Sarah Cefai
Media, Communications and Cultural Studies
Goldsmiths, University of London

Humiliation’s Media Cultures:
On the Power of the Social to Oblige Us
Humiliation’s Media Cultures:
On the Power of the Social to Oblige Us

[W]e all have ticking away within us something we fear will badly harm our reputation if it got out … even in these days of significant over-sharing we keep this particular terror concealed, like people used to with things like masturbation before everyone suddenly got blasé about it online. With masturbation, nobody cares. Whereas our reputation – it’s everything. (Ronson, 2015: 27–28)

Take a feather pillow, cut it open, and scatter the feathers to the winds. (Hasidic parable)

In this essay we will come to take seriously the proposition that ‘our reputation is everything’—from the vantage point of humiliation. While data are the economic language of digital culture, reputation is central to the cultural currency of networked and social media exchange. Online modalities of expression combine the articulation of a person’s social status, how someone becomes known to others, the impression one gives off, the selling of the self, and so on, in a cultural economy of reputation. This combination happens not only as a result of subjective intentions, but because the cultural formation of digital media hinges upon the mediation of the relation between individual and collective identities (Papacharissi, 2011). Within digital culture, personal and impersonal identities are mediated alike, as the logic of reputation criss-crosses organic and inorganic, human and nonhuman entities. Reputations put something at stake, and in the case of individual identities, they put at stake something of ourselves. Reputations can make or break us, as well as make or break the worlds we’re living. Humiliation, this paper goes on to argue, casts into action relations between reputation, sense of self, and the capacity to be in the world. As a thoroughly social phenomenon, humiliation speaks to our underlying affective obligation to one another and the world we’re living. I hence claim that because humiliation tells us about the power of the social to oblige us, humiliation also tells us about power and identity. I will further argue that contemporary media cultures are not simply fetishizing humiliation as a textual thematic (e.g. public shaming online or televisual scriptwriting), but are constitutively and substantively linked to humiliation in their mediation of our affective obligation to the social. As such, I put forward an exploration of why this nexus of relations, that I’ll describe as humiliation’s affective structure, has become all pervasive in times of precarity and ‘networked misogyny’ (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

Learning of my interest in humiliation, more than one colleague has recommended journalist Jon Ronson’s popular book, *So You’ve Been Publicly Shamed* (2015). Colleagues’ interest in the culture of shaming is unsurprising given the toxic combination of academic precarity and performance culture. In academic circles no less, the “terror of being found out” ticks away (Ronson, 2015: 27). This terror presents a somewhat ironic fate, given the scholarly promise of notions such as intellectual insight and integrity. Our disciplinary investment in such notions sets up our fallibility in the
event of their failure. Just think of the scientist Matt Taylor crying as he apologises for the “big mistake” of wearing a shirt that “offended many people” while reporting live on the Rosetta space mission (European Space Agency, 2014). Or how University College London pressured the Nobel laureate Tim Hunt to resign for a making a clichéd joke on the conference scene, about girls in science labs falling in love and crying (McKie, 2015).

We know these examples because of their traction online, and so perhaps too because of the gender and cultural standing of their subjects and institutions. Just as we know as well how the discourse on “student experience” magnifies anxieties around student complaint, thanks to the economic precarity of universities reliant on student fee income. Such examples point immediately to a link between humiliation, precarity and a heightened media discourse on gender.

Certainly masquerade arrives on the scene of academia at a particular moment—as ‘the market metrics of our time’ configure their subjects ‘as self-investing human capital’, and as knowledge comes to be valued only in terms of its ‘capital enhancement’ (Brown, 2015: 177): “imposter syndrome” arrives as our profession is humiliated. The worry that we do not live up to others’ expectations of us further incites a structure of humiliation—a patterning of expectation and response. Our subjectio to incompossible demands in the classroom is lived out in this worry, as the ‘saturation of university life by neoliberal rationality, metrics and principles of governance’ (198) diminishes our labour power. What was once a potential for ‘democratic citizenship’, collectively held and cradled for wider society, is territorialised by a version of ‘human capital’ (184) that is both technocratic and populist. Just such neoliberal transformations of work, including the rise of entrepreneurialism, casualisation, performance culture, ‘networking and selling the self’ (McRobbie, 2015: 26), extend the reach of capitalism into ‘the profane banality of the everyday’ (Lash, 2007: 66). In this articulation of capitalism—the ‘industrialisation of culture’ and the “‘culturification’ of industry’ (74)—we are increasingly beholden to the cultural circulations of reputation. As Scott Lash and Celia Lury earlier argued, brand capitalism generates value ‘via the logic of difference’ (2007: 5). Like the brand, a reputation consists in an ‘abstract, singularity’ (6); an ever-proliferating transversal individuality interlinking the “macro” and “micro” logics of investment, the corporation, and other capitalist terms. As the integrity of liberal (public, accountable, democratic, etc.) institutions is hollowed out, the identificatory phantasma of reputation gain prominence.

Humiliation is a ‘traumatic shame’, defined by Kathleen Woodward as ‘shame that cannot be transformed into knowledge’ (2000: 213). The knowledge that traumatic shame cannot be transformed into is self-knowledge and shame that cannot be transformed is traumatic. In humiliation, the (former) self is not recoverable from the (later) debris of their humiliation—something is shamed out of existence. “[T]hought of and remembered by their humiliation … [people] become their humiliation” (Burton, 2004). Access to a prior social fabric dissolves. In the trauma of humiliation, the subject ‘no longer finds traction in the ways of being that had provided continuity and optimism for her’ (Berlant, 2008: 4). In humiliation, you endure the ‘shattering realization that your most dearly held self-perceptions and bases of self-respect have been torn down’ (Saurette, 2005: 1). This shattering realisation nonetheless instantiates the value system that had generated such perceptions, particularly those normative pretensions of identity
that distinguish classed, raced and gendered forms of social interaction and pattern social belonging. As ‘a disciplinary force’ (5) then, humiliation mobilises regulatory fictions about the self that have the capacity to injure the subject’s sense of self-worth and withhold self-repair. These are inversions of the same fictions that give us a sense of self to begin. Yet, in its aftermath, humiliation ‘leaves little basis to refashion an affirmative subjectivity’ (8). As Silvan Tomkins said of shame, ‘loss of face’ can ‘be more intolerable than loss of life’ (Tomkins in Sedgwick and Frank 1995: 136). In humiliation, one witnesses one’s own life coming to an end, from within the ongoing necessity of living.

Situated within affect studies, I examine humiliation not as epiphenomenal, or as an expression of a psychologised subjectivity, but as a ‘structure of feeling’. According to Raymond Williams (1977) and his readers, the concept of feeling as having a structure places ‘the historical present in the affective presence of an atmosphere that is sensed rather than known and enacted, a space of affective residue that constitutes what is shared among strangers’ (Berlant, 2015: 194). I am interested in how humiliation constitutes just such a space of residue. In the sections that follow, the essay unpacks the residues of humiliation—what is constituted by humiliation’s ‘singularity of feeling’ (Cefai, 2012: 18). Humiliation is understood as a composite term, defined by an internal set of subjective and affective relations, but also by a thoroughly social and aesthetic patterning of affect. To theorise the singularity of humiliation, I offer a close reading of how humiliation is singularly lived according to such characteristics across a range of media examples. My analysis of humiliation looks beyond ‘the experience we associate with a typical emotional event’ (Berlant, 2008: 4), to the structural elements in play for humiliation to eventuate. As such, this essay seeks to: (1) draw attention to and account for the prevalence of humiliation as a textual thematic within contemporary media cultures, and; (2) consider the implications of digitally and affectively networked humiliation for how we theorise relations among the social, power, and identity.

The Everyday of Humiliation’s Media Culture

Pictures hang about on Google like a gypsy fucking curse. There’s no cure for the Internet. It would never go away. It’d be glued to your name; a fucking stain on you. I’d hang myself if that was me. Crack my fucking neck at the first opportunity.

—Hector (Jerome Flynn), ‘Shut Up and Dance’, Black Mirror

You think that everyone in the world is out to humiliate you.

—Marnie (Allison Williams), Girls

My analysis of the everyday of humiliation’s media culture begins with a consideration of how humiliation is thematised in televisual character and narrative development. Netflix’s popular and critically acclaimed Better Call Saul (2015–present) offers a telling example of how a TV series can hone the significance of humiliation within the contemporary social fabric. From the vantage point of television, humiliation is a social drama ripe for the screen—a drama of the circumstantial interdependencies and affective indeterminacies that foreground the relationship between identity and the rules of familial, institutional, and cultural inclusion. Interdependency and indeterminacy provide
dramatic suspense: humiliation as a structure of risk is made tangible in a range of ways. For example, the risk of injury to one’s dignity is made tangible in characters’ perpetual worry (such as, worry over “the terror of being found out”). In the case of a TV series, this structure includes the worry of the audience. The audience of *Better Call Saul* worries the protagonist Jimmy McGill (Bob Odenkirk), as well as indulges in the thrill of his play with social boundaries and categories. It is the hypocrisy of social status that Jimmy iconoclastically games, but not without risking his own status.

*Better Call Saul* examines our culture of humiliation by exploring the predicament of living with a ‘spoiled identity’ (Goffman, 1963). Throughout the series, the notion of a spoiled identity plagues Jimmy, later known as Saul (revealed in this episode to be a play on the expression “It’s-aul good!”). This ongoing thematising of humiliation is crystallised in the most recent episode of the last series, ‘Winner’ (2018). Party to a recruitment process that rejects Christy Esposito’s (Abby Quinn) application for a law scholarship, Jimmy chases after Christy to address the young applicant directly. Jimmy urges Christy to defy her reputation, to take justice into her own hands:

> You didn’t get it. You’re never going to get it. They dangle these things in front of you; they say you’ve got a chance. But, I’m sorry: it’s a lie, because they’d already made up their mind and they knew what they were going to do before you walked in the door. You made a mistake and they are never forgetting it. As far as they’re concerned, your mistake is just, it’s who you are. It’s all you are. I’m not just talking about the scholarship here. I’m talking about everything. I mean, they’ll smile at you, they’ll pat you on the head, but they are never, ever letting you in. (Beat) But listen. Listen. It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t. Because you don’t need them. They’re not gonna give it to you? So what. You’re gonna take it. You’re gonna do whatever it takes, do you hear me? You are not gonna play by the rules. You’re gonna go your own way. You’re gonna do what they won’t do. You’re gonna be smart. You are gonna cut corners. And you are gonna win. They’re on the 35th floor? You’re gonna be on the 50th floor. You’re gonna be looking down on them. And the higher you rise, the more they’re gonna hate you. Good. Good. Rub their noses in it. Make them suffer. You don’t matter at all that much to them—so what? So what. Screw them. Remember: the winner takes it all. (Better Call Saul, 2015–present, ‘Winner’)"
worthy of respect by the more mediocre characters he outwits. While he gives off the appearance of abiding by the mediocrity of his peers, they don’t recognise him as being one of them.

Thinking to the roots of the term humiliation in ‘humility’ and ‘humble,’ from the Latin *humilis* meaning ‘low’ and ‘lowly,’ from *humus* meaning ‘ground’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2018), to spoil or “soil” an identity is to lower a subject’s social status. Cultural notions of status such as “one-upmanship”, “tall poppy syndrome” and the “put-down”, encapsulate this articulation of social hierarchy by the spoiling of identity. In this scene and many others, the spoiling of identity occurs by activating differences in power. These differences are coded as discrepancies *in* social status—who sits at which table and with what influence; who is a decision-maker and who is an applicant; whose experience aligns with the consensus. Individualising notions of “winning” and “losing” offer neat condensations of ‘the pervasive inequality and competition that underpins the growth of the new creative economy’ (McRobbie, 2015: 13). These notions are ‘impressions’ of success or failure—they impress upon us an idea about desire, such as the desirability of being “on top”, “inside” or even, “an outsider”. We might think of reputations as relational surfaces—particular impressions made by ‘the very affect of one surface upon another’ (Ahmed, 2004: 6). We can see the affective impressions of status worked aesthetically, in genres such as irony, or narrative tropes like the heroics of the underdog.

Writer and creator of the Channel 4 / Netflix series *Black Mirror* (2011–), Charlie Brooker, singles out the episode ‘Hated in the Nation’ as having been inspired by Ronson’s *So You’ve Been Shamed* (Hibberd, 2018). Like *Better Call Saul*, *Black Mirror* evokes humiliation as a central narrative theme across many episodes. In ‘Hated in the Nation’, people are punished for using a hate-filled hashtag on a Twitter-like platform. A character explains: “It’s a hashtag game, you know, like ‘death to …’ You insert the name of someone who’s being an arsehole. It’s not real. It’s a joke thing”. But #DeathTo turns out to be no joke, as users of the hashtag are targeted for retribution. The episode exaggerates the discrepancy between the surface impressions that generate and draw people into a “hashtag game”—the game of humiliation—and the severity of its consequences. This discrepancy results from the gamifying of humiliation via platform media and generates many affects, such as anxiety, suspicion and fearfulness. Another episode, ‘Shut Up and Dance’, probes the power of social media to bring someone down. The anonymity of the Internet, in combination with the tabloid culture of social media (sensationalism and morality), allow sexual misconduct to become weaponised. The episode focuses on the intense drama of shame, fear and panic that follows being “found out” by some unknown person or group of persons. Operating in secret like the hacker organisation Anonymous, the extortionists threaten to upload video recordings of the protagonists engaging in morally compromising activities, such as masturbating with the aid of illegal images. Rather than extort money or material possessions, the activists extort a moral lesson—their game demonstrates the lengths that people will go to avoid their humiliation, highlighting how concern about others flips into self-preservation. Then consider how ‘White Bear’ stages the media spectacle of public shaming. In this episode’s version of reality TV, the concept of the immersive “viewer experience” is taken beyond existing norms of production, as the audience actively participates in humiliating those deemed deserving of such punishment. Exploring how the process of
social exclusion might become automated through one centralised data system, ‘Nosedive’ picks up on the direction of travel we see in the rise of the trillion-dollar industry in data. The downfall of the protagonist whose social faux pas leads to a downward spiral of decisions that contravene socially acceptable standards of proper behaviour, points to the horrors of a fully automated process of social exclusion and criminalisation. This is a vision of an automated humiliation, turning humiliation from a disciplinary power into a biopolitics. This could be taken as a Western fictionalisation of the scenario playing out in China’s Social Credit System, or India’s biometric registration project for the distribution of food security and other welfare entitlements, Aadhaar. The automation within such projects can compound inequality, exacerbate the punitive efficiency of moral policing and persecution, and introduce new obstacles to social justice (Arora, 2019). We could consider too Australia’s automation of the Centrelink benefits system, where an algorithmic flaw resulted in tens of thousands of welfare recipients being wrongly billed for welfare debt—“robo-debt”, as it was aptly named (Terzis, 2017). The audience is introduced to the mediation of humiliation by a national media culture in the very first episode of the series. ‘The National Anthem’ situates humiliation within the genre of political drama, as the ultimate challenge to power. The episode asks whether a figure of power, such as the British Prime Minister, could endure the humiliation of his own bestiality being broadcast live “to the nation”, on television (the audience learns, he can).

As this introductory discussion suggests, Black Mirror picks up on the centrality of humiliation to stories of the human-technology relation. The incitement to humiliate has become part of the way we live with digital media technologies: humiliation as a political strategy (showing someone up; bringing someone down) resonates with a social media ‘economy of visibility’ (Banet-Weiser, 2018) that is based upon the proliferation of status. Networked technologies ‘operating on nonconscious, bodily responses or affect’ and ‘flooding the domain of connectivity with other-than-human agencies or datafication’ (Clough, 2018: ix), open new domains of power among governments, corporations and self-governing subjects. The Cambridge Analytica scandal, of mobilising downfall through accusatory messaging that targetted individuals based on their data profiles, and without their knowledge, is a case in point. Automation might extend humiliation’s scale and scope. The ‘speeds of the territorialization, deterritorialization, and reterritorialization of social spaces, as well as the adjustment to the vulnerabilities of exposure to media event-ness, are beyond any user’s mere decision to turn “it” on or off’ (Clough, 2000: 3). This decentring of the human as the seat of social action might have the effect of augmenting humiliation’s ‘historical sensorium’ (Berlant, 2011: 3). Humiliation foregrounds the vulnerability of human dignity to the injuries of a technologized semicapitalism that downgrades or eradicates all kinds of manual, administrative and service sector work. Humiliation is mediated not only by identificatory notions and categories but, en masse, by governments, corporations and their informatics—a predicament shaped by a whole social scene of techno-mediated transformation that threatens to automate this degradation. As such, the fate of a single character’s humiliation articulates humiliation’s social force as a force of neoliberalism. Television narrates humiliation in this way, as a ‘structure of feeling’ (Williams, 1977)—as a mediation of ‘a collectively held generational historical sense of social relationality’ (Berlant, 2015: 199).
The cultural economy of reputation is at once substantiated and promulgated by social media (e.g. Marwick, 2013)—a repercussion of the personalised user profile that demands constant engagement in the task of making impressions in a neoliberal consumer culture wedded to the individual. As we are increasingly interpellated into social experience via a performative individual and collective identity online (Papacharissi, 2011), the ‘optimal balance between disclosure and privacy’ (Papacharissi and Gibson, 2011: 78) is thrown out of whack. Beyond our individual control, this balance becomes a matter of the ranking algorithms that govern how information appears: algorithms simulate and then intervene in the social field, shaping the conditions of representation that determine how the user is ‘recognized as a subject with a voice’—such as in the case of the old Facebook EdgeRank algorithm (Bucher, 2012: 1165). Our declarative performances of this balancing act thus entangle the need for recognition—that much discussed staple of social movement—with the matter of reputation; speaking, or not, becomes a matter of appearances within technologised schemas of visibility. The cultural logic of ‘convergence’ and its media architecture of ‘flow’ (Papacharissi, 2011: 305) wed social participation to the performance of an individual subjectivity—our ‘difference’ (Lash and Lury, 2007: 5) becomes an appearance that might make an impression.

The performance of impressions is mediated not only by media technologies, but by the structures of feeling they collate and disseminate. The social dynamics that networks mediate, such as ‘invisible audiences’, ‘collapsed contexts’, and ‘the blurring of public and private’ (boyd, 2011: 49), consequent to the ‘scaling’ (48) of content and various other ‘affordances of networked publics’ (46), distribute a range of social feelings in part by generating impressions. Immersed in an ‘algorithmic culture’ (Striphas, 2015: 395), subjects must interface and “face-off” the power differentials that are induced by algorithmic communication that paradoxically combines collective sentiment and social action (such as in, voting behaviour) with “black box” technologies (that conceal the premise of the communicative interface). These relations, among visibility and invisibility, what is known and not, expressed or hidden—the privacy and publicity of data—coincide with those that structure shame and humiliation. The everyday anxiety of living with ‘something we fear will badly harm our reputation’ (Ronson, 2015: 27) is exacerbated by the resonance between the cultural characteristics of humiliation and the ways in which digital media compel us to communicate our individuality online. Anxiety about appearances is hence an important site in the digital mediation of humiliation’s affective structure. These anxieties might propel us into competitive scrutiny, assertion or backtracking, as in the case of the YouTube apology video.

Prior to networked communication, Ian Miller observed that as ‘perhaps our most powerfully socially oriented emotion of self-assessment’, humiliation, ‘or at least the threat of it’, has become ‘a normal feature of most routine social interaction’ (1993: x). The more a neoliberal theory of competition pervades everyday life, and the more we enact this competitive mentality online, the more potent humiliation becomes as a latent force of our social relations. This latent force can be found in the threat of humiliation that is also a pertinent feature of humiliation’s structure. As the predicament of Better Call Saul’s Christy Esposito illustrates, it is humiliating to be called to interview for a job that does not exist. Moreover, in response, we cannot simply take justice into our own
hands: humiliation stages the problematic of social action in the face of hypocrisy. What should we do about the façade of power’s performance? Every day, a television character says: “you humiliated me”, “I was humiliated”, “I’m not going to be humiliated any longer”, etc., and news media reports represent people’s first person accounts of their humiliation by government policies, whether austerity or the Windrush scandal. The structure of humiliation extends beyond the shaming frenzies of Twitter that captured Ronson’s and my colleagues’ imaginations, or the schadenfreude that is exploited by reality TV (Cross and Littler, 2010; Skeggs and Wood, 2012). There are ‘clearly identifiable “tactics of humiliation” that are consciously mobilized by a [sic] various actors in a variety of contexts’ (Saurette, 2005: 6)—mobilized, and in the era of Facebook, monetised. The seemingly ‘conscious decision by the government to humiliate and degrade people,’ as the film maker Ken Loach put it (Wilkinson, 2017), suggests just such a conscious mobilisation. As do the hallmarks of ‘popular misogyny’—‘the instrumentalization of women as objects, where women are a means to an end: a systematic devaluing and dehumanizing of women’ (Banet-Weiser, 2018: 2) expressed in the ‘defensive propositional feelings’ (Murphie, 2018: 20) let loose on the Internet.

Humiliation’s Eventful Structure of Feeling

Even the most generic definition of humiliation, as the event of ‘mak[ing] (someone) feel ashamed and foolish by injuring their dignity and pride’ (Oxford English Dictionary, 2018), points to a ‘complex experience and emotion in which conceptual and cultural expectations and meanings intertwine with powerful affective and bodily forces’ (Saurette, 2005: 3). In humiliation, someone is (1) made to feel ashamed; (2) made to feel foolish, and; (3) injured (via an injury to dignity, pride, self-worth). Humiliation consists in an elemental structure in which each element relates to the other and, in combination, each acts as a relation of force. Humiliation’s shame, the shame of humiliation, is externally imposed and defined, which is in contradistinction to the usual aetiology of shame understood as an internal reflection and affective state that resonates outwards (e.g. Probyn, 2005; Tomkins, 1963; Woodward, 2000). The second element of humiliation is foolishness, also externally imposed and defined. Humiliation’s foolishness is stupidity of a particular kind—the bearing out of a lack of cultural capital. The kind of cultural capital that matters most to humiliation, the kind of knowing, the savvy, is that which exploits prejudicial forms of identity (e.g. age, gender, nationality, race and class) (see Woodward, 2000). Foolishness riffs off the status quo of identities to the extent that, as forms of cultural difference expressed as affective knowledges, they are able to articulate the terms of social inclusion. What we don’t know can hurt us. The fool is duped; the fool didn’t know better; the fool didn’t understand the rules of the game. The fool was “conned” (Banet-Weiser, 2018: 97).

The third element of humiliation is injury, also of a particular kind. Humiliation’s injury is an injury to self-regard. Dignity and pride, and associated conceptions of the self, including self-confidence, self-esteem, self-respect, self-assurance and self-possession among other notions, denote one’s relation to one’s self via one’s relation with others. Humiliation injures this self-relation. As such, humiliation attacks a person’s capacity to relate to and be in the world. To have one’s self-regard injured in this way, by
being made to feel ashamed and foolish of who one is through the imposition of a construction of who one is meant to be, compels one to experience the limits of one’s own self-perception. One must reckon with the power of self-perception in relation to the power of others, socially conceived. This relation between an epistemological and experiential view of perception is a manifestation of disciplinary power. As Michel Foucault memorably claimed, disciplinary power is wielded through you, in your self-perception—in your ‘soul’ (1977: 33).

In the structure of humiliation then, one becomes ashamed of their foolishness (foolishness is the object of humiliation’s shame); and, one is made to feel ashamed by dint of being made to be the fool (foolishness subjectivates the subject of humiliation). The “truth effects” of humiliation’s shameful stupidity are less the effects of an autonomous human agency, and more the result of forces that accumulate and are distributed through institutions, networks and cultures, and increasingly via their ‘other-than-human agencies or datafication’ (Clough, 2018: ix). Furthermore, we can surmise that the combined feeling and self-evaluation, or ‘critical feeling’ (Cefai, 2012: 35), that follows becoming vulnerable to an injury of this kind, is an embodiment of the reflexive definition of the self as ‘responsible for its own value’ (Skeggs, 2004: 33). Paradoxically, being made to feel ashamed and foolish for having one’s dignity or pride injured calls into question one’s own role in their humiliation. Humiliation doubly gives form to the experience of powerlessness: in the first, the feeling of inadequacy (it happened to you), in the second, the fact of the feeling of inadequacy being imposed (it happened to you)—the humiliated must account for their own humiliation by dint of an intractable relationality. The feeling of being ashamed sensitises the subject to their sense of self-responsibility, which, within neoliberalism, is a mode of subjectivity that individualises our responsibility to others. Humiliation’s shame thus amplifies the failure of the neoliberal subject’s own self-investment,1 as well as their affective disattunement to the status quo—the ‘normative standard of judgement and aspiration that is deeply embedded and accepted’ (Saurette, 2005: 13).

We might consider humiliation, then, as greater than the sum of its parts—the becoming of an affective event. On the one hand, feeling ashamed and foolish are the after-effects of humiliation; the event of humiliation having occurred. On the other, one couldn’t have been humiliated had they not been made to be the fool, in which case, foolishness precedes humiliation. This paradoxical temporality or ‘double movement’ is made possible, to invoke a Deleuzian concept, by ‘the event of the body’s own doubling’ (Colebrook, 2000: 78). Humiliation bears out a subject becoming-other in relation to its own image. Then again, humiliation marks a traumatic break in the subject’s ongoing process of becoming-other, cutting (into) the habitual affectivity of their social participation. Humiliation’s eventful structure is therefore characterised by a potent mix of breakage and continuity—humiliation’s event is one of a temporal schism that separates out a ‘before’ and an ‘after’, as irreconcilable but nonetheless connected senses of self held in tension within the flow of experience. The ‘unmasking of pretensions’ in view of ‘a larger audience’ (Saurette, 2005: 12) is retroactive and anticipatory, splicing the before from the after, marking out a dwelling in the ‘crisis’ of what has happened and in an impossible but inevitable ‘ongoingness’ (Berlant, 2011: 60).
The temporal schism of humiliation is also an aesthetic rupture, stimulated by the manipulation of certain aesthetic distinctions linked to social standing. The distinctions between ‘high’ and ‘low’, ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’, ‘knowing’ and ‘unknowing’, ‘public’ and ‘private’, are those by which shame, foolishness, and injury appear. *Shame* invokes notions of exposure, vulnerability, susceptibility, contagion, faciality, eye contact, skin, and the status quo, alone pointing to shame as the affect that has been most linked to our social obligation to the feelings of others (Povinelli, 2002). *Foolishness* invokes the relation between knowledge and stupidity, impulsivity, lack (of judgement), triviality, nonsense, insincerity (versus seriousness), the joke, a deficit (in cultural capital). Whereas *injury* invokes the wound, silence, voicelessness, and the carrying of secrets; being downtrodden, robbed, and ground down. This aesthetics of social hierarchy, morality and belonging is incorporated into and managed by institutions, networks and media cultures, generating norms of social inclusion. The affective event of humiliation therefore has variable but predictable cultural characteristics.

The Clinton Affair: Reputation and the Persistence of Social Value

I lost my sense of self.
—Monica Lewinsky, On the Internet’s Reputation Shredder

As a structure of feeling, humiliation is an *emergent* social propensity that works our cultural aesthetics of social relating, ‘saturating atmospheres of held but inexplicit knowledge’ (Berlant, 2015: 194). This does not mean that humiliation is ‘new’, but that in venting the excesses of social relations in flux—in ‘disturbance’ (194)—its affective structure has become prescient. In the example I discuss here, humiliation works the aesthetics of social relating in the service of patriarchal gender relations, reproducing women’s social subordination by turning on their capacity for self-abnegation. This type of abnegation, as discussed, is the outcome/coming in of humiliation.

In 2014 Monica Lewinsky herself reminded us that her story, published online on 21 January 1998 in the *Drudge Report* (www.drudgereport.com), was the first to break the Internet—despite the fact that the Internet was back then “a perk” even for major news organisations in the US (Susan Glasser in Harris, 2018). It was, Lewinsky (2014) said, “the first time you missed history being made if you didn’t have access to the internet.” To return to the theme of public shaming online, Lewinsky cites the media culture of humiliation as the motivation for her public talks: “cyber bullying, trolling, some forms of hacking, online harassment”, she observes, “all have humiliation at their core” (Lewinsky, 2015). “There is a very personal price to humiliation, and the growth of the Internet has jacked up that price … Cruelty to others is nothing new, but online, technologically enhanced shaming is amplified, uncontained, and permanently accessible” (Lewinsky, 2015).

That Lewinsky is the subject of a spoiled identity is plain to see—during her first video-recorded and platformed talk, her chin is tight and trembling, suggestive of the effort of her composure (Lewinsky, 2014). As I watch for the first time, I feel us both on the cusp of faltering: I *feel* that simultaneous requirement and impossibility of containing *something*—the mistake, so much bigger than you, and yet so engulping of you, as it is
imposed upon you. ‘Humiliation’, William Miller writes, ‘is the price we pay for not knowing how others see us’ (1993: x). “I was threatened with 27 years in jail”, Lewinsky says, emphasising the intolerable prospect of having to live beside herself long-term. She describes herself as being, almost, “humiliated to death”. Lewinsky outlines that price. Lewinsky’s parents had her on suicide watch. Lewinsky’s is the story of what it is like to be ‘Hated in the Nation’ (*Black Mirror*, 2011–).

The strategy of survival and its shortcomings that Lewinsky discloses is particularly revealing of humiliation’s social mechanism. Lewinsky’s self-identified strategy was to distinguish between the “two Monica Lewinskys”: “me” and “public Monica Lewinsky … constructed with a little fact and a lot of fiction”. By her own account, Lewinsky distinguished as much as she could her own sense of self from the impression of her held by others. She recalls her efforts to delaminate herself—who she (thinks she) is—from the “Monica” she was becoming known as—her reputation. However, the social embedding of her sense of self within the protective milieu of family and friends offered little defence against the “image of strangers reading the report” that “amplified by a thousand-fold the shame and humiliation” she felt. Lewinsky found that her reputation was part of herself: the ruining of her reputation, she claims, “was a form of identity theft”. Humiliation as a theft of identity, as defamation, undermines the sovereignty of the ideational self.\(^2\) Affect undermines the abstract—one abstraction supplanted for another, the social transpires as materially real. The underlying social reality of one’s sense of self—affective, embodied and constitutive—is under assault in the assault on one’s reputation. Humiliation works upon the fold of the social within the self, the impression of the reputation within self-perception. Looking back, Lewinsky tries to distil the entangled threads of her reputation online, her *data*—for which she never derived any royalties, she jokes—from her flesh and blood self—an entanglement upon which online humiliation pivots, the basis upon which “the Internet has jacked up that price” (Lewinsky, 2015) of ‘not knowing how others see us’ (Miller, 1993: x).

So described, humiliation emerges out of the problematic of identity as an exercise of power more generally, and specifically, out of the question of resistance. Resistance to, and in relation to, identity, can be encapsulated as the difficulty of escaping ‘binary organizations of asymmetrical power’, given how notions such as ‘hybridity, syncretism, third space … are in fact products of “the disjunctive logic’ that colonization and Western modernity introduced” (Hall 1999: 6) … implicated in the very diagrams they try to escape’ (Grossberg, 2010: 202). If the subject of a spoiled reputation could “fix” the bad identity herself, or if we could fix it for her, we would no longer need to contend with the power of representation and its incessant binaries; we could in fact abandon the project of identity altogether, and certainly of reputation. For Wendy Brown, this impossibility of doing away with an inherited relation of power underlies ‘subjection’ and the *ressentiment* that reinstates ‘the terms of domination’ (1995: 7, 5). Her concern, that resistance ‘is figured by and within rather than externally to the regimes of power it contests’ (3), points to the insidiousness of humiliation as an affective intensification of the subject’s self-relation within a context of power. Intensifying self-relationality via norms of sociality, humiliation becomes a neoliberal affect par excellence.
In response to the humiliation of her identity, it’s not enough for Monica to simply assert: “That’s not me!” As Elizabeth Povinelli explains, “the social fact of the feeling of being obliged” to “moral sense and to reason” are often not consistent: people “discover that their reasoning and their affect are out of joint” (2002: 4, 5). Humiliation foregrounds Lewinsky’s impaled agency in her own process of self-identification, but also the psychic pain of enduring the mal-aligning of her reason and her affect. We might want to distinguish ourselves from the bad reputation, but it’s not a matter entirely in our control—we incorporate standards “from the wider society” that render us “intimately alive to what others see as his [our] failing” (Goffman, 1963: 7). This incorporation cannot always be tracked or resisted by existing cultural codes. Humiliation works this tension, between “the sociality of affect” (Berlant, 2016), and the reckoning of knowing better, or otherwise. Although socially modified, moderated and mediated by cultural forms and technologies—from reason to sentimentality, to the panopticon to the algorithm—we might consider that the power of the social to oblige us is not derivative, but affective. Moral sense, especially the feeling of being obliged, is not exhausted by morality—by the cultural encoding of affect within any given system of representation (such as ‘moral knowledge’). It is perhaps because humiliation is predicated upon the sociality of affect—our affective experience of living with attachments to objects and abstractions, including our reflexive attachment to our sense of self—that the question of how to resist or move on from humiliation becomes so difficult. If affective sociality is immanent within social relations, resistance or change must occur therein, from within the inter- and intra-subjective swirl, from emotions to nonconscious bodily movement.

Living in these ironic times, we often precisely do know, reasonably, that the bad reputation is wrong; that, for instance, social values are stratified according to the biases of race, class, sexuality, and gender that are both concreate and abstract systems of knowledge informing the cultural economy of reputation. Yet we cannot entirely override a bad affect with a better education. Myriad examples from the postcolonial, critical race, queer and feminist studies literature attest to this in their evocation and politicisation of the painfulness of misrecognition, the ‘break with what is called reality’ (Goffman, 1963: 10). Humiliation is particularly linked to the anguish of the schism between reason and affect, the nonsovereignty of the subject of an affective sociality. So while within the eventful structure of humiliation the neoliberal dispositif of the responsible individual is squarely brought into focus, humiliation also attunes us to the social as that which affectively obliges us: in the crisis of experiencing the debris of a spoiled identity, we are sensitised to our affective sociality. Whether or not we are in reasonable agreement with the terms of this attunement, which might work for or against our better judgement, they do, nevertheless, pull us into social relating.

The Animus of the Social—Gaming Affect

Even as we seek to redress the pain and humiliation consequent to historical deprivation of freedom in a putatively “free” political order, might we thus sustain the psychic residues of these histories as the animus of political institutions constitutive of our future? —Wendy Brown, States of Injury
A confidence game is one in which a person swindles or robs another person after gaining their confidence.

—Sarah Banet-Weiser, Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyney

In 2018, the UK soap opera *EastEnders* ran a storyline implicitly examining ‘networked misogyny’ and its propagation of ‘rape culture’ among men (Banet-Weiser, 2018: 34). The story specifically critiques the ‘postfeminist framing of date rape’ that uses ‘women’s confidence and agency as a way to redirect blame away from men’ (54). Male sexual violence is represented as a cultural strategy of disempowering women by humiliating them—especially through denying their experience (of violence, of humiliation). This psychological play is now more widely known as “gaslighting”, thanks to the cultural visibility of networked feminism and the introduction of the offence of ‘controlling or coercive behaviour in an intimate or family relationship’ to section 76 of the UK Serious Crime Act 2015. The *EastEnders* storyline highlights male sexual violence as a strategy of social control through locating heterosexual rape within the defensive camaraderie of male social bonds. A series of scenes, from brunch at the local café to a game of football in the park, follow the 4 male friends as they engage in the mutual affirmation of what had happened the night before. “It was just a bit of fun wasn’t it?”, one character says to the others.

In contrast to the male violence displayed “in plain sight” in the male characters’ banter, the victim confides in quiet shock to her friend: “I didn’t say ‘no’. I just froze, like it wasn’t even happening”. Ruby (Louisa Lytton) tries to make sense of what is referred to in the trauma literature as “the freeze response”. At the same time, Ruby’s story moves beyond medical and psychological trauma to point to another sense of which she becomes aware:

Ruby: You know when you’re into it and then you’re just suddenly not sure. I thought about calling a taxi but [long pause], I felt like I owed him. I really fancied him in the club.

Ruby’s friend: You didn’t owe him anything.

According to the characters’ reflection, what passes in Ruby’s frozen response—in her inability to speak, move, or leave—is her sense of obligation. Ruby recalls: “And he had this look in his eyes that blokes get, and [pause] I couldn’t move. I didn’t do anything. I just lay there”.

This storyline, its scenes, and the scenario of being its victim, drew my attention to how the incapacitation of one’s senses makes way for ‘the feeling of being obliged’. We are, of course, socially obliged all the time: this obligation enables us to live a life. However, as Ruby “just lay there”, a certain obligation is made palpable—an affective bind (in both senses). We might observe how the inability to ‘sense’ (feel), and ‘make sense of’ (know), ‘what is going on’, both mark Ruby’s experience, suggesting that the obligation preceding humiliation is not adequately described as being either reasonable or sensible. Ruby is obliged by the male characters—their actions overpower hers in a way that forecloses her course of action. Yet, her obligation also extends beyond their actions, to the social relations they embody. We might think of these as relations of power, or as a form of sociality that is inseparable from power. The feeling of being obliged stems from a deep reasoning that is not necessarily captured by the feminist or social justice
discourse on consent that overemphasises the possibility of saying “yes”, or “no” (Fischel, 2019). We might consider this obligation as an affective reasoning, and we might consider that the patriarchal organisation of social life subtends our social interactions in this way. This would help to explain the affective obligation that humiliation casts into action as a patriarchal power.

Almost 25 years on, our political institutions can hardly be described as reworking the affective ‘residues’ of our pain and humiliation (Brown, 1995: 29). Rather, within a broader media culture of humiliation, they seem to be producing these anew, inciting the pain of humiliation as a key affective condition of subjection. Through its nostalgic image of working class, tight-knit community, the soap opera draws out the co-extensivity and intensivity of humiliation and our social relations. The soap opera storyline discussed here invokes the misogynistic culture that has proliferated in networked media and communications environments, but also re-embeds networked misogyny within the affective parameters of a particular locale. The soap opera thus emboldens humiliation’s social scene as it is being reanimated by networked media, and does so by expressing longstanding gendered dynamics. What happens, in networked media environments, when these conditions of social belonging are transformed? Does the tactical use of humiliation lose its force, or gain further significance, as social belonging is wedded to reputational profiles? This remains to be seen, and felt. If humiliation is prophetic, as in Williams’ original formulation—in which any structure of feeling must be prophetic of a future class organisation (Berlant, 2015)—it would hail an endemic crisis of self-relating, and self-worth.

Endnotes

1. Thanks to Sean Cubitt for this point.
2. By ‘sovereignty’ I refer to the work of Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman (2014), who identify sovereignty as a presumption of the discourse on the subject. Importantly, the ideational concept of sovereign subjectivity is confounded by our ‘experience of relation’ (viii-ix), linked in particular to what is threatening in sex. The broader context of Berlant and Edelman’s critique, an examination of optimism, might point us to the link between humiliation and optimism: it is our hope for the regard of the other, and for our own prevailing sense of self, that structures our vulnerability to the injury of humiliation.
3. In Povinelli’s example, this disconnect has particular resonance with the quandary of multiculturalism—a policy of cultural difference that cannot avow the affective social bond and its significance for how we live together within cultural difference.
4. For an account of a virtually identical scenario see The Guardian’s coverage of the trial of Alex Hepburn (Morris and agency, 2019). For several reasons, extending beyond the remit of this article while also being central to it, I do not repeat the details here.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Michael Richardson for an invitation to develop this work for a seminar at the University of New South Wales, as well as to participants in the ‘Humiliation’ conference stream for CAPACIOUS: Affect Inquiry/Making Space at Millersville
University. Thank you also to Harry Dyer and Zoetanya Sujon, for their editorial guidance, and for organising *Understanding the Social in a Digital Age* at the University of East Anglia. I would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their comments.

References


Berlant L (2016) Interview with Lauren Berlant. *2016 Summer School for Sexualities, Culture and Politics*. Research Center for Cultures, Politics and Identities (IPAK.Center), 28 November. Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ih4rkMSjmjs&fbclid=IwAR28oILkJ7AT_JUuz8EciVKHHevleO5MVl2Fu0Q-m-i48oEQisqGvSxKL10](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ih4rkMSjmjs&fbclid=IwAR28oILkJ7AT_JUuz8EciVKHHevleO5MVl2Fu0Q-m-i48oEQisqGvSxKL10) (accessed 10 November 2018).


