

The Persistent Scaffold Revisited: Confessional Shame and Racialized Spectacle in Plath and Morrison

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Abstract:

This article extends an ongoing inquiry into the transhistorical spectacle of female public shaming by turning to twentieth century American literature, specifically the confessional poetry and prose of Sylvia Plath and the fiction of Toni Morrison. Building on the governing metaphor of the persistent scaffold, understood as the apparatus that renders women's bodies visible for disciplinary consumption, the article argues that mid to late twentieth century American writing splits the shame spectacle along racial lines. In Plath's work, shame is privatized into a psychiatric and confessional register, even as its publication returns it to public view. In Morrison's fiction, shame remains an embodied, communal inheritance of slavery and segregation. Drawing on Michel Foucault's account of discipline and confession, Erving Goffman's theory of stigma, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's affect theory, and Sara Ahmed's model of sticky emotion, the article proposes that these apparently divergent modes rest on a single underlying structure of gendered visibility, refining rather than abandoning the scaffold thesis.

Index Terms: Confessional Poetry, Racialized Spectacle, Public Shame, Sylvia Plath, Toni Morrison, Performativity, Surveillance, Gendered Visibility

I. INTRODUCTION

The doctoral project from which this article is drawn traces the spectacle of female public shaming from eighteenth century Anglophone literature to contemporary digital culture, treating shame not as a private feeling but as a socially staged event that positions a woman's body before a witnessing crowd. An earlier article in this project examined the early modern stage, where the shamed female body was made visible through the theatrical conventions of confession, trial, and public penance. This article moves the inquiry forward roughly three centuries, to two mid and late twentieth century American writers whose work is rarely read together: Sylvia Plath, whose confessional poetry and single novel dramatize the psychiatric containment of a shamed white woman, and Toni Morrison, whose fiction insists on the communal, embodied, and historically inherited character of Black women's shame.

Placing Plath and Morrison side by side is not an attempt to flatten the profound differences between them. It is, rather, a deliberate test of the dissertation's central claim. If the scaffold, the apparatus that renders a woman's body visible for disciplinary consumption, is genuinely transhistorical and structural, it should be traceable across texts that appear, on the surface, to belong to unrelated literary traditions:

confessional lyric on one hand, and the neo-slave narrative and social realist novel on the other. This article argues that the scaffold does persist in both bodies of work, but that it bifurcates along racial lines. In Plath, shame is privatized into the clinical and confessional register, addressed to a doctor, a father, or a poetic persona, even as the act of publication restores it to public circulation. In Morrison, shame is never fully private to begin with; it is an inheritance written on the body by slavery, segregation, and communal judgment, and it is witnessed collectively rather than confessed individually. The article proceeds in four further stages. Section II establishes the theoretical coordinates that carry over from the dissertation's broader framework and adapts them for a modernist and postmodern American context. Section III reads Plath's *The Bell Jar* and selected Ariel poems as a privatization of shame into psychiatric confession. Section IV reads Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* as a refusal of that privatization, insisting instead on communal witness and bodily inheritance. Section V brings the two registers into direct comparison, arguing that the confession booth and the auction block are related descendants of the same historical scaffold, differently distributed by race. The conclusion returns to the dissertation's larger argument and indicates how this bifurcation anticipates the collapse of confession and spectacle in digital shaming culture, the subject of a later chapter.

II. THEORETICAL COORDINATES: FROM SPECTACLE TO CONFESSION TO AFFECT

Michel Foucault's account of the transition from sovereign spectacle to disciplinary surveillance provides the dissertation's initial vocabulary, but his later work on confession is equally important for this article [1]. For Foucault, confession is not the opposite of the public scaffold but its modern successor: a technology by which the subject is compelled to produce the truth of the self before an authority, whether priest, doctor, or psychiatrist, so that discipline becomes internalized rather than externally imposed. This shift matters directly for Plath, whose confessional poetics stage exactly this kind of compelled self-disclosure before clinical authority.

Erving Goffman's theory of stigma supplies a complementary vocabulary of performance [2]. Goffman distinguishes between a discreditable attribute, which can be concealed through careful management of front stage and back stage behaviour, and a discredited one, which is already visible and cannot be hidden. This distinction proves useful for separating Plath's shame, which her protagonists attempt, and fail, to manage and conceal, from the shame Morrison's characters carry, which is discredited from the outset by racial visibility and cannot be strategically hidden.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick reframes shame as constitutive of identity rather than a simple deficit to be overcome, describing it as an affect that marks the place where a self meets an other's gaze and is thrown back upon itself [3]. Sara Ahmed extends this affective model by describing emotions as sticky, circulating between bodies and objects and attaching more readily to some bodies than others, so that shame is not evenly distributed but concentrated on the bodies a culture has already marked as deviant [4]. Read together, Foucault, Goffman, Sedgwick, and Ahmed allow this article to track shame as it moves from spectacle, to confession, to affect, without losing sight of the disciplinary function that the dissertation identifies as the scaffold's persistent core.

III. THE CLINICAL CONFESSIONAL: SYLVIA PLATH AND THE PRIVATIZATION OF SHAME

The Bell Jar follows Esther Greenwood through a breakdown that culminates in psychiatric hospitalization and electroconvulsive therapy [5]. Critics including Jacqueline Rose have long noted the

novel's preoccupation with mirrors, glass, and enclosure, images that recur whenever Esther is made an object of clinical observation [6]. The bell jar of the title names precisely this condition: a transparent enclosure that isolates the subject from the surrounding air while leaving her permanently visible to whoever stands outside it. Read through Foucault, the bell jar functions as an internalized panopticon, a structure of visibility that Esther eventually carries inside her own consciousness even when no doctor is physically present.

Plath's poetry intensifies this dynamic by explicitly staging the shamed body as a performance for an audience. In "Lady Lazarus," the speaker addresses a crowd that gathers to watch her repeated near deaths as though attending a striptease, and she names a "Herr Doktor" and a "Herr Enemy" among the spectators, figures that fuse psychiatric authority with the historical trauma of the Holocaust [7]. Critics such as Al Alvarez and Linda Wagner-Martin have debated the ethics of this fusion, but for the purposes of this article, what matters is the poem's structural insistence that clinical suffering is simultaneously theatrical [8], [9]. The speaker does not simply suffer privately and later confess; she performs her suffering for a paying, watching public, converting the psychiatric case history into spectacle even as she narrates it in the confessional first person.

This double movement, privatization into clinical pathology followed by re-publicization through poetic performance, is the defining feature of Plath's contribution to the scaffold. Her shame is individualized: it belongs to Esther alone, or to the poetic speaker alone, diagnosed as illness rather than assigned as collective punishment. Yet the very act of confessional publication reconstitutes a crowd, the poem's readership, standing in for the jeering audience of the historical pillory. The scaffold persists, but it has moved indoors, into the psychiatrist's office and the printed page, and its crowd has become a readership rather than a mob gathered in a public square.

IV. THE COMMUNAL BODY: TONI MORRISON AND THE INHERITANCE OF SPECTACLE

Morrison's fiction resists the individualizing logic that governs Plath's confessional mode. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola Breedlove's shame is not something she discloses to a clinical authority; it is inflicted upon her by an entire community that scapegoats her for its own internalized racial self-hatred [10]. Pecola's longing for blue eyes dramatizes what Barbara Christian and later critics have described as the internalization of a white beauty standard so total that it becomes indistinguishable from self-annihilation [11]. Crucially, Pecola never confesses in the Foucauldian sense; she is watched, judged, and ultimately abandoned by a community that requires her degradation to stabilize its own fragile sense of worth. Shame here is public from the outset, distributed communally rather than extracted through private disclosure.

Beloved intensifies this communal and embodied dimension by locating shame directly in the historical apparatus of slavery. Sethe's back bears a scar she calls a chokecherry tree, a permanent inscription left by an overseer's whip, and the novel repeatedly returns to the scene in which Schoolteacher instructs his pupils to catalogue Sethe's human and animal characteristics in two separate columns [12]. This scene of measurement and classification is a disciplinary technology in its own right, one that predates and in some respects anticipates the clinical gaze Foucault locates in nineteenth century medicine, but applied here to the explicit end of denying a Black woman's humanity. Deborah Horvitz and Ashraf Rushdy have both argued that Morrison's concept of rememory, the involuntary return of traumatic history into

the present, structures the novel's refusal of linear, individualized confession in favour of a collective, recursive form of witness [13], [14].

The auction block that looms behind Sethe's history is not a metaphor borrowed from the scaffold; it is one of the scaffold's literal historical instances, a site where Black women's bodies were made visible and evaluated for sale under conditions of total legal and physical domination. Morrison's narrative form, its shifting points of view, its choral moments in which the community of women eventually gathers to exorcise Beloved from Sethe's porch, insists that this history cannot be resolved through private confession because it was never private to begin with. bell hooks and Trudier Harris have both emphasized that Morrison's communal narrative techniques function as a form of collective reclamation, returning the gaze to the community itself rather than surrendering it to an external authority [15], [16].

V. TWO REGISTERS, ONE SCAFFOLD: A COMPARATIVE READING

Placed side by side, Plath and Morrison suggest that the scaffold identified across this dissertation project does not disappear in twentieth century American literature; it splits into two registers, distributed unevenly along racial lines. For Plath's white protagonists, shame is treated as an individual pathology, eligible for privacy, diagnosis, and even a degree of narrative control. Esther Greenwood and Plath's poetic speakers retain the authority to shape how their suffering is presented, deciding when to perform it, as in "Lady Lazarus," and when to withhold it. This is the privilege of what Goffman would call a discreditable rather than a discredited stigma: it can, in principle, be managed.

For Morrison's Black women, no such privacy was historically available. The auction block, the overseer's whip, and the schoolteacher's ledger are technologies that predate and exceed the confessional apparatus Foucault describes; they mark the body as permanently, involuntarily public, denying the very possibility of concealment that underwrites Plath's confessional strategy. Where Plath's texts dramatize a struggle to control the terms of disclosure, Morrison's texts dramatize a struggle to reclaim a visibility that was never chosen in the first place, redirecting the communal gaze from judgment toward collective mourning and repair.

This comparison refines rather than undermines the dissertation's transhistorical argument. The confession booth and the auction block are not unrelated apparatuses; both descend from the same historical logic identified in the project's readings of the eighteenth-century pillory and the early modern stage, a logic that renders women's bodies visible for disciplinary consumption. What changes across the color line is not the presence of the scaffold but its distribution: privatized and individualized for white women, embodied and communalized for Black women. Sara Ahmed's account of sticky affect helps explain this unevenness, since shame, like other emotions, does not attach equally to all bodies but concentrates on those a culture has already marked as other [4].

VI. CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the persistent scaffold central to the wider dissertation project survives into twentieth century American literature in two related but distinct registers. Sylvia Plath's confessional poetry and prose privatize shame into a clinical and psychiatric idiom, even as publication returns that privatized shame to public circulation. Toni Morrison's fiction insists that shame, for Black women, was never private to begin with, but is instead an embodied inheritance of slavery and segregation, witnessed and eventually redirected by the community rather than confessed to an individual authority. Reading these writers together demonstrates that the scaffold is not a single, uniform structure but a historically

differentiated one, distributed unevenly along the axis of race even as it continues to organize the visibility of women's bodies according to a shared underlying logic. This bifurcation between confession and spectacle sets up a further line of inquiry, developed elsewhere in the dissertation, into how digital shaming culture collapses the two registers examined here, combining the self-disclosure of confession with the communal velocity of the historical crowd.

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