters come alive and 'hotspots' (MacLure, 2013) of shame's affective intensity make themselves known. Puzzling over them, I think with a cross-disciplinary literature to better understand how shame and other material-discursive forces plug into assemblages to produce possibilities for sexual subjectivities and bodies. Bringing this project to a tentative and somewhat artificial close, I discuss the 'emergencies' (Murray, 2020) of inquiring about shame and sex, the lessons gleaned from putting assemblage into practice, and where this work might take us.

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Introduction

This thesis explores shame and sex through storied encounters of seven dialogues that took place during the Covid-19 pandemic. The project itself spanned six years and went through many incarnations. In this introduction, I locate myself in relation to this topic and share my journey into a shame and sex assemblage¹ that emerged. As I'll account for in more detail following this chapter, I situate this work within new materialist theory, which views research as an already-always happening event instead of something conceived by the researcher. What follows is the principle that all events in the researcher's life (not just the 'interview' or 'analysis') inform processes and potentialities for knowing and relating. As such, I begin with my personal connection to shame and sex to shine light on the fermentations of thought and experience that called out to be investigated further, with others. Then, I share my reasons for inviting others into conversation and what I hope it can make possible.

Down the Rabbit Hole to Shame and Sex

My choice of shame and sex as a topic came about unexpectedly through writing into an autoethnography of teenage sexual assault. Initially, this topic made sense to write about, as I'd had 16 years of distance from it and many years processing it in therapy. I saw my trauma as offering "ideal grist for the mill" (Tamas, 2009, no page), as my story encompassed many areas including my abusive ex stalking me for 7 years, testifying to a police officer about the abuse, and attending my ex's criminal harassment trial. However, as I journaled into assault and its aftermath, I found myself more interested in the mess of shame I'd stumbled upon. Until that point, I hadn't named shame as an integral part of my post-assault trauma experience, and it struck me with its layers of painful unknowns. Speaking of thresholds, Wyatt (2014, 14) says they "may be places we seek despite the cost, despite the risk" and I found this to be true as I began to follow shame's pull. I was drawn to the unearthing process despite but also because of the emotional upheaval that could accompany it; I wanted to be moved and challenged. I remember sensing that I was on the edge of something important and risky as I wrote the following entry, full of painful questions and acknowledgements.

¹ As I'll describe in the next chapter, Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept of 'assemblage' is my grounding onto-epistemological lens for how knowledge is produced between two speakers and the multiplicities of force populating these moments of encounter.

December 27, 2018

This is a controversial topic- getting needs met through sex. I don't mean for this to be exhibitionist even though a critical voice in my head tells me that airing my dirty secrets is asking for attention. I'm still working it out; I can tell there's something important here.

Following the abuse, sex was impulsive. Often, I fucked as though it was sport, without feeling. I used to think this was liberating – women have sexual needs too, and I was realising them. Complicated needs. Pleasure, connection, to feel desired, make mistakes and learn from them. It was risky and I usually came out on the other side without scars. But sometimes I took too many risks. My actions verged on self-disrespect. Is that judgmental? A classmate in my counselling masters said I wasn't respecting myself and it felt judgmental when she said it...but when I say it, it feels natural.

If I hadn't been abused at 16, would I have felt as I did in my body, would I have treated sex the same? Who knows. Maybe if I attend a sex-addicts group I will meet other survivors who had similarly compulsive, risky sex for years following their abuse. It wasn't all self-harming, but it was also largely unconscious. When we're young we make mistakes, right? I didn't have a structure in place preventing me from taking risks. No religion, no protective parents. I was on my own.

Only recently have I begun to trace the damage. The sex is a trickster, masquerading as a promise of good feelings, a rush of intense connection that dissipates just as easily as it comes. A drug. A pattern that has become me. I feel like a hamster, spinning around on my wheel of promiscuous sex² because the animal of my body doesn't know better. Do I equate worthiness in my ability to attract someone? I want to pin down desire; maybe once I figure it out, I can change. But I also don't want to change. I love sex.

Being used hurts. I can pretend I'm doing the using, too, and often I was/am. However, many of these encounters leave me feeling like an accessory to the other's pleasure. One time, I told someone I'd just hooked up with how many people I'd slept with (143 at the time) and he said, "you need to take better care of yourself." Wasn't he the one who had just fucked

² I use the term 'promiscuous' in relation to sex to mean ravenous and plentiful. The word carries social connotations, like 'slut', often conjuring judgment and sparking shame (Kleese, 20025). Promiscuous also applies to my (non)methodological approach in its uncontained and blurred-boundary messiness (Childers et. al, 2013), which I'll address in the non-methodology chapter.

me? I feel lost between multiple selves that compete for my attention: the one who ‘knows better’ than to put herself in harm’s way, the ‘sexually liberated’ one who goes after what her groin wants, and the little girl who needs attention and care that cannot be found in casual sex.

Shame is a heavy weight telling me I am responsible and lack self-control. I’m messed up, pathetic. Where do these voices come from, and which are true?

Evolutions into Shame and Sex Inquiry

The above passage was my way into inquiry. As I unravelled contradictory voices competing with one another, I found myself embroiled in layers of shame that screamed to be worked through. I came to realise shame was an intimate configuration of my ‘self’ and story as it resided in the heart of who I thought I was (Probyn, 2005, x)³. In this new relationship with shame, I felt unsettled; getting in touch with its dimensions felt dangerous, threatening to expose sides of my personality I wasn’t ready to confront. As Wyatt (2014) says “our predisposition is to mask the truth from ourselves but, if we dare, our words may strip us naked, revealing not (only) our beauty but our raw, unwelcome ugliness” (10). My writing brought excitement but also fear of breakdown, which Murray (2021) refers to as the “reworlding” of writing shame, a dwelling “more into discomfort or out of the zone of thinkable thoughts” (Murray, 2021, 503). As I discovered, shame was enmeshed with and (in)formed by layers of other things, such as desire for sex, attention, and love as well as conflicting social messages. These painful interlocuters propelled me to search for the origin story underpinning my impulsive sexual pursuit; I thought if I found them I’d be on the path to healing. My encounters with shame were productive but not in the ways I had hoped: although they spurred me to write profusely and generated self-compassion, I couldn’t find straightforward answers. An intricate network of contradictory stories emerged, signalling the need for a *nomadic*⁴ (Braidotti, 2011) and conjunctive methodology to account for a

³ Although I use the terms ‘self’ and ‘other’ to describe the inner or outer subjective being-ness that we commonly think of as selves and others, I refer to ‘self’ in the post-structural deconstructive sense (de Frietas and Paton, 2009) as unstable, unreliable and in-process. I have settled on these terms and their connotations of separateness and possessiveness due to an absence of alternative signifiers.

⁴ Here I reference Braidotti’s posthumanist philosophy of nomadism which she describes as the “creation of new frameworks, images, and modes of thought, beyond the dualistic conceptual constraints and the perversely monological mental habits of phallogocentric thought” (2011, 22).

multitude of *intra-acting*⁵ affects (Barad, 2007), bodies, emotions, histories, discourses, subjectivities, and environments. I stumbled upon assemblage one day and breathed a sigh of relief. Finally, a concept that recognized messy, dynamic, and contradictory experience and honoured all the voices happening at once.

The Shift to Invite Others to Speak with Me

As I attempted to write into these layers with poems and journal entries, I kept coming to a standstill, as though being in contact with shame brought more closure than opening. An experience of shutdown is one of the isolating and confronting effects of writing shame, say writers Elspeth Probyn (2005) and Sara Ahmed (2014), as witnessing it further amplifies the compulsion to hide. Even while dialoguing with shame and sex literature, such as Murphy-Keith's powerful autoethnography *Living and Leaving Lolita: An Autoethnography of Identification and Transcendence* about female sexuality in the aftermath of childhood sexual abuse, I still felt I was in an echo chamber: the resonances I found with these authors weren't enough to quell a "metashame" (Tamas, 2009, 616) that was more destructive than generative. I questioned whether my experiences were valuable and relevant enough for research and judged my writing as self-indulgent. Like Tamas (2009, no page) shares, "the cop in my head call[ed] it melodramatic and embarrassing". Probyn (2005, 72) warns in *Writing Shame* that "there is a shame in being highly interested in something and unable to convey it to others, to evoke the same degree of interest in them and to convince them that it is warranted." Dwelling further down the shame-rabbit-hole without enough stories to resonate with, I was an 'auto' unable to "find my 'ethno'" (Murray, 2021, 501).

At this juncture, my mother received a diagnosis of pancreatic cancer and my focus shifted from writing to a complete life upheaval to take care of her. Luckily, I inherited some money from her death that allowed me to extend my degree to a Professional Doctorate from a Master's, which gave me more time and words to work with. I decided to change from autoethnography to researching with others in a group methodology called *collective biography* (Davies and Gannon, 2006). When Covid-19 hit in 2020, social distancing restrictions necessitated a change to 1-1 encounters. In my initial plans, I imagined research

⁵ For a detailed explanation of how Barad's intra-action factors into this inquiry, see the following chapter, but in short, it borrows from quantum physics to conceive of inter-woven self and other relating that supposes an inseparability across space, time, and material.

encounters would resemble a root-like or 'rhizomatic' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) network that emerged like satellites across the city. During the isolation of Covid, encounters brought opportunities for connection and breaking the silence of shame and sex.

A Turn Towards Encounters

In addition to my personal investment in this topic, I am interested in inviting others to speak and think about shame and sex in ways that feel appropriate and safe for them. I don't have guiding questions since I would like the shame and sex stories that need to be told to emerge in our unique configuration of encounter. Additionally, I am just as interested in dynamics between the co-constituent dynamics of human and non-humans as I am in the particularities of shame and sex 'data' that emerges. As such, I pay attention to impressions I form of affecting and being affected, beginning in the first stages of email and phone contact, and extending past the project's hand-in⁶. Rooted in a feminist standpoint that the personal is political (hooks, 2015), I view experiences of shame and sex as inextricably linked to the social and political. Engaging in conversations with others brings the political potential to unveil some of sexual shame's connections to dominant social norms and institutions, consequently highlighting shame's *affective economy* (Najafi et. al., 2008). Further, carving out spaces to speak openly about shame and sex in public is a small step towards defying silencing norms that reinforce their mainstream association with the taboo (Stein, 2018; Murray, 2020). Just as I experienced a shutdown effect while inquiring about shame and sex in isolation, I imagine others experience similar struggles and view inquiry as a way of breaking down barriers to thinking and speaking about shame and sex. Also, an invitation to speak about it with a psychotherapist might be appealing for the opportunity it brings to process these experiences. As I will elucidate in the next chapter, by orienting the work in a feminist new materialist lens, I hope to encourage nuanced, liminal, and intersectional engagements in encounters to challenge binary conceptions and produce *situated knowledges* (Haraway, 2004). In the absence of studies that think with assemblage and intra-action to narrate interview-like encounters of shame and sex, I see this inquiry as an opportunity to test new materialisms' offerings for intersubjective engagements with topics that are customarily deemed difficult to speak about. I am curious how assemblage and intra-action can inform

⁶ My views on non-finality and what it means for this project is something I address in my (non)concluding remarks, near the end of this thesis.

inventive and against-the-grain *research creation* (Manning, 2016) and hopefully venture into new territories. Further, since my post-humanist onto-epistemology entails blurred boundaries between the personal domains of my life and encounters with others, I am interested in exploring ways the personal affects encounters with others (and 'self') at varying stages throughout the project.

In the section that follows, I share my grounding onto-epistemological lenses for this post-qualitative exploration of shame and sex. Since I take a wandering and non-linear approach, philosophical concepts are important guides to steer engagements. Two post-humanist concepts guide my view of knowledge production in intersubjective relations of encounter: *assemblage* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) and *intra-action* (Barad, 2007).

Onto-Epistemological Assumptions

“...the question is, through all of this constitution of knowledge production systems, what kind of subjects are we becoming? What is happening to us? What kind of subject are we being constructed as, being in the process of constructing ourselves, in a field of deterritorializing forces?” (Braidotti, in an interview with Kathryn Strom, 2018, 207).

Introduction

Here, I outline my underlying onto-epistemological assumptions and the concepts I think with to meet the inherent contradictions and messiness within a shame and sex inquiry. Further, I explain how these concepts cohere with the prismatic nature of relating and conveying experience in an intersubjective encounter. Then, I describe a practice of embodied storying that helps me convey encounter from a starting point of affective flows. As Braidotti's words point to in the above quote, knower-known relations are important to think through in their ethics of (re)presentation, and this is something I address throughout the thesis. In addition to being founded in assemblage's emphasis on desire as the organizing principle for practices, knowledge production and encounter (Grosz, 1994), my non-methodological approach is rooted in an ethic of vulnerable reflexivity to trouble accounts of self/other in open-ended and dynamic relations.

A Non-Methodological Approach

This project is premised on the idea that research happens when we drop into an already-existing inquiry in the everyday (Brinkmann, 2014), which is to say that research is happening around us everywhere and all we need to do is tune into affective pulls of the material. Following in the steps of St. Pierre (2021) when she states that post-qualitative inquiry “refuses methodology,” I've pushed myself to think with an array of concepts that cohere with the material's shifting needs (5). This non-methodological stance is rooted in an ethic of refusal towards mining participants' data and using their stories to bolster my academic position (Brinkmann, 2014; Tuck and Yang, 2014). While encounter and the stories I witnessed were integral to this project, since they allowed a greater scope of reverberations than a purely autoethnographic project would have, this inquiry is not solely about others, nor is it a reflection or a representation of them: stories that have (in)formed my past and present feature prominently as well. Their/my/our stories come together in intra-active (Barad, 2007) collisions of material across a plane of immanence of the assemblage (Deleuze

and Guattari, 1987). I'm not alone in a post-qualitative exploration that engages with these concepts to trouble processes of knowing and seek expansive, multitudinous knowledges. For instance, Lisa Mazzei (2013) writes about the *interview assemblage* and introduces the concept of the *Voice without Organs* (VwO), or one that "is not contained by a singular subject nor bounded by the binaries between the discursive and the material" (739). In Barad's (2012) 'ontological indeterminacy' of diffraction, we are re-worked by others' stories threaded through us in encounter, so that encountering self/other is an infinite and complex tangle of "spacetime mattering" (214). By researching without pre-determined methods, I acknowledge the impossibility of researcher autonomy and control and partner with the field's directionality (Gale, 2018). Barad's (2003) articulation of an intra-active ethic resonates with me, as they acknowledge the mutually constitutive embeddedness of inquirer within inquiry:

"...the 'knower' does not stand in a relation of absolute externality to the natural world being investigated- there is no such exterior observational point. It is therefore not absolute exteriority that is the condition of possibility for objectivity but rather agential separability- exteriority within phenomena. 'We' are not outside observers of the world. Nor are we simply located at particular places *in* the world; rather, we are part *of* the world in its ongoing intra-activity" (828, italics original).

Further, as Alicia Jackson (2017) argues, binning method can help generate new ideas and resist the alluring temptation to replicate 'common sense' knowledges through representation and repetition (668). In *Thinking Without Method*, she urges researchers to be open to the "violence of the encounter" (670), which involves venturing into new concept-driven territory or "emergent, nonstratified space of resistance and a nonplace of mutation, where 'suddenly, things are no longer perceived or propositions articulated in the same way'" (Jackson, 2017, 667 with a quote by Deleuze, 1988, 87). As such, thinking without method involves staying alive to uncomfortable moments that gesture towards the new and excluding the "images we rely on to make sense" (670). I have consequently decided to go without conventional research devices such as the interview, coding, analysis, and themes, although I have held onto transcription for its help with honouring others' manners of speaking and a somewhat unconventional introduction and conclusion for their bookending quality. In iterating this (non)methodological approach, I don't mean to imply all methodologies and

methods are restrictive, as I recognize that many can be fluid, flexible and non-linear to promote new thought. I have chosen to embrace *methodogenesis* (Gale, 2018, 151), or a wandering and continual integration of concepts, in the spirit of “giving life” to inquiry by following where it takes me. This honours the material’s inherent processes and energies by centering them as guiding forces. Although I can’t predict how concepts will assist research-creation, my underlying assumption is that by reading ‘data’ through theory (Mazzei, 2014), I might feel shocked into thinking the previously unthought (Taguchi and St. Pierre, 2017).

Assemblage: Towards a View of Encounter

When I first imagined a sex and shame inquiry, I pictured a network of dialogues whereby each encounter affected the next. Each conversation, although seemingly separate, was woven through the conversation that preceded and followed because all tapped into a greater desiring energy to speak about shame in sex. At the time, I was reading Deleuze and Parnet’s *Dialogues II* in which Deleuze depicts knowledge-creation with Guattari as a ‘stammering’ of multiplicity that occurs in the relational interstices between material, and this concept appealed to me for its emphasis of knowledge creation as conjunctive. *Dialogues II* led me to the Deleuzoguattarian concept of assemblage (1987), which denotes a *plane of imminence* where affective forces come together in dynamic and emergent ways to either enable or constrain becoming (266-267). As a relational ontology, assemblage positions human and non-human force as equals in their potential to affect and be affected. Consequently, agency is distributed across all material and human actors are no longer “autonomous, intentional and rational” like the Cartesian model posits (Murriss and Bozalek, 2019). In effect, the immanent plane’s ideological conception coheres with my principle to de-center the researcher from a false pedestal of conducting and envisioning inquiry through its emphasis on relations of affect instead of individualized agency (Mazzei, 2013)⁷. Following from this, assemblage is an appealing grounding lens for inquiries interested in affective states like shame, as it shifts focus from identity to affective movement and the spaces in-between.

In addition, assemblage’s notion of desire as productive makes it appealing as a feminist framework, since it carries the assumption that bodies, subjectivities, and other

⁷ The material-discursive is a term coined by Barad (2007) that describes the entangled relationship between discourses and material phenomena.

matter share the driving principle of “proliferation or self-expansion” rather than deriving from lack (Grosz, 1994, 165). This underpinning assumption lends itself well to shame and sex research, where terms like ‘promiscuity’ carry gendered, raced, and classed connotations rooted in patriarchal philosophical traditions that conceive female desire as reaching to fill its gaping ‘not-enoughness’ (Klesse, 2005). As Klesse (2005, 445) argues, “promiscuity discourses” stigmatize women, conveying judgments of self-harm and indiscriminate behaviour to “police [their] behaviour.” Further, as Grosz (1994, 165) asserts, most traditional philosophies depict women as the “repositories and guardians of lack,” consequently constraining them to “inhabit the place of man’s other.”

In this study, an onto-epistemological shift to the agency of affective material informs all stages. It first manifests as a vision of dropping into already-existing, everyday conversations about sex and shame rather than assuming an ‘I’ who begins and ends inquiry. Integral to an ethic of staying open to the energies and desiring material of the field, I invite others to direct the conversation by telling stories that feel important to them. Our conversations are unstructured and free-flowing, and the only prompt I use is my initial question resembling variations of “tell me what it is about sex and shame that calls you to participate.” Further, I partner with the material’s lifeforce by writing from the imprint encounters make on my body (Ahmed, 2005), attending to what tugs and layering our stories with discourses and theory they evoke⁸. This reflexive approach of being receptive to interactions, environments, discourses, histories, physical sensations, feelings, and ideas stays true to a *response-able* (Barad, 2007) vision of inquiry where I continually question my role in constituting “who and what come to matter” (p. x).

Assemblage recognizes seemingly contradictory and disparate experiences that converge through the *Body Without Organs* (BwO), the technical term Deleuze and Guattari use to illustrate the plane of immanence (1987). This non-binary embrace of all that conjoins to impact the ongoing emergence of becoming and relating draws my attention to assemblage as a conceptual lens. Both/and realities are possible and constantly in flux. The BwO signifies the depersonalized and machinic nature of assemblage, evoking an image of

⁸ Here I evoke Ahmed’s (2005) discussion of the *Skin of the Community*, whereby the skin is akin to affect in its paradoxical ‘bordered yet boundaryless’ quality of containing the ‘self’ yet connecting to ‘other’ through being imprinted upon. Beginning with the body, I am moved by feelings to think about affects and their conjunctive forces.

production and potentiality that urges us to consider what affective forces *do* rather than what they *are*. It is a study of movement, shifting focus from identities to becomings and potentialities. Nothing is static or fixed, including the impressions generated from inquiry. Another important Deleuzoguattarian principle is that affect has its own agency and life force (Ringrose and Renold, 2014). Assemblage's emphasis on interstitial affective force between bodies, narratives, and subjectivities coheres with the literature's depiction of shame as context-bound and relational. The following quote shows Deleuze and Guattari's ideas on what the BwO does and its relationship to matter and intensity:

"A BwO is made in such a way that it can be occupied, populated only by intensities. Only intensities pass and circulate. Still, the BwO is not a scene, a place, or even a support upon which something comes to pass. It has nothing to do with phantasy, there is nothing to interpret. The BwO causes intensities to pass; it produces and distributes them in a spatium that is itself intensive, lacking extension" (1987, 153).

In this study, the BwO carries important implications. First, shame doesn't belong to subjects but is produced through a wide range of conjunctive material-discursive forces, including discourses, physical objects and bodies, emotions, images, and sounds. As such, the BwO enables cross-disciplinary theoretical engagements with shame, recognizing it as a sociological, psychological/neurobiological, and interpersonal phenomenon. Further, the random and in-flux conglomeration of intensities populating BwO coheres well with shame experience, since it facilitates nuanced readings of contradictory and ever-changing realities. In addition, assemblage's associated concepts of deterritorialization and territorialization offer practical strategies for mapping affective flows and acts of resistance or subordination, as Jessica Ringrose and Emma Renold (2014) demonstrate in their work "*F**k Rape!*": *Exploring Affective Intensities*. Working with affect's fleeting, abstract and embodied nature (Massumi, 1995), mapping is "a process of deciphering striations and lines [in the assemblage] that are 'life destroying' (territorializing) and 'life affirming' (deterritorializing; Bonta & Protevi, 2004, 10)" (774). These "lines of flight" indicate moments of becoming-minoritarian, which is a destabilization of power or majority rule (thought of as 'molar' forms) through the formation of molecular forms (1987, 292). As Deleuze and Guattari note, "there is no becoming-man because man is the molar entity par excellence, whereas becomings are

molecular” (1987, 293). Speaking of *becoming-woman* in research examining an adolescent girl’s subject-formation as a cheerleader, Jackson (2010) theorises becoming as a “movement through a unique event” that “creates something unique and particular within that would render the entire category imperceptible” (581). In other words, becoming is the something new we can’t quite perceive at the margins: the both/and, in-between, and breaking apart of “dichotomies that organize bodies, experiences, institutions, and histories” (Sotirin, 2005). In this inquiry, molar forms could pertain to the institution of heterosexuality (Ingraham, 1994), capitalist white supremacist patriarchy (hooks, 2013), social norms pertaining to which (sexual) bodies ‘matter’ (Butler, 1999), social taboos and Western culture’s silencing of sexual shame and its corresponding challenging affects (DeYoung, 2015), or normative popular culture and social medias such as dating apps like Tinder and programs like Love Island, where hegemonic notions of sexuality, gender, race, age and ability prevail (Thompson, 2018; Denby, 2021). As tiny disruptions to systems of domination, molecular entities in this research might resemble a woman’s nonconforming gender performance through dressing in a masculine way or a man crying in public as he speaks about shame or feeling less-than. Becoming-shame signifies shame’s alternative or imperceptible movements as it conjoins with other material forces within the assemblage to expand matter’s potentiality.

Textual Weaving of Selves and Others

Reading Ringrose and Renold’s (2014) method of data mapping according to Deleuzoguattarian concepts, I initially attempt to read the transcript and sense my way through for “data [that] glow[s] in specific ways because it represent[s] a moment of rupture co-constructed through [the] feminist research assemblage” (776). However, as I engage the transcript in this way, I don’t like how it privileges analysis over feeling and sensing. I also experience the transcript as a lifeless and sedimented document; although transcripts can evoke memories, feelings and ideas, my impulse is to pull literal translations that fit neatly into themes instead of feeling into affects. I seek to enliven the transcript, to “make evident (again- and differently) the messiness that’s absent from a neat transcription page [...] the always entangled and material intra-action between researcher/participant/text/machine /technology” (Cannon, 2018, 579).

Inspired by Peter Clough’s (2002) narrative ethnography in which he creates fictional accounts out of fieldwork, my first step is to write memory stories about what took place in

encounters. These stories flow from evocative feelings and thoughts that I've been left with – shame's affective imprint as it conjoins with other material – each serving as a gateway to understanding my relationship with others. As Ahemd (2005) says, "such intensifications of feeling create the very effect of the distinction between inside and outside, or between the individual and the collective, which allows the 'with' to be felt in the first place" (100). As I sketch memory stories about research encounters, layers of theory and other personal histories emerge, and I jot them down, too. These *superpositions*, or entanglements of "(seemingly) disparate parts [...] elsewhere, within here" (Barad, 2014, 176) are all part of the assemblage, as they are relations of affect *cutting together-apart* (Barad, 2014). I decide on what belongs where through *agential cuts* (Barad, 2014), or researcher-directed decisions that co-conspire with material enactments. Sometimes I follow an evocative theory or personal memory to its source such as an email correspondence or journal article. Like Carol Rambo Ronai's (1995) layered account in which she juxtaposes her experiences of childhood sexual abuse with sociological and psychological theories, each (in)forming the other in a rich patchwork, I present layers of selves, others, and theory as they resonate in an uncensored, free-flowing *line of flight* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). This is a deterritorialization, defying self/other separation (Barad, 2007).

Writing about the use of story in critical autoethnography, Stacy Holman Jones (2016) emphasizes stories "awaken us to the existence and experience of others- especially those others who are different from us. In this way, stories are windows- and doors- to understanding, and the more complex, nuanced, and multiple our stories become, the greater our understandings become" (230). Writing enables me to tune into the *felt sense* (Gendlin, 1984), or the implicit and intuitive directionality, of the shame and sex assemblage like I would in a therapy session. Weaving 'self-story' amidst the other's story, encounter comes alive again, and I feel moved by moments of affective intensity. As Trinh Minh-ha (1989) says, this process ignites self/other engagements, "making them sing again. Very softly a-new a-gain" (128). In addition, storying is an intra-active engagement (Barad, 2007) because the seemingly separate 'self' narrator is imbricated with others. Stories "(re) (con) figure" me: as I change, so do they (Barad, 2014, 181). This "hauntology,"⁹ as Barad terms it- where boundaries

⁹ Barad uses the word hauntology differently than Derrida (2006), and although she doesn't mention his work, she produces a layering of self and other texts in conversation with Minh-ha (2011) and Anzaldúa (1987) to show hauntings of self/other inseparability across spacetime-matterings.

between people, places and time don't exist and we "live in many worlds at the same time" (Minh-ha, 2011, 56), produces silent listenings (Mazzei, 2004): through (re) imagining sights, sounds, silences, sensations and smells, the "social situation of the speaker" comes more clearly into view (29).

As I write, dynamic multiplicities of selves, others, surroundings, senses and so on stabilize as fingers hit the keys, momentarily solidifying words and impressions. Once these materialize, I refer to the transcript and browse for 'hotspots' (MacLure, 2013). Hotspots are MacLure's (2013) word for language's affective force that sparks wonder and pulls us in. Grounded in the Deleuzoguattarian (1990) concept of the *sense event*, hotspots are instances of "mutually implicated" matter and discourse that move us (MacLure, 2013, 660). Other theorists make sense of matter's affective gesture towards the new as the "self in upheaval" when multiplicities populate the BwO (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, 240), the "backflip" that forces us to think (Jackson, 2017, 671), and the "breakdown" in understanding that brings astonishment and mystery (Brinkmann, 2014, 723).

An important part of referring to the transcript to thicken encounter's sense impressions is to pull word-for-word quotes from others so that I can stay as close as possible to how they narrate. This ethical practice begins when I transcribe, when I endeavour to capture others' speech patterns, emphasis, and language as closely as possible. The resulting fusions of material-discursive matter singing through a reflexive dance of self/other stories aren't finished after their first draft: I return again and again to reflect on, add, and change what I've written. As Jackson (2017) says, revisiting and reauthoring is integral to creating new relations of thought: "it is the difference produced by the repetition of an encounter—its newness each time—that is the power of thinking without method" (671).

Self-Exposure in Shame and Sex Assemblages

While my life histories as they are woven into the text come across as vulnerable and sometimes jarring, they are also impersonal in that they don't belong to me: they're a production *between-the-two* (Deleuze and Parnet, 1987). Assemblage and its corresponding VwO (Mazzei, 2013) trouble the possibility of singular and possessive voice, since the material-discursive is in constant flux. As Mazzei (2013) contends:

“And I was becoming- from the moment I decided to conduct interviews, to my choice of participants much like myself, in my encounters with them (then and still), in their stories, the data, and an analysis that is partial, incomplete, and always being re-told and remembered. Nothing is centred or stabilized in such an approach to interviewing: not voice, not the subject, not the interviewer or interviewee, not experience, not analysis” (736).

Staying with emotionally charged experience and then stepping outside to examine the whole of the assemblage is a challenging dialectical dance. Self/other entanglements in shame and sex research can stir up traumatic (re)membering, so switching from personal and affected authorship to somewhat analytical ‘macro’ thinking about machinic assemblages can require a degree of splitting (Tamas, 2009). Existing literature about post-qualitative research, particularly that interested in assemblage (Mazzei, 2013; Ringrose and Renold, 2014; Jackson and Mazzei, 2012; Ringrose, 2011), doesn’t mention the paradoxical and conflictual experience of writing one’s own emotional and embodied experience as affective force while simultaneously distancing oneself to attend to the field’s materiality. In fact, researchers don’t reveal their vulnerabilities or feelings in these inquiries. When I read accounts of the interview assemblage, like Ringrose and Renold’s *‘F**k Rape!’ Exploring Affective Intensities in a Feminist Research Assemblage* (2014), I find no trace of the authors’ feelings or personal histories. I wonder about these absences – do researchers fail to recognize their part in the “knot of forces” flowing through assemblages? When I don’t see my ethical and stylistic choices reflected in exemplary research, I feel troubled by this work being at odds with new materialist inquiry that involves others. Further, I question whether my move of inserting myself is self-indulgent (Thorneycroft, 2020, 4).

In their introduction to *Decentering the Researcher in Intimate Scholarship: Critical Posthuman Methodological Perspectives in Education*, Strom et al. (2018) concede that new materialist engagements often involve “simultaneously providing an account of the researcher and connect her up to multiple human and non-human others outside of the embodied self” (19). In the collection’s first chapter, Martin posits that the post-human researcher ‘self’ is mutable and emergent in assemblages, one of many “mutually constituted elements in an enmeshed entanglement of discursive processes, material contexts, animate bodies, social norms, and practices” (2018, 25-26), which leads me to believe self-disclosure

and reflexivity play an important role in research assemblages. All authors of *Decentering the Researcher* stress the researcher's task of letting go of the Cartesian conception of 'self' as an agentic, individualized sphere steering the inquiry. Circling back to my writing, I'm unsure whether I experience and position myself in this way, as my humanist belief in agency is ingrained. However, thinking about the agency of all material- including environments, discourses and energies between people and things- feels important, as does being as open as I can about how I'm impacted. Sharing my stories of shame and sex alongside others' shows how my experiences might influence the theoretical linkages and meanings I make and extends from an ethic of vulnerability (Helman, 2022). Ryan Thorneycroft (2020) demonstrates an ethic of vulnerability in reflecting on his choice to share his own stories of abjection and marginalization alongside others':

"In understanding abjections as a collective and relational practice, I became compelled to expose my own vulnerability, abjection and precarity. I became conscious of the ethics and politics of asking others about their experiences of violence/abjection [...] I could not reconcile invisibilising my own abjection while foregrounding that of the people who shared their life histories with me, especially when I was trying to engage in our collective vulnerability" (5).

Like Thorneycroft, I feel a responsibility to foreground my stories alongside others' because I share in the experience with them. I am affected by their stories in different ways and these affects (in)form the becoming-shame in assemblages. Sharing my shame in sex histories might be one way to begin to disrupt the power differential between researcher and researched, although I don't always share with participants what I choose to expose in the stories I write later. I decide on whether to share or not according to the comfort I feel and the kinds of stories that become ignited in encounters. If I sense that my self-exposure can help normalize the other's experience, particularly if we both feel marginalized according to patriarchal systems of domination, I will disclose. However, if I sense that my experience could create tension because it contrasts heavily with the other, I keep it to myself. This tends to occur in dynamics where the other is a cis male, which I examine in each story.

Questions of Incompatibility?

Although my experience of harmonizing assemblage with intra-action as grounding concepts for inquiry has felt complementary, Serge Hein's (2016) critique about their

incompatibility raises concern and prompts me to revisit this decision. Hein finds the combined philosophies of Deleuze and Barad in social science research “likely to result in ontological/theoretical incoherence” because Barad’s concept of matter, in its emphasis on matter mattering and intra-active entanglements, differs too much from Deleuze’s core principle of inherent instability in the plane of immanence (2016, 138). While his argument is troubling at first, it misses the mark according to both a Deleuzian and Baradian philosophy because it assumes an essentialist logic of dissecting theories to their core. As Murriss and Bozalek (2019) argue, Hein’s analysis relies on the very binaries and essentialisms that Deleuze and Barad’s relational ontologies warn against. They suggest reading Deleuze and Barad through one another can “lead to creative provocations,” and that their texts are compatible and harmonious (Murriss and Bozalek, 2019, 874, 873). Although Barad and Deleuze describe their onto-epistemological positions differently, they both envision matter, language, and subjectivity as dispersed and threaded through encounters, thus troubling dualist separation and encouraging understandings of entangled and dynamic multiplicities.

Assembling with Existing Knowledges: A Diffractive Literature Review

Intro to Diffractive Readings

In-keeping with emergent and processual shame and sex entanglements, what follows is a diffractive engagement with research and theory that explore shame, sexual experience, and new materialist inquiries interested in sex. Although in this project shame is imbricated within sexual experience, I make an *agential cut* (Barad, 2012, 46) to first discuss a selection of shame literature to harmonize with its offerings and identify which theories and conversations I take further. Then, I follow shame to its specialized and focused realms within psychotherapy and affect studies, tracing implications each have for this inquiry. Next, I discuss research and theorizing concerned with shame in sexual experience, finding connections and reading insights through one another (Murriss & Bozalek, 2019). I also look at some examples of new materialist sex or sexuality assemblages to locate areas my project builds on and diverges from existing scholarship and research. I attempt to do a diffractive reading of the literature (Murriss and Bozalek, 2019), one that is written from where the writing lands in me instead of assuming I am “at a distance of the literature, having a bird’s eye point of view- creating an overview by comparing, contrasting, juxtaposing or looking for similarities and themes” (1505). I know this is a conscious practice of un-learning, a “re-thinking of the concept of thought itself” (Manning, 2015, 203), and that I may not always succeed. Nonetheless, there are moments when the texts’ vitality invites me in, sparking a “dance of attention of the bare activity of becomings coalescing into a coming event” (Manning and Massumi, 2014, 29).

Shame

Elsbeth Probyn’s (2005) book *Blush: Faces of Shame* served as my entryway into shame literature and introduced me to the idea of shame as a productive force. Probyn’s position distinguishes her from a lot of psychotherapeutic writing on shame¹⁰, which tends to view it through a negative or pathologizing lens, and she acknowledges that this view may not be met with understanding by everyone (Bozalek et al., 2018). While the word productive stirs up concern in me as it signals something inherently positive, Probyn is clear that it refers to a capacity to produce affects that bring the possibility for action and awareness:

¹⁰ For an example of this, see further along in this chapter, where I review some psychotherapeutic literature.

“On a basic level, shame always produces affects—small and large, individual and collective. Shame demands acknowledgment. As we blush, we are made visible at the very moment we want to cover our faces and hide. But, equally, shame compels an involuntary and immediate reassessment of ourselves: Why am I ashamed? Why did I say or do that? Can I rectify the actions that have either brought shame upon myself or caused someone else's shame?” (2005, xii).

Here, Probyn makes evident that shame is relational and personal just as it operates as a more-than-human force that “demands acknowledgement.” Asking how shame produces affects shines light on its agency within assemblages and follows from my underlying assumptions that shame is inextricable from the social and political. In my own shame and sex narratives, I initially felt frozen and yet compelled to confess the things I was ashamed of, as though confession could excavate what I had come to see as inherent badness and dirt. Shame threatened to expose my ‘bad’ character and troubled me with its absence of clearcut cause and effect associations. However, viewing shame as productive force opens a landscape for it to spring from and conjoin with other human and non-human actors, coming together—institutions and their ideologies, interpersonal relationships and their unspoken yet felt messages, and most importantly, our connection to these through our desire to belong and connect (Tomkins, 1987). Like Probyn (2005), I am undyingly curious about the stories tied up with shame; “I am following shame because of where it might lead” (4). With Probyn’s prompting, I wonder more about certain aspects of shame I am inclined to take for granted, including why it brings so much fear that we hide our shame from others and ourselves, and why it has a birthing effect so that it is “shameful to speak of shame” (Probyn, 2005, 4). As she shares in an interview with Bozalek et. al. (2019), “when one feels shame it is a profound intra-subjective moment that has the capacity to undo something of the person – that provokes a deep psychic emotional disturbance” (325). This unraveling produces an incoherence (Najafi et. Al., 2008) that is inherently messy, fractured, and scattered, much like the form this project has taken throughout its evolution.

Another theorist who harmonizes with Probyn’s work is cultural studies scholar Sally Munt (2007), whose book *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame* looks at intersections of shame and queer sexualities, bringing together 15 years of research. Munt

emphasizes shame's rootedness in the body, claiming, like others (Probyn, 2005; Massumi, 1995), that the body is the first to "speak shame" (2007, 2). Further, her research highlights shame as a self-disciplinarian impulse in the event of failing to conform to normative ideologies. This thesis' underlying assumptions accord with Munt's view that shame (re)produces heteropatriarchal institutions' ideological stronghold and is influenced by her argument that shame research needs to consider cross-disciplinary literature (2007, 2) due to its interconnectedness with the cultural, political, biological, and interpersonal.

Another theorist who traces dimensions of shame as politically productive and interpersonally impactful is Sara Ahmed (2014), whose work also considers nationalistic uses of shame in the Australian reconciliation movement (2014). In *Shame Before Others* (2014), she situates her argument in the interpersonal, deconstructing facets of shame including its intensification when witnessed by another and frequent moralistic rootedness threatening a loss of belonging. Ahmed's insight that "in shame, I am the object as well as the subject of the feeling" (106) strikes a chord with my experience of shame producing split-off identifications between the shamed object and an "internal shaming other, turning that bullying energy not against self but against an external target of contempt and disgust" (DeYoung, 2015, 63). I am curious whether similar productions of shame in split-off selves occurs for others, as well. Like Munt, Ahmed draws our attention to normative discourses (in)forming shame when she contends "shame can also be experienced as *the affective cost of not following the scripts of normative existence*" (107, italics original). Following her insights, I will be listening out for shame's frequent ties to losses of belonging along gendered/racialized/classed, political/national/communal, religious or familial lines.

Feminist theorist Judith Halberstam's (2005) work is relevant to this project, as she stresses the importance of privilege in shame productions. In *Shame and White Gay Masculinity*, Halberstam (2005) posits shame as "exposure, in psychoanalytic terms, of the subject's castration, be it racial gendered, class-based, or sexual" and contends that intersections of privilege act as a kind of cultural currency that allows the transmutation of shame into pride (225). Focusing her argument on white gay shame, she traces the ways white men have occupied positions of power in queer movements, contending gay pride movements are examples of white gay men "reclaiming gay masculinity," or more specifically, accessing "the privilege that has been symbolically reserved for them" (226). Her overarching

claim that shame is a “gendered form of sexual abjection: it belongs to the feminine, and when men find themselves ‘flooded’ with shame, chances are they are being feminized in some way and against their will” strikes me as a grand-sweeping generalization and leaves me wondering about nuances and complexities that are also at play, adding shades of grey to men’s experiences. Just like any other identity, gayness intersects with a plethora of interlocking social locations including class, age, (dis)ability, culture, race, etc., all of which have the potential to complexify experience and bring contexts where a person may be ‘out of place’ (Thorneycroft, 2020) and stigmatized or shamed. While Halberstam’s work compellingly illustrates how it is possible for shamed subjectivities to transition more seamlessly into pride through making use of their privileged status within a web of heteropatriarchal forces, it also unconsciously conflates white gay male experience into a homogenous grand narrative that shuts down the possibility of being white and still confronting shame¹¹. While I am critical of Halberstam’s overly simplistic analysis, I appreciate her thinking around shame’s inextricable link to systems of power and privilege. In looking at shame through a lens of assemblage, I hope to highlight its connections to dominant systems and disrupt it from its enclosed space of the interpersonal, consequently encouraging dialogues about political economies of shame (Berlant, 2008).

As Halberstam’s work suggests, those who occupy non-normative and marginalized positions in heteropatriarchal, ableist, racialized and classed societies are likely to experience greater degrees of shame in relation to sex and sexuality. The literature agrees with this; for instance, Loree Erickson (2007), a queer ‘femmegimp’ activist, argues that dominant culture imbues disabled bodies with shame through “systems of desexualisation” and “sites of shame, such as dependency, sex, vulnerability and being an ‘out’ disruptive body” (42). One of shame’s disempowering effects in the lives of those with disabilities, she says, is forced isolation and separation from our own bodies, selves, and others. As someone with an invisible physical disability, I strongly relate to Erikson’s words, since I find myself isolated and alienated in my chronically pained and mobility-compromised body without seeing representations of others like me in popular culture or literature with sexual content. Another example of literature that illustrates shame/power intersections is Charlotte Morris and Sally

¹¹ For a more comprehensive look at the complexities of gay men’s experiences, see *The Everyday Lives of Gay Men: Autoethnographies of the Ordinary* (2022), a compilation of autoethnographic illustrations that bring complexity and nuance to break through oversimplistic narratives of gay maleness.

Munt's (2019) research with British single mothers in which interlocking dominant discourses of class, gendered sexuality and motherhood produce shamed subjectivities. Their work illustrates how these women's experiences of shame amount to a loss of respectability when the combined status of working-class, woman, and mother harkens notions of sexual promiscuity, underclassness, social deviance, and moral ineptitude in the British imaginary. Morris and Munt also point to moments of "dis-identification" when women deliberately place themselves as respectable in relation to others who are socially inferior to them, "namely young, often 'dirty white' or black or minority ethnic working-class mothers," which they suggest is a "transference of shame, from one stigmatised social identity, onto another, through the prism of the politics of race and class" (2019, 246). As these theorists show, intersections of (dis)ability and class influence productions of shame and sex and are important to attend to in material-discursive entanglements.

In a similar vein, theorists such as Lucas Gottzen (2019) have examined the 'politics of shame' in its potential to be harnessed in tandem with privileged identities as a mode of disavowal towards socially taboo acts. Gottzen (2019) argues that while shame might be seen as an "affective response when violating or not living up to sexual norms," it might also be a "sensorial experience when privileged persons feel that they do not live up to their own standards" (287, 288). Like Ahmed's theorizations on shame narratives producing a unified national identity while turning out disavowals of colonial harm, Gottzen's close examination into the affective potential of young men's shame narratives suggests that shame performance can help male violators distance themselves from their wrongdoings by allowing them to "control uncomfortable affective memories and put their abuse and shame behind them" (297). Looking at men's online testimonies on an anti-violence campaign called Fatta Man, he theorizes that social pressures to remain respectable act in tandem with the discomfort of shame. Two kinds of respectability scripts emerge: 'reform narratives,' where men position themselves as having "become sexually considerate and sensitive" after abuse in contrast to their sexually violating peers, and 'self-conscious narratives' where men attest to embarking on reformative self-awareness projects (293, 296). The notion of performative shame intrigues me because it suggests shame can be employed strategically to render forgiveness or sympathy. Gottzen suggests that a 'chafing masculinity,' or one in which the man stays with the embodied discomfort of shame, is integral for social and political change

because it leads to deeper understanding of their impacts within a framework of sexism. I am curious how a 'chafing' shame might figure in this inquiry.

Shame (and Sometimes Sex) in Psychotherapeutic and Psychological Literature

In addition to these culturally situated discussions, I've come across a small collection of psychotherapeutic literature devoted to shame and its implications for psychotherapeutic work (DeYoung, 2015; Taylor, 2014; Stein, 2008; Sanderson, 2015). Patricia DeYoung's (2015) book *Understanding and Treating Chronic Shame: A Relational/Neurobiological Approach* offers a relational and neurobiological perspective on shame experience, situating it as "the experience of one's felt sense of self disintegrating in relation to a dysregulating other" (18). She says trauma is a frequent backdrop to shame and argues 'chronic shame' stems from one or more primary attachment relationships where a person learns through an other's treatment that they are intrinsically 'bad.' Reflecting on work with clients, DeYoung contends she senses someone has been overtaken by shame when she feels her "presence has failed them," which signals their "visceral" experience of self-disintegration (34-35). As this project evolves, DeYoung's contributions about the neurobiological and relational components of shame feature as theoretical readings plugging into assemblages.

Affect theorist Silvan Tomkins' (1963) detailed study of shame as a psychosocial experience has inspired a lot of subsequent engagements, including Probyn's (2005) and Sedgwick and Frank's (1995) writing. In this work, I don't engage directly with Tomkins, but my understanding of shame has been informed in part by his thorough, open-ended, and nonpathological account of shame experience. In a chapter of Tomkins' most pertinent writing on shame from Virginia Demos' (1995) anthology, Tomkins depicts shame as an 'affect auxiliary' since it "operates only after interest or enjoyment has been activated; it inhibits one, or the other, or both" (1995, 399). In saying this, Tomkins means that shame cannot exist without first enjoying or being interested in a person or thing; in other words, we need some degree of attachment or desire to activate shame. I agree with his insights, but I also see the possibility that links to interest or enjoyment may be elusive or indirect, such as shame in the instance of not belonging and feeling others' stares even when we think we don't want or need acceptance. He argues there are a myriad of co-constituting emotional and affective states that conjoin with shame, depending on the social context: "the pluralism of excitement and enjoyment is without limit, and hence shame, too, knows no bounds" (389). Following

his insight into the relation between shame and interest, it makes sense that successful attempts to evacuate shame can only take place when a person rids themselves of interest or enjoyment in someone or something. I see some of Tomkins' groundwork on linkages between shame and attachment in Munt's (2007) writing about shame's cultural attachments, where she speaks from experience to explore conjoining states of expulsion, abjection, disgrace, stigmatization and even pride. Reflecting on her body's response to carrying the shame of queer non-conformity for 20 years, Munt concedes "although psychologically healed (and proud of my origins) this malady is like my soul's memory of what it is to feel estrangement and hindrance from your own life" (2007, 2). As Munt writes, shame can transform into pride when a person joins arms with a collective of others who are stigmatized by cultural shaming: "when you no longer care that you are being shamed, particularly when horizontal bonds formed through communities of shame can be transmuted into collective desires to claim a political presence and a legitimate self, that new sense of identity can forge ahead and gain rights and protection" (4). Her message rings true to the transformative power of vocalizing shame experience with others, dispelling its disciplinary grip through feeling an other's care and acceptance while breaking shame's divisive and isolating silence. However, due to shame's strong rootedness in interest, it is often too entangled in relationship to an other for the shamed subject to transmute it, at least not entirely. As Tomkins (1995) asserts, whereas with disgust or dissmell, the "food is both rejected now and rejected for all time to come, as are the symbolic objects of dissmell and disgust," with shame, a person feels called to return to that which shames them: "[he or she] wishes to resume his or her commerce with the exciting state of affairs, to reconnect with the other, to recapture the relationship that existed before the situation turned problematic" (400). This notion of shame as inextricable from the desire to be loved, accepted by and belong with an other explains the frequent automaticity to (re) turn to the site(s) of wounding, such as a relationship to an abusive partner or parent (DeYoung, 2015).

In *Counselling Skills for Working with Shame*, Christiane Sanderson (2015) devotes a chapter to *Shame in Sex and Sexuality* that I delve into, not sure what to expect. I see the words "biological basis of sex and sexuality" (122) and begin to wonder if her perspective is biologically deterministic. I come across other black and white, polarized assertions as I go along, such as the static depictions in of shamed sexual subjectivities in the following passage:

“[t]he body becomes a repository of sexual shame....this can lead to defences against sexual shame in which sex is avoided at all costs as in sexual anorexia, or through hidden, solitary sexual activities such as masturbation to extreme sexual fantasies, pornography or anonymous sex. Alternatively [sexual shame] can lead to hyper-sexuality as a way to mask [it] which manifests in promiscuity, multiple sexual partners and a range of sexual compulsions and addictions. These in turn can compromise sexual health and increase the risk of sexually transmitted infections such as chlamydia, gonorrhoea, herpes and HIV, all of which are a powerful source of shame” (Sanderson, 122-123).

This account misses out on the nuanced, both/and nature of complicated relational experience. Here she pathologizes sexual shame, categorizing it as either the sexually avoidant or sexually promiscuous and replicating age-old stereotypes. Prior to undertaking this thesis, I saw my sexual promiscuity according to these naturalized characterisations, associating it with STD risk, uncontrollable compulsion, and mental illness. Further in the chapter, Sanderson’s mention of Gagnon and Simon’s (1973) sexual scripts is useful, although not novel, as well as her exercise to reflect on our uses of sex. However, as I think about my uses of sex over the years and how I feel about it, as she recommends, I can’t begin to pin down anything concrete due to how complicated the activity is. I might use sex for pleasure, connection with an other, to fill a void of boredom or unknown hunger, to appease a partner who is anxious about our relationship, or to feel attractive. However, these uses are never clearcut or singular, and they are always in relation to others and contexts. The activity also prompts me to judge my uses of sex as ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ leaving me to question their notion of ‘uses of sex.’ It occurs to me that psychotherapy texts about shame might be tempted to provide a ‘how-to’ guide for working with shame when this work is rarely straightforward or generalizable. This example of psychotherapeutic literature is dangerously individualistic, when other texts like Munt’s (2007) and Tomkin’s (1995) still attest to individual experience while locating it in a wider web of social, political and relational systems.

Ruth Stein’s (2008) *The Otherness of Sexuality: Excess* is another example of psychotherapeutic literature that thinks about shame and sex under the larger project of theorizing sexual excess, or her non-pathologizing term for “liberated pleasure beyond bounds and abominable transgression and destructiveness” (43). Illustrating with a few

examples from her psychoanalytic practice, she argues the paradoxes of pain and pleasure work in tandem in sex and carry the potential of reversing shame: “our mind has the uncanny ability to transform feelings through sexuality, and it intensifies them by the specific emotions it overcomes, most particularly shame” (62). Stein seems to subscribe to the view that it is possible to transform difficult affects and emotions through sexual acts, although she also contends “sexuality is still drenched in shame and looming inhibitions... the cultural definition of sexuality as shameful, unspeakable, secret, and ‘dirty’ is deep-rooted” (64-65). Reading her work, I’m struck by the tension between the transformative potential of sex and deeply felt social rules and notice the blurred lines of agency and affect between the personal and social. She conveys the messiness of and contradiction in shame and sex, which is something I want to embrace and be curious about in this thesis. I hope my encounters with others open avenues beyond binaries of control/regulation and excess/pleasure, dialoguing about shame and sex that is both/and.

The Affective Turn: Important Considerations

In locating shame and sex research within the field of affect studies, I need to consider the ways affects “follow different logics and pertain to different orders” (Massumi, 1995, 30) and build these into the project’s ongoing methodogenesis. As theorist Massumi (1995) shows in *The Autonomy of Affect*, affect is experienced differently than emotion because it is embodied in “purely autonomic reactions most directly manifested in the skin- at the surface of the body, at its interface with things” (27). Another important distinction Massumi conveys is that affect doesn’t belong to anything or anyone but happens as forces actualize and emerge at a “bifurcation point,” the “turning point at which a physical system paradoxically embodies multiple and normally mutually exclusive potentials, only one of which is ‘selected’” (35). As such, affects are in-between autonomous multiplicities, sometimes perceived and sometimes not: “affects are virtual synesthetic perspectives anchored in (functionally limited by) the actually existing, particular things that embody them” (Massumi, 1995, 38). When these intensities become contracted in their “capture,” they become emotion, the “sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal” (Massumi, 38, 30). Given affect’s imperceptibility, it is almost onto-epistemologically impossible to know with certainty when shame or any other affect is present or not, since at this point it has solidified as a fixed state of emotion. For this reason,

this study is less interested in concrete naming and perceiving than it is in mapping movements of being affected, particularly at the level of the body. Rather than pin down shame, I want to witness the feeling states it joins with and use my body to feel for hotspots of relational and affective intensity¹².

Cultural theorist Lauren Berlant shares a more sophisticated view on shame than any other psychotherapist or sociologist I've come across in her interview with Sina Najafi and David Serlin (2008). She begins by reviewing work by queer theorists Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank (1995) in which they fuse a relational trauma shame perspective with a critical queer politic to theorize shame as both a 'broken circuit' of "attachment and desire that ought to circulate between the subject and its treasured object" and a political economy producing shamed subjectivities (Najafi et. al., 2008). Berlant is critical of organizing shame around the image of the shamed subject, which is a "fantasy that the emotional event tells a simple, clear, visceral truth about something" (2008). In reality, she emphasises, there are many other complex emotions interlocking with shame that need articulating, including "anger, numbness, hunger, a desire to self-stimulate, a compulsion to repeat, the pleasure of a recognition, grief, and/or curiosity, and these wouldn't merely be defenses against the impact of the pure feeling of shame, but actually different responses to being affectively cut off" (2008). Her view suggests that since shame coincides with an array of contextual responses, it may sometimes appear as something else that seems less important. Considering shame is difficult to speak about, I suspect its corresponding affects and emotions will often come to the fore.

Another affect author I engage with is Kathleen Stewart (2007), whose book *Ordinary Affects* explores affects in their abstract and concrete movements, theorizing the ways they inform the social and personal in everyday scenes. Stewart situates her work as an "experiment" (1) and outlines an onto-epistemology like mine by indicating affects' significance lies in their potentialities as they move through and couple with bodies, contexts, language, and other social material. Inquiring about affects, Stewart says, involves wondering about "where they might go and what potential modes of knowing, relating, and attending to things are already somehow present in a state of potentiality and resonance" (3). I glean from

¹² I offer a detailed description of my process of writing my body (Minh-ha, 1989) and its interwoven self/other stories in the (non) methodology up next.

Stewart the importance of paying attention to nuance and particularity and that studying affect isn't about knowing, it's about storying- in her words, "to collect them into a good enough story of what's going on" and "fashion some form of address that is adequate to their form [...] performing some of the intensity and texture that makes them habitable and animate" (4). In this I find some of my own agenda, which is to trace shame's "tangle of potential connections" (Stewart, 3) in sexual experience and perform, through embodied writing, some of the ways they work on and through bodies (physical, discursive, textual, and social) in encounters.

As these theorists make clear, working with affect can be challenging due to its tendency to resist capture as an indwelling between actualities, producing linkages of emotions and always changing. Consequently, I've considered Erin Manning's (2013) theorization of feeling as related to affect in that it "is the force that moves an event to reach its concrescence. [It] is also what outlives it, always still resonating" (21). Feeling through bodily senses is integral to my process of writing affects, which I elaborate on in the next chapter.

Intersections of shame and sex

In my survey of qualitative and post-qualitative examples of research interested in shame and sexual experience, I've come across many, but they are either more focused on certain populations or areas of shame or sexual experience (such as BDSM or pornography and shame figures into it but isn't the stated focus) or don't conceptualize knowledge production according to assemblage or intra-action. For example, there's Halberstam's (2005) work, as mentioned above, which concentrates on gay male shame as exemplary of privileged identities laying claim to shame experience and transforming it into pride. Other work, such as Deborah Tolman's (2005) examination into teen girls' missing discourses of desire or Deborah Thompson's (2018) study of male-perpetrated discursive shaming practices towards women in online dating forums, include mentions of shame as a sexist regulatory force limiting women's sexual agency and free pursuit of pleasure. In addition, Asha Abeyasekera and Jeanne Marecek's (2019) study of Sri Lankan women's experiences of shame in relation to breaking socially mandated sexual rules, consequently "violating norms of propriety" and jeopardizing their family's honour, is one example of literature that contextualizes shame

within intersections of gender, sexual, religious and cultural norms¹³. Further qualitative investigations into shame as it relates to sex highlight shame in trauma experience, such as Carol Rambo Ronai's (1995) autoethnographic reflections on child sexual abuse and Rebecca Helman's (2021) doctoral thesis exploring the normalization of rape in South Africa. Sharing the ways she and the womxn¹⁴ she interviews are affected by and contest rape's underlying and interlocking systems of cultural domination, she describes shame's "stickiness," noting that "all of the womxn I interviewed spoke about shame as a central component of their experience of having been raped, and how overcoming or moving beyond this shame was an ongoing battle" (2022, 8). She argues that the shame she 'catches' as a witness to others' shame illustrates how:

"The shame of rape works to produce othering and separation, rather than inviting empathy. This othering is powerfully evident within the broader context of sexual violence, in which womxn who have been raped are repeatedly met with hostility, denial, and the dismissal of their pain, as well as social responses which turn the public gaze away from rape as a pressing social issue" (2002, 8-9).

Rambo Ronai's (1995) autoethnographic account of childhood sex abuse brings powerful testimony to the importance of breaking silencing effects of shame. Rambo Ronai says, "children and adults everywhere are shamed into staying silent about their abuse because our culture does not have a way to comfortably frame the experience" (412). If incest were made more of a public issue, she contends, there would be more of a class consciousness to discuss child abuse. This seems to extend into most if not all sticky and uncomfortable intersections of sex and shame, as Fiona Murray (2021) attests. In her reflections on an 'ethno-autography' about her husband's porn addiction, she faces others' delegitimization and policing:

"There was no resistance to my topic in the beginning, before the study was named. Now, resistance can be found hidden in the inflection of the introduction at a conference or the force of the joke made to 'lighten' the

¹³ This study was one of many articles in *Feminism & Psychology's* special issue on the Feminist Politics of Shame.

¹⁴ Helman employs the term womxn to acknowledge all female identifications, including those who are non-binary and transitioning.

academic atmosphere. This policing can come in the form of sniggers, furtive glances, and on occasion, the odd dismissive sneer” (2021, 500).

Rambo Ronai and Murray’s work highlights how delegating shame to the ‘taboo’ silences shamed subjectivities. This further enables the perpetuation of sexual violence and continued resistance to speaking openly and honestly about shame. Part of my motivation to engage in a study of shame and sex with others is to make a mark in the world of post qualitative research, albeit small, where shame and sex matter. I hope to engage with the notion of the unsaid, the taboo, tracing what it produces and the bodies and subjectivities it favors.

Taking a more sociologically focused examination into shame and sex, accounts like Nicola Gavey’s (2018) critical look at the ‘cultural scaffolding’ of rape culture or Lynn Phillips’ (2000) book detailing her research with college-aged women navigating contradictory sexual subjectivities shine light on the heteropatriarchal misogyny that sustains women’s self-blame and shame in relation to men’s sexual violations and boundary crossings. Like these examples, my work pays close attention to the systems of domination created and maintained by white supremacist, western, heteropatriarchal paradigms as they strengthen shame’s potency as it acts on and through bodies and subjectivities. However, my work differs because I conceptualize voice as depersonalized through a lens of assemblage. This means the shame and sex narratives I (re)present don’t belong to (my)self or others, and I don’t make truth claims. Rather, voice, just like affect, arises in spaces between (Deleuze and Parnet, 1987) and amongst other emergent multiplicities. Here, although ‘voice’ is what comes through the text and may appear to be privileged, I consider other human and non-human forms of matter, such as the body, physical spaces, sounds, and so on, with equal weight. Further, the stories I write enable me to attend to affects through moments of contradiction, resonance, conflict or confusion, consequently employing reflexive self-experiencing as a tool for making sense of affects. Tuning into moments of affective intensity through my own experience means that what I come up with is never straightforward, trustworthy or ‘valid.’ As I’ll describe more in the following chapter, layering others’ material with my own shame and sex stories as well as theory conjured in these encounters conveys the dynamic, in-flux, context-specific liveliness of assemblages. Like Gale and Wyatt (2013) convey in their writing on assemblages: “and so it seems that this assemblage/ethnography cannot only be about the ‘whomevers’, it will also

have to involve the witevers and in each of these both gain and attempt to convey a sense of what Kemmis has called ‘happeningness’ (2010, 417)” (144).

Sex Assemblages

There are a few examples of new materialist inquiries into sex, sexualization and shame that show the possibilities of assemblage as a way of breaking through binary impressions for static dichotomies by conceiving of both/and. For instance, Susan MacKay’s (2022) *Troubling Pleasures: A Creative-Relational Inquiry* puts forward her ‘pleasure pain sex assemblage,’ which thinks with pleasure pain to show how:

“It is not one thing or another but a multiplicity of experiences that defy labels and categorizing them as only pathology or pastime or normal. Or produced from childhood or society. In the dungeon or in the vestibule of my home. Pain pleasure sex assemblage is a concept that can hold the smallest reference to these categories, locations and expand beyond them and entwine with other ideas” (73).

MacKay’s assemblage takes me through her hunger for dangerous, painful and pleasurable sex, her wondering about instances of being told (implicitly and explicitly) that her desire was bad or pathological, and her troubled and tentative offering about where to ‘draw the line’ in pain pleasure sex. Musing that “hidden under this investigation of terminologies is a slow path towards shame” (49), MacKay writes into, at variously scattered interludes throughout, trauma-filled experiences including being sexually abused at the age of 16 by her parents’ 36-year-old friend. I keep noticing my desire for her to make direct connections between trauma and shame, or trauma and gender/power, but she doesn’t do this explicitly. These connections are there, but they are more wandering and evasive, as though they are poking at the reader to form (and question) a more concrete impression. Probing into her pull towards ‘problematic relationships,’ MacKay writes:

“As I walk slowly home up Marchmont Crescent, I identify my unease; satisfied with everything is connected to my capacity to erotize things like pain, anger, violence, or vile ephemera. Satisfaction or tolerance. I tolerate mold and decay and scarcity. I am satisfied with problematic relationships because I gild them with erotic. I endure suffering; make it sexy. I make it a prize by smothering

the unacceptable in glitter, using erotic to transform it to succulence. Use erotic to transform danger into dazzling” (312).

As I read MacKay’s account, I watch my discomfort build while witnessing her flagrant and pleasure/pain-filled encounters with danger, risk, and sexual excess. These don’t comprise the whole of her thesis, for there are many other complicated stories of negative affects including shame that weave through sexual experience, but her vivid descriptions of seeking pain and debasement also trouble me. I have thrown myself at sex with strangers, ambivalent yet aware, and I often left these encounters regretting them. I don’t find this trace of regret or humiliation in MacKay’s writing; it is as though something enables her to feel powerful in these encounters and impenetrable from the overarching context of patriarchy. Perhaps her impenetrability is part of what makes her narrative so deterritorializing (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987): she refuses to present the story we have been socialized to expect, which is that a woman who engages with dangerous and violent sex has ‘bad’ things coming for her. MacKay describes her first encounter with penetrative sex as one in which “it had not occurred to me that I could have said no to him,” and explains this is because she wanted to experience sex but didn’t know she “had a choice about who, where and why” (146). It is implied that her gender and age, under the context of patriarchy, influenced her ability to choose, but when she doesn’t mention these explicitly, I wonder about how power features in the rest of her encounters with shame and sex. I feel moved by her reclamation of labels and leave her work questioning my relationship to power, as it seems very different to hers. Do I put too much weight in power’s role as a co-constitutive force? I am also spurred on by MacKay’s model of assemblage as a device to ‘trouble’ what troubles us. Here, assemblage works in a similar way, inviting all intra-active forces to the frame and engaging closely with them even when this isn’t easy and requires a second (or third) encounter with ‘data.’

Nick Fox and Pam Alldred (2013) were the first to conceive of a ‘sexuality assemblage’ as a way of challenging humanist understandings of agency within processes of sexual being and becoming. They suggest, and I agree, that most available sociological accounts of sexuality subscribe to some degree of identity politics and “posit an essentialist subject whose sexuality is buried and/or released by culture,” (770) while assemblage thinking opens greater possibilities for sexual subjectivities, including non-human dimensions that combine to produce what sex and sexuality can do. For instance, as Fox and Alldred put forward, a

particular event such as a 'kissing-assemblage' is linked to many other relations through flows of affect that might look something like:

"A's lips – B's lips – past experiences and circumstances – social and sexual norms – A and B's personal attributes (e.g. physical appearance, personality, job) – dating conventions – immediate material contexts" (2013, 775).

Similarly, the shame and sex assemblage hosts affective flows associated with other relations of matter, continually multiplying to refuse capture and produce further affects. It might look something like:

A's question about why B has come to speak about shame and sex – B's comment that they have been interested since they were young, as there's been a lot of shame – A's associations with young + shame, the feelings and response this produces – the sensation of grass, hot sun on skin, a churning stomach in B and slight anxiety in A's chest – sexual scripts, norms and ideas from cultural institutions – A's and B's sexual, geographical, religious and family histories – others nearby, their sounds, smells and images – phones with texts from partners, dating apps, social media and their gestures towards shame/sex – past/present/future messages from and encounters with dominant institutions – and so on.

Among its endless potential of affective forces cutting together-apart (Barad, 2014), the assemblage may produce affects such as: feelings of closeness and intimacy that encourage expansive openness, moments of blushing and turning away with intensified shame, feelings of misunderstanding and divergence or shutdown through collisions of difference and recognition, and moments of confusion leading to wonder and desire for more exploring and unearthing of shame that has been silenced for so long. I am interested in the ways human and non-human materials affect and are affected by encounters just as much as I am interested in what we say about shame and sex. For, as Fox and Alldred argue, assemblages within human-centered fields like sociology (or psychotherapy) risk privileging human and action so that "every deterritorialization is also a reterritorialization" (784). A possible resolution, they suggest, is to be highly critical of 'truth' and ground inquiry in a reflexive stance, both of which I take to heart in my research.

Jessica Ringrose and Emma Renold (2011) look into girls' 'schizoid' sexual subjectivities, employing Deleuzoguattarian assemblage to attend to girls' nuanced sexual becomings within heterosexualized spaces. Their non-binary, non-linear insights into complicated acts of conformance and resistance, often happening at the same time, offers an alternative to the "sexualization discourse" that problematically encourages binary agentic positioning of active/passive, empowered/dangerous, healthy/unhealthy, and so on (391). They achieve this by viewing the body as "a site of production 'in all sorts of unexpected and unpredictable linkages' where girls might knowingly or unknowingly subvert sexual regulations within particular social and cultural 'affective assemblages'" (394; Ringrose, 2011b). Ringrose and Renold employ assemblage in multiple inquiries about girls' sexual subject formations and negotiations (2008, 2011, 2012, 2014), and what stands out to me is an absence of *their* material-discursive engagements in the knowledges they (re)present. I'm left wondering, along with a host of other questions, how their collective girlhood experiences populate the multiplicities of the pack (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), affecting and being affected by entanglements to produce certain readings and not others. Of course, reflexivity is not problem-free (Kress and Frazier-Booth, 2018), but I see their absent (yet inevitably present) acknowledgement of their own co-constitutive affective landscapes in-relation to others as an oversight that verges towards a positivist logic of the 'expert' knower standing outside in objectifying relation to the 'known' (Flyvberg, 2001). In this project, I attend to the auto in the assemblage (or the assemblage in the auto?) by exploring layers of my spacetime-matterings as they are entangled with others' (Barad, 2014). By writing my body (Minh-ha, 1989) and engaging in reflexivity as an event (Kress and Frazier-Booth, 2018), I acknowledge my inextricable embodied relation to the material-discursive and engage with a *creative-relational*¹⁵ process of following encounter where it takes me. I listen for the depersonalized VwO (Mazzei, 2013) of shame moving in relation, affecting and being affected, through attending to how it lands in my body and the stories that flow through it. I haven't encountered this degree of working through layers of self in-relation to assemblages in

¹⁵ By creative-relational, I refer to Holman Jones' (2020) account that depicts a performative, artful inquiry of charting the "unknown territory [of encounter] without needing to set it down or rub it out. About the affective and intensive in our everyday- language, thoughts, and feelings, ways of being together" (117). Although I don't use the lens of performance to theorize this work, there's an element of the performative in the event of storying encounters, since this involves creating scenes of relation and affect.

others' work,¹⁶ so I'm without a blueprint to guide reflexive practices of vulnerable self-exposure. I hope that through taking stock of my intra-active engagements with others with as much openness as I can, while also critically deconstructing 'self,' I can be more accountable to the ways my histories, body, emotions, affects, and ideologies produce certain stories about others. I invite shame to be a "gateway to the new" by sifting through uncomfortable unknowns, sensing where intensities take me in this "particular moment of becoming, of in-forming" (Murray, 2021, 498).

Defining Sex, Gender, and Sexualities

In studying sexual experience as it intersects with shame, I want to convey what I mean by sex and gender as well as how I locate myself within these domains. First, I think of *sexual experience* or 'sex' for short as a range of body-mind engagements that could be said to be sexual in nature, including fantasy, masturbation, touching, flirty innuendo, kissing, and penetrative or non-penetrative acts. I leave it up to those who I speak with to define what is sexual to them and acknowledge that sexual experience can also refer to ideological encounters, such as sexual education lectures in school or advertisements that generate information about sex. Following from a diffractive onto-epistemology, I understand gender and sexual orientations as in-flux and co-constituted through processes of dynamic spacetime-mattering (Barad, 2014). I like Sweet's (2022) understanding of gender as a "relational process of embodying that is not contingent on body configuration," since the body is "always already both/and" feminine and masculine (161). Although there are moments or periods where states of bodying (Manning, 2013) feel concretized so that a person identifies with one gender or sexual orientation, our processes of taking up gendered bodies are always changing. Putting into practice an understanding of gendered subjectivities and embodiments as "multiple, mobile, relational, contextual, intersectional, and fractured" (Sweet, 2022, 169) is an ideal of mine yet I am still working through onto-epistemological blind spots (Sweet et. al., 2020). One is my view of dominant expressions of masculinity as hegemonic, or normative expressions that "reflect whatever customs the culture privileging it values" (Sweet, 2022, 158), which I picked up during my undergraduate Women's Studies degree. I now consider this problematic since it concretizes and dichotomizes masculinities.

¹⁶ See my discussion of negotiating vulnerability in the assemblage in the next chapter for more on this. By 'self,' I mean an indivisible self/other relation, as Barad (2007) theorizes.

Also, since my lived experience of gender has always aligned with my assigned gender, my understandings of nonbinary or trans are limited to conceptual frameworks.

Along similar lines, I think of sexual orientation with the help of Ahmed (2006), who positions orientations according to bodies we are oriented towards and what these desires and pairings afford us (or not). For instance, being queer is “out of place” (Thorneycroft, 2020) in most (mainstream) circles, whereas heterosexuality follows the unspoken social agreement of ‘legitimacy’ (Ahmed, 2006). I have been queerly oriented, or ‘pansexual’ since becoming sexual. However, since this project’s conception, I have gone from a *slantwise* view (Ahmed, 2006), which is onto-epistemologically situated in the experience of inhabiting a body whose queerness “extends less easily into space,” to a straight position in my current relationship with a cis man (102). These days, I benefit from others’ projections about my seemingly ‘in-line’ sexual desire, which includes corresponding value judgements of being “decent, conventional, direct, and honest” (Ahmed, 2006, 70). Being read as straight yet having spent years as an ‘out of the closet’ queer (Thorneycroft, 2020) is a paradoxical position. I hope these multiple positionalities can be useful for building rapport.

The creative-relational process of sifting through shame and sex stories as they are woven through me prompts me to review and rethink black and white categorical ‘truths’ that I am drawn to in attempts at easy answers. Some examples include a theoretical generalization that powerful or hegemonic subjectivities are afforded more privilege to move away from shame, or that shame is too ingrained and all-consuming to allow for simultaneous instances of transformation and pleasure. There’s no clearcut, linear experience of shame and sex; subjectivities, bodies, objects, discourses, environments, histories and sensations in the complex system of spacetime-mattering (Barad, 2014) are in constant movement. Just like femininities and masculinities are fluid and develop specific expressions in relation to others, times, and places, so are shame and sex assemblages.

Encounter, Story, and Other Practicalities

Riffing Off of Existing Assemblage/Intra-active Engagements

There's an abundance of post-qualitative research that thinks with concepts including assemblage (Ringrose and Renold, 2014; Martin, 2018; Fox and Alldred, 2013; Ringrose, 2011), diffraction (Taguchi, 2012; Mazzei et. al., 2014), becoming (Jackson, 2010), Body without Organs (Mazzei, 2013) and intra-action (Kostas, 2022; Kuntz and Presnall, 2012) among many others¹⁷. In my comprehensive overview of shame and sex (or shame/sex) inquiries with others that think with assemblage or intra-action, I've not come across a single example that breaks free of conventional methodological concepts such as the interview and data analysis. For example, Lisa Mazzei (2013) posits the Voice without Organs (VwO) that borrows from the BwO in assemblage and argues "the interview must be thought as assemblage as are the organism (BwO) and voice (VwO)" (735). While she is explicit in her new materialist conception of the material-discursive forming emergent and depersonalized voice in the interstices, she maintains the concept of "interview" throughout the article, thus rendering stable the "image of thought" conjured by the interview (Deleuze, 1994). Another example is Jessica Ringrose's (2011) article *Beyond Discourse? Using Deleuze and Guattari's Schizoanalysis to Explore Affective Assemblages, Heterosexually Striated Space, and Lines of Flight Online and at School*, in which she instrumentalizes assemblage theory to map teen girls' resistances to heterosexist domination in online and school environments. Although she stays true to Deleuzoguattarian concepts to the extent that she examines "whether lines of flight are *destructive or productive (or both)* and [considers] what they *enable or affect* in specific space/time configurations," she remains faithful to the conventional paradigm's constructs of data and the interview, thus adhering to method's compartmentalization and its corresponding dualisms (603, italics original). There are many other examples of post-qualitative work that hold onto at least one or two of qualitative research's integral and recognizable elements, and I could go on listing them- for instance, Mazzei's (2014) article *Beyond an Easy Sense: A Diffractive Analysis* holds onto the concept of data as stable and separate from the researcher while illustrating diffraction as a methodological analytical practice for reading texts "*through, with, and in relation* to each other to construct a process

¹⁷ I list these concepts because they are ones I'm particularly interested in, however there are endless examples of post-humanist and new materialist concepts to think with.

of thinking” (744, italics original). Mazzei’s unproblematic use of data is at odds with a diffractive philosophy’s notion of “agential separability,” which I’ve described above as Barad’s (2003) conception of the embeddedness of knower in the known (828).

Although I’m disappointed by these examples’ contradictory preservation of conventional research devices that harken the dogmatic image of thought, I have found myself in a similar position of not completely doing away with methodological practices. In both my ethics application and call out for participation, I use the word interview to symbolize what I conceive of as “encounter” due to the interview’s currency as a ‘safe’ and recognizable concept. This affords me not having to undergo extra work of explaining my language and way of thinking, which saves time and energy. When I meet with people, I share my concept of encounter and a simplified explanation for ditching the concept of the interview. Everyone receives this well, which doesn’t surprise me because most people are social science researchers and academics. Throughout the duration of this project, I continue to struggle with letting go of conventional devices and stages because it requires me to create and articulate entirely new constructs- not in the image of the interview, for instance, but from my own values and their resonances with philosophical standpoints. This is both scary and exciting (Taguchi and St. Pierre, 2017) but I have come up with a language to describe non-linear and uncontained processes. The following is a set of articulations of each process, bearing in mind that while these appear to be distinct entities, they bleed into and are co-constituted by each other:

- 1) The *encounter* refers to conversations with others in an array of online and in-person environments. It opens with me asking a variation of “what interests you about sex and shame” and follows an unpredictable material-discursive entanglement. Knowledge-creation in the encounter is premised on Deleuze and Parnet’s (1987) image of the stammer in the chapter *A Conversation: What is it? What is it for?* in *Dialogues II*, and by this line in particular: “In the TV conversations *6 times 2* what were Godard and Mieville doing if not making the richest use of their solitude, using it as a means of encounter, making a line or bloc shoot between two people, producing all the phenomenon of a double capture, showing what the conjunction AND is, neither a union, nor a juxtaposition, but the birth of a stammering, the outline of a broken line which always sets off at right angles, a sort of active and creative line of flight? AND .

. . . AND . . . AND . . .” (7-8). Encountering is a never-ending process of intra-active mattering and will continue past the project’s official end date.

- 2) The *story* refers to fictional non-fictions, instrumental for attending to the lifeforces of others’ stories as they came alive and “announced themselves gradually” (MacLure, 2013). Storying incorporates reflexivity with a recognition of the unreliable narrator to “redefine the relations between subject with object, of researcher and researched identities, and of knowing with the known” (Clough, 2002, 4). The story is an integral to becoming receptive to the material’s affectivity. It is another encounter, a way of attending to material-discursive entanglements through intra-acting with the transcript, embodied affects, memory and theory as they thread through one another. It attempts to bring in important aspects of experience and knowledges that the transcript excludes including sounds, tone, images, feelings, and sensations (Cannon, 2018).
- 3) The *hotspot* is an affective intensity sparked by material, particularly language (MacLure, 2013). It signals something perplexing, stirring, and moving that requires greater exploration produced by the material’s affective intensities. Deciding on hotspots is an intra-active process of being affected by moments or events and enacting agential cuts (Barad, 2012) with matter through its “ongoing topological dynamics of enfolding” (177). Hotspots are markedly different than themes in that they arise from material-discursive entanglements and work to expand the not-yet-known, while themes involve researcher-imposed categorization and sectioning off (Jackson, 2017; Brinkmann, 2014).

Practicalities: What, Where, Why and Who

As soon as I had ethical approval to speak with others about shame in sexual experience, I put out a call for participation through a few social science email list-serves at the University of Edinburgh and sent out emails to my own friend networks. I also posted the same call-out on my Facebook page and made it public so that friends could post it on their personal pages. Within the first day, I received more interest in the project than I anticipated and would be able to accommodate. Out of the twenty-five people who expressed interest, I organized pre-interview phone calls with the first seven to express interest. Out of these were three friends who I didn’t see on a regular basis and hadn’t known for very long. I was eager

to include them in this research because we'd already established a rapport that could serve to endow a foundational level of trust for talking about shame and sex with a greater degree of richness and comfort. Pre-interviews were a way of assessing a person's suitability and to clarify that the research was oriented towards sharing experience rather than engaging in therapy, both of which are important for shame and sex research due to its close connection to trauma. In our phone conversations, I asked whether people had traumatic experience that corresponded to shame and sex and what they'd done already to process it. I also asked what they anticipated would happen if they felt triggered mid-conversation and listened for their capacity to access self-support and regulate their nervous system in the moment. Often people had questions, including why I was interested in sex and shame, how long our conversation would likely be, and what I planned on doing after I'd finished the research, so I answered these. All participants were either students or had been students recently, and many brought an academic interest to their involvement as well as an interest to share their stories. I determined from my seven 20-minute conversations that everyone was suitable to join and sent out documents including the Participant Information Sheet (PIS), Consent Form (CF) and Resources Sheet (RS) for them to read and sign if necessary (see Appendix A). I included both online and in-person versions of the PIS and CF, since these were slightly different according to the potential risks each context brought. As the PIS conveys, I offered the choice of meeting twice to provide an opportunity for gradual rapport-building due to the vulnerable and intimate nature of the topic. One person, Amy, voiced her preference to meet twice, so we did. Next, I planned meeting times and places with each person according to their preference for online or in-person meetings. Due to Covid-19, I wasn't able to schedule private university meeting rooms like I'd planned for, so we needed to be creative. Out of the seven participants, three were friends of mine and I agreed with two of them to meet at my flat¹⁸ due to rainy weather and mutual convenience. Two others met with me over Zoom¹⁹, while the remaining three met with me in parks, where we situated ourselves according to a mutual choice of location. Sometimes environmental changes and other bodies in these spaces prompted us to change locations. For instance, Amy and I originally sat down in a somewhat shaded location at her shared garden but five minutes into our conversation a man

¹⁸ Here I refer to Sarah, Frank and George. I met with Frank and Sarah at my flat.

¹⁹ Although Teams was the first proposed online meeting forum, people were more familiar and comfortable with Zoom, and this had been approved as an alternative option so it worked well for us.

started cutting shrubs next to us with a noisy tool, so we moved to the opposite side. The combined forces of others and our proximity to them, images, sounds, sensations, times of day and so on affected what materialized and despite my efforts to make note of these elements in the transcript, many of them became lost fragments.

I didn't have a consistent procedure for obtaining demographic information about each person I spoke with, nor did I have the desire or need for it. Rather than prompt or probe, the details that mattered emerged in our conversations, and details that didn't stayed silent. The information that emerged was that all people were younger than me (35) at the time, 3 identified as male and 4 as female, 5 were native English speakers and 2 weren't, 2 identified as non-Westerners and the remaining 5 didn't identify themselves as either²⁰, 1 person identified as queer, and the 3 men identified as straight. Everyone provided accounts of heterosexual experiences, which isn't to say that these weren't "queered" (Rossi, 2011).

After transcribing encounters, I emailed each person the transcript and checked to see how they were doing. My intention was to share that rendering of encounter in case they wanted to add or omit anything. In retrospect, this was an unnecessary step since the transcript is far from how I've (re) presented our stories. I can say now that I was still operating according to a representational logic. I emailed everyone the finished thesis a few months after submitting it and heard from most that they received it, inviting them to review and share their thoughts or feelings. Only Mina so far has let me know she had some thoughts about it that she will email my way. I can't say why the others haven't been in touch, but there are things I imagine such as they're busy, have moved on, or perhaps something doesn't sit well but it's hard to articulate without being face-to-face.

Limitations of this work

The lived experiences that showed up in this study are privileged since everyone is middle-class, educated, young, able-bodied, and predominantly heterosexual. Most people are white and come from Western countries, although one woman is Turkish, a man is Chinese North American, and one participant identifies as queer but doesn't explicitly speak of queer experience. The exclusion of trans, nonbinary, (dis)abled, queer, working class, non-

²⁰ I would presume this stems from whiteness as an unmarked category, where a white western subject doesn't need to mark himself due to experiencing himself as the taken-for-granted norm (Frankenberg, 2001).

Western and older/elderly experiences is a huge limitation of this work, especially since these more marginalized social locations are disproportionately subject to sexual shame and shaming in the context of ableist, patriarchal, white supremacist, heterosexist, transphobic and ageist societies (Munt, 2007; Erickson, 2007; Feinberg, 1998; Noble, 2007; hooks, 2003). The identities of those who showed up could be associated with the mostly academic and inner circle spaces I advertised as well as a reflection of my privileged identities. Focusing on the seemingly uncoincidental occurrence of privileged subjectivities and bodies coming together to speak about shame and sex prompts me to think of Halberstam's (2005) assertion that privilege enables people to take up space and transform shame. However, I agree with Massumi (2019) that "people do not live in their identity, they live in their differencing," where difference is constantly shifting (119, italics original). Here, differencing happens as bodies relate to and face each other and other others (Ahmed, 2002), their surroundings, discourses, and political systems. In these complex and dynamic relations, I attend to forces that produce certain possibilities but not others to ignite a critical exposure of power, marginalization, and dominance. As I engage with assemblages, I ask what shame does as it couples with social, political, environmental, and interpersonal forces. Where does it go, what does it produce, and how do we speak about it in relation to sexual experience? Which feelings does it stir up in the body in the here/now, there/then? What might we learn about shame and sex in these spaces, and what can assemblage offer as a lens?

Ethical Considerations

As per an agential realist understanding of distributed agency amongst human and non-human forces, the collection of environmental sensory input, feelings, actions, discourses, Covid-19 and other contemporary goings on and subjectivities materialize to produce the event of spacetime-mattering (Barad, 2014). This onto-epistemology influences ethical frameworks and decision-making. In the absence of available university rooms to meet in due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which would have been more controlled and private spaces, we needed to be creative and seek out settings that were primarily outdoors and brought a slew of unknowns and risks. We didn't know who else would be there, what the weather would be like, and which sounds, sights, and smells we would encounter; all of this was there for us to discover as it unravelled. I/we met each scenario's unique pull with "response-able" action (Barad, 2014, 184). This Baradian ethic entails responding to matter-mattering in its

dynamic material-discursive dance with us. In the agency I share as researcher, I make “agential cuts”- the temporary stabilization of specific aspects in entanglements that “do not mark some absolute separation but a cutting together/apart – ‘holding together’ of the disparate itself” (Barad, 2012, 46). In other words, agential cuts are boundary-making events of affecting what might be possible and come in the form of questions I ask, whom I decide to meet with, how I describe the project, material I choose to include or exclude and how I respond to unforeseen situations that spark ethical tensions.

Throughout the course of inquiry, I encountered a few “ethically important moments,” or “difficult, often subtle, and usually unpredictable situation[s]” (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). These caught me off guard, challenging me to think creatively to resolve the tensions each event brought. As Marilyns Guillemin and Lynn Gillam theorize, ethically important moments are often those we haven’t been prompted to think through in the customary “procedural ethics” application we’ve submitted. In the following section, I’ll describe ethical tensions and my processes of thinking and feeling through them. In the absence of a unitary model, this involved listening to my sense of what was appropriate and just in each situation. Deleuze (1990) articulates an ethic of following one’s responsibility to an event that resonates with the approach I used: “either ethics makes no sense at all, or this is what it means and has nothing else to say: not to be unworthy of what happens to us” (149). I interpret “not being unworthy of what happens to us” as taking to heart the unique needs of what has arisen and deciding on a course of action that most honestly and justly meets it. There’s no blueprint for this. As Elizabeth St. Pierre (1997) articulates, arising to the unpredictability of ethical moments in post qualitative research involves learning to “live in the middle of things, in the tension of conflict and confusion and possibility,” and that not being able to create an advance blueprint leaves us “always on the hook, responsible, everywhere, all the time” (176-177).

The first ethical tension arose when I realised I’d gone off-piste from my proposed ethics protocol by meeting with two people in my flat. I was worried that having conversations in my personal space would signal a break in my contract with the university because I hadn’t sought approval first. I wrote to the ethics board at the university to inform them of my action and provide a rationale. In this letter I outlined that my decision struck me as ethical because the participants had suggested we meet at my flat due to my hip condition limiting my mobility. Since we knew each other, both of us felt comfortable in my personal space, and the

enclosed space of the flat was a better option than a somewhat private nook in a park. The unpredictability of the weather was another consideration that swayed us to speak at my flat. Anna Ross, Co-Chair of the CPASS Ethics Committee, replied to say she was satisfied with how I'd thought through the ethics process and that I could proceed.

Another ethical tension emerged when I transcribed encounters. I was trying to decide whether to transcribe my second meeting with one of my participants, Amy, the only person I'd met with twice. This encounter resembled and felt more like two friends gossiping about our dating lives than a research encounter about sex and shame. The tone was supportive and joyful. When considering whether to include or omit our conversation that day, I asked myself whether Amy would want it in. Would she trust my agential cut (Barad, 2012) of omitting this from our story? As I wondered this, I thought of how that meeting inevitably made its way into her/our story regardless of its literal word-for-word account, since it affected how Amy's becoming-shame threaded through me. I decided to not transcribe it from my sense that I would "be worthy of" my encounter with Amy by leaving out the words that came out of that day. However, I have since (re) turned to my story of our encounter to add a brief mention of that day and what transpired between us.

The ethical dilemma relating to my story of encountering Amy links to an overall 'crisis of representation' (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), or the impossibility of getting others' words and meanings right (Cannon, 2018). My first attempt to resolve this is to deliberately (re) present stories through the unstable narrator of 'I', which honours the fiction of my own subjective experience (St. Pierre et al., 2021, 104). However, even though I don't purport to represent anyone or make truth claims, the desire and responsibility to accurately portray others' experiences still tugs at me. I respect the trust someone has extended to share self-exposing, vulnerable, and sometimes traumatic experiences and strive to honour this in the writing. I also sense the impossibility to ever 'know' someone in their differences and sameness through touching and being touched; all I can know is the particularities of encounter and what arises between us (Ahmed, 2002). In feeling an undue power to discursively construct the version of their stories that I'll (re) present to others, I keep asking myself *what makes me worthy of this?* Or, returning to Deleuze, how can I not be unworthy of bringing what they've shared? Another story that prompts me to question whether my rendering is ethical is my account of Frank and me. Our dual relationship needed careful untangling and I revisited and

revised my original frustrated narrative several times. During this process I realised I'd been carried away from appreciating his vulnerability into a world of frustration and insensitivity due to our dynamic stirring up past experiences and affects. I followed my anger to heteronormative patriarchal sexual scripts that plugged into the assemblage, realising I'd lost sight of the particularities that made our encounter possible. To return to particularity and to not being unworthy of his shared stories, I traced my steps back to conflictual and difficult feelings that I'd projected into our encounter. I laid out the stammering (Deleuze and Parnet, 1987) that endowed these hard feelings with prismatic multiplicities. I saw the shame-sex assemblage was populated with co-constitutive forces of a 30-something year old man and 35-year-old woman who he had met on a dating site, speaking in her flat about his shame towards losing his virginity late, premature ejaculation and higher sex drive, with their gendered subjectivities and corresponding sexual histories and the heteronormative patriarchal sexual scripts plugging in. In returning to these particularities, I recovered empathy towards Frank's vulnerability and his move away from shame, gaining appreciation for the threads of distress and challenge in what seemed privileged and the 'norm'. This helped me open to the VwO and to resist the "violence of essentializing discourses" (Mazzei, 2013) that rang through my homogeneous conception of a cis, white, able-bodied, young, middle-class, and educated man bringing an often-told story of male sexual desire. As Barad (2007) reminds us, every new moment brings possibility to encounter material and ourselves differently, so justice entails "the ongoing practice of being open and alive to each meeting, each intra-action, so that we might use our ability to respond, our responsibility, to help awaken, to breathe life into ever new possibilities for living justly" (X).

This research ventures into topics that ask us (participants, me, and the reader) to be vulnerable and prompts the sharing of painful experiences including trauma, abjection, and stigmatization. Although I screened for others' readiness to speak about potentially triggering material, there's still the potential for harm to occur during or after an encounter. Due to this, I checked in with those I spoke with several times after. Further, some of the stories I write are unresolved and jarring, as I want to convey their in-process complexities. At the same time, I resist creating "trauma porn," or sensationalist accounts that accentuate the most disturbing details in an individualizing, consumer-driven manner (Yeboah, 2020, 134). I do this by deliberately tying in any shocking and horrifying experiences with the patriarchal, white

supremacist or relational systems that co-produce them, an ethical practice from Yeboah (2020) that “privileges contexts over character” (137). I strongly believe tales of harm and suffering are only valuable in research when they expose the oppressive systems that uphold them, and even then, researchers need to be selective about which stories they share (Yeboah, 2020). In addition, any violent or otherwise concerning material needs to be intertwined with stories of complicated survivorship, equally highlighting the strength and resilience we bring to find safety and connection. Not only does this portray the complicated and nuanced lives behind these stories, but it also helps prevent them from being triggering. Further, although my practice of juxtaposing layers of my experience with others came about organically, without springing from ethical principle, it is a way of reflexively accounting for how my positionality affects what others tell me, what I hear, and what I choose to include. I agree with Yeboah (2022) that “without deep reflection and engagement with the ways in which we are interpolated by the larger socio-political matrix of which we are all a part, how can we dare to begin the work of representing an other?” (285). I hope these reflexive engagements encourage readers to reflect on the ways they are implicated in shame and sex stories through locating themselves in relation to the heteropatriarchal and colonial systems that undergird them.

Before moving onto the stories, I’d like to mention a final ethical consideration, which was the dual relationships I had in researching with friends and acquaintances. Frank, George, and Sarah were all people I’d known prior and could speak with on an intimate level despite not feeling especially close to them. If they had been closer friends, I wouldn’t have agreed to include them in the project, since our tie as friends might have prevented me from speaking frankly and honestly about my experience in our encounters due to more being at stake. I felt there was enough distance between us to allow the research experience to take precedence, without worrying that taking part in the research would change our relationship. In saying this, I also want to acknowledge that my relationships with all three people haven’t been tarnished by this experience.

The chapter that follows takes you through my storied versions of encounters with Frank, Amy, George, Lara, John, Sarah, and Mina. I invite you to notice what these texts stir up as you merge with them, co-mingling in conjoined material-discursive forces of shame and sex across your and our spacetime matters.

Shame and Sex Stories

Encounter 1: Frank

Frank is at my flat; it's a summer evening and he's brought a bottle of red wine. We're friends so the gesture isn't entirely out of place, yet the wine stirs a feeling of unease in me. I'm not in the mood for blurring the lines any more than I already have by inviting a friend to my flat for research. I want to get down to business, so I lead us into the only comfortable sitting area where we can be across from one another, which happens to be my bedroom²¹. I ask him to tell me what's on his mind as we enter this conversation on shame and sex.

Frank says shame and sex are strongly connected for him, although they have changed over the course of his sexual journey and lessened over time. There are three distinct shame phases of his sexual experience through which he has processed shame and grown into his current relationship to sex. The first phase took place in high school when he worried he wasn't 'normal' because he hadn't yet lost his virginity and imagined most of his friends had. Frank says,

"Just not having experienced that before and I would think, oh, maybe I'm behind my mates or something and I felt like a part was missing. I wasn't fully grown up yet because I hadn't had sex yet. There was shame attached to that."

He saw losing his virginity as an important rite of passage to ensure membership with the group of friends he hung around, and that other people who had sex were "so cool, a step ahead." I echo his phrase "step ahead" and note this was the second time he'd used it. When I say this, his absence of negative affect pushes me to probe deeper:

"I'm curious why the shame towards being a virgin came out, you know, how did you feel that shame?"

Frank's response surprises me. "Well the main word I associate with it is inadequacy, but I don't know what you're looking for."

Frank's comment that I was looking for something suggested he thought I was fishing, digging, mining for data. Tuck and Yang (2014) contend most qualitative researchers risk

²¹ My hip was flaring up during this period and swayed the decision-making for seating.

treating others as objects for their own academic gain through “becoming-claims,” or “all of those things that might be revealed in our findings, make us famous, put our children through college, allow us to retire and be remembered where we’re dead- might change the world for the better” (814). As I write, I am aware of the risk to turn Frank’s story into a becoming-claim as I churn his story, with its worries and desires and “sense of the way the world works” into a contribution to the field, with very little benefit to him other than an experience of processing with an attentive other (Tuck and Yang, 814). I ask myself how I’ve instated a politic and ethic of refusal in this research whereby I object to “the very processes of objectification/subjectation, the making of possessors and possessions, the alchemy of becoming-claims” instead of merely engaging in reflexive or confessional writing (Tuck and Yang, 814). I cannot answer clearly, and this worries me. Others’ stories (in)form the assemblage and although I do not claim anything here - I tell stories about self and other - there’s still a feeling of exploiting what the other has told me and using it to make a point. I know awareness of the problem isn’t enough, so I stay with it, continually reminding myself to turn “the gaze back upon power” and make “transparent the metanarrative of knowledge production - its spectatorship for pain” (Tuck and Yang, 2014, 817).

Taken aback by Frank’s suggestion that I’m looking for something, I worry he experiences me as pushy or manipulative, or that I am trying to extract something from him. I quickly come back with:

“Like, did you have like a visceral shame, an embodied shame experience, does that make sense?” Something motivates my line of questioning, but it isn’t the pursuit of data. I want to know more of what he feels, as I sense his disconnect. As a therapist, probing is second nature for me, but I sense Frank’s discomfort. Probing in this instance might feel invasive, like an internal ultrasound or intimate boundary crossing.

“Um, about the sex I had or about the virgin I was before?” Frank clarifies.

“It could be both,” I suggest.

“Well, if it was true that it was shameful to be a virgin, you’d think I would have a big sense of relief to have lost it but I didn’t experience that, it was just a bit anti-climactic” he says. “It just kinda invalidated the shame before.”

“Sounds like it wasn’t that much of a big deal to you...?” I question tentatively.

Frank replies that the act itself wasn’t that significant, but everything leading up to it had a huge significance, a “big thing looming over him” that was lifted off his shoulders as soon as he had sex. He continues talking about the next logical (as he puts it) sequential phase of shame, which was during his early relationships when he found himself always being the one who wanted more sex.

“I always felt like the bad guy for wanting sex, and that me wanting sex was, you know, bad for the relationship. There was no, like it wasn’t warranted for me to desire sex and to demand sex, you know, there was a lot of shame associated with that.”

“Are you saying you felt shame because of your desire for sex?”

“Yeah.”

Since Frank’s first few serious relationships were with partners who didn’t initiate sex as much and often turned down his sexual advances, he perceived these partners to have lower sex drives and believed he’d never find a partner whose libido matched his. He was constantly afraid to make a move and be rejected and found himself to be the “problem.” He also felt like he had to fight for sex. I ask whether Frank ever brought up these feelings with ex-girlfriends as a way of clarifying their experience and he said no, there was little communication. I catch a sense of my discomfort towards his assumption that they had a lower libido instead of other more relational possibilities. Perhaps these women desired sex but just not with him? Had he considered this? As we speak, I can’t formulate a thought towards what makes me feel uneasy, but I connect with it later and realise I find Frank to situate the blame of his sexual shame in his exes rather than finding himself to be part of their decreased desire.

As I listen to Frank, I feel an edge of unease but push it aside. Perhaps because the encounter with Frank is my first, I am anxious about missing something he says, which leads me to be engrossed in his frame of reference rather than tuning into and responding from my gut feelings. The feelings stirred up in me relate to our gender difference, rendering a memory of a male partner blaming me for having a low libido and causing him distress. This is on the periphery of my mind, too faint to name yet occupying my body as added tension gripping my back and belly. I wonder later- why didn’t I speak from this place of difference? Was it out of

my fear of being too challenging? Frank is helping me out with my research, so I don't want to upset him.

Frank continues, describing these long-term ex-girlfriends as 'sex-negative,' a term he acquired from listening to Dan Savage podcasts. He experienced their negative attitudes towards sex as a judgment on his desire. He began to shift how he felt towards his desire to have sex after leaving his last sex-negative partner and establishing casual sexual connections with women who initiated sex more than him. He describes this as validation for his desire, and the *Lovecast* further reinforced this experience by pointing out the importance of sexual compatibility in relation to desire. The *Lovecast* helped him feel more 'normal' for having problems in sex and made him privy to the range of issues other people grapple with in sex and intimacy. It also opened a window into ways of talking openly with partners about sex, which improved his sex life and allowed him to speak about shame through expanding his vocabulary.

Upon Frank's recommendation, I suggest to my partner that we listen to the *Lovecast* while we're on a road trip. We choose one about ethical non-monogamy and listen as Dan espouses his opinion that everyone should be in an ethically non-monogamous relationship. This feels one-sided to me, and I get annoyed, pausing the podcast to discuss with my partner. We agree that although this could work for many people, it is not for us, not now. He suggests the podcast is targeted at a particular crowd; maybe we're too vanilla to get it. Dan says people who think they can live happy monogamous lives need to re-think their choices, and I'm angry at his black and white conviction and commanding tone. Sure, I get that monogamy doesn't work for him - but why claim his lifestyle choice is for everyone? Does my frustration towards Dan seep into the writing as I (re) turn to Frank?

Frank sees a positive side of going through different periods of feeling shameful in relation to sex and the associations, meanings, and differences it has brought up for him in various relationships. For instance, he appreciates how shame about coming quickly prompted him to learn other ways of pleasuring his partners:

“I think that, in a way, battling with that shame and that knowledge about myself was a good way just to learn a lot about other ways to pleasure my partner. Which I couldn’t really do during the relationship with those sex-negative partners because I think they weren’t really interested in prolonging the sex longer than it had to last.”

Frank’s third experience of shame had to do with premature ejaculation and the performance anxiety that accompanied it. He felt anxious even prior to having sex with a woman, who was initially the last woman he was in a long-term relationship with but later became women he saw on a more casual basis. He describes it as “the big barrier that was there to even entering having sex with a woman,” which sounds like a psychological obstacle as much as a physical one. The turning point for his performance issues was when he began having more casual sexual relationships with women who wanted sex more than his previous partners. These ‘sex-positive’ partners sometimes even enjoyed sex more than him, which helped him feel relief because he knew that if he didn’t last long the first time, he’d have more chances soon.

Frank lights up when he speaks about his sexual exploration in non-monogamy. I feel a bit sick to my stomach, my interest wanes and I judge him for being a player. I know this isn’t fair to him, yet my body continues to respond this way. It’s just harder for me to get on board. I write this one year later wondering whether my response was influenced by our different gender positions within the *heterosexual matrix*²² (Butler, 1990) and their corresponding histories. If he were a woman, would I judge him for being a player? Probably not. I’m guessing I would feel empathy for her because I’d project my story onto hers and feel closer to her, knowing we’ve both faced social denigration as women who have done a lot of sexual exploring. I wonder whether my history of abuse and the underlying feelings of resentment I have towards men who are celebrated for their sexual exploits blocked me from relating to him. Furthermore, I didn’t like his labels of ‘sex-negative’ and ‘sex-positive’ because these are oversimplistic and unfair to partners whose desire for sex is comparatively low. I see it as Frank’s shared responsibility to bring up his sexual frustrations with his partners, but I didn’t voice this during our conversation. It’s possible my uneasy feelings

²² The heterosexual matrix is Butler’s (1990) concept for the “grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized” (208). These are performative and each gender, sexual orientation and sexed body is assigned different scripts; the more convincing the performance, particularly with powerful/dominant identities, the greater the social rewards. This term arises throughout the thesis.

produced a shutdown effect and prevented me from prompting richer and more meaningful conversation. Although there's common ground between Frank and I along the lines of both having experienced and enjoyed casual sex, our relationships to it are differently impacted by gender. I doubt I'll ever be able to speak so joyfully about the sexual exploration I've done, as there will always be varying degrees of shame that he doesn't have to contend with.

In her 1984 paper *Gender Difference and the Production of Sexuality*, sociologist Wendy Hollway argues there's a 'male sexual drive discourse' which works to naturalise men's sexuality as out of control, ravenous and uncompromising. This discourse is one of three she identifies in the re-production of gendered heterosexual subjectivities and is insidiously contained and circulated through 'everyday' status quo assumptions. She also outlines the 'have/hold' and 'permissive' discourses, which partner with the male sexual drive discourse to set the scene for hegemonic masculinities and femininities. The have/hold discourse has moralistic Christian roots pertaining to family life yet partners with the male sexual drive discourse by letting men off the hook for their animalistic nature, portraying women as either chaste or dangerously whorish. As 'offspring' of the male sexual drive discourse, the permissive discourse advocates that sex is natural and should not be suppressed (Hollway, 87). Unfortunately, due to continued gender norms, the permissive discourse hasn't paved the way for an equally liberating sexual experience for both genders. As Hollway says:

"The practices that a discourse re-produces are not neutral. The liberating effects of the permissive discourse were particularly contradictory for women. Certainly the discourse enhanced men's powers (men's rights') to a heterosexual practice without emotional bonds" (1984, 88).

When I first sit down to write about my conversation with Frank, I feel bored and struggle to get anything down. Initially, I relate it to finding him rehearsed and ordinary. The issues he spoke about are ones I've seen represented frequently in popular culture and other medias as typical male problems – losing their virginity, wanting more sex, and struggling with premature ejaculation. However, I question my lack of interest and whether I am categorizing his experience unfairly, dismissively grouping it up with the other white hetero cis young

middle-class educated males whose stories are well known. Could there be something else happening? Is my boredom related to wanting to hear something shocking or different? Do I seek exotic or violent stories? If this is the case, it is problematic, and I don't have easy answers. I realise Frank connects me to parts of myself I want to disavow – my middle-class, educated, white, cis, and heterosexual identities. These taken-for-granted privileges have safeguarded me from racist, classist and transphobic violence when I hooked up with strangers. They were an invisible shield that I hadn't considered, although being a woman made those hook-ups more dangerous than if I'd been a man.

Upon reflecting on my encounter with Frank and revisiting our story again and again, I want to be gentler with his seemingly rehearsed narratives and inquire deeper about their vulnerability, fears, and shakiness. I didn't sense these affects in our encounter and question how much of this was me, him, us. I wonder about the potential (im)possibility of Frank embodying a vulnerable shame as he sits across from a woman he briefly dated, whom he might have felt rejected by, in the flat she shares with her partner. Further, there's a potential that the material-discursive content concerning gender difference held greater intensity for me as I wrote this story, potentially obscuring or plowing over vulnerable affects. Through remembered "bodying" (Manning, 2013), feelings that stay with me spark a story about the affective event, leaving out affects that resist capture. These are, as Massumi (2021) says, "unactualized, inseparable from but unassimilable to any particular emotional expression" (XXXV). Perhaps the wine we didn't drink would have co-produced another version for him/me/us, a softer and less rigid one?

Encounter 2: Amy

I meet with Amy on a sunny summer's day in a grassy garden. As soon as we first say hi, I feel a casual tone and easefulness between us. She's a friend of a friend, so perhaps that fosters a feeling of greater familiarity. We scope out the grassy space and settle on a private corner, resuming a reclined, relaxed position with the sun on our faces. I ask my usual open-ended question:

"Tell me about your experience with shame and sex, or is that a big question to begin with?"

Turns out it was a big question to begin with, so she begins by summarizing some of the aspects of shame that she's been working through over the last few years, using the words 'blocks' and 'areas of discomfort from negative past sexual experiences.' She's drawn to my research because it presents an opportunity to externalize the processing she's been doing in therapy. She also finds speaking about sex difficult and shame with sex even harder, so she values the opportunity to speak frankly and openly with someone. Initially, she takes our conversation to a socio-philosophical place:

"I think it's sometimes inherently silencing because it's the sense of like, not just I did something bad, but I am bad. And I think it's that the relationship between sex and shame in my case is not simple or, um, easy to explain, like it's really subtle, I think shame tends to subtly infiltrate a lot of my sexual experiences as a woman....the performance of female sexuality has just historically been, there's so much shame baked into it."

Her words 'as a woman' hint at a politicized position from which she reflected on her sexual experience and summon my inner feminist to join her in what feels like an unspoken shared acknowledgement of gendered inequalities within sexuality. The interview assemblage of two North American women sunning themselves speaking casually about shame and sex with fast intensity and closeness engenders a sense that we share a language, with a flair of the feminist adage that 'the personal is political.' Her theoretical musing ("the performance of female sexuality has just historically been") strikes me as a way of leaving her experience. Is theorizing a more comfortable default position for her? To me, these words carry an air of prestige and sophistication. Recognizing Amy as another academic, I sense our quick and easy openness might have something to do with some degree of seeing oneself in

the other. At least this is what I believe, and perhaps want to believe, since I take a fast liking to her.

Amy's origin story of sex and shame centers on her first sexual relationship, where she had a traumatic experience of losing her virginity. In her words,

"The first guy that I ever had sex with was quite a bit older than me, he was 25 and I was 17, and had been interested in me for a long time and I definitely felt special for that reason and very much took the, um, mindset of like well I don't want to be a virgin going to college so I might as well get this over with. And um, when we did first have penetrative sex, it wasn't very fun or comfortable or enjoyable at all, it was very little about what I wanted or how I felt and then a week later he ended up cheating on me with his ex-girlfriend in a very public way."

Although the sex itself wasn't great, as it set a tone of male pleasure as priority, what impacted Amy more was the fallout from the experience when this man cheated on her with his ex-girlfriend and they broadcasted their exploits. She felt betrayed, as though she "should have known better because he was kind of notorious for getting around." She conveys she hadn't been all that into him and this added a layer of embarrassment since it was the way he'd made her feel special that sparked her interest in the first place. She regretted not waiting for someone else and indicated she was angrier with the woman he cheated with more because she felt the woman was the 'mastermind' behind the cheating. She recognizes this now as the tendency for women to blame each other for men's transgressions. I think to myself that these small details, such as this being her first experience of sex, the cheating, and the tactful humiliation, could have complicated her shame and perhaps set the stage for sexual experiences and relationships that followed.

Amy's sentiment that she 'should have known better' is a common thread throughout her story of shame in sex. This resonates with me, as I've often gone to a place of self-blame. The similarities between us contribute to a seamless flow of conversation where questions and responses come naturally- at least it feels this way for me. She continues to recount experiences that followed her initial encounter, many of which involved not treating sex as something that mattered and finding herself in hook-ups with pretty much anyone who expressed interest in her.

“It was less about who I liked and more a matter of convenience of the rush of feeling, like I was the one who was liked by this person.”

She details a particularly shame-inducing experience when she was drunk and had gone back to a guy’s apartment only to realise she was on her period:

“He was trying to take out my tampon and then I realized what was going on and I was like ‘no no no’ and pushed him off me and he was not happy and then um, didn’t understand why I didn’t want to continue. I basically had to pretend that I was asleep. He got all huffy and puffy and rolled over and then I left in the morning without saying anything because I was like so humiliated, and just felt that was the most shameful thing. I had to walk back to my dorm in my little dress and stuff.”

I feel impacted by the violence and humiliation packed into this encounter. The blood, the stranger forcing himself on her, her feeling unable to say no, pretending to be asleep, and then the walk of shame home. The territorializing forces of sexist violence through his refusal to listen and back off paired with social norms signaling period blood as abject are “the most shameful thing.” Amy’s fake slumber serves as both a compromising defense and a line of flight in the Deleuzoguattarian sense, as it is a lie that saves her from complying even though she’s powerless in relation to the drunk man. I wonder how many women (and men, perhaps) pretend to fall asleep when they don’t feel safe to say no.

I’ve pretended to be asleep during more than one mistaken one-night stand. There was a time when I’d taken the ferry from Victoria BC to Vancouver to meet a guy who ticked all my boxes on paper- he was outdoorsy, incredibly smart, good looking, and cool. He lived just outside of Vancouver in the mountains and was finishing his PhD while ski touring and rock climbing any chance he got. We struck it off immediately, which wasn’t hard for me to do at the time because I didn’t have strict preferences and got along with most people. I had a dinner arranged with my mom for a few hours after the date, but Dave was incredibly charming and convinced me to ditch her and hop in his car for a 45-minute drive back to his place. I remember an ambiance of danger, flirtation, and risk as we shared premature openness and directness. It hinted at something more ominous that I couldn’t grasp until we were in his car, when he drove with reckless speed around mountainous curves and launched

into a rant about his mother. Calling her a psychotic bitch, Dave was now unrecognizable to me. Alarm bells rang in my head; I realised I was trapped. As soon as we stepped into his apartment he grabbed me, forcing a sloppy kiss. I froze in fear and the pit of my stomach filled with dread and regret. I sheepishly followed him into his apartment, knowing I'd set myself up for disaster but was unsure how it would unravel. A mess of candy wrappers, old garbage and dirty dishes littered the apartment with a rank smell. Dave directed me to his bedroom, smiling wickedly like one of those creepy clowns in horror films. He pushed me down to the bed, saying things like "oh you want it, do you?" and "I've been wanting to do this since I first saw you." My body went limp, and I couldn't respond, not with anything true. Was he deluded? Did he think that grabbing me forcefully and pushing me onto his bed was okay? Or did he know it wasn't and put on a performance to make it more enjoyable for himself? I knew from past sexual assaults that if I resisted, he might escalate the violence. I let him have sex with me, hiding my pain. As soon as it was over, I pretended to be asleep. It was 8 pm. In the morning, I acted as nice and pleasing as I could so that he would agree to drive me to the bus station. Stepping onto the bus, I couldn't believe the narrow escape I'd made.

Some of Amy's shame in relation to sex overlaps with her lifestyle in college, where she had a party persona that carried on from high school. She did a lot of drinking and drugs, and although part of her felt this was cool, another part found it shameful. Her serious boyfriend during this time would shame her for going out to party, making her feel like a 'bad' and 'out of control' person, and she internalized these judgments over time to the point that it became her self-concept. She says he also did drugs but treated it as though it was ok for him to do them:

"In college, with Michael, I started to do acid on the weekend and that was somehow bad and made me a bad person and he didn't want to be with that kind of person. Even though it was such a double-standard because he was allowed to do all that stuff."

"Oh no, really? That's gross," I say. She explains that it was "baked into" the university she went to, where the Greek system was in place and she was in a sorority. She calls it patriarchal, and I get the sense that the young men in her life had undue power for their judgments to impact Amy's already-established sexual shame. She says that even though her serious college boyfriend was judgemental, he was the first partner who cared about her

pleasure; in fact, he has been the partner who she's had the most emotional intimacy with. At the same time, he cheated on her when she was studying abroad, and this experience coupled with her early sexual betrayal to reinforce her idea that "sex doesn't matter, because the less it matters the less it hurts." I think to myself how confusing it can be to have to weigh up the new nurturing qualities that a partner offers in a young relationship with the detrimental ones they bring.

Most of my sex life has been characterized by sex being about everything except having an emotional connection with the other person. I suppose this is a trickle-down effect of abuse, being frozen and disassociated but also seeking out a plethora of sexual experiences. I would convince myself that sex was a way of getting what I wanted when I'm not sure it ever did. This sounds harsh and almost verges on the black and white dichotomy I'm trying to avoid. While I've felt ashamed of reaching for sex in a misplaced way, when what I needed was care, love and attention, years of therapy and a loving partner have helped me change the narrative. Engaging in sex in a half-seeing and somewhat unconscious way was a tool I had at my disposal, a lie I had picked up from fairy tales and pop culture teen movies. It's a paradoxical time to write about it because my relationship to sex has changed dramatically since meeting my current partner. Not only do I place less emphasis on sex, but it carries more emotional weight. It matters and I spend less time thinking about and doing it.

Amy continues to narrate strands of experience and feelings stemming around what she makes out to be her tendency to "frivolize" sex (she feels this word suits her treatment towards it best, but as it turns out this word doesn't exist). I think she means trivialize, which could imply she turns it into a small thing to lessen or deny its emotional weight. Amy conveys she's learned to frivolize sex to shield herself from the hurt she felt after her first sexual experience. Accordingly, she has tended to act disrespectfully towards her body over the years and disassociated from it. She's had a few partners in her adult life who valued her pleasure but her interactions with them were clouded by other relationship dynamics like double standards, betrayal and cheating, or a discrepancy in sexual desire. She says it's hard for her to find a partner who she can trust to build a long-term connection with and express herself vulnerably. Part springs from not really knowing what she's looking for, as well as

being fickle on dating apps by trying out many potential matches to find she's not into anyone. She also had a tragic experience of meeting a guy who seemed perfect for her and reciprocated her interest but had to move away to a different continent during Covid, so their interest never had the opportunity to develop.

While listening, I have a sudden thought that her sexual experiences haven't been satisfactory for her, so I ask whether this is the case. The notion of sexual satisfaction has become a recent topic for me in therapy, as it relates to my impulsive drive to initiate sex in and out of relationships. In a session a few weeks ago, my therapist asked quite pointedly whether I ever feel satisfied from all the sex I initiate, which prompted me to realise I never have. For Amy, dissatisfaction has generated feelings of numbness and holding back, even with generous lovers:

"Even people who were interested in giving me pleasure or exploring things, I like didn't, I couldn't even really feel, and I didn't feel comfortable enough to allow the time for that exploration to take place, like I feel like I'm always on a clock, once you know, make it happen, make sure that they get off, then book it."

Amy says her numb and disassociated body comes from a 'subconscious' avoidance to go deep with people because "there's a lot of stuff there...having sex with an emotional connection brings up a lot." She's been taking courses on 'sacred sexuality,' which look at female pleasure and 'de-arming practices.' I'm not familiar with these but Amy clarifies they're "designed to help you breathe and work through numbness in and around the vulva and the vagina that's often a result of repeated sexual trauma or even just having sex with someone you don't want to have sex with, that's then a small trauma that gets stored in the body."

The thought of small traumas stored (and storied) in the body from having sex when we don't want to (but can't go so far to classify it as rape) brings me to wonder: how do we draw the line between repeated sexual trauma and having sex with someone we don't want to have sex with? What draws us into unwanted sexual encounters in which the word assault doesn't fit? How about other close encounters, like a stranger's arm on our shoulder or a forced hug? Writer Melissa Febos' (2021) book *Girlhood* examines her own and others'

experiences with unwanted touch or ‘empty consent’ as she terms it, grounding her discussion in a feminist critique of patriarchal norms that underly and (in)form these encounters. In the chapter *Thank You for Taking Care of Yourself*, she shares a survey she conducted with other female sex workers, asking them about unwanted touch across their lifetimes. She says,

“I was not prepared for the experience of reading these surveys. They were often lengthy, detailed accounts – entire lives punctuated by unwanted touch. Many of the women wrote at the end of the survey that they had never articulated the events therein to anyone, sometimes including themselves” (222).

The forces at play that actualize an unwanted sexual encounter fascinate me, as I’ve spent years examining, unearthing, and trying to make sense of them. I’ve now told Amy’s story according to how I received, transcribed, reviewed, and chosen principal features to make available to you. This narrative is an assemblage of Amy and I, our past and present between the continents of North America and Scotland, our academic selves making sense of disempowering subjugation of heterosexual relationships that have tones of being used, betrayed, but also seeking a sort of equalizing through numbing and acting like sex doesn’t matter. Carving our bedposts with numbers of men we’ve slept with, pretending to not feel anything. Amy’s story is so much more than I can tell. Since the encounter happened between the two of us²³, I can only relate my telling through the bits of her narrative that made an impression on me.

Amy and I meet for a second time, which she’d expressed a desire for when I’d offered a 2-part meeting. We lay down in the soft grass under the sun in one of Edinburgh’s central grassy locales, the Meadows²⁴, satisfactorily distanced from others, speaking about the men in our lives and exchanging dating exploits. I am in a new relationship, so I tell Amy about how we met and how it’s going. She relays difficulties in finding a suitable match, and I empathize with this and express a similar background of countless incompatibilities. This research

²³ ‘Between the two’ is a reference to Parnet and Deleuze in *Dialogues II* (1987) where knowledge creation is an act that occurs in multiplicities that populate spaces between two speakers.

²⁴ The Meadows is a central park in Edinburgh that served as the meeting grounds for conversations with Amy, George, and Mina. It is quite close to my flat, so it is also imbued with personal memories. Its sounds, sights, smells, passers-by, and environmental conditions all (in)form shame and sex encounters.

encounter feels more like two friends gabbing, so I follow its tone instead of steering Amy back to where we left off last time. I sense that leaving our encounter on a fun note through light-hearted sharing is an important part of shame and sex talk, at least for us. When we part ways, we express interest in seeing each other again. We meet for coffee a few months later and say we'll get together again but never do. The feeling of friendship that we generated made the research feel more like an everyday conversation. These blurred boundaries weren't a problem, as they cohere with my concept of research as an always-already happening event.

Encounter 3: George

George and I had known each other as acquaintances for a year or so and had passing conversations from time to time about sexual experiences and how they intersect with masculinity. Our interview takes place on a warm summer's day at the Meadows near the tennis courts. I tend to suggest the Meadows to those who prefer meeting outdoors because it is vast enough to find privacy and close to my flat, which is helpful because I can still use my crutches to walk over. We meet on a bench in front of the tennis courts, with lots of people walking past in a steady stream. I ask whether he wants to move to a more private area, but George wants to stay. He wants his story to be known by passers-by, he says. He is doing a public service by making his sex and shame experiences known.

"This guy is shameless," I think. What a paradox, speaking about shame and sex from a shame-free stance, as though he has complete command over his words and the feelings they engender. George comes across as well-spoken in an academic sort of way, self-reflective and communicative, and in control of his thoughts and feelings. These are my projections since I don't know him that well. He is in his early thirties, Scottish, university-educated, middle-class, active, fit, and handsome. To me, these qualities qualify him as privileged, and I think George would agree in an educated, 'woke'²⁵ kind of way. So, when I ponder over his shameless tone, I wonder if privilege is a factor. Perhaps as you take in his story, you'll form impressions of how and why George could speak so publicly about difficult feelings.

When I put forward the question of 'why take part in my research,' George indicates he is interested in reflecting on the last long term serious relationship he'd had in which the "sexual aspect was not something [he] was proud of," and sees the research as a positive opportunity to do this with someone who "knows kinda how to talk about it." He starts off by describing his last serious relationship, when he first experienced shame in relation to sex. I've met the partner he was speaking about once and had formed an impression of her, so I try set this aside. He attributes their long-term relationship's issues with sex as stemming from its "borderline caring dynamic where I was doing a lot of emotional holding and support for my partner, to some extent trying to fill the role of her father who had died when she was young." The more the two of them co-created and played out this dynamic, the less he felt

²⁵ 'Woke' is predominantly US slang for "aware of and actively attentive to important societal facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice)" according to the Merriam-Webster (2023) online dictionary.

they were approaching sex as 'equals.' Time went by and they would go long periods without having sex. When they did have it, it was precipitated by intense emotional conversations where they would "lay their souls bare." In his words,

"Then when we were having these really emotional conversations, immediately after those conversations when we had both done sharing we would suddenly be in that zone where we felt like we were able to have sex with each other, and those sexual experiences were good and they were equal, but they were equal because of this extensive emotional work that we had both been doing to try show up to the relationship, which eventually ended...so that was a hugely like charged, sexual environment to be in and one where there was so much pressure derived from it."

Concomitant to the importance of feeling like an 'equal' to his partner, George was struggling to uphold ideas of what a 'real man' was like, particularly in relation to sexuality. He describes his concept of masculinity as hinging upon being a 'sexual beast,' or someone with a voracious sexual appetite. Although he didn't want to have sex with his partner, his adherence to masculinity ideals kept him in denial to his partner and himself. George has a moment of thoughtful silence, then says:

"The shame aspect of it was that I was not being honest with myself, you know, not looking at the big picture, and just treating it as everyday...oh I don't want to do it today, I don't want to do it. Then all of a sudden it's been six months, we've not had sex in six months. And then the shame became around lying to myself and to my friends about, you know, pretending we had a robust healthy sexual relationship when we very much didn't. Not having anyone to talk to about that, not being able to talk to my partner about that at the time, not being able to talk to myself or my friends or my family about that."

There's a lonely silencing in George's shame, a sad upholding of masculinity ideals as he experienced them. His mention of an internalized pressure to perform a sexually ravenous masculinity and lying to his friends reminds me of Micheal Flood's (2008) writing on 'homosocial' masculinity. According to Flood, homosociality is an integral part of performing normative masculinity and is an enactment "in which the performance of manhood is in front of, and granted by, other men" (2008, 341). Homosocial bonding occurs in a group where others attend to men's real and imagined sexual stories, creating an environment where sexual activity grants higher status (Flood, 2008). Had George internalized the homosocial

gaze? He continues, conveying that both he and his partner worked hard to maintain the myth they were still sexual:

“The sex became very important to us continuing to perpetuate the idea that we had a romantic and sexual relationship, rather than a friendship or a familial relationship, which is what it eventually kind of became, it just kind of ran out of steam sexually, you know what I mean...and so these rare sexual interactions became really, really charged, because we both felt that they had to go brilliantly in order for us to feel like we were still a romantic couple.”

He describes two extreme versions of sexual selves stemming from who he felt he needed to please- the patriarchy or matriarchy, as he puts it:

“I certainly feel that right in my early sexual days it was a very selfish masculine performance: look at me, I’m young, I’m hot, I’m good at sex. So I was playing to that audience which was my idea of what all the lads would want, you know what I mean, and then in my, in relationship 1 as we’re calling it, my last relationship, I went totally to the other side of the spectrum, I was trying desperately to perform to what I thought she had wanted and she would think, it was just on the different end of the kind of, patriarchal to matriarchal, you know, masculine to feminine spectrum, of whose opinion you were caring about.”

I understand this dramatic shift as perhaps not that uncommon for men who form sexual self-concepts within patriarchal contexts. Through the influence of partners, men often develop their sexual identities and ways of relating to form the necessary critical awareness to dismantle socialized misogynies. I find it interesting that George identifies his first audience to be other lads- is that a direct reference to the patriarchy? Pleasing other men in his mind’s eye? I’d never heard or read this before and as I write this, I wish I’d asked him whether he had an inkling of why he performed for other men. When he describes this early sexual self, I feel aghast in how starkly it contrasts with the version in front of me. He reflects on the shift between these misogynistic and feminist selves:

“In the middle of that previous relationship, that’s the point where I would probably start calling myself a feminist, and I think that I went too far, to the point where I didn’t like my previous self and my hypermasculine relationship to sex, because it was deeply unhealthy and it was misogynistic, and it wasn’t good, I wasn’t being kind to women, because I think I

probably didn't view women as equal to myself and therefore my sexual experience was the one that mattered and not theirs."

However, when this shifted dramatically in his relationship with his last partner, he replaced the audience with that of a judgmental feminist gaze. He says he wanted to please his partner and thought the only way would be to put her needs before his in every instance. George then transitioned to an in-between period of sexual activity that came after he and his partner broke up when he tried to have short-term sexual encounters and relationships and experienced what he calls 'erectile dysfunction.' During this period, he carried over the pattern he'd established with his first serious girlfriend of having intense emotional conversations prior to sex in which they laid their souls bare. This level of vulnerability was difficult to foster in short-term hook-ups and although he was able to get into the groove of making out and feeling turned on, his penis would go flaccid whenever he went to put on a condom. He thinks the condom gave him time to think and feel his looming anxiety:

"Stepping away from that sexual place to do something safe and logistical and kinda boring that would make me go 'oh god, it's about to happen, oh god, it's a thing if I can just get this condom on it's going to be fine' and then it would be done."

He experienced this again and again until he met his current partner. Their meeting nurtured a significant change in his relationship to sex and helped dissolve the shame he'd carried in his first relationship and subsequent period of erectile dysfunction. He links his sexual desire to emotional vulnerability and "just being able to be genuine and honest in that sexual space." The first time he had sex with her he had erectile dysfunction, but her reassuring response and patience was all he needed to release his anxiety. George says,

"She just nailed that, just by saying 'this is fine, this is a fine thing for you to do, this is alright it's not that something's broken, it's not that something's not working, this is just your body doing what it needs to do right now'."

As I listen to him, I think of the man I'd started seeing only a few months prior because George's mention of vulnerability and finding a partnership with open and trusting communication sounds a lot like our relationship. The entanglement of me-George-my partner make for a complex configuration of understandings and silent imaginings as we

continue to speak, particularly once George reveals feelings of shame in upholding the image of a 'sexual guy' while staying silent about not wanting to have sex. Staying in denial to himself was a key factor in my partner's situation with his last sexual partners, and with some degree of awareness, I transplant more of his feelings of shame and sex into this conversation. No, not just his feelings, but *my* feelings towards them, such as compassion, care, love, celebration, and a desire for more- all of these are transposed into those moments with George. In this way, my sex life around the time of encounter comes into play and (in) forms what is becoming. We had been working through my partner's anxieties around sexual desire and erectile 'dysfunction.' I can relate to George's partner's remark that he could take all the time he needed to feel comfortable, since I had said the same and it seemed to offer relief. In transposing my understanding, do I trick myself into thinking I know what George means? Do I glimpse over the unsaid and unquestioned to make 'easy sense' (Mazzei, 2007)? Through my intimate connection to another man whose experience resounds with George's in many ways, I feel an affinity towards George that I might not have otherwise. In this event, the "lived past of the body" (in)forms a bodying (Massumi, 2021, XXXIV) of warmth and ease.

George relates shame to imagined 'others' who would think certain things about his performance in sexual acts. In his phallogentric phase, as he calls it, he would measure himself against porn stars, since porn was the main source of his sexual education and prime demonstration of masculinity on a sexual stage. He went in the opposite direction as his feminist consciousness evolved with a partner who needed a great deal of care from him, and he now acknowledges that performance wasn't beneficial for either of them.

"When you're performing," he says, "you can't be vulnerable in the way that leads to potent, valuable healthy sex, and so my [flaccid erection] was my body just being like 'I don't want to do this.'"

In the weeks that follow my conversation with George, I linger on his sentiments around performing and how his testimony of shame and sex felt itself in some ways like a performance. He was proud about the sexual shame he'd overcome, sharing about performance anxiety and erectile dysfunction on a bench in front of the Meadows tennis

courts, with passers-by steadily streaming past us. I'm also struck by how rapidly he became shame-free with the help of an understanding and patient girlfriend, as though she was the midwife to absolute resolution. Although George is straight, I see parallels between his experience and Halberstam's (2005) theory of white gay men undergoing easier transformations of shame into pride, since George comes across as privileged in ways that might bolster his transformation. If only we all (everyone else who isn't a white middle-class male) could speak about sexual shame in public with as much fearlessness as George does. What systems would need to change to support this?

Encounter 4: Lara

I meet Lara over Zoom, her preference. In our pre-interview call, Lara had been open and direct about her interest stemming from an early experience of sexual assault. Without any prompting from me, she gave a quick summary of the string of events surrounding the assault, all of which sounded heavy and difficult. Her tone sounded detached and reminded me of how I used to talk about my sexual abuse. Back then, being detached signaled toughness and brushed off sympathy or support, arising from a deep-seeded belief that I wasn't worthy of others' concern. Lara's fast, emotionless disclosure stirred up unease in me that is also present now as I look at her on the screen. We say awkward hellos and Lara indicates she can hardly hear me. I feel guilty and apologize, then feel relieved when Lara offers gracious understanding. I settle in.

In response to usual question about what sparked her interest to be here, she says shame and sex have always gone hand in hand, especially in her early sexually active days. She had her first sexual relationship around the age of 14, when she'd begun to identify as queer. She'd been in a Catholic primary school and all of her exposure to sex was full of misconceptions and silences. She figures the absence of education about healthy and consensual sex influenced her choice to be with a partner who used her for his own sexual gratification:

"I remember being told at an early age by my boyfriend at the time that if he was aroused at any time for any reason and didn't get off it would hurt him, and so I was constantly in this mindset that like, anytime I do anything that is remotely arousing for him I have to be able to finish the job."

This boyfriend was older than her and came from a rich family, and he would 'repay' her sexual duties with gifts and international trips together. The transactional nature of sex scared her. Since they were in the same friend group, she couldn't speak about her difficult experiences with her friends out of fear she'd disrupt the status quo. The power differential between her and her boyfriend was exacerbated by her uncommunicative relationship with her parents, who were closed off in relation to sex. In addition to feeling isolated, Lara feels her youth and lack of experience kept her 'stuck' in the relationship for longer. If she'd had a clearer image of a healthy relationship, she would have left him much sooner.

When we're young, early sexual experiences often happen in secret, hidden away from parents and other grown ups (Fallon, 2013). Without open and frank conversations about healthy sexuality and media representations of equality in sexual relationships, how can young people establish self-affirming and safe pursuit of sexual desire?²⁶ These processes end up relying on luck, something that Lara didn't have. When she mentioned to her parents later that she'd had a bad time in her first relationship, her mom said she found her boyfriend 'creepy' but they "didn't want to think about it" so avoided saying anything to her. Lara wishes her mom had been more involved by reaching out to let her this model of relationship wasn't healthy or standard.

Lara doesn't mention the word 'abuse,' but he seems abusive to me. When she tried to break up with him, he said "I don't think that's a good idea." She stayed.

Her shame back then manifested as a twofold paradox: on one hand, she felt she was betraying herself by continuing to do things she was uncomfortable with; on the other, she was ashamed she didn't know enough about sex. In addition to encouraging her to stay with him to gain experience, shame kept her silent in their friend group. Her boyfriend depicted a 'double standard' regarding what he wanted from her as a sexual partner:

"I had to be completely innocent and not have done anything but then the first time I had sex I had to be perfect at it."

Feeling the heaviness of her early sexual relationship, I ask Lara how she's doing.

"It's making me think a lot, because I haven't thought about this in a long time, and I haven't thought about it with relation to like my emotions, or shame or any of that. Sometimes I've recalled it like a series of events that I've kind of put together in my mind like oh, that really shouldn't have happened like that, but I haven't really thought any deeper than that. I'm doing ok."

Lara continues to narrate her story. She entered university as a 'virgin,' not having had penetrative sex. Her university was seven hours away from her hometown and she didn't know anyone, so she went on Tinder in the hope she'd meet someone to date. Tinder was

²⁶ See Tolman's (2005) book *Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk about Sexuality* for more on this.

normalised; all her classmates were on there. She met a guy who seemed nice and didn't expect anything to happen. I wasn't expecting what came next.

“We'd been talking a few days and I'd kinda mentioned before like you know 'yeah, I'm a virgin and you know eventually it'd be nice to have sex but I don't know what I'm doing now' and then, well, I won't go into details of everything unless you want me to but basically he raped me in my college dorm, um, and I just felt like well ok, it's just because like there's a miscommunication on my part and I didn't do something right and so the reason that it went that way is because, because I just didn't know any better.”

She conveys this in a rapid-fire, matter of fact way. I'm shocked by her smooth and unfeeling delivery, which comes across as nonchalant. For a moment, I don't know how to respond. I feel flustered and want to say something that shows I understand her, but I'm stunned by her words. Could this be shame sticking to me (Ahmed, 2014)? I think to myself: rape is something that doesn't need details. I don't need to know what happened to believe her, nor did I want to put her through re-telling for the risk of re-living the trauma. I know from experience how difficult it is to re-count rape experiences.

My therapist reminds me periodically that we still haven't spoken much about my experiences of rape. Initially I disagree with her since it seems to me that I've spoken a lot about it. Yet, the more I reflect on it, I know she's right. I've avoided it without realizing. I try broach the subject, but don't know where to begin. My throat closes and my chest feels tight; my breathing becomes faster and shallower. As I search for the words, a beginning, I am surprised to notice fear and self-doubt. I used to speak freely about the abuse in my early 20s, but now, as time has passed and I've undergone longer-term therapeutic work, I don't know what to say. This seems paradoxical to me. Have I forgotten? Partly, yes- my worst experiences of being raped happened more than ten years ago. But something else has occurred, something difficult to describe. I have a hunch that my mind/body exercises a will to forget such difficult memories out of self-preservation. Faced with a blank, I push through.

“So you know, the guy who abused me was called Mike. There was a time when we got really drunk at his small apartment. I don't remember much about the night except that we were drinking vodka. I could tell you what his small in-cut kitchen looked like in his Council

flat, that his fridge was located to the left and he had our half-guzzled 26-ounce bottle of vodka in his hand. The next thing I know I'm on all fours on his couch and he is spraying suntan oil in my ass. He rapes me. I don't remember anything else, not the feeling I had or anything we said. I know I ran to a friend's house that night, but I don't remember what else happened."

This is a version of what I told a police officer in the summer of 2009 when I was trying to get a Crown prosecutor in my small town to add my ex's sexual assault to his criminal harassment trial for stalking me during the 8 years that followed our relationship. It didn't work due to an absence of physical evidence. I can still feel the embers of shame from having tried to bring this highly personal experience of violation out in the public, disclosing details to a cop that weren't his to know. Could this be a part of my frozen feeling when Lara tells me about her rape, a discomfort in the face of being told something so violating that it isn't mine to know?

Lara stopped thinking about the rape incident for a week or so until a woman from her university approached her and asked out of the blue if she knew her rapist. The woman had found a link between them on social media and approached Lara because he'd raped her best friend. This prompted Lara to arrange a meeting with the other rape victim. Through listening to the woman's story, Lara reached the conclusion that the rape wasn't her fault. Nonetheless, she blamed herself for not seeking justice when she found out she was the first victim and could have prevented another rape if she'd called the guy out publicly. She initiated a court case through the university's civil right's office and spent her first year in a court battle. Unfortunately, she ended up losing. I am upset at the injustice she faced during such a transitional time of her life. The first year of university is hard enough, but Lara had been raped, exposed herself publicly in a court case and had the case overruled.

"Ok, there's a lot there, that you just told me. So, it happened, and you didn't think it was going to happen, and you blamed yourself, is that fair to say? Why?"

I stumble on my words, trying to find a compassionate and understanding response that shows interest but doesn't pressure her. Lara's tone continues to be matter of fact as she

explains she couldn't think of her experience as rape because it didn't fit the image of rape she'd grown up with.

"My conception of what rape was didn't include what happened. I always thought it was a scary man in the park that tackles someone, and you know she's screaming and really doesn't want this to happen and she's fighting for her life, and it happens anyways. And although I wasn't fighting for my life, I wasn't screaming at the top of my lungs, I could have done other things to have kept this from happening, and I think the fact that I had talked with him about wanting to have sex before that, that was also me sending mixed messages and insinuating that I wanted something that I didn't."

In her book *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again*, Katherine Angel examines consent, desire, and pleasure in contemporary discourses, foregrounding a heterosexual female perspective while occasionally dipping into the heterosexual male experience (2021). Angel maintains that 'bad sex,' which she conceives of as unsatisfying, one-sided and/or subtly violent, is a political issue as much as a personal one, since it "doesn't have to be assault in order for it to be frightening, shame-inducing, upsetting and a legal concept has trouble drawing out this difference" (27). She also contends consent rhetoric across feminist and post-feminist movements is problematic because it views desire as a static entity, foreseeable and existing in isolation (2021). Angel points out that the onus for 'making sex good again' is frequently placed on women for knowing, communicating and realising their true sexual selves, and this reality is linked to the phenomenon of women being "held responsible for managing the risk of violence done to them" (91). She ends the book with a chapter on vulnerability, highlighting male vulnerability as a gateway to balancing the power and mutual vulnerability as the means to unlocking pleasure. Angel's conclusion is that sex is a never-ending negotiation, always fraught with power:

"The negotiation of imbalances in power between men and women, between all of us, occurs minute by minute, second by second. And there is no realm, whether sexual or otherwise, in which that act of negotiation is no longer necessary" (115).

Lara's struggle to conceive of herself as the victim seemed to connect to cultural representations of rape as well as victim-blaming messages she had received from her mom. Two months after her sexual assault, she received a text message from her mom that said they needed to speak urgently. She left class and her mom let her know she saw that Lara downloaded Tinder and was upset with her.

"She basically said 'I can't believe you would do something so reckless and stupid. You're asking for someone to rape you by downloading one of these dating apps. If you ever do something this stupid again, I'm taking you out of college because you're just asking for yourself to get hurt.'"

How punitive and unsupportive, I think. No wonder she met herself with blame and shame in the absence of a compassionate and loving parent. This exchange with her mother was the last straw for Lara and she concluded that speaking with her parents again about sex would be too emotionally damaging and conflictual. She resolved to avoid the subject and sought long-term counselling to develop a healthier mindset around sex. Part of this, contends Lara, involved considering sex work as a way of financing her master's degree. The only deterrent for her was the thought of her parents finding out. I feel a pang of sadness to hear this, wondering whether sex work was a way of capitalizing off pain while still maintaining its legacy.

Lara's shame about her first penetrative sexual experience was replete with judgment. She found herself immoral, pathetic, and guilty of not giving herself a more affirming time while losing her virginity to a stranger. I wanted to counter her punitive self-blame with caring and understanding messages. The assault was out of her control; it wasn't her fault. She did the best she could. Still, I understood her inclination to hold herself responsible, as I'd always done the same. Like Lara's description of her mother, my parents blamed me for putting myself in risky situations where I was sexually abused, and I internalized their blame. Yet Lara's feelings also had to do with it being her first; as she put it, 'the first sets the stage for what comes after.'

Lara had wanted *something* but *not what happened*. How could she reconcile desire with violent invasion when her limited experiences already positioned her as the servient one? She reasoned that by wanting something and not putting a halt to his aggressions, she gave him licence:

“In the beginning when he first came into my room, I didn’t think that was going to happen, I thought we were going to kiss for a bit and then go back to dinner. That’s all that I wanted to happen. But it was kinda in the stages where, I didn’t stop it from going further. Like that’s where I took on the extra responsibility and thought, I didn’t do something so I must have wanted it in some way. And I, I mean I did, but not like that. And so, I don’t know, sometimes I would just like, I would think a lot about like ‘did I really not want it? I could have stopped it, but I didn’t, and because I didn’t then it means I must have wanted it to go further.’”

I know as I listen that I would have struggled with the same thing. In fact, I have struggled throughout my adult life with stating clear boundaries in situations that felt sketchy, where I was afraid of the possible repercussions in saying no and figured the easiest and safest way of ending the encounter would be to go along with it and find the earliest excuse to get the hell out of there.

Lara’s ambivalence towards her sexual relationships extends into her recent experiences and she relates this to her high sex drive. She finds sex pleasurable, especially since it gets her to reconnect with her body and helps resolve the body dysmorphia and disassociation she’s developed over the years. She calls herself promiscuous, since she’d had sex with a lot of different partners, and I feel more resonance because I also identify with this term. She oscillates between feeling proud because she’s good at sex and feeling “like shit a little bit” because having many partners can feel degrading and makes her question who she does it for. She often judges her risky sexual exploits as immoral and wonders whether she has borderline personality disorder due to links she’s made between early sexual trauma and compulsive sexual risk-taking.

My strong resonance to Lara’s story grows throughout our conversation and I decide to convey this. I stumble on my words, as I’m afraid I’ll steer away from her storyline, but my desire to share is stronger. In my experience, it is a hard story to tell, and I would find it reassuring to hear that the other relates closely. Luckily, she appreciates my disclosure and says it helps her to hear I’d had a similar experience. It seems my disclosure serves as an opening: we speak about struggles to follow desire and take risks, finding a frequent backlash of shame and regret afterwards. Lara expresses she finds it difficult to terminate or change

the course of a sexual encounter as soon as she loses interest. She refers to this as “sticking through right until the end and going home to deal with my own shit and delete the person’s number.” This is another parallel for me from past sex stories.

What feelings and narratives are entangled with the trouble to say no? Sometimes we find ourselves in bed with a stranger and suddenly realise we don’t want to be there but stay quiet out of fear we’ll upset them. Other times it’s a fear of violence. As Febos (2021) contends,

“It is the shared technique of abusive partners, corporations, cult leaders, despotic governments, and many who benefit from unequal power structures and wish to continue benefitting from them: to convince the disempowered to identify with the needs of the powerful instead of their own” (240).

In our sex stories, the free and liberated woman who initiates sexual encounters is then quickly reprimanded by another voice, which Lara coins ‘social narratives.’ It tells us *you should have gotten out of there earlier. You should have stood up for yourself. You should have been stronger in the face of harm.* Where lies the other’s responsibility to not inflict harm? In *Shaming the Feminine*, Clough (2017, 71-72) argues the invisibility of male privilege works in tandem with gender norms to “obscure women as the empowered subjects in their own stories and obscure the wrongful actions of men in the construction and maintenance of the masculinist systems that violate and oppress others.” Shame’s silencing and isolating effects further entrench the cloak of invisibility, as they reinforce gendered scripts portraying sexual violence as the woman’s problem. As Febos (2021, 87) says:

“This is the brilliance of shame as a tactic of domination: it conditions us to maintain our own isolation. The genius of a social structure is that you cannot see it; it is built to be invisible to you, this machine that compels you to perpetuate it.”

Lara leaves me wondering about contradiction and the space we allow for it. When she pursues sex, she’s in control and feels like she’s reclaiming her power. But shame often shows up, too, trickling through and conjoining with desire. She signals numerous threads

from my past sex lives, making it difficult to (dis)(in)tangle, to separate my 'self' from her and us. 'Voice' reverberates as though it is both singular and collective, like Gannon's (2004, 83) work with the *collective girl*: "In the discussion and (sometimes) rewriting of the stories, the memories of individuals interweave into a discursive fabric of collective embodied experience."

There's a tension between enjoying sex and having sex on our own terms, or at least with a feeling of mutuality. Neither of us mention words like patriarchy or sexism, but I feel them plugging in through narratives of desiring and enjoying sex yet leaving encounters feeling ashamed and used, having strayed from our wants and needs. Sex is an intimate and personal act, yet so politically fraught in its inextricable connection to power and socialised gender roles²⁷. Trying to enjoy sex frequently and willfully as a woman under patriarchy is anything but straightforward, as Lara conveys:

"Some days I feel better than others and there's this constant note of shame but also like empowerment and it's a weird mix, and I'm not really sure which part is more present at any one time."

I feel rattled by my discussion with Lara during the weeks following and think of her often. Mindful of the rape experience she shared as well as her directness and honesty towards her other in-process relationships to sex and shame, I am worried she might regret sharing in so much detail and intensity, that doing so has caused harm. I check in on her, acknowledging the personal and complicated discussions we had and asking whether she wants to debrief. She writes, "thanks so much for checking in. I'm doing just fine. Hope the rest of your interview process has been going smoothly. It was a pleasure to be a part of your study." I believe there might be more to her experience, and I notice the boundary she has set: her part in this research has ended and she'll be ok.

²⁷ See Gavey (2005), Tolman (2005) or Kim et. al. (2007) for greater analyses on this.

Encounter 5: John

John and I meet over Zoom one summer morning. He's in his car; his phone must have been slightly beneath him because he keeps looking down at me as well as up and sideways. I feel more of a distance than I have with other participants but I'm not sure why this is.

I ask my usual question- why take part in research about sex and shame? Many aspects draw his interest. He studies counselling, he said, so he is used to talking more about himself these days. I take this further in my mind and sense he welcomes opportunities to speak about himself, almost like he's making up for lost time. He says shame and sex have been integral to his adult life and he's spent a lot of time being silent. When he had searched for information relating to his experience, he'd found nothing, so another motivation of his to take part is to add to the limited existing 'data.' He asks whether I would like him to go into specifics now.

"However you want," I say.

"Ok, I'll give the introduction, I'll go into detail. My wife and I have been married for eight years. And we were both brought up in a conservative Asian Christian community and we both grew up in [city in North America] so it's our parents were quite um, typical, uh [ethnic group], uh, in relation to sex practices. And that means uh things related to sex are not openly talked about but there's always just the implication that when you, you try to um, like not engage in sexual activities until you're married but once you get married there's a big push for the new couple to have a child as soon as possible...also with that added onto our evangelical Christian upbringing it's again abstinence from sex before marriage is a high priority among many things and there isn't a lot of grey area to discuss with and you also were encouraged to not live together until you're married. And then so, we dated for two years before we got married and for, until then, we got married when we were in our late twenties and uh, as far as I know and I'm confident that both my wife and I we were both virgins until we got married and it just so happens that after we got married then um, it turns out my wife, she would experience, they call it muscle spasms, and then so her vagina and I guess the related areas would tense up and then so actual penetration is not possible."

As I listen, I think about how foreign this experience is to me, even though I'd been exposed to Evangelical Christian rules and the purity movement through friends and family growing up. I'd also briefly attended bible camp and had been questioned about whether my

faith was sincere, so I'd avoided anything religious after that. John continues narrating in a steady stream about how he felt when they discovered his wife couldn't have penetrative sex:

"I didn't want to keep pushing the subject because it made me seem very needy and then it's um, I'm also sensitive to the stigma that oh you know guys, all they want is sex, but then in my situation it's kinda a big thing that I was looking forward to because the part that was built on from my upbringing is that you've waited and you've kept yourself pure until marriage because it's something so worthwhile, but once you've gotten to that stage and it turns out you can't have intercourse, in the church situation it's not something they openly talk about, especially when there is people with challenges in regards to sex life, that would never be talked about."

John couldn't talk about it with friends, nor could he and his wife talk about it. Not pushing the matter further yet longing for sex has caused him inner turmoil, as he'd been looking forward to it leading up to his marriage. John feels bitterness and resentment towards his wife. Over the years, he fashioned different personas according to what he imagines his wife finds more attractive. When this hasn't worked, his frustration grows. He uses an analogy of eating chicken to describe his dilemma:

"If my wife doesn't like to eat chicken I can just go and have chicken by myself, that's not going to be frowned upon. But if I you know, go and find someone to have a one-night stand, have an affair, all of those things are very much frowned upon in my background and we don't do an open relationship, that kind of thing, so that amounts to like, there's no resolution."

I feel as though I'm being presented with an argument, as if John is appealing to my logic brain. Has he had to do this with himself, with others? Provide a rationale for his unmet needs? Since we began speaking, John's urgency to share his experience is evident through his steady flow of words. He spends the first ten minutes speaking rapidly, leaving little space for me to come in with reflections or questions. I wonder if meeting online creates a technological divide, contributing to difficulties in maintaining contact. I don't know what John's surroundings are like outside of his car- could he be anxious about his wife stepping out from inside of their home?

His nonstop narrative also reminds me of a confessional. At points I interrupt him to check my understanding and feel mildly agitated in the efforts I make to be heard. I feel like a sounding board, someone to offload on. I remind myself that this might be the first time he's been able to share these things and shift back to an empathic stance. It occurs to me that a driver for him to participate in my research might be the opportunity to finally share these experiences with a researcher-therapist who is curious, can listen to and contain his difficult emotions, and isn't part of his community²⁸.

As I listen to his difficulty in communicating his needs with his wife, I am distracted by my curiosity about her experience. She is a present absence in our encounter, implicated in his shame. A voice inside tugs at me: "surely there's a reason she's avoiding you. What does she say about how she feels?" I want to interrogate him because it sounds like he hasn't asked her. When John relays his worry that she married him out of convention, not desire, I find a way of asking about her feelings.

"So have you talked about that with her, have you asked her?"

"On and off I would say. Like you know, I did find I ended up putting a lot more thought over the years since we got married into how I look and, it's to a point my focus is always to change how I look from what I was before, hoping that maybe there is something that she is looking for that she just wasn't able to voice."

This response doesn't say much about how his wife feels. John continues describing his conviction that her body is unable to accept him as he is, even though she has reassured him that she likes how he looks. He has considered changing his career path to make her more attracted to him, but she supports any career path he suggests. It strikes me he has taken on her/their sexual blocks as a personal project, as signs of deficiencies he can change. I ask again whether he's asked her explicitly about things he's insecure about:

"Can I ask you, have you ever asked your wife what's going on, because you have a narrative of what's going on for her, where her body doesn't want to accept you, or isn't able to take you in, but what's her explanation?"

²⁸ Although I felt the pull to offer more therapeutic responding in this encounter, it does not remove it from the realm of 'research,' as the categories 'research' and 'therapy' are often blurred in psychotherapeutic inquiry. Both are practices of meaning-making. See Bondi (2013) for more on indeterminable boundaries between research and therapy in the helping professions.

“Yep, so we did talk about it, after a few years, not like a few months,” John says jokingly.

“After a few years,” I say, playing along with the joke. He doesn’t say more.

I resign to what seems like John’s inability or resistance to speak about his wife’s experience. He continues to describe the incarnations of his shame. He says that in his continued silence, his unmet desire has a kind of control over him, and he struggles to manage temptations to flirt with and fantasize about other women. He feels shame around these incongruent personalities: the ‘good’ yet uncommunicative Christian husband and his ‘primal’ thoughts and urges that come out when he’s around other women:

“When I meet any other female, it’s a part of my mind...I’m trying to create scenarios to kind of satisfy my longing for sexual closeness. For a lot of the time, when I see ladies, I guess their attractiveness or sexuality would hit me strongly, because I’m not able to channel those feelings towards my wife.”

John has felt temptation towards certain female youth he’s worked with who “like to wear revealing clothing at inappropriate times.” I am shocked at his admission and feel uneasy about the onus he has placed on these girls for their choice of attire. Surely his sexualizing and objectifying gaze also plays a part? He wrestles with the experience:

“I understand they’re girls. Teenagers are always looking for attention. I always have to be on-guard, not to say I wanted to or would have acted on my sexual desires but it’s just like, then there’s always the challenge in my mind, it’s like when anybody trying to be sexually attractive, even the person might not have any intention of doing so and that’s because I’m kind of starved for those kinds of attention, and so in my job I’ve gotta be professional about it and it adds a layer of stress within myself.”

I have an impression of John as someone who views his sexual desire as primitive and uncontrollable, which strikes me as being at odds with his fear of being “one of those guys where all they want is sex.” He describes his work to enhance their sex life as futile because she doesn’t match his efforts. He’s even bought her books about vaginismus that she doesn’t read. Surely there’s more going on between them than discovering she has the right mechanics, I think to myself as I listen. To me, his wife’s inaction seems like a form of

resistance. I ask another question that's been on my mind since the beginning of our conversation:

"I get the sense there's a hesitancy towards pushing for counselling with your wife?"

"I think it's just the same feeling, not wanting to be too nagging about it. But you know, that's a, like a catch-22, because if I don't push for a counselling session for us both then we don't get to solve the issue about me feeling naggy about intimacy."

This word 'nag' comes up a lot and I'm curious about it in relation to raising an issue that's been influencing the wellbeing of their relationship for a long time. Nag implies a one-sided demand, whereas counselling entails mutuality. It seems to me that John operates on unspoken cues, forming assumptions from implicit communication. Shame is relational- it assembles within John's relationships, each its own unique dynamic of forces that act upon and through John. As I listen, I track a link between John's marriage and their shared Christian backgrounds and family, which John characterises as uncommunicative and rigid. John describes another relational sphere where he can speak more freely about his experience: the counselling program he's enrolled in. He views his counselling education as a place to work through some of these issues even though he questions whether he's learning counselling to "work on his wife." In being weary of his desire to work on her, he shows an awareness of something I've wondered about, which is an erasure of her voice and agency. He characterizes her as avoidant of intimacy yet compliant enough to sustain their marriage:

"Even when we watch movies, we tend to sit apart...once a month she would be kind of into having intimacy and when we do have intimacy, like kind helping each other masturbate. I do feel happier for the next week, a bit more content in the relationship. But then again it doesn't, you know it would go away because the issue is still that she hasn't looked into the whole situation. She did talk about seeing a counsellor for herself, but then it's been years and she didn't follow up."

I don't catch my frustration with John until I transcribe our encounter. I'm frustrated by a collection of things that come together- the way he speaks about his wife and her body as the root of his problem, the little space I feel to participate in the dialogue, and the lack of communication between them. I am perplexed by how my feelings have changed – during

our talk I felt compassionate towards his struggle, yet afterwards I feel used as a sounding board and annoyed by his narrative. These affects require unpicking, since I worry they'll influence an unfair characterization of John. I want to sift through the extent to which my embodied relation(s) and sexual shame histories (in)form these spaces and point towards certain readings and not others.

Over my 20-odd years of sexual activity, I've encountered countless male partners who acted entitled to sex and pleasure. I don't count myself alone in this. According to feminist theorists like Nicholls (2020, 149), patriarchy's social conditioning instills a belief that "men are entitled to women's attention, women's care, women's respect, and women's bodies." Patriarchal systems require enactments from all genders to maintain and sustain them, say Cohn and Enloe (cited in Nicholls, 148), particularly women's "complicit femininity" that sustains the 'real man' masculinity construct of 'Prince Charming' who saves his damsel in distress. Zeroing into more specific cultural mediums, such as porn or Hollywood film, male sexuality is portrayed as ravenous and domineering, with female sexuality performed as submissive and subjugated (Grosz, 2018). Even though I developed a feminist consciousness early, I've worked hard to dismantle ingrained social ideologies that prioritize male desire and pleasure. The assemblage was populated by oppositional forces: whereas I have a history of being subjected to unwanted touch, mostly at the hands of men, and desire freedom and autonomy from these demands, John has an uncontainable yearning for more female touch and sexual attention. The encounter stirs up frustration and annoyance and draws my attention to sexual scripts naturalizing primitive male sexuality and mandating female servitude. These plug into the assemblage along with suspicion and concern for his wife. These affects, ignited by our differencing (Massumi, 2019), enable a critical narrative about John, and constrain a more empathic one that would privilege his frame of reference.

As I write about that day, I think about John and his wife's combined avoidance and status quo maintenance, wondering what it might enable. I've never been with a Christian partner and the closest I came to Evangelical culture was two summers of bible camp, where the counsellor questioned my faith and consequently repelled me from anything church based. Something about unmet sexual desire and its connection to female sexual refusal angers me. As I dig deeper, I connect to instances my own refusal wasn't respected over my last 20 years as a sexual being. Although these were quite different, they bring me to the

privileging of male sexual desire at the expense of an absence or silencing of female desire (Tolman, 2005). I couldn't bring this up during our encounter; in fact, it didn't occur to me that I would feel this way or notice these things. Coming back to my frustration now and compassion then, how is it possible that I'm able to hear him with empathy during our conversation but later recoil when I am more attuned to the ways his account rings bells of entitlement and an erasure of the woman's experience?

During our interview John indicates he feels free to speak about his shame and doesn't feel judged. This surprises me even though I know I've been treading carefully and playing a therapist role. Conducting the interview over Zoom adds an element of distance that might have obscured my slight resistance and defensiveness. He says he didn't feel as bad as he thought he might when he shared aspects of his shame, such as his desire to have an affair, flirt and seek intimacy with others. I imagine I represent a 'safe outsider' and that our interview presents a rare opportunity to engage with repressed parts of himself; perhaps bringing them into the open is relieving. His reassurance at the end appeals to my therapist identity – I'd like to see myself as easy to be open with. Still, I keep silent about the feelings our encounter stirs up because I'm afraid it'll make him uncomfortable and take away from his ease in using the space. It's a loss, as we could have ventured into a more relational space that resisted the either/or domains of 'neutral and accepting researcher' versus 'feminist woman with a history of experiencing unwanted male desire.' I muted parts of myself that questioned his perceptibility and compassionate curiosity towards his wife and her avoidance. These parts wanted to urge him to inquire into her experience and not let his supersede it. I couldn't help but see him from the female end of the heterosexual dyad and project feelings I have towards that experience, such as anger and a desire to bring him to task. At the same time, my interviewer and counsellor selves were strong enough for me to respond empathically to his shame, and it sounds like he experienced this.

Bondi (2013) writes that in qualitative research, "the invitation to talk [about vulnerable or personal details] in the presence of an interested and attentive listener may be very welcome to research participants; indeed, it may be a motivating factor for their participation" (10). She highlights researchers' ethical responsibilities to employ ongoing

awareness to shifts from making meaning in a research frame to a psychotherapeutic frame. Some ways of mitigating harm include “careful clarification of their purposes compared to those of therapists (Hutchinson & Wilson, 1994), having available contact details to facilitate onward referral of research participants to professional sources of support (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2007), self-care strategies (Stoler, 2002) and ensuring that researchers have adequate training and support (Johnson & Clarke, 2003), perhaps including the use of group psychotherapy (Corden, Sainsbury, Sloper & Ward, 2005) or research-focused therapeutic supervision (Bingley, 2002)” (10). The feeling of urgency I get from John to share his experience gestures towards his need for therapy. If I weren’t a therapist, perhaps I wouldn’t have shifted into the frame naturally and would have enforced a boundary that kept us in ‘research mode,’ whatever that looks like. The way I see it, the blurring of boundaries between ‘research’ and ‘therapy’ constitutes a difference of agendas. In oversimplistic terms, the distinction between agendas might be portrayed as follows: the researcher’s agenda relates to gathering material relevant to their line of inquiry, while a therapeutic agenda serves the participant’s need to process with an attentive and empathic outsider within a safe and confidential environment. The spaces to speak about shame and sex are so sparse that it makes sense for participants to be driven by a need for therapeutic processing.

John and I are both North American, so despite us having very different cultural backgrounds (I was raised culturally Jewish and Doukhobor Russian and am white), our differences don’t register with me as much as our similarities. I think this is due to both of us being foreigners here, from a similar place. When I share this story with my second supervisor, he points out I’ve neglected to reflect on the racial and cultural differences between John and me even though I do this with others. In reflecting, I realise there is so much about his experience that I can’t relate to or imagine, notably the silencing in Christian Asian culture around sex, and that my inability to empathize with this narrowed my reflexive lens to the gendered aspects playing out between us. I’m disappointed in myself when I see that important and impactful aspects of his experience affecting shame didn’t land with me enough to curate a story with them as the guiding force. As I write this, I wonder what John would have wanted to be the guiding force. What would a response-able (Barad, 2014)

rendering look like? Perhaps our conversation also didn't venture into these areas as much as it would have if I'd been familiar with his experience of Asian-Christian North Americanness. This shines another light on my power, as researcher, to affect what comes to matter, and leaves me questioning whether I have done justice to John in the process.

Encounter 6: Sarah

Sarah and I know each other through a friend and prior to our discussion we'd spoken with our mutual friend present but never 1-1. She mentioned in passing that she was interested in taking part, so we arranged a phone call to discuss. I was interested in her story, so we agreed to meet at my flat. This felt comfortable for us because Sarah had already been there once before, and private university meeting spaces were still unavailable due to Covid-19 restrictions. My mobility was also quite limited during this time, as I'd had a hip surgery that had worsened my pain.

Sarah and her partner had been volunteering in a small remote village in Greece earlier that year for a host who she describes as lovely. They worked with him most days, and sometimes he had his friends over for coffee. One of his friends, who she calls F, was a frequent visitor. His English was poor, and he didn't speak much with them, but as time went on he began to visit frequently and then invited them for dinner. He was recently widowed, and Sarah sensed his loneliness. She also got a slightly weird vibe from him but wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt, "trying to be optimistic." He offered to pay them to work on his land, which they happily accepted because it was better than the free work they'd been doing. One night, they went for dinner at his place and Sarah's partner had to leave promptly to teach English over Zoom. She had planned to phone a friend and walk in the village to escape the awkwardness of being alone with F, but when the time came, she felt bad for leaving abruptly so she thought "I'll just hang out with this man until my pal calls me."

After dinner, he took her to feed some dogs in kennels upstairs. Sarah's awkwardness prompted her to ask, "are they going to have puppies?" They passed a dog who had very developed mammary glands and he said something along the lines of "this one had or will have puppies" and in doing so grabbed her breast twice. She took a step back to show him she didn't like it but felt ashamed.

"I suppose there was the shame with me being freaked out so I laughed it off, I suppose you do that when you're embarrassed or whatever, but you know, I could have easily hit him at that point, but I felt that I couldn't. And I suppose there's an aspect of shame in that, just being like woah you've, I should have been able to snarl back at him because he went a step too far, although I did a bit, I wasn't fully like 'what are you doing' you know. I didn't confront him, which I surprised myself not to have done."

Sarah has mixed emotions around not standing up for herself in that moment. Although she would have liked to have been more assertive with him, she also didn't feel threatened by him due to his age. The fact he was hosting and employing them also put her in the position to be more lenient towards his actions and she wonders whether their cultural differences prompted her to give him the benefit of the doubt.

"Having been a volunteer for over a year, I was very much at people's disposal and that maybe played a part in it...?" said Sarah.

"You're not on your own turf?" I replied.

"Yeah absolutely. And I think it adds, the whole, when the sexual thing comes into it, it was a completely different ball game. It felt very different, much more stifled than if somebody had stolen something from you, you'd be like, can I have that back? This was like, I shouldn't say anything, I feel like I can't say anything."

Sarah's analogy of sexual assault as theft is a thought-provoking one. He copped a grab and violated her body. And yet, he wasn't punished for this like he would have if he'd stolen something from somebody's home. What's the difference between these two examples of personal space and property theft? I search for research comparing sexual assault and burglary cases and find an article that points to a 'special leniency bias' in sexual assault cases when compared with robbery cases (Bieneck and Krahe, 2010). The study showed that perpetrator blame in the 6 rape cases they surveyed was lower than the 6 robbery cases, and much lower when alcohol or a prior relationship was involved. This suggests that more onus is placed on perpetrators of object theft than the bodily theft of rape due to social narratives of accountability and what counts as assault/trespassing (i.e. that women are responsible for others' violence and must not make themselves vulnerable through consuming alcohol and wearing showy clothing). Sarah alludes to these social workings of injustice when she says "can I have that back? [...] I feel like I can't say anything". Knowing him and being in his home silences her as it couples with "widely shared stereotypes about sexual assault that deny cases that involve [...] a prior relationship with the perpetrator the status of a 'real rape'" (Bieneck and Krahe, 2010).

Sarah laughed off F's inappropriate boob grabs at first. When I ask her why, she says it just felt like the natural response and questions whether it is due to her being a people-pleaser. Reflecting on it, she thinks she had every right to hit him. She goes on to describe the next part of her interaction with F that evening. Her friend still hadn't called, and she felt bored just sitting in F's house, so when he asked her if she wanted to see his childhood house she agreed.

"Now I know I shouldn't have, like after what had happened before, but I was still sort of like adrenaline-driven, filling in time, and I was like 'yeah let's go'. So we saw his house, and then as we were going back into the car, he tried to grab me and hug me and stuff like that and I was like, even though I was pushing him, like go away, this is not my problem, because he kept saying he was lonely and needs a woman, stuff like that, and I was just like this is not for me to deal with. But I was in a village, in the dark, I didn't know where I was and even then, I gave him a chance again by saying 'I'm going to get into your car and you're going to drive me to where my boyfriend is.'"

This man's total lack of innocence really strikes me. I inquire more about what she told him, was it exactly what she had just told me? Sarah replies yes, but in a nicer way, and once they got into the car, he started trying to rub her thigh and lie down in her lap. At this point she started hitting him and told him to stop, feeling trapped.

Sarah questions why she allowed the interaction to reach the point of being alone with F, trapped in his car. She could have screamed at him to stop when he first touched her breast. Why didn't she feel it was the right thing to do at that point?

"Did he have some sort of authority over me that, other than it being his land, why did I feel shameful of really protecting myself? I don't know."

Sarah keeps reflecting on why she acted the way she did. Another line of reasoning she identifies is that as women, we are "used to males being more primitive" and this causes us to take for granted their sex drives as something normal and natural and then excuse them for their behaviour. The male sexual drive discourse plugs into the assemblage again, at a different angle. I find it noteworthy that Sarah absorbed F's responsibility for making her feel uncomfortable and violated until his inappropriate touching became unbearable and she was trapped in a car with him. Their interaction highlights the male sexual drive discourse's role

in re-producing gender-based inequality at the deep, unquestioned level of the implicit. The discourse sets the stage for total responsibility to be projected into the woman's psyche so that she feels obliged to manage her own fear, anger, and violation as well as the shared awkwardness produced by the man's unacceptable actions. Hollway (1984) defines these gendered 'common-sense' ideas as *significations*, which are "completely woven into the practices of sex, suppressed as they are with the aid of the male sexual drive discourse" (93).

Additional overlapping factors came into play between Sarah and F. She believes that being in F's country and on his land prompted her to abide to his wishes, that being his guest meant she had to tolerate his trespassing. If he'd been a woman, she thinks she would have stood her ground more and said something sooner. The real and perceived power differential held her back. When she finally spoke up, she said:

"This is not my issue, I am not here to fill any of these things, any of your criteria, and I just want to go back to my boyfriend now."

Sarah quotes herself with an angry tone. I don't understand what 'any of his criteria' means but I don't ask. Instead, I want to know whether he understood her. She knew he did when he drove her back to his place because he smiled and told her to keep what had happened a secret.

"That made me feel as though he completely disrespected me because I was a woman and he thought it was just between two men. It made me see he didn't view me as a person, just as an object, like just a female, which is a whole different channel to go down. You know, the sort of, machismo and stuff like that in the male psyche. Especially in a small village in the middle of Cyprus."

It took her a while to tell her boyfriend about the assault. First, she walked to where she'd seen their host sitting in the village square and F followed her. He sat close to them, and Sarah acted casual, hiding her fear. After, when she walked back with her boyfriend, she brought up what happened nonchalantly, obscuring F's violence and inappropriate touching. She said they wouldn't be able to go up to F's for internet again because he was "kind of weird." She was uncomfortable revealing what had happened, embarrassed to share a negative sexual experience she'd been a victim of. When she revealed the truth the next

morning, her boyfriend and their host were shocked and confused she didn't tell them straight away. They didn't understand the dynamic and F's power.

The assault challenged Sarah to shift her worldview in relation to trusting strangers, particularly older men who seemed harmless at first glance. Not only did it disrupt her taken-for-granted feeling of safety in everyday life, but it shook her faith in humanity by exposing male violence, especially from an older man. Reflecting to their encounters prior to that evening, Sarah shared that she'd seen a porn notification on his phone that she'd pushed out of her mind. She had reminded herself that he was a "grandad" and the notification meant nothing. She also gave him the excuse of being a single lonely man in Cyprus and naturalised the porn as something that all lonely men resort to. However, his age had also prompted her to see him as less of a threat, since she was inclined to view older people as asexual and 'pure.'

Sarah doesn't view the sexual assault as "too traumatic." What irked her about it was the difficulty to talk about it and to mention details like "he touched my boob." She felt shameful saying those things.

"I don't know if it was the shame, and even sort of admitting that you have these sexual parts to you that people find attractive because I was talking to just guys around me...to say that you have this thing that men find attractive that he touched, I found it shameful saying something like that. Or even the fact that I have a thigh that he stroked was a bit like, it was really difficult to go into those details and tell that level of detailed report to not only my boyfriend but then the host and then the police later."

I can understand her shame in revealing her sexual/sexualized body was alluring to a man who assaulted her. As women, we are encouraged to be sexually desirable, yet shamed and blamed for it. Sarah says feeling an older man's desire for her was especially shame-inducing, since she had absolutely no desire for him:

"Desire can be a vulnerable word and exposing that in somebody who you have no desire for, but they see you in that way is quite...I don't know. It's a shame because I think the age gap was the big shame for me, in that sense. Because I really wanted him to be just a grandad. Like with your own dad you don't have any sort of, or you should have any sort of creep vibes from and if there is some sort of sexual desire there, em it changes the dynamic of your interaction with that person."

Sarah brings up another point of shame, which was that F saw her in her bikini one day prior to the assault. She describes the moment as a “slip,” a mistake she normally wouldn’t make except that she and her partner were painting in the heat. If she could have heard him coming, she would have covered herself up. Due to the moment of exposure, Sarah automatically blamed herself for the assault, finding herself to blame for enticing him and igniting his attraction to her. We discuss how self-blame in the face of sexualized violence is a common response for women. Sarah says,

“Although I wouldn’t like to think that’s how I think, maybe that’s the reason I had to have my t-shirt on all the time around these guys because you don’t want to ask for it or provoke. Although, I would never say that when anybody else was wearing something like that, but subconsciously maybe I do think that and that’s why I wanted to cover myself up and then felt shame when this old man saw me.”

Similar incongruences also pop up between my thoughts and actions relating to being provocative, such as my conscious choice not to show a lot of skin in public out of fear I’ll attract unwanted attention, even though I’m a feminist and believe everyone is responsible for their own actions. Sarah wouldn’t accuse anyone else of asking for it but could identify her own deeply lodged belief that she couldn’t be seen wearing something provocative for fear it would bring the wrong kind of attention. Her narrative is fraught with contradiction, which is often the case of shame’s operation in female sexuality (Hollway, 1984). Take, for example, the ‘virgin or whore’ discourse (Hollway, 1984), which holds women responsible for men’s ‘uncontrollable’ urges through encouraging their purity while men’s animalistic desire goes unquestioned and sometimes celebrated. Sarah’s story clearly sheds light on this: she feels the burden of responsibility for both in F’s sexual trespassing and is reluctant to say anything. Rather than call him out on his wrongdoing, and rather than shame him, she carries shame on her own.

Sarah emphasizes the evening disrupted her default view that people are essentially good and innocent, particularly older people. She prefers to live freely and assume others’ goodwill matches hers. She also expresses she is “aware of being a female around men” and

consequently doesn't like wearing revealing clothing around them. In my view, there's a dissonance between her two philosophies: on one hand, she gives everyone the benefit of the doubt and feels completely safe, yet on the other, she takes precautions to protect herself from male desire. Her stance on having felt completely safe in the world and giving others the benefit of the doubt differs enough to my outlook that I feel slightly annoyed. *How can a woman feel this way*, I think, but I avoid challenging her. I've felt unsafe since I first felt men's objectifying gazes while walking home from high school. As soon as I developed breasts at 14 years old, I came to know my body's sexual currency. I both enjoyed and feared feeling objectified by men and boys in my small town. Since my parents weren't very interested in my life, this attention satisfied my craving for being seen. However, I also knew it was inappropriate and could escalate into something more, so I acted like I didn't notice their catcalls and whistles. A few times, when I returned the gazes of men driving by and whistling, I sensed an underlying shamelessness that scared me. There were many of them and one of me; they were larger and stronger. Being preyed upon as a developing teenage girl instilled basic tenants of heteronormative ideological systems, particularly the notion that men are natural-born sexual animals, and their predatory sexuality is justified. I wondered why Sarah's belief in others' goodwill had been untouched for so long. Had something shielded her? I saw her original stance as one that only men were privileged to take up, then noticed the binary I'd created. It wasn't this simple.

Ethnographers Renold and Ringrose (2008) trouble binaries and simplistic notions of status-quo resistance and subjection in their research with young women. Their article *Regulation and Rupture: Mapping Tween and Teenage Girls' Resistance to the Heterosexual Matrix* uses Deleuzoguattarian tools for mapping subversions to and re-inscriptions of normative systems, showing how moments of *imperceptibility*, or the "small and often passed over spaces where regulation and resistance might meet," are fraught with contradiction and require multiple readings. The *theatre of representation* that comprises heterosexual teen girls' experiences, or "girls' active investment in, as well as subversion of and challenges to, the heterosexual matrix" (320) shows both defiance and re-enactment of femininity norms. In their study, race and class privilege bolster the girls' ability to defy norms: "[t]he girls' white middle-classness (in a predominantly working-class school) raises a central issue regarding

the politics of location and how such ‘freedoms’ (to distance themselves from hypersexualized femininities) are perhaps only accessible from a place of relative privilege” (323). Consequently, the heterosexual matrix is intersectional, with power operating along multiple strata. In Deleuzoguattarian terms, lines of flight are often accompanied by a reterritorialization, which has the effect of muddying subversions. Linking back to the difference I notice between Sarah and I, I wonder whether growing up in a privileged context offered her a buffer from experiencing the risk of ravenous male desire. I can only surmise these differences because we don’t address them explicitly- my experience in Edinburgh tells me that class can shield someone from harm in ways that it doesn’t in smalltown British Columbia. Of course, this is only my fantasy to explain why she doesn’t feel on edge as a sexual object.

Another difference between us that sparks my curiosity is the absence of desire in Sarah’s narrative. Although this coheres with her account being an assault story, which may have distanced her from desire or produced a shut-off effect, there’s something peculiar about her not once acknowledging her own sexual agency. I wonder whether Sarah pretends she doesn’t have a body that men find attractive (applying conventional beauty standards to Sarah from my view, she is an attractive, fit young woman). Throughout our conversation, she often mentions talking about the assault stirs up shame because it conveys others find her body desirable:

“It was difficult, very difficult to talk about it, and even difficult to tell details like, oh yeah, I have a boob and the man touched my boob twice or held it. I found it kind of shameful saying that. And I don’t know if it was the shame, and even sort of admitting that you have these sexual parts to you that people find attractive or whatever that even though I was talking to just guys around me...you know, they know that I have a boob, but maybe I don’t...you don’t talk about that but maybe I had to, to say that you have this thing that men find attractive that he touched...I found it shameful saying something like that.”

Sarah’s interchangeable use of ‘I’ with ‘you’ also grabs my attention. As a therapist, I’ve been trained to view a client’s third person self-referencing to indicate a disconnection from self-experiencing (Gendlin, 1984). I point out near the end of our conversation that I notice her tendency to do this. She shares that speaking about herself as a general or abstract

person makes the assault less personal and resolves her discomfort in “making it about myself.” I struggle to understand this, so I ask her to elaborate.

“Maybe because it makes it less special and specific to being a massive traumatic incident to just you, and it’s more like, ‘oh these things happen to lots of people, therefore you’re just a statistic and it feels less targeted to you, to me, and to being a victim.’”

She adds that depersonalizing helps her speak about it with friends from a distance. When I reflect my understanding that speaking about it from a distance allows her to “feel less special,” she says the following, which I find illuminating:

“Or less of a victim, less traumatized maybe. And less like ‘this was a massive incident that happened to me’ that is going to affect me for the rest of my life. Because I don’t feel like that, I feel like this was a learning point. Although it has raised some interesting conversation topics, shame-wise or masculinity-wise.”

Sarah and I finish recording after around an hour, and during our conversation we verge in and out of non-research topics such as women’s choice to leave their legs unshaved in the UK versus Canada. There’s a casual vibe between us and I find it tricky to determine the endpoint for our conversation due to its blurred boundaries throughout. Once we stop the recording, we speak about hip injuries and running, then say goodbye once our mugs of tea are drained. Since that night, we have seen each other twice and it’s felt easeful, as though we’ve managed to compartmentalize the research from everyday life.

Encounter 7: Mina

I meet Mina at the Meadows one breezy summer day. We both have our bikes with us. I sense slight nervousness on her end, which I interpret to mean she has some reservations about speaking about shame and sex in a public space. We ask each other in a fumbling manner where we'd like to go and agree on a shaded grassy location that seems relatively private.

"So, what sparks your interest in sex and shame?" I ask in my usual direct manner.

"Well, I mean, I come from Turkey. And there, I mean like, until I came here it was always like...I really don't know where to start. Well, I have shame, yes!"

Mina's response surprises me a bit, since she immediately relates her interest to being a Turkish woman, as if to say there's necessarily a link between the two that she expects me to know. My surprise reflects my ignorance about how imbricated shame and sex are for Turkish women due to the predominantly Islamic influence in their lives, which I read about after our conversation. I feel a wash of shame in not knowing and regret my decision to arrive without first having informed myself.

Mina identifies as Muslim but is selective about which rules she follows; for instance, she doesn't wear the coverings. She tells me culture and religion are intertwined in Turkey, which can lead to contradictions between the private and public spheres when it comes to relationships. Growing up, she asked her mom whether kissing was a sin, to which she replied, "sure, kissing someone on the mouth is a sin." Mina says she felt weird and surprised about this because she saw people everywhere kissing. She also asked whether her mom would accept her if she got pregnant. Mina hadn't yet entered puberty, so she didn't have a fully developed concept of pregnancy, but she'd heard about it somewhere. Her mother replied she wouldn't forgive her which she took to mean pregnancy and sex were bad.

Mina's story mostly centres around navigating her virginity in intimate relationships, which challenged her conceptions of intimacy and safety. To begin, she describes a scenario of sexual discomfort with an ex-partner who was "culturally conservative but not religiously conservative." Sensing the contradiction between the two, I ask what she means. She explains he wanted her to have anal sex with him but wouldn't allow her to have male friends.

"I was following his rules in a way, I mean maybe not sexually but...oh."

“Did you say not maybe sexually?” I ask quizzically.

“Not maybe sexually, yes, because I was like ‘no, we, I mean, there’s no sex before marriage,’ I mean, full penetration, as you say,” Mina replies.

“So that’s no sex before marriage, full penetration.”

“Yep, mhm.”

Mina leaves subtle mystery, seemingly avoiding the question of whether she refused anal sex because it counted as penetration. I carefully choose what questions I ask, feeling pulled between what I don’t understand and what feels too delicate to clarify. She says penetration refers to damaging the hymen- does this mean anal sex was acceptable? Perhaps that’s why this man was conservative in a cultural but not religious sense...? I don’t clarify this directly, sensing a need to respect the silences. The way Mina avoids spelling everything out tells me these details aren’t ready to be known. The silences generate a feeling of an *absent presence* that “[falls] heavier on the ear than if voiced” (Mazzei, 2007, 41).

She speaks about his desire for anal sex and prohibition towards male friendships with a tone that sounds accepting, but I don’t ask about this so I can’t confirm my impression. Being able to distinguish whether her decisions are culturally or religiously motivated has been important to Mina’s sexual journey. She explains that once she came to Edinburgh and met a partner here, she realised her wish to preserve her virginity was motivated by culture. Her partner here said he wouldn’t be able to have a relationship without penetrative sex, which she could understand but also experienced as his lack of acceptance. This led her to see maintaining her virginity was motivated by a fear that losing it would cause her future husband to reject her. She spoke about it with her Turkish friends, who all revealed they’d lost their virginity and were having sex. This helped Mina become clearer that she wanted to, too.

“I decided to go for it, to live my sexuality actively. And I feel more fulfilled. But now, this shame...because I felt really loved, I didn’t feel that I was used, um, as a sexual object. Sometimes, I felt that way, when I was in Turkey, especially before coming here, and I had a sexual...I really don’t know what the word is...harassment, experience, a sexual experience in my childhood.”

“Do you mean harassment or abuse?” I ask. She says there wasn’t any penetration but didn’t know how to define it exactly and explains:

“So I was sitting on his lap, I was eight, and he wanted me to do [something that the wind conceals] and I didn’t know why I was doing that, and then after a while, I really thought that it was something like a play, a game or something, I really don’t know, I mean I knew that he wasn’t that pleasant...but I didn’t know what it was about.”

I say that it sounds like sexual assault to me, and Mina agrees. When I ask her how it feels to talk about now, she replies that she finds it interesting that it doesn’t affect her that much anymore. She can talk about it more freely since she’s been in therapy for a while. The person who abused her was her 17-year-old cousin, who she had customarily played games with, leaving her confused about what he wanted her to do. The fear of being used that this experience left her with prompted her to seek the guarantee that someone loved her before she had sex with them.

“I need to make sure my partner loves me and he’s my partner,” she says.

My body remembers feeling used. I am at the women’s health clinic for a third attempt to remove my IUD with missing strings. The doctor says she’s done many of these before, so I trust her. She inserts the speculum, goes inside, and says she’ll need to dilate my cervix to search for the IUD in my uterus. As soon as she does this, I feel the first powerful surge of pain, a gripping spasm through my stomach and pelvis. The pain intensifies as she rummages around; my screams remind me of difficult birth scenes from films. Each painful surge triggers shame-inducing sexual encounters, as though my pelvis is a concentrated block of shame and pain. I’m flooded by flashbacks of times I’ve made myself available to lovers who used and disrespected me. The IUD enabled my promiscuity and their/our use of my body for (mostly their) pleasure, and I feel sharp pangs of anger. *This pain I’m enduring was for them*, I think, but I’m also angry at myself for being impulsive and careless. I wonder, *who is to blame for this?*

Mina can rationalize that if her future husband doesn’t accept her, it’s not her problem. However, her heart anxiously fears rejection. Remaining a virgin has played another

role, an arguably more important one than cultural acceptance. Her 'no sex' rule served a function of figuring out her partner's intentions and warning them that she's not up for being used:

"Then I will set this barrier, like look, you cannot have sex with me because I'm a virgin, so I will know if the person was using me or not."

"Mmmm so a sort of test?"

"Well maybe, I didn't think it was a test because it was already there and I needed to protect him, you know. But it served, um, a function, yeah?"

"A function?"

"So that they would know, they wouldn't have done that with me."

Mina felt a lot of shame during her undergrad years when she started exploring physical intimacy with men. She describes layers of yearning, need, taking the risk of physical intimacy and then feeling used. She says it all connects to her sexual assault experience but doesn't go into detail. The other would show interest in her, which led her to reciprocate and feel hopeful that he wanted to be in a relationship. In the end, she felt let down by his desire for something physical and blamed herself for not taking greater care.

"I had that connection in my mind, if I give some of my body then maybe they will accept me, we will be in a relationship together. But it never happened, and I remember every time I had those interactions, I felt so shitty, and so ashamed. Once I remember I was so glad that my mom wasn't in the house because I wouldn't feel comfortable looking at her because it was a sin..."

I clarify whether seeing her mother somehow mirrors back the shame, and she says in a way yes, but there's more to it. There's the perfect word in her language, which doesn't translate to English, so she explains that it has to do with knowing the reason she can't share with her mom is that she wouldn't accept her. Her mom would punish her by not talking to her. To me, it sounds like shame is enmeshed with fear of her mother's disapproval and the destruction of their relationship. This fits in with shame literature that says shame is relational (Probyn, 2005; DeYoung, 2014), often produced when we imagine an other's rejection if they

were to see us. We internalise the other and do the reprimanding for them, disciplining ourselves to avoid their rejection, blame and exclusion. Mina says she built a strong superego during this phase of her life, filling her mind with 'shoulds' to avoid breaking the rules.

Mina discussed her decision to lose her virginity with her therapist before having sex. Having known Mina's history of sexual abuse, her therapist was initially worried and cautioned her that a history of sexual abuse can encourage a person to become sexually overactive:

"She was quite worried that I would be having dangerous sexual interactions if I lose my virginity because then, nothing will stop me, you know what I mean, because I had already begun, so I could just have sex with any man. But I could see that, it's a bodily thing, and also because I wasn't able to say no to people I liked, and they wanted to have something with me."

Ironically, when she lost her virginity, she felt free and powerful; saying no to things and being assertive became easier. She also consulted with her mother about her desire to have sex and was surprised when her mom expressed support if she chose to go ahead.

"I was like 'mom, I'm just so in-between, like I really don't know what to do' and she was like 'religiously it's a sin but on the other hand, thinking about that and not doing it also limits you, so this might not serve your wellbeing, so do whatever you feel like.' And it was quite liberating actually!"

Mina's face lights up as she says this; her joy is palpable. She even told her mom after her first sexual experience that she lost her virginity and this interaction felt good to her because although her mom was sad, she didn't reject her. Sometimes her mom tells her to be careful and asks her to try not get pregnant.

When I ask her how she is now with sex and shame, Mina replies that sometimes, very rarely, she has tiny moments when she's ashamed of what she's doing. She searches for the words and says,

“Just one second, and it’s gone. But it’s there, it’s coming. It’s really difficult to describe actually. This is beyond language. I mean, those moments remind me of my childhood, sometimes I was feeling that way. Maybe it was after the sexual abuse.”

“When do those moments happen?” I inquire.

“I think mostly when I’m naked, laying on the bed.”

“With someone?”

“Well I was thinking, it’s quite surprising that it hasn’t happened for a long time. So I’m thinking....no I think when I’m mostly alone, not when I’m with someone. Or maybe...when I’m with someone, but when I’m not hugging them, you know, when we are sleeping separately.”

In these moments of nakedness, mostly when she’s alone, she feels ashamed of her body in its nakedness. She’s clear that this doesn’t happen when she masturbates; it tends to happen when she wanders around the room.

“Just maybe, being free, all naked, and just walking around, but it’s all of a sudden, these feelings...shame comes quite suddenly, just one second or two and it disappears.”

“Do you have a sense of what happens in your body, what you feel in your body?”

“That’s super difficult to describe. Ok, I’ll try. My inside, especially my chest, it feels like it all empties. And it’s covered with curtain, like a really thin curtain, a transparent curtain. Maybe it could be able being fragile, I don’t know. I feel lighter, not psychologically lighter but weight-wise, lighter. I don’t know.”

It’s been a month since Mina felt this way. She attributes this to a new relationship; it’s the first time she’s felt soulful love, an integration of body and soul. She feels received for who she is as a ‘whole person,’ and it’s the first time she feels her partner isn’t using her. When I ask what it’s been like to speak with me, she says she’s proud of herself for having worked through her shame rather than pushing it away, and that through the process of speaking she forgot we were in the Meadows surrounded by people. Her anxieties eased during our conversation. I get the sense that speaking about it externalized the transformations she continues to journey through.

Mina's story is one of the last I've written about. I procrastinated with her story because I felt challenged by the misfortune that some of the most salient, vulnerable details were blocked out by wind and sirens in the recording. The timings of environmental elements obscuring Mina's difficult-to-tell moments fascinate me, as it seems these sounds were conspiring to keep the material secret. Initially I was desperate to include these details and replayed each section several times, straining my ear as I listened closely. Although I could make out some of the missing sections after revisiting them, some of the ones I see as most important remain too obscured. In one section, Mina describes her experience of being sexually assaulted at the age of 8 by her 17 year-old cousin and tries to decide whether it is harassment or assault:

"Ok well harassment there's not any penetration of anything but there's a, but I don't know how to say this, ok so I was sitting in his lap, I was eight, and he wanted me to do [wind obscures her speech] and I didn't know why I was doing that, and then after a while, I really thought that it was something like a play, a game or something. I really didn't know, I mean I knew that he wasn't that pleasant...but I didn't know what it was about."

"Right, that could be called assault," I said.

"Ok assault then."

"How is it to talk about right now?"

"Hm, yeah it's quite interesting that it doesn't affect me that much anymore. And I can talk about it freely, because you know, I've been working on that for quite a long time."

After transcribing what I could, I tried to arrange another meeting with Mina over Zoom to go over the missing pieces. We set a date, but she wrote a few days prior to cancel, saying she didn't feel comfortable speaking in her shared flat out of fear someone might hear her. When I suggested we set up an in-person meeting at a university room, she didn't reply, so I left it. I had a sense that what she'd given was already a lot.

Discussion

Untangling what “Tugs” and Plugs into Interview Assemblages

Since this inquiry took a non-linear, uncontained approach, the material grabbed me at various unpredictable points, producing a sporadic and ongoing analysis akin to what Childers et al. term *promiscuous* (2014). Promiscuous feminist research recognizes and embraces the inherent messiness of the field and “makes room for material engagements with the empirical world that collapse time-space as I stay ‘in touch’ with the data committing infidelities as I shuffle, label, highlight, write on, and revisit data, remembering through my body-mind” (2014, 824). As I sit with ‘data’ and gather impressions, I’m aware my collection will inevitably be incomplete, as assemblages, inquiries and ‘data’ are constantly in-flux (Mazzei, 2013). As I accounted for earlier, the material world presented a few major disruptions to making sense of and accounting for ‘data;’ these disruptions came in the form of three hip surgeries in October 2021, May 2022, and March 2023. As I engage with these entanglements, my hips, with their limiting pains, engrossing mysteries, and sleep-depriving powers, make their way into research assemblages. However, I haven’t been able to devote conscious attention to them due to being in the middle of ongoing chronic pain. Stopping and starting the project numerous times with a body undergoing intense inner and outer transformation adds a disjointed and disassociated feeling to material engagements. This adds a layer of difficulty to the already messy and complicated work of storying from the body and attending to hotspots.

I begin this discussion by exploring the intensities that tug at me as I (re)member encounters. The first site of affective intensity concerns instances of incongruence between the spoken content (i.e. words and language) and the overwhelming sense I am left with about the other’s overall feeling states relating to sex and shame. Tracing my sense of shame’s affective intensity and finding it at odds with the words the other uses when I revisit the transcript causes me to question these losses of translation. At first, I attempt to theorize shame’s capacity to veil itself and shift shape within the assemblage but catch my rush to reductive rationalization and challenge myself to consider a system of intra-acting forces. When I circle back to these incongruences in the transcript, I notice discrepancies between my sense of the interaction and the language the other employs to describe their shame experience. In addition, there are moments in the encounter when I put forward my sense of the other’s feelings aside from shame- for instance, pride or stoicism- and the other corrects

me by clarifying it is shame he or she speaks of. Still, despite their corrections, I write my original sense about their relationship to shame and the way it transforms into something else. It's as though the affective agency of forces conspiring and colliding to form the *sense event* (MacLure, 2013, 663) overrides their words. This gestures towards ways the assemblage produces differing affective realities for shame, just as shame produces potentialities for the interview assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). The *collective enunciation* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, 37) of words, tones, historical and social locations, geography, relationships between researcher and participants, ideologies and significations of sex and shame produces these sense events on the embodied instrument of the researcher that becomes the text. In the discussion that follows, I conjure moments that glow with irking affective intensity. Once a hotspot grabs my attention, I (re)turn to the transcript to look for exchanges whose material-discursive forces help elucidate the hotspot's logics. I also follow lines of flight that de-territorialize a policing, silencing shame and forces that re-territorialize the BwO (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). The resulting discussion is fragmented and incomplete, as hotspots are sites of wonder, resisting finality and closure (MacLure, 2013).

Hotspot 1: Where does Shame Go? Masculinity, Universalizing Experience, and Pride

I begin with Frank, whose narrative leaves me with an overwhelming sense that he is deplete of shame, at least in his current narrative. He portrays shame in sex through three distinct phases that resound with popular heterosexual male performance anxiety narratives (Khan et. al., 2008; Montemurro, 2022): loss of virginity, coming too quickly, and feeling rejected by partners who don't want as much sex. I come with my own shame stories that are at odd with Frank's, and the mix of contrasting gendered histories, sexual scripts, and discourses that plug in and out of the assemblage produce an experience of Frank's account as prideful, not shameful. Although Frank mentions feelings of inadequacy, rejection, and failure, he overcomes them by embracing his high sex drive and resolving to only date women whose sex drives match his. I am left with an impression of the male sex drive discourse reterritorializing the assemblage to squash shame-induced anxieties and threats to masculinity. Frank also transitions out of shame by using a universalizing rhetoric to speak about it as something that happens to everyone. The transcript reads:

Anna: Do you have conversations with partners you're with these days addressing these things you feel shame around?

Frank: Um no, not really I mean certainly I have conversations about what they want from sex, but it just isn't really a problem anymore

Anna: You don't feel the need to discuss it with them, the things you feel shame around?

Frank: Well sometimes I will open up about it, but it's not something I need to disclose immediately, it's also, if it was a problem still, if I'd come after like, you know, half a minute or whatever then I would say, look, I come really quickly, but you know I am happy to accommodate you in other ways, but because it's not usually happening so now it's quite, you know occasionally I will come really quickly so it's more of a rare thing and sometimes I won't come at all, but again just because I understand more how, you know, diverse everybody's sexuality is, I never even started feeling shame about the not coming part. I have witnessed a much broader range of sexualities at that point and sort of lots of problems that other people have and that it's just you know, because in a way its normal to not be normal because everyone's experience is just so different, and everyone has some history of shame.

Frank's shame becomes subsumed into a universalizing discourse with 'everyone isn't normal' and 'everyone has some history of shame.' Even more confusing is the way he negates the shame he purports to feel, saying "I never even started feeling shame about the not coming part." His transition from a vulnerable masculinity to one deplete of shame stirs up a mix of wonder and frustration in me. His seemingly easy mutation into a man who has many sexual partners, knows how to please women, and speaks of shame as a past phenomenon troubles my perception of shame being associated with a shaky voice. However, as Montemurro (2022, 91) illustrates, pressures to perform that men internalize from pornography and other popular culture remove them from embodied pleasure and encourage a false sexuality that is "powerful, well-endowed, and able to please (and often conquer) hypersexualized women partners." Although Frank doesn't explicitly mention the emotional costs of performance anxiety aside from situating them as shameful, I imagine they made sexual enjoyment conditional on the degree of successful performance and served as blocks to intimate and authentic connecting.

Sitting with this further, I think about the reterritorializing forces that dissolve Frank's shame. Within a patriarchal context of a man speaking to a woman about shame, the assemblage conjures Meenagh's discussion of 'compensatory manhood acts,' a phrase she coins in *'She Doesn't Think that Happens': When Heterosexual Men Say No to Sex* (2021, 323). As Meenagh asserts, compensatory manhood acts work to redeem normative masculinity from moments in which it is under threat. I wonder whether Frank felt more vulnerable than he wanted when he shared feelings of inadequacy, rejection, and premature ejaculation, and out of this, re-established himself as a sexually skilful man who has overcome shame. A prideful position might have felt safer.

Shame seems to mutate in a few other encounters, including the one with Sarah. She employs the term 'you' to refer to herself as she narrates her experience of assault on an older Greek man, which dissolves shame into the universal:

Anna: I notice you say 'you' rather than 'me' or 'I.'

Sarah: Yeah, I guess I've removed myself from the experience so much that I'm just thinking about this happening to a person, or 'one.' It's not so like self um, it's not like in the present of that situation, I prefer to talk about it sort of more, not philosophically, but just seeing it as an incident and that happened to, that I have an insight into, because it must have happened to a lot of people. I don't like to just make it about myself, this happens to women everywhere, so it's like thinking about the psyche of a woman and man and this assault that could be anywhere, and being able to apply it to other situations or apply it to other people's experiences.

Anna: Does it feel helpful?

Sarah: To me it does, yes

Anna: Do you know why?

Sarah: Maybe because it makes it less special and specific to being a massive traumatic incident to just you, and it's more like, oh these things happen to lots of people, therefore you're just like, you're just a statistic and it feels less targeted to you, to me, it feels less like being a victim

Speaking about shame from sexual assault in the universalized subject position of 'you' helps Sarah feel less victimized, as it signals joining others and not being singled out. There are various readings of this, but I see it as a means of releasing shame's stronghold. When shame becomes something that happens to everyone, it loses its fear-inducing power of making the person feel like an abject outsider. Probyn (2005) contends that one of shame's most devastating effects is its propensity to evoke a feeling of not belonging. She relates this to Bourdieu's concept of the habitus, which refers to the embodiment of history, suggesting that the body consciously and unconsciously knows and follows cultural rules. Upon experiencing the unwanted sexual touch of an older Greek man, Sarah is marked by the taboo of this social more. By evoking the universal subject and placing herself amongst others who have been sexually assaulted, Sarah de-territorializes shame. She releases its sticky grip marking her as abject and dirtied by unwanted touch (Helmann, 2021). However, engaging in a third-person process also means Sarah leaves her experience, even if just slightly, consequently re-territorializing the BwO and muting her act of enunciation. This can also be seen as shame's disassociating effects. As Munt (2007) indicates, experiencing shame can initiate splitting, whereby shame works to "sever the connection between self and other and to annihilate the individuated self" (87).

Hotspot 2: Shame as Moralistic Force

There are a few encounters that glow with intensity during moments when moralistic admonishment populates assemblages. Shame takes the shape of a moral arbiter, territorializing the BwO through silencing, encouraging a pathologizing self-concept, and policing behaviour. This was most pronounced with John, who comes from what he describes as a traditional Christian upbringing and is married to a woman he met through the church. Shame comes through the amalgamation of forces within our dynamic of female researcher/male participant as well as narratives of religious doctrines and constraints. At times, I sense his confessional tone points towards feelings of guilt instead of shame, although predominantly his narrative feels more shameful through his "negative valuation of the self" as opposed to a negative assessment of behaviour as DeYoung (2015) distinguishes. Another distinct shame quality that shows up in John's narrative is an inextricability of his shame from relationships with others, notably his Christian roots and his wife (DeYoung, 2015). His overwhelming narrative of unmet desire spills into the online forum through long, flood-like

waves. I wonder whether the internet provides a protective secrecy to voice the 'taboo' while he sits alone in his car and sense his urgency to be witnessed in his desires and fears. As a silencing force, shame is painfully isolating, and bearing witness to it deterritorializes the BwO. I'm drawn in by a hotspot of 'good' and 'bad' in our encounter, particularly in relation to John's conception of gender. It strikes me there's a moralistic currency to shame that I want to unpick:

John: I'm completely ok with talking online to an interviewer, counsellor person, and you know it's always better when that someone is...um, like right now to talk about the topic of shame and sexual issues, you still come across as very open and accepting, that's very good. I wasn't worried about the potential, like um, biases that might come back to me, I didn't feel that I had to put up the good guy image for you to make sure I don't get bashed in the report later on. I would say before we did this study, if you had asked me whether I could do a study of this topic, I would say I would prefer to speak with a male researcher or therapist, but I'm glad to say that to be interviewed by you was just as comfortable. I didn't feel a lot of hesitation sharing what's on my mind.

Anna: So there was something, you mentioned you had a potential fear, maybe a slight worry, of me being not as accepting because you shared things that could make you look like the bad guy.

John: Yeah, there's just a whole, like topics about libido levels, and the thinking about having an affair, those things I would worry speaking to a female researcher. Even though I trust the process is going to be confidential, is going to be anonymous and I'm not going to see that researcher again, I still don't want to be seen in a bad light.

John's differentiation between a male and female audience interests me, especially when he says he needs to put on the 'good guy' image with a woman but not a man. His presumption that his desire would be met with more understanding by a man elicits an image of 'homosociality,' where primitive male sexual desire is naturalized (Flood, 2008). In our encounter John says he didn't feel the need to project a good guy image with me, which I take to mean the reality differed from his fantasy and he felt accepted in his desire. There is

something liberating about us speaking freely about unmet desires and him experiencing acceptance by a woman. However, his words “I still don’t want to be seen in a bad light” in a context where his identity is protected suggest the moral judgment of ‘badness’ remains as a prevailing force. As Ahmed (2014) contends, “the story of moral development is bound up with the reproduction of social norms, in particular, with norms of sexual conduct” (106). In John’s case, shame serves as the “affective cost” for deviating from normative Christian sexuality just by desiring sex that lies outside of acceptable domains (Ahmed, 2014, 107). I experience John as deeply troubled about his desire and sense the affects circulating in the assemblage are highly relational, “inextricable from the relationship of self with other” (DeYoung, 2015, 30). In this case, the other comprises his church and all the people he faces in connection to it, especially his wife.

John mentions early in our conversation that he grew up receiving messages from his church that sex would just work out once couples were married, and that couples don’t talk about their problems:

John: My wife and I have been married for eight years. We were both brought up in a conservative Asian Christian community and we both grew up in (location hidden to conserve anonymity) so our parents were quite um, typical, uh Asian, in relation to uh, sex practices. And that means things related to sex are not openly talked about but there’s always just the implication that when you, you try to um, like not engage in sexual activities until you’re married but once you get married there’s a big push for the new couple to have a child as soon as possible. So that’s the progression and then, also with that added onto our evangelical Christian upbringing it’s again abstinence from sex before marriage is a high priority among many things and there isn’t a lot of grey area to discuss with and you also were encouraged to not live together until you get married. [...] Because of our background we don’t talk about uh sexual activities that openly, it wasn’t easy to talk about finding uh outside support because it felt like between the two of us, we just couldn’t get things going. But then to think or talk about getting outside support, we touch on it every once in a while, but we never get anywhere as if we don’t want to, um, well I didn’t want to keep pushing the subject because it made me very needy.

His above portrayal of naturalized sex, not initiating conversations about it out of fear of being 'needy,' and abstinence before marriage harken an image of purity culture. In her work about the Evangelical purity movement, Schnable (2019) explores its rigid ideologies that naturalize gender essentialism and position men as authorities of women's bodies to uphold familial stability. As Schnable says, "the extension of [the purity movement's] traditional morality is the strong belief that sexual activity is designed for the marriage covenant between one woman and one man" (67). John's shame towards his sexual desire seems to be relationally tied to both his Christian upbringing and his wife, who is also intimately connected to the same faith community. In the following long quote, John shares intersecting feelings that (in)form the constellation of shame towards his desire, all under the systematic rule of the church. His bitterness and resentment towards his wife stand out to me, as I catch a sense of her bearing and embodying responsibility for his unmet sexual desire, when it seems the blame would be more accurately attributed to strict religious rules and moral dogma:

John: I'm also sensitive to the stigma that oh you know like guys, all they want is sex, but then in my situation it's kinda a big thing that I was looking forward to because kinda part that was built on from my upbringing is that you've waited and you've kept yourself pure until marriage because it's something so worthwhile, but once you've gotten to that stage and it turns out you can't have intercourse, in the church situation it's not something they openly talk about, especially when there are people with challenges in regards to sex [...] now I want to bring this more out into the open, for myself as well, just really talk about it and try to process our cultural and family background that contributed to this current situation and hopefully find a better next step instead of what I have been doing which is not a whole lot. And just a lot of bitterness and resentment that got built in between me and my wife, for me, when I look at her, there's that part that keeps coming up that ok, this is one thing that I thought I would be able to enjoy as a part of the marriage and that I'm not able to, but there's no one around to ask for help and of course sex outside of marriage is also very frowned upon from my upbringing and so within myself I've struggled a lot because it's like, if my wife doesn't like to eat

chicken I can just go and have chicken by myself, that's not going to be frowned upon. But if I go and find someone to have a one-night stand, have an affair, all of those things is very much frowned upon in my background and we don't do like an open relationship, so that amounts to no resolution, and so I'm trying to get away from that feeling of uh, the bitterness.

Internalized moral codes also populate the encounter between Mina and I, where Mina shares the interwoven religious and cultural rules surrounding sex (in)form many of her experiences with shame. These codes link to a network of other affective forces and are consequently complex. Like John, the morality imbuing her shame and sex journey act in relation to an intimate other, her mother, affecting the relationship they have. In her home country Turkey, her mother was her primary source of information to decode the intimate and sexual acts she saw on TV as unforgivably sinful:

Mina: I remember when I was a child, I remember watching something like there was kissing and I remember asking my mom 'is kissing someone a sin?' and she was like, well I think I said sin, and she said 'sure, it is. Kissing someone from the mouth is a sin.' It was quite surprising because it was quite normal, I mean, I didn't kiss anyone at that time but watching it on TV, seeing it quite regularly I would say, and then knowing that it was a sin, just, I remember it made me feel weird. But I really don't know how I felt. I was really surprised, I remember that.

Anna: It made you feel weird, watching it and knowing it was a sin?

Mina: Yeah, I mean, it was more surprising to know that it's a sin. Because it's all there, um, people are kissing. Um and also, I really don't remember why I asked the other questions to my mom, I was ten years old or something, and I'm not sure if these are relevant but I go that way....I was like 'mom, if I get pregnant now, would you accept me?' Would you accept it or something like that. I wasn't even in puberty, but probably I heard of it in some way, and she was like well no I wouldn't forgive it. And I was like, this is something bad.

Mina's dissonance in this exchange stands out to me. How can something that is widely represented as normal in popular culture be a sin? Ozyegin (2009) offers an explicit

answer to this through her research with upwardly mobile Turkish young women in her article *Virgin Facades: Sexual Freedom and Guilt Among Young Turkish Women*:

“Preoccupation with women’s chastity/sexual purity appears in the code of honour. In its classical conceptualization, the code of honour refers to the honour or moral purity of a group – that is the group defined as family, lineage, caste, class, region and nation – and this honour is determined by the behaviour of its womenfolk...the female body symbolizes the social boundaries of cultural identities, and virginity ultimately represents the demarcation between ingroup and outgroup mores (111).

As Mina describes, clarifying that her fear of losing her virginity was rooted in culture, not religion, helped her decide to have sex. Although I didn’t confirm this, I suspect that viewing the loss of virginity as no longer indicative of sin lessened its moralistic grip and she felt assured that she would be accepted by those who truly cared for her. She portrays a dichotomous divide between her mother’s conditional acceptance and empowering self-realizations. Her relationship with her mother stands out because the shame is augmented when Mina views her sexual ‘mistakes’ and perceived moral shortcomings through her mother’s eyes:

Mina: This was happening in my bachelor years, my undergrad years. And I had that condition that it’s sorry, I had that connection then in my mind, if I give some of my body then maybe they will accept me, or maybe they will go, we will be in a relationship together. (Anna: mhm) But it never happened, and I remember every time I had those, um, interactions, physical interactions, with those people, I remember I felt so shitty and so ashamed that once I remember I was so glad that my mom wasn’t in the house because I wouldn’t feel comfortable looking at her because it was like a sin, and my dad as well, but my mom, because with my dad he didn’t talk about those things but I knew my mom’s position so...

Mina narrates a turning point in her sexual decision-making that frees her to choose a path that fulfils her desires without fear of how others will treat or view her. The combination of finding out that all her friends were having sex, sorting through her feelings regarding past sexual experiences with her therapist, and then expressing her desire to have sex to her

mother and experiencing her acceptance all contribute to her resolution. There's a line of flight in our encounter in which Mina's face lights up with joy as she recounts her discussion with her mother about having sex:

Mina: Oh, by the way, I talked about this with my mom before giving my decision, and I was like mom, maybe I was gaining more confidence in me let's say and maybe again I'm telling you that she's more open-minded, maybe I trusted that, and maybe I saw that she's not a perfect person so, everyone has those, um, turmoils, these dilemmas and everything. So now that I'm more articulating them and people are feeling freer, this is my experience. Anyway I think one of them or all of them were the reasons why I told about this with my mom and I was like "mom, I'm just so in-between, like I really don't know what to do" and she was like "well this is your decision," which was really surprising and she was like "religiously it's a sin but on the other hand, thinking about that and not doing it also limits you, so this might not serve you well, your wellbeing and stuff, so do whatever you feel like." And it was quite liberating actually!

Anna: I can see it on your face, it feels joyful.

As we've seen with Mina and John, shame as moral arbiter is bound to and reinforced through relation(s) to others. This agrees with literature that conceptualizes moral entanglements and utilities of shame. As Ahmed (2014) argues, "the fear of shame prevents the subject from betraying 'ideals,' while the lived experience of shame reminds the subject of the reasons for those ideals in the first place" (106). While thinking about moralistic shame, I find it useful to employ Probyn's (2005) theoretical exploration of shame as productive force, asking "what can [shame] do and not do?" (79). With Mina and John, shame disciplines its subjects for straying from cultural and religious codes. Its affects are accentuated in relationships with others who subscribe to similar moral codes to remind us of the relationships and 'goodness' at stake should we break the rules. I agree with Probyn (2005) when she contends shame has dark powers within contexts of moral righteousness: "if shame is construed only as a means of reproach and becomes a way of wielding power under the guise of moral rectitude, its uses are likely to be unpalatable" (94). Shame as a disciplinary

moral instrument remains one of the most powerful normative forces in social institutions (Clough, 2017).

Hotspot 3: Trauma's Shaky Voice in Discourses of Desire and Pleasure-seeking

Four out of seven people I spoke with share shame in sexual experience that is enmeshed in and inextricably connected to trauma. A hotspot forms in the shape of a complicated knot of contradictory forces involving shame, trauma, desire, and pleasure-seeking. I'm not sure whether it's a coincidence due to the small number of people I speak with, but the presence of trauma narratives is split according to gender: while all the women explicitly mention trauma, none of the three male participants do. In my encounters with women, assemblages are populated by vibrant moments of reclamation- of one's body, sexual scripts, and pleasure/desire. However, these lines of flight are reterritorialized by patriarchal systems that women experience as real and/or imagined threats to their/our sexual subjectivities within interpersonal contexts with intimate others. In addition to the more obvious split of gender, geographical and cultural situatedness play a prominent role affectively co-producing shame's shifting shape. Environmental elements and our physical locations also (in)form these productions.

The Mess of Contradiction, Norms, and a Missing Discourse of Desire

The first person who stands out is Lara, who tells a harrowing story of rape that happened during her first penetrative sexual experience in college as well as a high school relationship with an abusive partner leading up to it. Lara presents a nuanced story full of messy honesty, contradictory emotion, and strength. I hear my own experience mirrored in hers, since I was raped as a teenager and found myself engaging in impulsive sexual activity throughout my twenties and early 30s. Reverberations of parallel experience create an energy in the assemblage that draw out more of Lara's (and my own) complicated, painful and difficult experiences. At the 50-minute mark, I disclose to Lara that I notice similarities between us, which seems to strengthen our rapport²⁹. At the time of our conversation, I share Lara's self-identification of a 'high sex drive' as I've spent my sexual livelihood struggling to reconcile my enjoyment and often impulsive pursuit of sex with its risk and danger, blurred boundaries, and feelings of being used. I share Lara's dissonance and confusion towards my

²⁹ See "Lara" page 76.

high sex drive and sexual activity because they seem incommensurable with early adulthood sexual assault. I have the sense that the honesty and openness we bring creates space for sharing vulnerable and at times (in)coherent testimonies. In the following passage we speak about our sexualities not making sense:

Lara: I'm a very sexually open person now, like the fact that I look back like, on myself when I was younger and thought oh, I could have been asexual is hilarious to me. I feel like given my experience, given the fact that, you know, I had that forced sexual time with my first boyfriend and the first time that I had sex was sexual assault and I've been assaulted since then that I shouldn't be this willing to like sex and to want sex. I shouldn't be this sexually driven of a person considering my history. But I am, and that makes me feel really weird about it as well, like those two things shouldn't go together but they do.

Anna: I know what you mean. It doesn't make sense, the reality.

Lara: mhm

Anna: So that's a bit of unknown to you? Or, you say the word 'should.' Should makes its way a lot into your narrative (L: yeah). Any sense of why?

Lara: I think that I want it to make sense. And I feel like there, there's a kind of narrative that would make sense...and that isn't what's happened to me. And I don't know why, I don't know if I would rather it make sense even if it means that I would be less happy with who I am now. But I just don't understand what happened, what flipped, what made me....the person that I am now.

Tolman (2002), in her research with young women in the United States, positions processes of striving to make sense as one of many 'dilemmas of desire' that preoccupy their sexual journeys in place of self-attuned pleasurable pursuit and free-reigning desire. In *Biting the Tongue that Speaks You: (Re)writing Survivor Narratives*, Sophie Tamas (2011, 433) writes about impossibilities to make sense of trauma and its aftermath, arguing that although we want to be able to narrate experience as linear and sensical and face social pressures to do so, the degree of "selective perception" required to make sense can harm us. Omissions of experience to successfully make sense involve denial and repression, which haunt us and "manifest[s] socially as oppression, colonialism, and objectification. Internally, they appear as repression and denial" (2011, 433). The nonsensical often remains unspoken (Tamas, 2011)

and consequently fails to become integrated into experience. Biddle (1997) contends that in relation to sex, shame “articulates” the unspeakable and un-named parts of self-identity – “bodily bits and functions, physical appearance, sexual practices and preferences” (230). While these self-identifying aspects aren’t explicitly named, we know them implicitly because they are “socially coded and normatively regulated” (Biddle, 230).

Trauma’s shaky voice also (in)forms narratives of risk, where shame constrains what the sexual subject can do. This shows up in conversations with Lara and Sarah, both of whom speak of trauma. In the encounter with Lara, we discuss what makes experiences appear ‘risky.’³⁰ The assemblage glows with contradictory elements: on one hand, Lara has a high sex drive, is in an open relationship, and desires and pursues different kinds of sexual encounters—some aimed at casual fun, others at deeper intimacy. On the other, she often regrets experiences that could be deemed ‘risky,’ including blurred consent, trouble saying no, feeling used and the double blow of self-blame for bringing harm to herself. To make sense of these moments of contradiction in which desire is territorialized, I find Butler’s concept of the *heterosexual matrix* (1990) helpful as a conceptual frame for thinking about hegemonic discourses that plug into assemblages. Butler defines the heterosexual matrix as:

“[t]hat grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized. I am drawing from Monique Wittig’s notion of the ‘heterosexual contract’ and, to a lesser extent, on Adrienne Rich’s notion of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ to characterize a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality” (1990, 208).

As a theoretical frame for gendered and sexual subjectivities, the heterosexual matrix provides fruitful grounds for examining discursive norms within heterosexual relations and serves as a tool in understanding the cultural backdrop that produces disciplinary sexual

³⁰ The notions of ‘risk’ and ‘harm’ in sexual experience can be loaded and fraught with dichotomies in heteropatriarchal contexts. For more on this, see MacKay’s (2021) thesis, *Troubling Pleasures: A Creative-Relational Inquiry*.

shame. The matrix's 'grid of cultural intelligibility' creates what Gavey (2018) terms *conditions of possibility* through its sexual scripts that condone and naturalize male power and violence within sexual encounters. Sexual scripts operate on cultural, interpersonal and intrapsychic levels to systematize "mutually-shared conventions that help actors to enact a sexual situation interdependently" (Dworkin and O'Sullivan, 2007, 105). Theorizing from a Foucaultian frame that conceptualizes sex and sexualities as sites of production for 'modern' subjectivities, Helman (2021, 101) contends any sexualities that fail to meet normative standards are subject to shame and shaming. Defining normative might prove challenging, as norms vary according to context, with intersectional influences like religion, race, sexual orientation, (dis)ability and ethnicity further impacting a person's experience of sexual subjectivity and the discourses available to them. In my conversation with Lara, the strong contradictions between following desire, sensing blurred boundaries and fearing violence alerts me to sexual scripts plugging into the assemblage to reterritorialize desire and incite shame:

Anna: So when you've been out there, having sex, have you found yourself in situations where it felt like there was a risk of harm and how did it go?

Lara: Yeah, um, yeah definitely. Usually (sighs)...I can't think of a situation where, completely on my own I've felt comfortable just saying no, absolutely not, I'm going to leave, like no matter what was going to happen I've always stuck through right until the end and then kind of gone home and then dealt with my own shit and then deleted the person's number. So, I wouldn't necessarily call a lot of those times rape or sexual assault, I would just say there were a lot of times when the consent lines have been blurry, and I haven't been able to figure it out until afterwards. And sometimes that'll happen, when I'll be like in the middle of something and I won't know how I'm feeling but I don't want to stop it because I don't want to upset the other person, and then I'll just kind of realize later after some reflection and some introspection that this wasn't something that I really wanted.

Anna: It sounds like taking charge in the moment is difficult, like following your desire in the moment.

Lara: Yeah definitely. I just....I don't know whether it's because....I'm afraid of just upsetting someone or I'm afraid of physical retaliation or because I think I'll put myself in harm's way in some other, like not just emotionally in harm's way but also in a physical like danger sort of harm's way, but yeah, I have a lot of trouble communicating in the moment when I'm not enjoying something or when I want something to stop.

Lara feels responsible for the other's violent response to her 'no,' pointing to her belief that she is responsible for keeping the encounter safe through complying to the other's desired sexual acts. She describes a fear of possible violence, which makes me wonder where this comes from and how she has come to take it for granted as 'normal.' In her analysis of six discourses that naturalize gender-based sexual violence, Grosz (2018) contends the 'man as both gentleman and beast' and 'masculinity is tied to the capacity to act violently' discourses work in tandem to support the ideology that women are responsible for controlling men's biologically endowed unruly nature (87-88). Grosz also identifies a 'pleasing woman' discourse that espouses male pleasure takes priority and women must be pleasing objects of desire to secure a mate (2018, 89). In addition to the pleasing woman discourse, the 'have/hold' discourse (Hollway, 1984) plugs into our encounter. Hollway (1984, 86) describes it as a double standard whereby male sexuality is understood as animalistic and uncontrollable while women are understood as harbouring a "rabid and dangerous" sexuality that must be controlled to preserve family honour. The following passage gestures towards multiple discourses at play to produce a confusing sense of sexual subjectivity:

Lara: I mentioned before I would be super open to do sex work, um, I've had a lot of sex with a lot of different partners, and I'm in an open polyamorous relationship, so we both can like see other people. On one hand, it's like I'm proud of that, because sex has become something that I know I'm good at, and sex has been something that I know can give me a sense of confidence, but also the fact that like oh I've been with so many people and I'm promiscuous and I'm sleeping around, like that also makes me feel like shit a little bit...that makes me feel like I'm degrading my self-worth and like I'm only doing this for other people, which isn't true, I'm doing it for me. I'm just having a lot of trouble making sense of that.

As Lara conveys, her confidence and pride garnered by sexual acts are complicated by quick judgements she makes about herself through seamlessly integrating ideological constructs that women who have lots of sex are 'promiscuous,' 'degrading ourselves' and 'only doing this for other people.' At first glance, the traditional female sexual script of 'Madonna/whore' populates the assemblage, a strong material force influencing her/our self-concepts from multiple encounters among various other assemblages (Dworkin and O'Sullivan, 2007; Hollway, 1984)³¹. Sexual pleasure and enjoyment are counteracted by social norms for female sexuality reterritorializing the assemblage, as in this encounter, we both speak of finding ourselves abject for being 'promiscuous.' This resounds with contemporary feminist research demonstrating a missing discourse of uncomplicated sexual agency and desire within our social context of misogynist patriarchy, where women and girls feel free to pursue sexual desire without fear of violence or judgment (Grosz, 2018; Phillips, 2000; Gavey, 2018). As Phillips (2000) states in her book *Flirting with Danger: Young Women's Reflections on Sexuality and Domination*, in her research with university-aged women exploring their experiences navigating sex, "the messages conveyed the notion that women's bodies are not the sites of active desire, but rather objects to be admired and kept under control" (40).

The body as a site to be controlled and regulated for fear of sexual provocation comes through in the encounter with Sarah, who highlights shame arose from the assault indicating she has a desirable, sexually attractive body:

Sarah: Re-living the experience, it wasn't like re-living the trauma every time I told the story. Once it was out, I was like ok I'm safe because people around me know. But it was difficult, very difficult to talk about it, and even difficult to tell details like, oh yeah, I have a boob and the man touched my boob twice or like held it, like I found it kind of, saying that, a little bit shameful. And I don't know if it was the shame, and even sort of admitting that you have these sexual, sexual parts to you that people find attractive or whatever that even though, yeah because I was talking to just guys around me, you know, they know that I have a boob but maybe I don't, you don't talk about that but maybe I had to, to say that you have this thing that men find attractive that he touched, I found it shameful saying that.

Relational trauma

³¹ I include myself here due to my strong resonances with Lara's experience.

In addition to the shame and sex assemblage being populated by sociocultural discourses springing from the heterosexual matrix, it reverberates with trauma harkening back to relational contexts. These shape women's self-experiencing as they navigate their sexuality in the aftermath of trauma. As we see with Lara, the territorialization of her desiring sexuality produces self-doubt that plugs into the blaming narrative she has internalized from her mother:

Anna: You said there's emotional repercussions, when you have space and you realise they're there. What are they?

Lara: Feeling used, feeling subhuman, feeling like, like I'm just a body and not a person. I feel like I lose parts of myself, and I just feel like I'm repeating this social narrative in my head, like oh, I should have had more respect for myself, I should have you know, stood up for myself, like I think of it as being weak. Because it would have been harder for me to stand up for myself in the moment, but I didn't do that. I chose to just ride it through and...I feel like for myself, that deserves self-punishment.

DeYoung (2015), in her book *Chronic Shame: A Relational/Neurobiological Approach*, contends that for trauma survivors like Lara, shame can couple with disgust towards oneself:

"It seems that the more traumatic and objectifying a relationship is, the more likely it will produce affects of both shame and disgust for someone injured by it. A shame-disgust self-concept will then take up powerful 'unthought' residence within the survivor's right-brain self-imagery" (45).

In addition to the disgust that seeps through, Lara's self-blaming narrative ties in with her mother's pathologizing and rejecting sentiments towards her daughter. DeYoung (2015, 30) argues that the relational component of shame is what distinguishes it from guilt because it encourages the person to believe she is inherently 'bad' and is "always inextricable from the relationship of self with other." Here's what Lara says about her interactions with her mother when she had found out Lara was on Tinder:

Lara: Two months or so after the assault had happened, I already had the court case and I had gotten a message from my mom in the middle of class saying "I really need to talk to you right now" so I left class, and she called me. She said

“so I saw that you downloaded Tinder,” she saw it on some kind of Apple records thing, and she was so pissed with me, she basically said like “I can’t believe you would do something so reckless and so stupid. You’re basically asking for someone to rape you by downloading one of these dating apps. If you ever do something this stupid again, I’m taking you out of college because you’re just asking for yourself to get hurt.”

Anna: Wow. So her message was quite similar to your own victim-blaming message, I don’t know if that’s the right way to put it but that’s what comes to mind (Lara nods)

Lara: Yeah, yeah. And she said ‘I’m not going to forget this,’ when she hung up she said ‘when you get raped don’t come calling me’ and it had already happened at this point so I just said ‘fine I won’t’ and I just sat in the bathroom and cried. And it was in that moment that I just, I was like ok, I’m not telling my parents, I’m not telling my parents anything about this, I’m not telling them anything about my sex life. Because if this is how they respond, it’s not going to do me any good. So I went to a lot of counselling after that...

Amy also mentions a traumatic sexual experience with a guy who tried to push her to have sex when they were both drunk. She shares other stories of sex that carry feelings of shame for various reasons, some clear and others unclear. Her first sexual experience left her feeling humiliated and used, and she attributes it as setting the tone for approaching sex in an unfeeling and detached way. She describes finding out much later that she’s been disassociating for many years without realising:

Amy: I think subconsciously I have avoided going deep with people because, I think now, as of recently there’s a lot of stuff there and it brings up a lot.

Anna: Going deep brings up a lot?

Amy: Yeah, having sex with an emotional connection brings up a lot. Like recently doing some of the...like for example I have a friend who is a tantric embodiment coach, and she teaches courses of sacred sexuality and female pleasure and de-arming practices. And so, she’s shared with me some of these de-arming practices that are designed to help you like breathe and work

through numbness in and around the vulva and vagina that's often a result of repeated sexual trauma that gets stored in the body. And from doing these practices I realise I am so numb, and I didn't even realise until recently that I was numb, which I then think you know made all my sexual practices that much more unsatisfying. Because even people who were interested in giving me pleasure or exploring different things, I like didn't, I couldn't even really feel, and I didn't feel comfortable enough to allow the time for that exploration to take place, like I feel like I'm always on the clock, like I just....make sure that they get off, then book it

Amy relates her experience with sex to her family situation growing up. Her parents fought a lot and had conflict that carried long after their divorce. The following segment suggests parental modelling as a relational referent for sexual development:

Amy: I just recently came to the realization that I actually really want partnership, for a long time that felt like an admission of weakness or something.

Anna: How so?

Amy: this is something I was actually talking about with my therapist last week. So I didn't grow up with any good examples of relationships. My parents absolutely hated each other, couldn't communicate via anything but email, my mom and my stepdad have a very, not a great relationship either, they're on the verge of divorce, and intimacy was never modelled very well. It's not, you know, solely to blame but I was always ok with the fact that I might not ever get married and maybe that just, I just kinda internalized this idea that maybe this just wasn't in the cards for me, like that kind of long-term committed relationship...

Hotspot 4: Pressures to Perform

Shame relating to performance pressure and perceived 'failure,' or failed masculinity, stand out in two out of three encounters with men. Discourses surrounding heteronormative masculinity plug into these encounters, where shame takes the shape of losing erections, coming too quickly, and not really wanting to have sex. In these expressions of shame coupling

with territorializing forces of virile, in-control and sexually proficient masculinities, men speak of feeling shut off from genuine expression and connection with themselves and others since they're operating from assumptions. For example, both Frank and George speak about pornography as informing their ideas of how men are meant to be in bed, while George also considers what his imagined audience of other 'lads' would think. George portrays his pressure to perform as a self-shaming analytical voice, the "bit that speaks to you with words, rather than the bit that feels things." Here's a snippet of our interaction:

Anna: It sounds like, so the shame was linking up with erectile dysfunction and sort of like, the body saying something...if you follow that.

George: Yeah, I think that was a clear representation of my body saying 'I don't want to have sex with people who I don't feel vulnerable with' cuz like, when you're dating, you're performing, or I certainly was at that point, I was trying to be the people-pleaser they wanted me to be and that continued into the bedroom. And when you're performing you can't be yourself, you can't be vulnerable in that way that, for me leads to potent, valuable healthy sex....my kind of analytical mind was saying, 'you know, you're a man, this is a thing you want to do, you're a straight man, you want to have sex with this woman, so go and have sex with this woman, you're less of a man because of x y z.'

It interests me that George positions the mind as diametrically opposed to the body/feelings and points to it as the source of social pressures to perform a sexually ravenous, 'straight' masculinity. He also speaks of vulnerability as being at odds with normative scripts, although coincidentally vulnerability serves as the gateway to 'potent, valuable healthy sex.' Another aspect of our discussion that stands out to me is the way George ties in performance with pleasing his partner, even though pleasing her is about him being a 'good sexual partner':

George: My experience of performance, it certainly came from wanting to please...wanting the person to be having a good time, to be having the best time, and then by them having a good time that would reflect well on me as a sexual partner, rather than acknowledging the very clear reality that in order to be a good sexual partner I need to be honest about what I want from that relationship...and that's where I got to with sex, where I couldn't enjoy the reality because I was so obsessed at it being a textbook positive sexual interaction, for them.

George's sentiments about performing to please so that it can reflect well on him concurs with the literature. Montemurro (2022), in her research with heterosexual men about sex, differentiates between private and public performances of masculine sexuality and finds that in private encounters men tend to perform for affirmation and validation. She contends:

"In a patriarchal, heteronormative culture, boys and men must negotiate private, feminized feelings with public expectations for compulsive heterosexuality and hegemonic masculinity. They grapple with seeing women as both objects and agents of affirmation – with knowing that men are supposed to dominate in sexual situations but also that women's reactions and satisfaction can signify something important about them as men" (14).

Another kind of performance takes place in George's earlier phase of sexual development. He likens it to a normative masculinity that was selfish and geared toward the imagined audience of his 'lad' friends:

George: I certainly feel that right in my early sexual days it was a very selfish masculine performance: look at me, I'm young, I'm hot, I'm good at sex so I was playing to that audience which was my idea of what all the lads would want, you know what I mean and then in my, in relationship 1 as we're calling it, I went totally to the other side of the spectrum, I was trying desperately to perform to what I thought she had wanted and she would think; it was just on the different end of the kind of, patriarchal to matriarchal, you know, masculine to feminine spectrum, of whose opinion you were caring about. And now it feels like, me and my current partner are in a space of nice and healthy in the middle, where the one thing that is missing, the one thing that has left is the performance, and now it's just honest.

George's depiction of a 'homosocial' (Flood, 2008) masculine sexuality reminds me of Aho and Peltola's (2022) study of 'respectable' heteromasculinities, where they find that "in the process of performing manhood appropriately, other boys and young men served as a real or imagined audience for whom our participants were being accountable to perform" (11). Here George outlines a shift from being selfish to selfless and performing according to what he imagines his partner wants. At the time of our conversation, he no longer suffers from the constraints of feeling compelled to perform, and sex with his partner is "nice and healthy in the middle."

In my encounter with Frank, neither of us mention masculinity norms, but discourses that plug into the assemblage gesture towards them. Performance pressures to uphold masculinity play into the ways Frank initially feels “behind his mates” because he hasn’t had sex yet, where he views sex as a status symbol and fears his virginity positions him lower on the hierarchy. Then, coming too quickly becomes a source of shame. Here’s how he describes it:

Frank: So the other big thing that I felt a lot of shame about was um coming too quickly. That was a massive thing that I for the longest time felt shame about. Because I mean, again just a complete feeling of inadequacy, not being able to satisfy my partner and then, yeah I remember um, you know just coming and then kind of just being completely destroyed in a way because I thought alright I’ve failed again.

This shame experience is populated by discourses of failure and inadequacy which link to an inability to satisfy his partner. In their research with Bangladeshi men about sex, Khan et. al. (2008) find sexual performance to be a key issue and argue that “the penis is situated at the core of masculinity. The meanings of penile erection equate with male power and potency” (45). This suggests that feelings of failure incited by premature ejaculation or an untimely flaccid penis signal the shame of ‘falling short’ (Connor, 2001). In Farvid and Braun’s (2018) study of ‘risk’ in casual heterosexual encounters, they found the top-ranking risk for men was “not being recognized as a ‘performing’ hetero-masculine man, who could have and enjoy (any) casual sex at any time” while the primary risk for women was “being positioned as irresponsible and naïve, putting themselves at risk, and therefore doing casual sex badly” (1416). Gendered ‘risk’ and shame seem to feed into one another, since rhetoric for both tie into stereotypes like ‘slut,’ ‘stud,’ ‘skank’ and ‘player,’ all of which have come into play in encounters in subtle or overt ways. Performance pressure as a hotspot for shame glows in stark contrast to women’s trauma narratives.

Hotspot 5: Locating Responsibility in Whose Body?

While writing about these shame encounters, the notion of responsibility in relation to shame kept calling my attention. Through engaging my sense of the material, I was struck by repeated instances of male speakers locating responsibility in the (female) other or requiring assistance from their female partner to process or move through shameful states. In contrast, women repeatedly locate responsibility in themselves and labour over shame that

had become lodged in their bodies. At first, I want to resist mentioning these dichotomous gender differences, as they come across as generalizations. I also wonder whether my experience as a woman who has felt (and been made to feel) responsible for shame combines with the material to sway this reading. However, it still feels important to discuss processes of locating responsibility (i.e. in which bodies and what this produces) as well as the ways discourses, contexts, and other bodies (including my own) plug into and affect them.

Earlier, I explored shame's propensity to shift shape, transitioning to narratives with prideful or triumphant tones while suggesting an absence and conquering of shame. We saw Frank's shame in failing to uphold masculinity through premature ejaculation coupled with feeling rejected by partners who wanted sex less find resolution through his move towards 'sex-positive' partners. This suggests shame was located outside of himself, in his past partners' sex-negativity³². With Sarah, we witnessed her self-blame for having enticed the man's unwanted violation and shame towards having a body that was sexually provocative, suggesting an ingrained ideology of the female body being an inherently dangerous source of provocation for male-perpetrated sexual violence akin to the Madonna/whore complex (Hollway, 1984)³³. We also saw her pity the sexually aggressive man for their shared shame, as though she automatically took on the burden of responsibility to bear this difficult emotion. Later, Lara's self-blaming and self-pathologizing narratives relating to her complicated post-trauma sex experiences and Mina's fear of setting herself up to be used by a sexual partner suggest to me some deeply held assumptions that their wellbeing and safety in sexual scenarios is solely their responsibility³⁴. In addition, we attended to John's shame relating to unmet desire rooted in his wife's bodily malfunctioning³⁵. Shame here was co-constituted through Evangelical Christian rules for strict monogamous relations and gendered scripts of sexual desire. In my experience of John, he located blame in-between his wife's bodily misfortune, her refusal to take further action and their traditional upbringing's silencing. In locating blame in others but not the self, John's shame transitions to sexual frustration. Other assemblages, such as the one with Amy, show shame being stored in the female body in the form of numbness and disassociation that the woman must endeavour to un-do through "de-

³² See "Frank" page 52.

³³ See "Sarah" page 93.

³⁴ See "Lara" page 75 and "Mina" page 100.

³⁵ See "John" page 82.

arming practices”³⁶. In the encounter with George, shame resolved and discontinued its mind/body manifestations of performance anxiety and erectile dysfunction when his partner (a therapist by trade) showed him acceptance and understanding³⁷. While this is a beautiful tale of effective communication and care, his narrative locates responsibility in his partner’s skilful hands as it was only in relationship to her that he overcame shame.

These vignettes carry strong images of women tending to, witnessing, and caring for shame experience in relation to others. They also show shame experienced by men to be associated with standards of sexual performativity relating to internalized pressures from normative masculinity ideologies and a great sense of failing to live up to these standards. At the same time, there’s a missing narrative of working through notions of masculinity, apart from George’s therapist girlfriend reassuring him that he doesn’t need to stay erect and perform for her. Further, all vignettes point to responsibility located in the female body and/or subjectivity, where men supplant blame onto the woman or her body (i.e. her body doesn’t function to serve his sexual desire or her desire doesn’t match his) or find salvation through a woman, also suggestive of shame requiring a woman’s touch. When the female subject experiences shame, she finds blame and responsibility in herself, questioning what she did to incite the shameful event, feeling her shameful/ashamed, disassociated body and working to restore its ruins, fearing the shameful event of being used and allowing this fear to guide her sexual expression, and following shame’s post-trauma narrative that bad sex or blurred lines are her fault. These instances show a gendered production of shame whereby male subjectivities cannot bear to stay with shame, whereas women accept responsibility for the emotional and physical labour of resolving shame. These stories show shame to be inextricably linked to heteronormative sexual relating whereby masculinity and femininity norms conspire to transmit shame from the masculine to the feminine.

Following their premise that men experience a subset of shame related to their masculinity being under threat, psychology researchers Gebhard et. al. (2019) created a questionnaire to study the phenomenon. “Threatened masculinity shame,” they say, is rooted in masculinity’s tenuous nature and subsequent requirement for constant public maintenance (429). Following their curiosity if shame is “the lynchpin of the threatened-

³⁶ See “Amy” page 61.

³⁷ See “George” page 67.

masculinity dynamic”, they surveyed 460 socioeconomically and culturally diverse participants using a shame questionnaire and found a strong correlation between shame-related masculinity under threat and self-reported instances of violence. Although this study’s positivist approach dialectically opposes my onto-epistemological positions, I find the researchers’ discussion useful because it links masculine shame to a sense of failing to uphold masculinity ideals and sheds light on conjoined forces of shame and internalized pressures to appear masculine producing violent affects as a protective mechanism to bypass shame (2019). Linkages between masculine shame and the subject’s experience of ‘failing’ as a man have been echoed by other shame theorists including literary theorist Kaye Mitchell (2020) in her book *Writing Shame*. Mitchell analyses paramount 21st century fiction by both women and men, drawing out gendered discursive constructions of shame experience. She argues that the literary imaginary portrays the feminine as bearing shame through depicting it as shameful by nature and displacing masculine shame onto female bodies. After agreeing with literary theorist Connor that men write shame to “displace or disavow” it, Mitchell concludes: “it seems that, ultimately, shame always brings with it some taint of femininity- and femininity carries, likewise, some echo of shame- and that the writing of shame may facilitate its mutation, displacement, expansion or transmission, but never its purgation” (2020, 201, 236).

In the section that follows, I take a brief interlude to pay tribute to my hip’s (dis)abling involvements in assemblages before sharing some (non)conclusive remarks. This may come as unsettling and seem out of place, as it disrupts the flow, but I’ve decided to leave it this way since these effects mirror the ones my hip has had on the research.

Retrospective Acknowledgement of (Dis)ability and its Affects

During the year-long process that the project underwent its methodogenesis (Gale, 2018) from the 'auto' to the collective and then the assemblage, I began a journey with chronic hip pain that has become a continual source of disability and trauma. Although my pained hips and their embodied affects (in)form the intra-active (Barad, 2007) material in this shame and sex assemblage, I haven't been able to integrate and acknowledge my hips in encounters with 'data.' I have pushed them aside, split them off from the research. Looking back, it's clear my splitting was a form of disassociation. Caught up in the middle of trauma that comprised chronic unanswerable pain and a constant fight for appropriate medical care, I was too overwhelmed to simultaneously engage with my hip and the project. Onto-epistemologically I knew better, but I chose to care for myself by ignoring their affects. My hips and their limitations have altered my relationship to this thesis, so I would like to reflect on these retrospectively while acknowledging that I am still in the middle of it and might not see clearly with a bird's eye view.

For most of lockdown in 2020, I couldn't walk outside of my flat without sharp shooting pain in my hip and groin. In April 2021, when I began using crutches to walk, I found out that I would need surgery on my left hip to repair the suction seal of the joint called the labrum. I had that surgery, a hip arthroscopy, in October 2021 and it ended up worsening the pain, since it was the wrong treatment for my underlying condition of hip dysplasia. Unfortunately, I wasn't diagnosed by that surgeon with dysplasia until after the arthroscopy, which added a layer of trauma and distrust. In May 2022, I had an operation called a peri acetabular osteotomy (PAO) that was much more serious with a forecasted recovery of 1-2 years. Throughout all of this, I have had chronic pain in different parts of my body- the recovering hip, the other hip that became symptomatic, and my back and neck from all the compensation patterns I developed. My interest in sex and shame waned, intellectually and in my body, producing feelings of ambivalence and numbness towards the project. My hip led me towards experiential and theoretical movements I could find myself in, such as (dis)ability and medical rights activism, and my writing veered more towards feelings of alienation and disembodiment. This change in body/mind felt (and still feels) at odds with the project.

Inviting my Hip to Speak

As I near the project's (tentative and unfinished ending), I write into my hip's affective force in assemblages. Having been past the unknown of chronic pain but still in the middle of a long series of surgeries, I can access just enough reflective space to acknowledge the pain and struggle. In the following interlude, I use poetry to invite difficult experiences to speak, since like Faulkner (2018) I find the poem's free-flowing playfulness gives permission to not have it figured out completely. "Poetry has the power to highlight slippery identity-negotiation processes and present more nuanced views of marginalized and stigmatized identities," says Faulkner (2017, 93), and I agree; the poem leads me places I would not have dared go otherwise.

*Body stiff, tired, limping
she's distracted by the click-clack of her mobility aids:
cheeks flushed red, sensing stares to "render the abject disabled subject socially dead"³⁸
hobbling down the street with effort, pain intensifies in her hip.
Visible yet invisible, she feels undeniably out of place.*

*"Pain demands to be felt"
she's seen this line in other PAO warriors'³⁹ Instagrams
En route to meet George to speak about shame and sex,
the 5-minute walk to the Meadows (now 12 at ideal crutch speed)
feels like mission impossible for her once-distance-runner body.*

*Her mind is elsewhere, not in conversations about shame and sex.
The harsh and sudden change from athlete/lover/dancer to chronically pained and disabled
floods her with anger and self-pity.
George asks how she's doing with a concerned look.
"I'm ok, this will be ok" she says, sparing him of the complicated answer.*

*Once driven by sex (and her crotch), her loins are desolate territory these days.
Sex happens infrequently and needs planning, pain pills, and plenty of time for slowness.*

³⁸ From Thorneycroft (2020, 868), in his discussion of microaggressions towards disabled and queer people.

³⁹ A PAO warrior is someone who has had reconstructive hip (PAO) surgery, the most intensive and hardest to recover from musculoskeletal surgery that exists in the world of orthopedics.

*Last week, she said out loud for the first time that she has a disability⁴⁰,
Others seemed shocked at this word- (her? She's an athlete!)
but to her it is a warm hug affirming the hell her body has put her through.*

*Her supervisor wants her to write from her hip;
she finds this almost impossible,
disassociated and angry at her bad luck, it's easier to be at war with it.
Asking again, she finds her hip a child needing undivided care:
"Be gentle with me," it says, so she does.*

*It's been one failed surgery, a second total reconstruction of her hip, and the removal of
screws.*

*Despite her pained body-mind spilling over, continuing its fight,
A small miracle occurs in the space she creates for sex and shame stories.
She finds slowness, gentle care, and deep listening:
intensities she couldn't have appreciated before.*

Above, I seek to convey the "singularity of a moment" in which unstable, previously not-yet-known selves are invited through the event of the poem (Gannon, 2018, 23). The poem brings me to a woman who experiences herself as abject (Thorneycroft, 2020) through others' stares as she imagines what lies beneath them. Through writing, I begin to see a transformation in my relationship to shame and sex that isn't inherently 'bad,' even if it is unwelcome.

During real-time encounters with others, my hip entered the equation at the edge of my consciousness, always affecting but only sometimes acknowledged through our choices of location, hip-friendly seating arrangements, or the crutches I had with me. Pain and (dis)ability seeped through all phases of encounter in insidious ways through sleeplessness, impatience, distraction, aversion, and ambivalence. I felt most unsettled by my ambivalence towards the project: as an asexual and pained body, I felt as though anything involving sex was no longer important. Sex and shame had interested me in a state of promiscuity, not abstinence, so I needed to find new ways of relating to others' stories. Nobody I'd spoken

⁴⁰ Hip dysplasia, the condition my left hip PAO corrected, is classified as a congenital disability.

with shared an experience of asexuality or (dis)ability, so my sudden difference in relation produced feelings of alienation and apathy towards their/our stories. Around two months after my peri-acetabular osteotomy surgery in 2022, I found a way back to engaging with shame and sex encounters through its distraction from my day-to-day experience of gruelling recovery. Unlike before, when desire emerged from shame spilling over in relation to sexual excess and trauma, a complete metamorphosis of body and mind brought me to the work. As recovery continued and I inhabited a body that was averse to anything sex-like, I engaged with encounters and wrote stories as though they were a fantasy, leaving my pained body to escape into faraway worlds.

Conclusion...?

I presented this research at a University of Edinburgh student conference near the final stages of writing up my first draft. During the discussion period that followed, a fellow student asked me “so, what were your findings?” I replied somewhat confidently “there are no findings, but there are things I can wonder about.” In the absence of something definite and concrete to put forward, I’ve been putting off writing anything that suggests conclusion. Shame and sex assemblages defy finality in their continuous shape-shifting and ad infinitum emergence. They await further inquiry; in fact, you might have found yourself wondering about the shame and sex assemblages you find yourself in as you encounter this text, your body and its histories (in)forming and conjuring new readings here and there in a cross-pollination of spacetime matters. Just as inquiry is always already happening prior to a researcher’s interest (Jackson, 2017), it continues for myself and others. Rather than tie it all together with a neat bow and put it away in a box somewhere to revisit sometime, I want to critically review the process and its emergencies (Murray, 2020). I want to “keep the problem alive” (Murray, 2020, 31) by reflecting on the process, challenges I came across and what I’ve learned from them. Although it has been a few years since face-to-face encounters took place, I still think about them, replaying specific moments to understand them better and catch nuances I might have missed. However, these relations of affect, these spaces between the two and their multiplicities, are ever-changing: they are at thresholds, where “‘knowing’ is not possible; ‘selves’ are lost” (Wyatt, 2014, 15). I revisit the page or memory, bodying (Manning, 2013) according to this new moment and version of self, and there are infinite additions and revisions I could make. At a certain point, I need to let these stories be in their current imperfect versions and trust I have invested enough in them.

Puzzling over the ethics of witnessing and (re)presenting vulnerable stories is another form of encountering, a never-ending critical and reflexive process (Thorneycroft, 2020). As Thorneycroft conveys in *When Does Research End? The Emotional Labour of Researching Abjection* (2020), research haunts us well after its official end date, since emotional and intellectual entanglements with others stay with us and require our continued engagement. I have found writing about others’ (and my own) difficult emotional experiences to be inherently troubling; mostly, I worry about whether I’m able to see and write fairly without projecting aspects of my personality into others (Murray, 2020). I wonder whether I could

have said more or less during face-to-face encounters, how others felt and feel now, and what they might think about how I've portrayed them and us. It feels important to reflect on how I've used assemblage and intra-action to make sense of multiplicities of affective force coming together from a meta-perspective as well as a personal one.

In the absence of a representational medium, my embodied experience was the tool for transposing the stories I've authored about others. Vulnerability and 'self' have featured heavily in this project, most notably in the making of stories to attend to encounters' affective sparks. Although I've called this process reflexive and argued it is integral to intra-active engagements with matter, I haven't theorized or problematized reflexivity. As I near closure, I fear I've committed lapses in awareness about self and other coming together-apart and feel a sense of unease about the potential I've subsumed others' realities into the self. Since this work is just as much about process as it is about what occurred, I want to re-trace my steps and engage in a meta-reflexivity, asking how I committed to reflexive practice and engaging theory to better understand and improve.

In the following section I'll unpick and trouble my reflexive uses of self, highlighting a process of circling back to texts with the aim of producing fairer, uncomfortable (Pillow, 2003), vulnerable (Adams and Holman Jones, 2011) and lenticular⁴¹ (Pillow, 2019) accounts. I want to engage in what Adams and Holman Jones refer to as *(re)turning*, particularly in relation to "questions of clarity and transparency, to the desire to name and claim stories-identifying who and what they're about, who can tell them and for what purposes, and what they know and might do for the world" (108-109). Integral to a process of (re)turning is a willingness to stay with the trouble at its uneasy edges, to "slow the quick jump to representational thinking and evaluative critique" (Stewart, 2007, 4). Or, as Paige Sweet (2020) says, reflexive circling back requires accounting for the epistemic privilege⁴² and politicized standpoint that produces ways of seeing while also stepping outside of the self to "consider the conditions for knowledge production that are 'external' to experience, including the researcher's own assumptions" (931).

⁴¹ Lenticular refers to Pillow's (2019) proposal for reflexive practice that is committed to viewing an experience from different angles at different times throughout inquiry.

⁴² Epistemic privilege stems from feminist standpoint theory (Sweet, 2020) and refers to "the idea that more accurate knowledge is likely to be generated from marginal social positions" (925).

Troubling Encounters: Circling Back and (Re)(In)Forming

I have re-visited encounters many times. The first instance came when I'd printed the initial drafts of each story and sat with them, intending to read closely and feel for hotspots. I found it challenging to read through them, especially all at once, but couldn't name why. Now I view this as a sort of epistemic resistance- I wasn't ready to face the problematic portraits I'd made through omitting, out of my inability or resistance to reflect fully, the ways my experience (in)formed the writing. This was especially present during friction-full and uncomfortable periods or moments. I wasn't ready to consider that my writing held claims to 'know' the other a certain way even though I sought to resist unproblematized (re)presentations. This kind of critical reflexive analysis, to understand "how we frame ourselves and others, particularly how we make ourselves look good and just while making others look bad and unruly" (Adams and Holman Jones, 2011, 112) felt inaccessible in the initial stage of story creation, so I let those stories settle for a little while in their unfinished and raw state. While discussing hotspots, however, I needed to engage in closer readings of these texts, which brought an opportunity to revisit depictions of self and other with a more critical eye. I found areas I'd characterized others without questioning and accounting for the epistemic privilege that informed my feminist standpoint, which meant I'd mobilised my standpoint without deconstructing its contexts (Sweet, 2020). Diving into the story another time, I expanded on my account in to portray more fairly the other or what had occurred between us. At these junctures, I looked inward to find what it was in my body and being that was being stirred up to produce a critical or judgemental narrative, thus making myself "vulnerable to critique" (Adams and Holman Jones, 111)⁴³. I asked, "if I were this person, what would I think about this portrayal? Would I be able to face the researcher and feel they'd written a fair account?" As a result, I had to take stock of other (hi)stories I took for granted that informed my worldview, or the "larger knowledge system in which standpoints are taken up" (Sweet, 2020, 932). To produce a more *lenticular* reading (Pillow, 2019), or one that shows "what is seen in one instance may not remain constant in the next viewing" (130), I acknowledged layers of experience that became tangled to co-constitute an experience of self/other (and self and other) in that intersubjective moment. I also brought in sociological

⁴³ Here I'm aware that it is not just the other I am in relationship to, but *other others* (Ahmed, 2002) both in terms of others who they are connected to and the material-discursive present in our encounters.

or political theories that (in)formed my encounters in the now and then. In sum, the process consisted of attending to the “many others, proximate and distant, familiar and strange” (Bondi and Fewell, 2017, 120) who populate encounters while aiming to depict encounter as a form of witnessing that is “hybrid, multiple, complex, temporal” (Pillow, 2019, 130)⁴⁴. To illustrate more clearly, I’ll bring in the encounter with Frank as a case in point to explore what I found unsettling, the reflexive approaches I undertook and their theoretical underpinnings. Further, I’ll discuss how a reflexive ethic of refusal came into play with Mina, where I wrestled with questions of (re)presenting and encountering difference. This confronted me to unpack my colonial ways of seeing and attend to the refusals challenging me to listen “to and for the silences and stories we can’t tell” (Adams and Homan Jones, 2011, 111).

Gender Difference Dissonance and Being Accountable

As I’ve indicated, I found the encounter with Frank the most challenging to write about. At the point of encounter, Frank and I had a dual relationship- we were good friends at the time, although after that evening our relationship dwindled to the point of us not staying in contact. My experience of him wasn’t limited to the encounter explicitly deemed ‘research,’ as I had a series of conversations with him both pre and post that undoubtedly influenced how I made sense of him and us. However, Frank didn’t give me permission to write about those other instances, so they are the felt-untold that (in)forms the told. I worked with what I could tell, which included how I knew Frank and details about his background that he permitted me to include. Still, how I knew Frank before and after inevitably made its way into my story of us as it is impossible to dislodge those experiences and all they carry from it. The discord created by having experiences that inform how stories are told and being ethically mandated to exclude them is something I hadn’t considered or prepared for. For future projects, I will refrain from including friends I’ve dated due to these possible complications.

The conversation we had about his shame in sex created a sort of emotional and cognitive dissonance in our relationship. Prior to this, I knew we had different views about dating and sex, but I didn’t experience negative feelings and had no difficulty accepting them. However, the process of speaking, transcribing, and storying the encounter sparked a change because it required me to engage deeply with these differences. I found myself disliking

⁴⁴ In case this isn’t clear, encounter here is both the physical moment of facing a self/other as well as the (re)membering moments of being with selves and others that follow.

Frank's portrayal of sex-negative partners influencing his shame and sex-positive partners signalling his eradication of shame; it disturbed me to the core. In my story about our encounter, I disclose my negative judgments about Frank, indicating I see him as a player for engaging in non-monogamous sexual relationships and that I see his labelling of sex-positive and sex-negative as blaming mechanisms that ignore the relational nature of libidos and sex drives. This experience of him is inextricable from my critical feminist standpoint (Sweet, 2020), or a reflexive positionality borne out of "epistemological insights [that] grow out of material life and political practice," both a "site of inquiry *and* relational achievement" (927, italics original). As a woman whose location in the heterosexual matrix positions her to face ideologies that not only naturalize primitive male desire, entitlement and sexual domination but also condemn her free-reigning desire, I feel confronted by our differencing (Massumi, 2019) and his privileged embodiment of the permissive discourse (Hollway, 1984). As such, integrating both how I feel and the politicized subject position I listen from feels important. However, I also need to trouble my sense of privilege and male sexual drive discourses by accounting for why these particular readings are available to me. I do this by revisiting our story several times, going back to instances I am inclined to turn away from or reject what he says and asking myself to look deeper at what is going on. Sometimes I can unwind moments of being moved in a conflictual way to early histories of being a woman in a patriarchal context and catch hold of projections that come alive in our encounter. In doing so, I extend empathy towards myself and the other, recognizing vulnerabilities I hadn't noticed before. With Frank, this helps me thicken our stories and imagine what might have felt difficult for him.

Unpicking the Uneasy Sense: Reflexive Uses of Refusal

Mina's story highlights moral evocations of shame within the context of Turkey, where young women experience a continued tension between renouncing the past generation's model of "selfless femininity and protective masculinity" and feeling the country's continued norm of virginity (Ozyegin, 2009, 108). As Mina shares, culture and religion are inextricably connected, making it difficult to differentiate between the two. Within the interview assemblage, collective knowledge creation around religion and culture is complicated by our differing locations and needs to be unpicked. I'm an outsider to Mina's experience, just as I was with John, but my outsider-ness feels more pronounced because Mina speaks from a place and history that are 'other' and unknown to me. With John, who is also from a North

American country and subscribes to a faith I was exposed to as a kid, I can relate from our shared strands that allow me to easier envision what his life might be like. Even if these strategies for sensing the familiar are off the mark, they produce a different set of feelings that affect what the assemblage brings into existence. Not knowing Turkey's history around female sexuality prior to speaking with Mina produced feelings of shame and paralysis during our interview; these encouraged me to hold back from asking questions that could risk re-enforcing the shame I felt (Helman, 2021). While feeling a sense of 'knowing' can be equally problematic in an encounter, I regret not coming more prepared by reading anything I could find about Turkish women's experiences around sex and sexuality. Perhaps by arriving with a background awareness of virginity being a site of contestation for Turkish women and the generational and class differences in recent decades towards negotiating sex, I would have been able to show Mina I was familiar with her background and created trust leading to deeper conversation. However, as Spivak (2013) reminds me, even if I'd done this reading, I would still be faced with my white Western-centric ideas of culture: "every definition or description of culture comes from the cultural assumptions of the investigator" (119). This is to say that no advance reading will transport me out of my body and worldview into the experience of the other, with her own self-identifications, history, and changing views.

Ahmed, in her influential article *This Other and Other Others* (2002), critically examines encountering difference and proposes ethical considerations and actions for these encounters. She states, "rather than using particularity as a description of an other, which turns 'this-ness' into a property of her body or her speech, we can think of particularity in terms of modes of encounter through which others are faced" (561). In other words, thinking about *how* we encounter more honestly and ethically locates inquiry in the space between rather than in difference seemingly reducible to others. It brings inquiry back to the here and now, refusing abstract associations of otherness, as a way of attending to particularity.

Some questions to ask include what happens when we come together, what makes it possible and what are the limits and why (Ahmed, 2002). As I think of how Mina and I met and conversed in the Meadows one summer day when Covid restrictions still prohibited university room bookings, I remember feeling disjointed in our conversation and yearning for more detail but not asking. She ate a sandwich as she spoke, which I took to mean she was fitting me into a busy day. There were occasionally people passing by us closely and I sensed

her discomfort, feeling guilty for proposing such a public location. I struggled to hear her over the wind and sirens that cut in at important moments, such as when she described a childhood sexual assault experience. While transcribing, I strained my ear to hear Mina's words, as I thought I had a responsibility to report what she'd said. I was frustrated by the wind and siren's meddling as well as the minimal details she gave in the rest of her story, which made these missing pieces even more crucial to understanding. I felt pressured to both produce something meaningful for this project and (re)present her justly.

The combined enactment of Mina's sparse details and the sirens and wind cutting in encouraged me to wonder about what was happening. As I reflected on the environment's agency, I came to see it as a co-conspiring force in a *refusal* (Tuck and Yang, 2014) to give away that which wasn't mine to know or reveal. The sirens and wind, as annoying as they are for concealing, partnered with Mina's delivery and add vital material. When our plan to meet a second time to clarify these lapses in information fell through, I became alerted to refusal as vital to the shame and sex assemblage. Thinking through refusal opened my eyes to an underlying colonial agenda to glean salient details of trauma that informed her shame and sex story. Refusal was, and is, a call to consider narratives that are not mine or ours to objectify. As Tuck and Yang (2014) say:

“Refusal is a code concerned with not selling. It is the code of the object- the code of the dog itself, the being that is made a ‘thing’ by those who assume the right to sell, buy, and own” (814).

I imagine those details weren't important to Mina otherwise she would have made them known after I sent through a transcript with the gaps. As trauma researcher Sophie Tamas (2009) concedes, trauma stories shouldn't be easy or readily consumable, nor is it our responsibility to present them in an orderly or sensible way:

“If we are sitting in the gore and confusion of our own suffering, my sane, readable account of loss may reinforce the expectation that our trauma ought to make sense, and if it doesn't we must be somehow inadequate or failing. It implies that the order of the universe is, in fact, intact, and the traumatized who have lost faith in reason, language, and human decency are mistaken” (5).

The encounter with Mina was the only one that stirred up an uneasy sense, or the “wrong feeling” (Tuck and Yang, 2014, 815) and I think this is because I felt on the verge of an unethical move to essentialize difference in my encounter with the unknown. This would involve appropriating it or containing “otherness as a way of establishing my identity” (Ahmed, 2002, 560) to resolve the discomfort of not-knowing in a research situation. I’ve seen Mina since our interview, and she’s said to me “I’m sorry I couldn’t meet again to speak about it some more. It was just too difficult for me.” Our conversation was cut off by others joining us in the room, so I couldn’t ask questions that I’m left with. Was the interview too difficult? Or was it meeting up a second time? Although I’d like to know what happened so that I can learn from this, I also don’t see it as Mina’s responsibility to explain it to me.

Refusal wasn’t on my radar when I began inquiring; I hadn’t read Tuck and Yang’s powerful article until around halfway through. As such, I fear there’s a degree of data mining in the way I’ve spun others’ stories into a product that I will submit to earn a professional doctorate designation. To resist turning out ‘shame porn,’ or the appropriation of others’ pain into a consumable product (Yeboah, 2020), I’ve created non-representationalist texts that blur self/other boundaries in the form of the story. I’ve woven my own histories of shame amid others’ stories to highlight our collective vulnerability (Thorneycroft, 2020). I also displace shame from the individual/possessive by layering theory to show the ways it is implicated in and informed by in the social and political. Further, I have endeavoured to share openly about the lenses (in)forming my understandings of others’ stories. However, these attempts to democratize inquiry aren’t complete refusals – they still give away painful narratives about trauma, sexism, cultural and religious ‘difference’⁴⁵, unmet sexual desire and forbidden fantasies, premature ejaculation, and performance anxiety, and so on. I’m not happy about this, and at the same time, I hope these narratives help normalize shame as relational and affective, in-between and on the move; something that conjures and couples with other material-discursive entities to constrain or enable what subjectivities and bodies can do.

Where this Work Might Take Us

As I’ve shown, thinking with assemblage coheres well with creative-relational inquiries into shame and sex as it opens the stage for complicated realities to emerge and not need to

⁴⁵ Here I refer to difference in relation to the inquirer, not as a fixed category.

make sense. Assemblage also provides a lens for viewing flows of shame and sex affecting and being affected by accumulations of material-discursive forces across a flat plane of immanence, promoting a non-linear and non-hierarchical discussion that embraces the 'both/and' nature of experience. These shame dialogues spring out of the particularities of encounter, with its entangled human, non-human, and more-than-human factors uniquely co-constituting shame's continual shape-shifting and frequent imperceptibility. Consequently, the theorizations and analysis I've offered about shame do not cover the breadth of the field, as they are generated by specificity coming together and affecting in each given moment. Future research into shame and sex that thinks with assemblage might explore in more detail the seemingly gendered division of responsibility for sexual shame that arose, perhaps with deliberate attention to the body and/or discursive constructions. You may have noticed that invitations to speak about shame sometimes prompt sharing other (seemingly unrelated) emotions and stories, since shame joins with and involves a plethora of interlocking emotional states (Tomkins, 1995; Najafi et. al, 2008). Another avenue for future research might involve looking at "affective clusters" (Probyn, 2005, 32) where shame couples with other related states like pride, fear, disgust or humiliation (Tomkins, 1963). The shift from shame to pride showed up here, and I would have gone into more detail about other coalescing affective states if I'd had more words to work with.

In this project, I attended to shame's affective pulls through wondering about a series of hotspots that arose while storying encounters. This prompted forays into prismatic dimensions of sexual shame interwoven with the social, neurobiological, interpersonal, and environmental. A crucial element of this work involved employing a deconstructive and vulnerable reflexive practice to disclose and sort through self-in-context, (re) turning to moments of uneasy or conflictual feelings and staying with the discomfort to trouble my accounts. This has been missing from other post-qualitative inquiries that think with assemblage and intra-action to explore matters of relation and non-relation. In the relational sphere of encounter, accounting for the partial and shifting 'I' who makes sense of assemblages added another layer of thinking about how shame "makes us feel proximity differently" (Probyn, 2005, 35). Future projects that think with assemblage and intra-action might also take on this form of response-able (Barad, 2014) research to continue to wonder

about the ways we affect what comes to matter, as a rigorous reflexivity helps us stay accountable to *how* we 'know' just as much as *what* we 'know.'

Final thoughts: Auto-Emergencies in Shame and Sex Assemblages

I came into inquiry with a sense of urgency to encounter my own histories with sexual shame, wanting to uncover and understand. Through a turn of events, this turned into an assemblage with others in seven face-to-face encounters. While I thought these encounters would focus predominantly others' stories, engaging with assemblage and intra-action encouraged me to bring more of myself in, including brushes of shame from my history. Through a reflexive dance of affecting and being affected, I storied intersubjective experiences of shame contingent upon the specificities of encounter in its culmination of embodied, historical, cultural, political, environmental, and emotional relations. The hotspots I've described sprung out of embodied emergence arising from our exchanges; as such, I present them as contextually and relationally situated wonderings. When I envisioned speaking with others and writing about shame and sex as affective force, I didn't anticipate the extent to which the act of facing others would bring alive shame and sex narratives from my past that I originally sought to write about. In theorizing *The Emergencies of Creative-Relational Inquiry*, Murray (2020) speaks of a lightning bolt as the not-yet actualized yet fertile creative-relational inquiry, which "accepts an invite to land" (28). The lightning bolt is a spark of relation and sometimes non-relation, the "strike of the event where something is created, and a new contrast comes together" (34). Here, shame is the lightning bolt that came to visit me as I wrote into the aftermath of sexual assault. It found a place to land in sites of multiplicity between bodies, environments, discourses, feelings and physical sensations, histories, and so on, resonating and becoming tangled in these configurations to spark something new (Murray, 2020). The shame and sex experiences that have emerged are unstable, messy, and contingent on the specificities of relating and differencing (Massumi, 2019). I have found the relational space in encountering others to be particularly generative for shame and sex as the here-now (and there-then) collective of bodies coming together has helped dislodge some of shame's silencing and isolating effects for myself, and hope it has for others.

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**PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET:
Shame and Sexual Experience: Rhizomatic Dialogues in a Pandemic**

I am inviting you to take part in research on early memories of shame and sexual experience. My name is Anna Planedin and I am a professional doctorate student at the University of Edinburgh. Before you decide to take part, it is important you understand why the research is being conducted and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

The purpose of the study is to contribute to psychotherapeutic understandings of shame and sexual experience. This research uses conversational interviews to gather data, which means that you and the researcher will have a free-flowing conversation about your experience. There is a rough map of possible questions, however, a large degree of spontaneity will be worked into the research design. You will meet with me at an agreed upon public location to speak around 1 hour. I am interested in your narratives of shame in relation to sexual experience and will be asking you to go into detail about your experience, often using follow-up questions prompting you to go deeper. It will be a process of ongoing consent, so you can always decline to answer a question or decide to stop participating. I will need to audio record the interview and will ask for your written consent to conduct and record it prior to beginning. In order to take part, you need to have a strong verbal command of English as well as an interest in sharing personal stories of shame and sexual experience.

WHY HAVE I BEEN INVITED TO TAKE PART?

You are invited to participate in this study because you expressed an interest in speaking about shame in sexual experience within the context of an interview.

DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART?

No – it is entirely up to you. If you do decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. Please note that your data may be used in the production of formal research outputs (e.g. journal articles, conference papers, theses and reports) prior to your withdrawal and so you are advised to contact the researcher at the earliest opportunity should you wish to withdraw from the study.

If you do decide to take part, please keep this Information Sheet. You will be asked to sign an Informed Consent Form to show that you understand your rights in relation to the research, and that you are happy to participate.

WHAT DO I DO IF I DECIDE TO TAKE PART?

Once you express your interest to me via email, I will arrange to have a brief phone conversation with you to discuss any questions you may have and confirm your readiness to

Speak openly in a conversational manner about shame and sexual experience. The research itself will take place in an agreed upon location; possibilities include a coffeeshop known to have a quiet table, an outdoor park, or a university classroom. You will be asked to come prepared to share your experience surrounding shame and sex.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE BENEFITS OF TAKING PART?

There are no direct benefits, but by sharing your experiences in this study, you will be helping me and the University of Edinburgh to better understand processes of narrating and remembering shame in sexual experience. Although this is not therapy, the experience may help you gain insight into your experience, which might feel therapeutic.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS OR DISADVANTAGES ASSOCIATED WITH TAKING PART?

Since the topic of shame and sexual experience can relate to situations that are traumatic, taboo and highly personal, you might feel triggered or uncomfortable when sharing your experience. For this reason, I would like you to consider the extent to which you are able to regulate your emotions should you become triggered as well as whether your desire to participate outweighs the potential discomfort you may feel. If you have experienced sexual trauma in the past, it is advisable that you participate only if you feel like you have had enough distance from these events and have processed them enough to feel safe while speaking about them. I am a qualified psychotherapist and will also be able to help if you find yourself emotionally overwhelmed. However, it is important to note that the meeting is for a research project and not a therapy session. In the case that you feel you need post-interview support, there is a list of local counselling agencies that I have included along with the consent form. You are encouraged to consider seriously whether you are comfortable enough to share openly in relation to this topic and put supports in place if you think you'll need them.

WHAT ARE THE COVID-19 RISKS OF PARTICIPATION?

We have taken specific steps to minimise the risk of exposure to COVID-19 during the study by adhering to the most up to date Scottish Government [guidance](#). These measures include maintaining 2 metres social distancing; using face coverings if social distancing of 2 metres cannot be maintained, individuals are not stationary or are in a communal space; avoiding crowded places; cleaning hands and surfaces regularly (or local alternative – add as appropriate). Further, you will only interact with me given that I have experienced no COVID-19 symptoms nor had any known contact with COVID-19 positive individuals for the 14 days prior to the research interaction.

{If you are a participant who is deemed at higher risk, but exceptionally the research is justified as there is either a clinical need or the benefits outweigh the risks, then I will have tested negative for COVID-19 in the 7 days prior to the research interaction.}

However, even with these control measures, there remains some additional risk of exposure from participating in this study.

WILL MY TAKING PART BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

Your data will be processed in accordance with Data Protection Law. All information collected about you will be kept strictly confidential. Your data will be anonymized in my records since you will choose a pseudonym for the study and the pseudonym code sheet will be kept in a locked cabinet. If you consent to being audio recorded, all recordings will be kept in a locked cabinet and destroyed once they have been transcribed. Only I will view your data. All electronic data will be stored on a password-protected computer file and all paper records will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. Your consent information will be kept separately from your responses in order to minimise risk. The data will be kept for three years after the completion of the project in a password-protected vault in the university system.

For general information about how I will use your data go to:

<https://www.ed.ac.uk/records-management/privacy-notice-research>

WHAT WILL HAPPEN WITH THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY?

The main purpose of this study is to inform a thesis that will help me qualify for a professional doctorate in psychotherapy. The results of this study may be summarised in published articles, reports and presentations. You will not be identifiable from any published results. Quotes or key findings will be made anonymous in any formal outputs unless I have your prior and explicit written permission to attribute them to you by name. A summary of the findings from the study will be made available to participants who indicate they would like to receive this. This summary will be sent to participants by email.

WHO IS ORGANISING AND FUNDING THE RESEARCH?

I am organizing and funding the research.

WHO HAS REVIEWED THE STUDY?

The study proposal has been reviewed by the School of Health and Social Science Ethics Committee.

STORING CONTACT DETAILS

The meeting location for the research will be negotiable between us. If the research requires you to be a visitor in our University Buildings or another indoor off-campus location such as a cafe, then for the purpose of [NHS Test and Protect](#) I will request your name and contact details and store these for 21 days after the research interaction. This will ensure full cover of the typical incubation period and additional time during which people may be infectious, to allow for testing and contact tracing. This information is in addition to the data collected as part of the research study, will be stored separately from the research data, shared with NHS Test and Protect if requested, and the legal basis for collecting these data is substantial public interest.

WHAT IF I AM UNWELL PRIOR TO THE RESEARCH INTERACTION?

If you feel unwell, experience COVID-19 related symptoms, or have been in contact with a COVID-19 positive individual in the past 14 days, then please contact me and I will postpone or cancel the research interaction.

WHAT IF I BECOME UNWELL AFTER THE RESEARCH INTERACTION?

If you experience COVID-19 related symptoms, and/or have a positive COVID-19 test following the research interaction, please follow the Scottish Government guidance (or local equivalent).

WHO CAN I CONTACT?

If you have any further questions about the study, please contact me (Anna Planedin), the lead researcher: (email removed to preserve privacy)

You can also contact my supervisor Jonathan Wyatt, Director of the Centre for Creative and Relational Inquiry: (contact information removed to preserve privacy).

If you wish to discuss concerns related to the research or make a complaint, please contact:

Matthias Schwannauer, Head of School of Health in Social Science: (contact details removed)

**PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET:
Shame and Sexual Experience: Rhizomatic Dialogues in a Pandemic**

You are being invited to take part in research on early memories of shame and sexual experience. My name is Anna Planedin and I am a professional doctorate student at the University of Edinburgh as well as leading this research. Before you decide to take part, it is important you understand why the research is being conducted and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

The purpose of the study is to contribute to psychotherapeutic understandings of shame and sexual experience. This research uses conversational interviews to gather data, which means that you and I will have a free-flowing conversation about your experience. There is a rough map of possible questions, however, a large degree of spontaneity will be worked into the research design. We will meet online to speak around 1 hour. There will be the option for a second meeting, if you would like. This way, you can feel out the first interview session and then use the second one to go into more depth. It will be a process of ongoing consent, so you can always decline to answer a question or decide to stop participating. I will need to audio record all conversations and will ask for your written consent to conduct and record it prior to beginning. In order to take part, you need to have a strong verbal command of English as well as an interest in sharing personal experience relating to shame and sex.

WHY HAVE I BEEN INVITED TO TAKE PART?

You are invited to participate in this study because you expressed an interest in speaking about shame in sexual experience within the context of an interview.

DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART?

No – it is entirely up to you. If you do decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. Please note that your data may be used in the production of formal research outputs (e.g. journal articles, conference papers, theses and reports) prior to your withdrawal and so you are advised to contact me at the earliest opportunity should you wish to withdraw from the study.

If you do decide to take part, please keep this Information Sheet. I will ask you to sign an Informed Consent Form to show that you understand your rights in relation to the research, and that you are happy to participate.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I DECIDE TO TAKE PART?

Once you confirm your interest to me, I will arrange to have a brief phone conversation with you to discuss any questions you may have and confirm your readiness to speak openly in a conversational manner about shame and sexual experience. The research itself will take place online using Microsoft Teams or an alternate forum if you cannot use Teams. You will be asked

to come prepared to share your experience surrounding shame and sex and I will record the conversation. In order to ensure your comfort and safety speaking about the subject matter in an online interview, I would like you to choose a private location where you feel comfortable speaking openly.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE BENEFITS OF TAKING PART?

There are no direct benefits, but by sharing your experiences in this study, you will be helping me and the University of Edinburgh to better understand processes of narrating and remembering shame in sexual experience. Although this is not therapy, the experience may help you gain insight into your own experience, and this might feel therapeutic.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS OR DISADVANTAGES ASSOCIATED WITH TAKING PART?

Since the topic of shame and sexual experience can relate to situations that are traumatic, taboo and highly personal, you might feel triggered or uncomfortable when sharing your experience. For this reason, I would like you to consider the extent to which you are able to regulate your emotions should you become triggered and whether your desire to participate outweighs the potential discomfort you may feel. If you have experienced sexual trauma in the past, it is advisable that you participate only if you feel like you have had enough distance from these events and have processed them enough to feel safe while speaking about them. I am a qualified psychotherapist and will also be able to help if you need my support. However, it is important to note that the meeting is for a research project and not a therapy session. In the case that you feel you need post-interview support, I have included a list of local counselling agencies. You are encouraged to consider seriously whether you are comfortable enough to share openly in relation to this topic and put supports in place for anytime you think you'll need them.

WILL MY TAKING PART BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

Your data will be processed in accordance with Data Protection Law. All information collected about you will be kept strictly confidential. Your data will be anonymized in my records since you will choose a pseudonym for the study and the pseudonym code sheet will be kept in an encrypted file. If you consent to being audio recorded, all recordings will be kept in an encrypted file and destroyed once they have been transcribed. Only I will view your data. Your consent information will be kept separately from your responses in order to minimise risk. The data will be kept for three years after the completion of the project in a password-protected vault in the university system.

For general information about how we use your data go to:

<https://www.ed.ac.uk/records-management/privacy-notice-research>

WHAT WILL HAPPEN WITH THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY?

The main purpose of this study is to inform a thesis that will help me qualify for a professional doctorate in psychotherapy. The results of this study may be summarised in published articles, reports and presentations. You will not be identifiable from any published results. Quotes or key findings will be made anonymous in any formal outputs unless we have your prior and explicit written permission to attribute them to you by name. A summary of the findings from the study will be made available to participants who indicate they would like to receive this. This summary will be sent to participants by email.

WHO IS ORGANISING AND FUNDING THE RESEARCH?

I am organizing and funding the research.

WHO HAS REVIEWED THE STUDY?

The study proposal has been reviewed by the School of Health and Social Science Ethics Committee.

WHO CAN I CONTACT?

If you have any further questions about the study, please contact me (Anna Planedin), the lead researcher: (contact details removed to preserve privacy).

You can also contact my supervisor Jonathan Wyatt, Director of the Centre for Creative and Relational Inquiry: (contact details removed to preserve privacy).

If you wish to discuss concerns related to the research or make a complaint, please contact:

Matthias Schwannauer, Head of School of Health in Social Science: (contact details removed to preserve privacy)

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Study Title: Shame in Sexual Experience: Rhizomatic Dialogues in a Pandemic

Researcher: Anna Planedin

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet (dated 04/19/2021) for the above study.

2. I have been given the opportunity to consider the information provided, ask questions and have had these questions answered to my satisfaction.

3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can ask to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without my medical care or legal rights being affected.

4. I understand that my anonymized data will be stored for a maximum of 3 years and may be used in future ethically approved research or published in a journal or article.

5. I agree to my participation being audio/video recorded.

6. I agree to take part in the above study.

Name of person giving consent

Date

Signature

Name of person taking consent

Date

Signature

1x original – into Site File; 1x copy – to Participant

Resource List for Participants

The Next Chapter: 0131 4674044 info@thenextchapter.org

Offers some affordable counselling costing between 10-30pounds per session depending on circumstances.

24 Hour Crisis Centre: 0808 8010414 crisis@edinburghcrisiscentre.org.uk

A crisis centre for Edinburgh residents aged 16 and older

CoCo Counselling: 08824152557 info@cocoed.org.uk

Person-centred counseling with affordable rates depending on income.

Bright Light Counselling: 0131 5561527 askus@bright-light.org.uk

Relationship/marriage/sex counselling that offers affordable rates in-line with income.

Edinburgh Women's Aid: 0131 3158110 info@edinwomensaid.co.uk

Provides a free listening and information service for female survivors of domestic abuse.

Health in Mind: 0131 2430106 (information line) 0131 2258508 (regular telephone line)
information@health-in-mind.org.uk

Provides trauma counselling for Edinburgh residents who have experienced childhood sexual abuse, telephone counselling for adults anywhere in Scotland who have experienced childhood abuse or neglect, counselling for Craigmillar residents and information and referrals.

Hope Park Counselling Centre: 0131 6506696 counselling@hopepark.org.uk

Provides sliding-scale counselling for adults living in Edinburgh.

Open Secret: 01324630100 info@opensecret.org

Counselling for adult survivors of childhood abuse/trauma. Free.

PF Counselling Service: 0131 4470876 info@pfcounselling.org.uk

Offers sliding-scale counselling for individuals over the age of 18. Also offers short-term counselling for young adults aged 18-25 on Saturdays.

Simpson House Counselling and Recovery Service: 2256028/2251054
simpsonhousecounselling@crossreach.org.uk

Donation-based counselling is for those who are affected by their own or someone else's past or present drug use. Specializations include trauma, anxiety, childhood sexual abuse, PTSD and drug addiction.

These are only some of the counselling and other support offered in and around Edinburgh. For more listings, you can visit the Edinburgh Counselling Agencies List maintained by the Whole Works: <https://edinburghcounsellingagencies.co.uk/> Many, if not all, of these agencies have waiting lists. Therefore, it is advised to call ahead of when you think you'll need support.