

## CHAPTER 1

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### Introduction

To be “made of flesh” is “humiliation,” remarks Alice Munro’s character, Del Jordan. Indeed, as we shall see, to be made of female flesh is to be well-schooled in the abjections and humiliations of embodiment such as those experienced by Jenefer Shute’s anorexic character Josie, who, despite her skeletal appearance, feels repulsed by her “fat face, fat gut, fat quivering thighs, fat disgusting tits”; or by Nancy Mairs, who views herself as a grotesque spectacle, a woman whose body is “crippled” and “misshapen” by multiple sclerosis; or by Margaret Laurence’s elderly character, Hagar Shipley, who, as she spends her final days trapped in her dying and abjected body, feels that other people are treating her as if she were “bad rubbish” to be disposed of; or by Toni Morrison’s character, Pecola, a poor African American girl who is made to feel like a black and ugly—and dirty—girl because of her dark skin color; or by Dorothy Allison’s narrator-character Bone, who comes to see herself as an ugly and dirty white-trash girl. My aim in *Embodied Shame: Uncovering Female Shame in Contemporary Women’s Writings* is to provide an analysis of representative works by contemporary women authors who deal with what I call embodied female shame: shame about the self and body that arises from the trauma of defective or abusive parenting or relationships and from various forms of sexual, racial, or social denigration of females in our culture.

While shame about the body is a cultural inheritance of women and thus an issue that pervades literature, this work focuses on recent fiction and nonfiction works by North American and British women writers, specifically works published during or after the second-wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s, and therefore works potentially informed by the feminist critique of cultural representations of femininity and the feminist revisioning of the female character in literature. Part I, *Coming of Age, Coming to Shame*, investigates works that depict the ways in which shame about the self and body remains an important concern of women writers in coming-of-age narratives detailing the spoiled body-self identity experienced by those who are physically or sexually abused by their fathers, such as Pecola in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and Bone in Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina*, or sexually shamed by their mothers, such as Sophie in Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath*,

*Eyes, Memory*, or those who feel sexually dirtied by the culture, an experience Naomi Wolf recounts in her personal coming-of-age story in *Promiscuities*. Part II, *Speaking a Kind of Body Language*, deals with the shamed bodies and spoiled identities of women who feel physically unattractive, flawed, or undesirable, concerns that find particular expression in works communicating the self-loathing of the anorexic woman, such as Jenefer Shute's Josie in *Life-Size*, or the obese woman whose self-hatred is vividly described by Judith Moore in her memoir, *Fat Girl*; in works describing the debilitating sense of bodily imperfection and social inadequacy of the plain woman, such as Anita Brookner's Frances Hinton in *Look at Me*, or the ugly woman, such as Fay Weldon's Ruth Patchett in *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*; and in works describing the troubled plight of not only the elderly woman, such as May Sarton's Caro Spencer in *As We Are Now* and Margaret Laurence's Hagar Shipley in *The Stone Angel*, but also the disfigured woman, such as Lucy Grealy, who describes living with a facial disfigurement in *Autobiography of a Face*, and the disabled woman, such as Nancy Mairs, who writes about her life as a "crippled" woman suffering from multiple sclerosis in *Plaintext*, *Carnal Acts*, and *Waist-High in the World*. Serving an important cultural function, these works point to the deeply entrenched body shame that persists in the lives of many girls and women in our postfeminist, postmodern culture even as we celebrate the supposed freeing of the female body from the social and cultural constraints and repressions that have long bound it.

### Embodied Shame: The Cultural Shaming of Women

"Shame is the distressed apprehension of the self as inadequate or diminished," writes feminist philosopher Sandra Bartky, who describes shame as women's "pervasive affective attunement to the social environment" (86, 85). A "multidimensional, multilayered experience," as shame theorist Gershen Kaufman observes, shame is "first of all an *individual* phenomenon experienced in some form and to some degree by every person," but it is "equally a *family* phenomenon and a *cultural* phenomenon" because it is "reproduced within families, and each culture has its own distinct sources as well as targets of shame" (*Shame* 191). Conceived of as defective or deficient from male norms and as potentially diseased, women have long been embodiments of shame in our culture, and, indeed, the female socialization process can be viewed as a prolonged immersion in shame.

If recent theoretical discussions of the female body have attempted to reclaim female embodiment, this effort has been beset with problems, as Jacqueline Rose has observed. When "feminism takes up, and valorises for women, the much-denigrated image of a hysterical outpouring of the body, it has often found itself doing so, understandably, at the cost of idealising

the body itself” (27). And when the “traditional devalorisation of women” is inverted—a “classic feminist” maneuver—“what is most discomforting about the body disappears.” Indeed, this “pure” and “uplifted” body, as Rose observes, “often seems remote from sex and substance, strangely incorporeal, suspended in pure fluidity or cosmic time” (28). Although the idealizations of the body Rose describes can be read as an attempt to value what has been devalued—that is, to turn shame into pride—the female body remains a locus of shame for women, associated as it is with out-of-control passions and appetites and with something dirty and defiling.

Susan Bordo’s analysis of the gendered story of mind/body dualism that has long pervaded Western culture points to the cultural embeddedness of embodied shame—shame about the body and self—that persists in the experiences of many women. In her discussion, Bordo shows the consequences for women of being “cast in the role of the body,” the negative term in the mind/body binary (*Unbearable Weight* 5). Internalizing this ideology, which views the body “as animal, as appetite, as deceiver, as prison of the soul,” women come to feel “unease” with their femaleness, “shame” over their “degraded” bodies, and “self-loathing” (*Unbearable Weight* 3, 8). Contrary to the “social mythology” that claims that contemporary culture is a “body-loving, de-repressive era,” women, even though they may be “obsessed” with their bodies, are “hardly accepting of them” (*Unbearable Weight* 14–15). In her comments on the “new understanding” of the female body that emerged out of the “personal politics” of the second wave of feminism and its critique of the politics of the body, Bordo writes, “What, after all, is more personal than the life of the body? And for women, associated with the body and largely confined to a life centered *on* the body (both the beautification of one’s own body and the reproduction, care, and maintenance of the bodies of others), culture’s grip on the body is a constant, intimate fact of everyday life” (*Unbearable Weight* 17). And in a culture that continues to devalue women and in which women are “willing (often, enthusiastic) participants” in the cultural practices that objectify and sexualize them (*Unbearable Weight* 28), the female body remains a source of profound shame for many women. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault in her work, Bordo remarks on how female bodies are disciplined by the culture, becoming what Foucault calls “the ‘docile body,’ regulated by the norms of cultural life” (*Unbearable Weight* 165). Even though we live in a contemporary world in which the public arena has opened up to women, women are still subject to feelings of body shame. For the “normalizing disciplines of diet, makeup, and dress” not only focus women on the tasks of self-modification and self-improvement, but also engender in them “the feel and conviction of lack, of insufficiency, of never being good enough.” Indeed, “through the pursuit of an ever-changing, homogenizing, elusive ideal of femininity . . . female bodies become docile bodies—bodies whose forces and energies

are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, ‘improvement’” (*Unbearable Weight* 166).

What in part lies behind this desire for self-improvement and the drive to achieve the idealized body image is the fear of the “out-of-control” body to which the docile body serves as an antidote. Julia Kristeva vividly describes what women most fear in her account of the abject body. In her analysis, Kristeva uses the work of cultural anthropologist Mary Douglas, who, drawing a distinction between what is clean and unclean, equates dirtiness with that which is out of its proper place. For Kristeva, “there looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable” (1). In Kristeva’s scheme, the body, which must be “clean and proper in order to be fully symbolic,” must “bear no trace of its debt to nature” (102). The abject, which is opposed to the clean and proper body, produces visceral feelings of loathing, shame, and disgust. Associated with bodily substances and waste products—such as tears, saliva, feces, urine, vomit, and mucus—the abject is defiling and disgusting, but because it is part of the self and body, it cannot be totally expelled or rejected. Representing the horror of physical embodiment, the abject produces a visceral reaction: “Loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung. The spasms and vomiting protect me. The repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck” (2). Culturally manifested in various ways—as food loathing and food taboos, as repulsion for bodily fluids and waste products, and as revulsion for the signs of sexual difference evident in the taboo against incest and the cultural horror of menstruation—abjection involves a fundamental rejection of the maternal body. Describing the struggle against “what, having been the mother, will turn into an abject,” Kristeva views the maternal body as the infant’s first experience of the abject, a horrific and stifling sensation of embodiment (13). In her account of the visceral disgust for bodily processes and embodiment and the related fear that the “clean and proper” body will be tainted, Kristeva calls attention to the shame and disgust associated with the abject maternal—and female—body in our culture.

Like Kristeva, Elizabeth Grosz, in her account of women’s “volatile” bodies, calls attention to the continued shaming of women in our culture. “Can it be that in the West, in our time, the female body has been constructed not only as a lack or absence but with more complexity, as a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid; as formless flow; as viscosity, entrapping, secreting . . . a formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order?” writes Grosz (*Volatile Bodies* 203). Elaborating on Kristeva’s account, which describes excrement and menstrual blood as polluting body fluids, Grosz observes that this “coupling” suggests the association of menstrual blood with excrement; moreover, the “representation of female sexuality as

an uncontrollable flow, as seepage associated with what is unclean . . . has enabled men to associate women with infection, with disease, with the idea of festering putrefaction.” In a culture in which women’s menstrual flow is viewed “not only with shame and embarrassment but with disgust and the powers of contaminating” (*Volatile Bodies* 206), women are conditioned to feel deep body shame and self-hatred and to view the uncontrollable, uncontrollable female body with fear and loathing.<sup>1</sup>

### Shame, the Master Emotion

It is suggestive that shame, which has long been associated with women and which induces secrecy and a hiding response, is an “only recently rediscovered feeling state” (S. Miller xi). Since 1971, “there has been a rapid increase in the literature on the psychology of shame, thus redressing a long-standing neglect of the subject,” writes shame theorist Helen Block Lewis. “Once clinicians’ attention is called to shame, it becomes apparent that, although it is easily ignored, shame is ubiquitous” (“Preface” xi).

This neglect of shame, in part, can be attributed to “a prevailing sexist attitude in science, which pays less attention to nurturance than to aggression” and thus “depreciates the shame that inheres in ‘loss of love’” (H. Lewis, “Preface” xi). Because of the Freudian view that attachment is regressive and that women are shame-prone as a result of their need to conceal their “genital deficiency,” there is an implicit hierarchy in classical psychoanalytic discourse, which views shame as preoedipal and guilt as oedipal (H. Lewis, “Role of Shame” 31). To Freudians, guilt was the “more *worthy* affective experience” compared to shame, which was viewed as “the developmentally more primitive affect” (Morrison, *Shame* 5). Shame, then, until recently has had a “stigma” attached to it so that “there has been a shame about studying shame in the psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic fields” (Goldberg x). But with the movement away from the classical Freudian oedipal conflict-guilt model of personality and the intensifying focus on the narcissistically wounded and shame-ridden self—beginning in the 1970s and with increased interest in the 1980s and 1990s through the present—shame has become the subject of psychoanalytic and psychological scrutiny, most notably in the work of affect and shame theorists such as Silvan Tomkins, Helen Block Lewis, Donald Nathanson, Andrew Morrison, Paul Gilbert, Gershen Kaufman, and Léon Wurmser.

An intensely painful experience, shame “follows a moment of *exposure*,” an uncovering that “reveals aspects of the self of a peculiarly sensitive, intimate, and vulnerable nature” (Nathanson, “Timetable” 4). Shame sufferers feel in some profound way inferior to others—they perceive themselves as deeply flawed and defective or as bad individuals or as failures—and this

internalized shame script grows out of repeated interactions with shaming parents or contemptuous others. At once an interpersonal and intrapsychic experience, shame derives from the shame sufferer's "vicarious experience of the other's scorn," and, indeed, central to the shame experience is the "self-in-the-eyes-of-the-other" (H. Lewis, "Introduction" 15). In the classic shame scenario in which the "eye is the organ of shame par excellence," the individual feels exposed and humiliated—looked at with contempt for being inferior, flawed, or dirty—and thus wants to hide or disappear (Wurmser, "Shame" 67). Fear of visual exposure, as Léon Wurmser explains, leads to the wish to disappear as the person one has shown oneself to be, or to be viewed as different than one is (*Mask* 232). Shame-imbued people may suffer shame-vulnerability—that is, "a sensitivity to, and readiness for, shame"—and shame anxiety, which is "evoked by the imminent danger of unexpected exposure, humiliation, and rejection" (Morrison, *Shame* 14; Wurmser, *Mask* 49).

Experiencing a heightened sense of self-consciousness, shame sufferers may feel inhibited, inferior, incompetent, dirty, defective, scorned, and ridiculed by others. Shame, and its related feeling states—chagrin, embarrassment, mortification, lowered self-esteem, disgrace, and humiliation—can lead to withdrawal or avoidant behaviors, which reflect the desire of shamed individuals to conceal or hide themselves in an attempt to protect against feelings of exposure. Other classic defenses against shame function to help shamed individuals recover from painful feelings of vulnerability and helplessness. For example, "feeling weak may be 'repaired' by arrogance, self-glorification, aggressiveness," and the "powerful, surging" feeling of anger may work to temporarily overcome the "helpless feelings of being disregarded and insignificant" that often accompany shame (Goldberg 69). Many expressions of rage can be understood as attempts "to rid the self of shame," whereas contempt represents "an attempt to 'relocate' the shame experience from within the self into another person" (Morrison, *Shame* 14).

Often described as the master emotion, "shame is important because no other affect is more disturbing to the self, none more central for the sense of identity" (Kaufman, *Psychology of Shame* viii). Because "almost any affect feels better than shame," individuals develop defending scripts against shame that foster the conversion of shame "into something less punishing" or that "limit its toxicity when it cannot be prevented" (Nathanson, *Shame and Pride* 312). Shame also has profound consequences for individuals in their daily interactions with others. Indeed, "Shame and pride seem to be an almost continuous part of human existence not only in crises but also in the slightest of social contacts," according to Thomas Scheff. Cross-cultural investigations of politeness behavior suggest "the universality of shame" in revealing how cultures "provide elaborate means for protecting *face*, that is, protecting against embarrassment and humiliation" (*Bloody Revenge* 51). In daily social

interactions, states of shame and pride “almost always depend on the level of deference accorded a person: pride arises from deferential treatment by others (‘respect’), and shame from lack of deference (‘disrespect’). Gestures that imply respect or disrespect, together with the emotional response they generate, make up the *deference/emotion system*, which exerts a powerful influence on human behavior” (Scheff, Retzinger, Ryan 184–85). Sandra Bartky’s observation that shame is women’s “pervasive affective attunement to the social environment” (85) points to the significance of issues surrounding pride and shame and the deference-emotion system in the social formation of female identity.

### Body Shame

In his important work on body shame, shame theorist Paul Gilbert explains that shame of one’s body can result not only from how others treat the body (as in cases of physical or sexual abuse), but also from how others perceive the body in our appearance-driven culture, where those who feel physically unattractive, especially those who are disabled, disfigured, or aging, are vulnerable to shame. “When people experience their physical bodies as in some way unattractive, undesirable and a source of a ‘shamed self’ they are at risk of psychological distress and disorders,” as Gilbert observes (“Body Shame” 3). An “inner experience of self as an unattractive social agent,” shame is an “involuntary response to an awareness that one has lost status and is devalued” (“What Is Shame?” 22). In body shame, such an experience of social devaluation may be reflected in negative assessments of the body—“I hate, or am disgusted by, my body . . .” (“Body Shame” 10). Explaining the psychological and social contexts of body shame, Gilbert writes, “Not only is the body that part of us that is immediately observable to others, it is also connected to a complexity of self-conscious experiences.” Although “we may think of ourselves as individual minds or personalities, our existence can only take place in an embodied self. . . . And our body often operates outside our control; it grows, ages, changes in its functions, can become sick and disabled, and will eventually decay and die” (“Body Shame” 27). Moreover, our body “can be experienced as an aspect of self” that both defines us (for example, as male or female or as beautiful or ugly) and that we also can “work on, shape and change” (“Body Shame” 28). While the body can be a “source of pleasure”—something to be displayed to approving others—it can also be “a liability, something that can be a source of rejection, to be covered or hidden. . . . The power of culture to shape body aesthetics . . . should not be underestimated” (“Body Shame” 29–30).

The power of culture to shame women should also not be underestimated. Indeed, as Gilbert remarks, “Control of female sexuality (and the

female body) has been institutionalised in social and religious forms for hundreds of years and more . . . often involving the shaming/stigmatising of female sexuality and appearance” (“Body Shame” 35). Moreover, parents’ attitudes and behaviors toward the bodies and sexuality of their growing children can have “an enormous impact,” as children learn to distinguish what is “acceptable and unacceptable in their appearance or bodily functions (including sexuality)” (“Body Shame” 30). Commenting on the link between body shame and childhood sexual and physical abuse, Bernice Andrews remarks that although childhood abuse often does not leave physical scars, “its emotional impact” on women survivors “can be just as devastating as visual disfigurement. . . . Abuse survivors often report a deep shame and hatred of their bodies that goes far beyond the normative discontent experienced by the majority of women in Western societies” (257). Like abused children who grow up believing that they are “damaged goods,” so abused women can develop intense body shame and “come to experience their own bodies as objects of disdain and disgust,” feeling that they are “spoiled, damaged, ruined” (Andrews 260; Gilbert, “Body Shame” 32). Thus, in effect, “abuse can be experienced like an (inner) disfigurement”—the feeling that “something that was good [has been] made ugly and bad” (Gilbert, “Body Shame” 32). And in our appearance-driven culture, those who are adjusting to a disfiguring or disabling condition, or to the aging process, can and often do experience body shame (Gilbert, “Body Shame” 39). Those who suffer from severe forms of body shame may experience such intense “self-dislike and self-attacking” that they want to “get rid of, remove or destroy, the hated aspect of self” (Gilbert, “Body Shame” 40). But as Gilbert points out, while some individuals may accept and become passive victims of the values imposed on them, others may resist the shaming process. Because central to the shaming process is seeing the other as having “if not the right, then the skill or power, to judge,” when individuals refuse “to accept the legitimacy of the ‘judger or rejecter,’” they are refusing to internalize the negative judgments of others and thus resisting shame (Gilbert, “Body Shame” 23).

### Uncovering Female Shame in Contemporary Women’s Writings

“A particular feeling condenses and expresses an unconscious fantasy about self, body, other, other’s body, or self and other,” writes Nancy Chodorow in her analysis of the psychoanalytic contribution to the study of feelings (239). “Through the power of feelings, unconscious fantasy recasts the subject—emotions and stories about different aspects of self in relation to one another and about the self and body in relation to an inner and outer object world” (239–40). Chodorow’s observation that “shame seems central to many



women's feelings and fantasies about mother, self, and gender, and [that] shame and disgust often color women's sense of bodily self" (121) will be apparent in the representative works by women writers examined in *Embodied Shame*. Part I, Coming of Age, Coming to Shame, investigates the familial and cultural sources of shame through a detailed analysis of representative coming-of-age narratives that show the connection between body shame and the sexual abuse or cultural denigration of girls. The section begins with a discussion of Alice Munro's comic and yet dark exploration of a young girl's coming of age in *Lives of Girls and Women*. Anything but a straightforward feminist quest for identity and celebration of female sexuality, Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* is a complex shame drama in which Munro's character, Del Jordan, becomes aware of the humiliations and abjections of female embodiment. What Munro's Del Jordan glimpses in her "incommunicable" vision as she becomes aware of the utter "helplessness" of the flesh—that "to be made of flesh was humiliation"—becomes the lived daily reality of Dorothy Allison's character Bone in the semiautobiographical novel *Bastard Out of Carolina*. Socially disgraced because she is the bastard daughter of a poor, white-trash woman, and physically and sexually abused by her stepfather, Bone comes to feel deep self-contempt and profound body shame. Even as Allison suggests, in the closure of the novel, that lesbianism might offer Bone an alternative to the oppressed form of femininity she has experienced in her stepfather's brutal patriarchal household, she also insists on the debilitating effects of shame and trauma on her character as she describes the painful process by which Bone learns to view herself as a "dumb and ugly" and dirty white-trash girl "born to shame and death."

Like Allison, Toni Morrison is interested in the connection between class and shame, an issue complicated by race in Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*. Intent on revealing the "devastation that even casual racial contempt can cause" in a child, Morrison depicts the damaging impact of racial shame and sexual and physical abuse on the life of the "black and ugly" Pecola Breedlove, who comes to believe that she can win her parents' love and cure her bodily ugliness, that is, her racial shame, only if she is miraculously granted the same blue eyes that little white girls possess. While Morrison, in her characteristic way, links dark skin with the black lower class, Marita Golden describes her feeling of racial self-loathing and body shame growing up in a nurturing family in the black middle class in *Don't Play in the Sun* as she, like Morrison, examines the damaging impact not only of white standards of beauty but also of intraracial color prejudice on the dark-skinned girl who is made to feel black and ugly not only by the white culture but also, and more intimately, by members of her own community.

The power of shame to dirty the individual and induce feelings of bodily self-loathing is also evident in Edwidge Danticat's novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, which deals with the sexually dirtying effects of rape in telling the

story of Sophie Caco's painful coming of age. The product of her Haitian mother's brutal rape, Sophie, who leaves her Haitian village at age twelve to live in New York with her mother, is forced as an eighteen-year-old to endure a series of virginity tests at the hands of her mother, something, as Sophie is told, that all Haitian mothers do to ensure the "purity" of their adolescent daughters because "soiled" daughters bring "shame" to their families. In describing an oppressive and sexually abusive cultural practice perpetuated in the postfeminist and sexually liberated United States, Danticat points to the potentially shameful plight of other immigrant girls who, like Sophie, come from patriarchal societies obsessed with preserving female chastity in the name of family honor. Experiencing her virginity testing as a kind of rape, Sophie becomes a direct inheritor of her mother's shame, and, like her mother, comes to feel a deep-rooted sense of shame and disgust for her sexually dirtied body. If the presumed antidote to the kind of oppressive practices Danticat describes is the sexual freeing of girls, Naomi Wolf, in her sexual coming-of-age memoir *Promiscuities*, reveals the persisting power of culture—the post-sexual revolution American culture that has supposedly liberated female sexuality—to dishonor and shame female sexuality. Even as Wolf attempts to redeem what she calls the "shadow slut" in all women, she gives testimony to the abiding power of the shaming invective "slut" to control and define female sexuality in the post-sexual revolution world we inhabit, a toxic culture that "dirties" adolescent girls as they begin to embrace their sexuality.

Part II, *Speaking a Kind of Body Language*, investigates the shaming of women in our contemporary culture of appearances, focusing, through a series of representative narratives, on the shamed bodies and spoiled identities of the anorexic and obese woman; the socially excluded and unattractive woman; the elderly woman; and the severely disfigured and disabled woman. The chapter discussing the anorexic body in Jenefer Shute's novel *Life-Size* and the obese body in Judith Moore's memoir *Fat Girl* focuses on the self-loathing and body shame of the anorexic and overweight woman. Both works expose to public view the fears and fantasies surrounding female embodiment in our culture in which many women fear, above all else, being fat. To Shute's anorexic character Josie, the skeletal form represents the good and perfect self while bodily flesh is disgusting. Equating female embodiment with being fat, the skeletally thin Josie, when she undergoes refeeding in a hospital, fears that her body is out of control: that her "immense mass of flesh" is swelling like dough, that her belly is "engorged like a giant tumor," that she is being buried "in flesh." Like Shute's character, who envisions herself as a "ravening monster . . . huge, with a crammed, bloated maw," Judith Moore describes herself, in her painful memoir, as a "wide-mawed flesh-flopping flabby monster." Dealing in a frank way with the self-hatred that grows out of fat oppression, Moore conveys the intense body shame and

feelings of self-disgust that are the cultural inheritance of overweight women in our fat-phobic culture.

The plight of the socially invisible and unattractive woman who, like the overweight woman, suffers from appearance anxiety, is central to the chapter discussing Anita Brookner's *Look at Me*, Doris Lessing's *The Summer before the Dark*, and Fay Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*. A lonely woman and one of life's losers, Brookner's character, Frances Hinton, becomes vividly aware of her own social and bodily deficiency when she is befriended by the Frasers, a married couple who are so physically "stunning" that she feels "weak and pale" in comparison. In sight of the "rare perfect example" and the "highest breed of human being" in the Frasers, Frances wants to attract their attention—to say, "Look at me!"—but when she is inevitably excluded from their charmed circle, she becomes profoundly aware of her social invisibility and the very sight of her body fills her "with shame" because she finds it "so lacking" and "so unremarkable, so humiliated." Like Brookner's protagonist, Doris Lessing's character Kate Brown becomes aware of her need for the admiring gaze of others when, at age forty-five, she undergoes a crisis of identity and comes to experience intense body shame. Kate, whose "whole surface . . . had been set to receive notice," basks in the approval of other people when she smiles in her emphatic way and sends out the signal, "I am accustomed to being noticed." But when she appears not as the stylish Mrs. Kate Brown, but as a sagging, unattractive older woman after she becomes ill, she feels socially invisible, preparing her, during her "summer before the dark," for the role of the aging woman in our culture. Like Brookner and Lessing, Fay Weldon, in her novel *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, explores the shameful plight of the socially excluded, and in the case of Weldon's Ruth Patchett, ugly woman, in our appearance-driven culture. Measuring her image against the cultural beauty ideal embodied in her hated rival, the ultrafeminine Mary Fisher, Ruth sets out to refashion her appearance through cosmetic surgery, becoming an exact replica of Mary Fisher. Even as Weldon provides a parodic commentary on the contemporary culture of cosmetic surgery in her novel, she also reveals the power of the beauty culture to entrap women by describing the tortuous plastic surgery Ruth undergoes to transform herself bodily into the feminine ideal.

The shameful plights of the elderly woman and the disfigured and disabled woman are the focus of the final two chapters. The chapter on May Sarton's *As We Are Now* and Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* examines how the elderly woman's body becomes a locus of shame, showing how Sarton's semi-invalid, Caro Spencer, becomes acutely aware of "all the horrors of decay" of her aging, failing body, as does Laurence's Hagar Shipley, who expresses mortification at the sight of her aging body—her "blue-veined swollen flesh and the hairy triangle that still proclaims with lunatic insistence a non-existent womanhood." Laurence, like Sarton, shows how her character

fighters to retain a sense of self-worth in an ageist society in which elderly women, as Hagar comments, are made to feel like “stupid old baggage.” Like the elderly, those who are severely disfigured and disabled suffer from body shame because of their deviations from beauty and body ideals, as Lucy Grealy shows in *Autobiography of a Face*, which describes what it is like to live with a facial disfigurement, and as Nancy Mairs reveals in *Plaintext, Carnal Acts*, and *Waist-High in the World*, which recount Mairs’s plight as a “crippled” woman living with multiple sclerosis. Detailing her long struggle with the shame she suffered after losing half of her jaw to cancer as a girl, Grealy confesses her intense feelings of ugliness—“I *was* my face, I *was* ugliness,” as she remarks—and her obsessive attempts through multiple reconstructive surgeries to “fix” her face and thus find her “‘real’ face,” the one she was “meant to have.” Like Grealy, Nancy Mairs understands the pressures women face in our body-obsessed contemporary culture, which idealizes bodily perfection and humiliates and rejects those who are disfigured or physically disabled. In graphic detail, Mairs describes how her symptoms have put her “well off the ideal” of femininity: “My shoulders droop and my pelvis thrusts forward as I try to balance myself upright, throwing my frame into a bony S. As a result of contractures, one shoulder is higher than the other and I carry one arm bent in front of me, the fingers curled into a claw. My left arm and leg have wasted into pipe-stems, and I try always to keep them covered.” Aware of how her body looks to others, she feels “ludicrous, even loathsome.” Insisting that there should be cultural models for women like her, Mairs calls attention to the debilitating effects of body shame on the disabled. But even as Mairs speaks the brutal truth about her “crippled female body” and “misshapen life,” she also, through her “body” writings, works to reclaim her experiences as a “crippled” woman as she offers to her readers, many of whom will confront the bodily vulnerabilities and body shame that accompany illness and old age, “companionship in a common venture.”

### The Shame that Is Felt by and on the Body

If the body has often been invoked in recent theoretical discussions as “a material antidote to deconstructive theory” and if some recent attempts to reclaim the body have led to a tendency to idealize the body so that “what is most discomforting about the body disappears” (Sceats 62; Rose 28), somatophobia—that is, rejection of the body—remains a troubling issue for many women. Susan Bordo, in her trenchant critique of our contemporary image-saturated culture, describes how a “pedagogy of defect” feeds women’s body shame (*Twilight* 37). Having become accustomed to a “visual iconography of the perfected body”—the “ageless and sagless and wrinkleless” female body—women are learning to “expect ‘perfection’ and to find any ‘defect’ repellent,

unacceptable" (*Twilight* 3). And living in a fat-phobic culture in which the "idolatry of the trim, tight body shows no signs of relinquishing its grip" on women's conceptions of female "beauty and normality," women's anxieties about the body "as the source of hungers, needs, and physical vulnerabilities" not within their control have become "especially acute" (*Twilight* 107, 111). Like many adult women, "girls today are concerned with the shape and appearance of their bodies as a primary expression of their individual identity," as Joan Brumberg has observed in her well-known and extensive study of contemporary girls' preoccupation with their bodies (*Body Project* xxi). As the body has become a "central paradigm for the self" and the "central personal project" of girls who "organize their thinking about themselves around their bodies," coming-of-age girls have begun to express intense dissatisfaction with their bodies (*Body Project* 197, 97). Internalizing the "new ideal of physical perfection," girls have become "more anxious than ever about the size and shape of their bodies, as well as particular body parts" (*Body Project* 94, 98). Indeed, as Brumberg remarks, "fear of fat, anxiety about body parts, and expectations of perfection in the dressing room have all coalesced to make 'I hate my body' into a powerful mantra that informs the social and spiritual life of too many American girls" (*Body Project* 130). Sadly, as girls make the body their "central personal project," they inevitably become subject to the body angst that drives them to "hate" their bodies, and thus they feel deeply inadequate, inferior, and defective: that is, shamed.

"Just because an idea or image—of the body, say—is thrillingly 'transgressive' to a bunch of artists or academics does not mean we should start trumpeting the dawn of a new age," states Susan Bordo who, as a cultural critic and philosopher of the body, insists on the "need to get down and dirty with the body" (*Twilight* 185, 183). Even as well-known accounts of the female body circulating in contemporary discussions of the body—such as Foucault's "docile" body, Kristeva's "abject" body, and Grosz's "volatile" body—call attention to the cultural shaming of women, a collective form of denial exists among critics who, in effect, have turned what is often described as the unruly, transgressive female body into an abstraction: a cultural text that can be "fixed" within the fixated gaze of the critical establishment. And even as critics have come to view the body as "discursively constructed and thereby open to (voluntary) resignification and change" (Hanson 16), the social meanings assigned to female bodies as deviant and inferior—that is, as shamed—still have real consequences in the lived experiences of many women. Feminist theory has long recognized the crucial links between the culturally constructed meanings assigned to female bodies and the very real consequences of those meanings in the lives of women, and in recent years it has come to emphasize the role of the body in female identities as it has investigated not only how race, class, and ethnicity act as shaping forces in the construction of women's multiple identities, but also how various

negative and shaming bodily attributions, such as fat, ugly, old, disfigured, or disabled, influence female identity and selfhood. What is missing from such discussions is an explicit account of the body politics of shame—the “most body-centered of affects” (Paster 2)—in the lives of women. Shame is “a self-feeling that is felt by and on the body,” as Sara Ahmed observes, and, indeed, “the very physicality of shame—how it works on and through bodies—means that shame also involves the de-forming and re-forming of bodily and social spaces, as bodies ‘turn away’ from the others who witness the shame” (103). Moreover, “the individuation of shame—the way it turns the self against and towards the self—can be linked precisely to the inter-corporeality and sociality of shame experiences” (105). Remarking on shame’s “sheer bodily intensity,” Elspeth Probyn similarly describes shame as a “powerful instance of embodiment” that is “called into being by, and then inflects, historical and political circumstance” (*Blush* 64, 79). What critical discussions of the “discursively constructed” body leave out of their accounts is the crucial knowledge that comes from the bodily world of affects, for what underlies the cultural manipulation and exploitation of women, apparent in worrisome images of female bodies as defective, or spoiled, or damaged, or dirtied, is the shame that is “felt” by and on the body.

The authors investigated in *Embodied Shame* bring a heightened awareness to the body politics that devalues and disrespects women as they illuminate in their literary works how women can become passive victims of the values imposed on them. The way out of the shame impasse, as shame psychologists tell us, is the recognition of shame and the narration of the shame story. But because there is shame about shame and because we tend to look away from the other’s shame, attempting to avoid shame contagion, the telling of such stories is risky business. But it is also necessary business. Dealing in an open way with the fear and loathing of the female body that continues in contemporary culture, the authors discussed in *Embodied Shame* acknowledge the insidious ways in which shaming stereotypes can become internalized and embodied in the lives of girls and women. If scholarly discussions of the body as a discursive text are often accused of, in effect, dematerializing the body by turning it into an abstraction, literature, despite its obvious textuality, gives an odd and paradoxical kind of presence to female bodies by invoking the world of feelings and getting “down and dirty” with the body as it tells stories about the embodied self. Examining the shaping role of the body in the formation of female identity, these authors, as they read and interpret the female body, draw connections between the social meanings attributed to the body and the self-hatred women often feel. Clearly bent on discomforting us, these authors expose—uncover—the shame that persists in the lives of many women in our postmodern, appearance-driven age in which the need to constantly refashion and improve the body has added yet a new burden to women’s lives and a renewed focus on the body.

But these authors also point the way toward the recognition of and resistance to the body politics that pressure women to conform: to become socialized, and thereby shamed, bodies. Through their very explicit public exposure of female shame, these authors do vital cultural work by providing a powerful critique of the cultural narratives that shame women. And in their works, they also seek a remedy to shame, the “most body-centered” of all affects, by providing gestures of healing even as they expose the shame that binds so many of us in our “extreme makeover” shame-driven culture in which the devaluation of women and their bodies remains a pervasive force in the lives of so many of us.