"Everything Being Tangled Up in Every Other Thing": Class, Desire, and Shame in Michelle Tea's *The Passionate Mistakes and Intricate Corruption of One Girl in America*

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This article explores the relationship of shame to class and to desire in Michelle Tea's memoir The Passionate Mistakes and Intricate Corruption of One Girl in America. *Through applying a class analytic to the framework of shame recently advanced by feminist, queer, postcolonial, and affect theorists, I foreground shame as central to the experience of being poor and queer, and examine shame as not only negative and positive, but as productive. I operationalize an "oppositional reading strategy" to insist on attention to the materiality of embodied desire and labor, in particular queer desire and sex work, that is made available in poor and working-class women's life-writing. Tea's memoir demonstrates how writing about an ambivalent relation to shame is an act of resistance, an opportunity to transform private, individual experiences into public, and therefore collective, articulations.*

How might a poor or working-class, queer, female writer make use of the affect of shame? This essay proposes to explore shame's attachment to poor and working-class queer subjectivity through a close reading of the third chapter of Michelle Tea's memoir *The Passionate Mistakes and Intricate Corruption of One Girl in America* (Tea 1998). In claiming shame as central to poor and working-class experience and to queer desire, this essay weaves together analyses of class, sexuality, and memoir to argue for a reading of shame as potentially productive of subjectivity and identification across difference. Despite the common-sense assumption that shame is wholly negative or destructive, and that experiencing shame produces only incommensurability or alienation, I argue that for a poor, queer, female writer, the intimate relationship of shame to identity might instigate a complex and ambivalent

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working-through of both positive and negative experiences via the transformative act of writing.

As Tea's subjective "I" traverses multiple social locations, the kind of work her text performs is as disruptive as it is cohesive. Lee Quinby posits that memoirs "construct a subjectivity that is multiple and discontinuous" and is simultaneously "externalized" (Quinby 1992, 299). In contrast to the self-possessed subject of traditional autobiography, Quinby suggests that the "I" of memoir draws on relationships to others in order to make sense of and locate an understanding of the self. *The Passionate Mistakes* is Michelle Tea's debut memoir, recording in sharp detail deeply private encounters in the half-decade between her late adolescence in Boston, Massachusetts, and her early adulthood in Tucson, Arizona. The text centers on exploring her burgeoning queer sexuality in two partnerships—both characterized by class inequality and emotional abuse—the first with a heterosexual man, Ian, and the second with a bisexual woman, Liz. Although both figures are central to the text, it is in the memoir's middle chapter where Tea's tumultuous relationship to Liz and to sex work best capture the dynamics this essay strives to foreground. As a catalogue of love and labor, *The Passionate Mistakes* reveals the under-theorized connections among desire, identity, shame, and class. Emerging from these complex entanglements is Tea's unique narrative voice, a sometimes painful, always candid vocalization of intimacy and alienation, longing and struggle. Through her recollections of young queer desire and sex work, Tea's text makes visible the risks involved when poor and working-class women dare to write themselves into discourse.

Tea's text joins an American tradition of lesbian and queer working-class women who have also found representation through life-writing (for example, Lorde 1982; Allison 1994; Hollibaugh 2000). As Francesca T. Royster claims, "Queer life narratives explore the boundaries of truth and feeling, myth and lived experience; they see history from the cracks within the surface" (Royster 2011, vi). Yet, despite Tea's prolific record of documenting queer and working-class life from the margins—she has now published more than ten books, edited three collections, been a regular columnist for a popular feminist blog, founded literary nonprofit Radar Productions, and started a feminist reading series, Sister Spit—the critical attention paid to Tea's work hasn't exceeded a smattering of mixed book reviews over the past two decades (Sickels 2000; Bearse 2003; Johnson 2005; Roush 2006; Miller 2013; Farley 2015; Parravano 2015). The absence of critical engagement with Tea's texts—and in particular *The Passionate Mistakes*—suggests that poor and working-class women writers not only continue to grapple with the material struggles of writing and publishing, but that within the academy, this work encounters barriers to being taken up as legitimate literary objects.

When class becomes visible—which often occurs *vis à vis* the recognition of a *lack* of class power—a poor or working-class woman's text can become positioned as outside of literature. In this process, both the writer and the subject of the text may be narrowly interpreted as "victims" of their circumstances (Taylor 2001, 166). Yet it is crucial to retain a sense of the author's agency—both historical and textual— particularly when considering the intersections of gender, class, race, and sexuality. As a

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kind of ethical orientation to engaging with poor and working-class women's writing, Roxanne Rimstead calls for an "oppositional reading strategy" that requires "prying open both dominant and subversive representations of poverty in literary works and in everyday, popular discourses" (Rimstead 2001, 4). This oppositional reading strategy facilitates a critique of how literary representation, and often its attendant criticism, has obscured, made invisible, or distorted poor and working-class subjects. I draw on this oppositional reading strategy in my discussion of *The Passionate Mistakes*, particulary as I position shame as central to my reading. This reading is not meant to perform a diagnostic of Tea's lived experiences, but rather hopes to show how her text theorizes the relationship between class and desire, and the potentially productive relation of shame to both. There is a political urgency to the literary rendering of experiences of poverty, sex work, and queer desire; and perhaps of equal significance, there is much at stake in refuting an easy association of these experiences with negative conceptions of shame. Given the significance of shame to representations of both poverty and queer sexuality, prior to the exposition of shame within *The Passionate Mistakes* I initiate two tasks: first, I examine Tea's text through the insights of working-class women's literary criticism, and second, I intervene on the theoretical shame framework by insisting on the significance of class.

Contextualizing Working-Class Women's Literature

Poor and working-class women writers creatively resist many barriers in literary discourse, demonstrated by a struggle for recognition that occurs not just in the generic form of their writing, but also in the formal elements of structure and style. *The Passionate Mistakes* is composed of five chapter-length vignettes underscored by the time and places they span, each possessing a narrative arc with its own complete rising action and subtle form of resolution. Akin to short stories, the vignette performs the function of enabling the separate pieces to have an affective or narrative impact in the absence of any other context, which I aim to capture in my close reading of the text's third chapter. Michelle Tokarczyk suggests that working-class writers "choose experimental styles that represent the everyday reality of working people's lives … writing from and for a working-class life in which both reading and writing must be done in short snippets of time" (Tokarczyk 2008, 35). This description reinforces why the life-writing modes of memoir or "confession," with their de-emphasis on a unified narrative flow (Felski 1989, 99), can provide an accessible narrative structure for poor and working-class writers.

Tea's writing style both conforms to and troubles shared literary conventions performed in the genre of memoir and within some poor and working-class women's writing. Indeed, Janet Zandy describes working-class women's writing as "accessible, straightforward, with a sense of immediate and direct revelation," at the same time insisting that it "defies easy categorization" (Zandy 1990, 12). Although I contend that the sense of immediacy Zandy foregrounds is intrinsic to the stream-of-consciousness style that characterizes Tea's prose, there is a potentially limiting strand of

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thought in poor and working-class literary theory that insists that poor and working-class texts be taken at face value. As Rimstead articulates, the issue is that engaging with poor and working-class texts through alienating or exclusionary "Theory" risks their being collapsed into objects—not subjects—of knowledge (Rimstead 2001, 191–92). Although this concern serves to maintain a closeness with the text itself, I caution that it can make it difficult to register the potential for poor and working-class female writers to participate in an intentionally abstracted literary discourse. Conditions of materiality are certainly central to many poor and working-class women's texts, but I write against an *a priori* limit on what these texts can do.

Tokarczyk puts forward a more flexible approach to this issue of (mis)representation at the level of academic discourse, opting for the critic of working-class literature to perform the role of a "bridge between working-class and academic sensibilities" (Tokarczyk 2011, 4). This sentiment aligns more clearly with my own motivations in this essay; wary of the potential to elevate criticism over the knowledge put forward by the writer herself, I nonetheless consider the critical task of exposition to be a productive one, specifically within the realm of academic discourse. The relationship between critic and writer, or between writer and writer, is not predetermined; rather, it is through close reading and discussion that an opportunity for new relationships of power can occur, and that the intimate effects of literature can enact a broader reach.

For instance, Tea's prose captures a sense of immediacy through accessible language, but the formal content of her writing is anything but simple, as she also expresses innovation in the use of dialogue. Rita Felski has suggested that one of the adjustments made to traditional autobiography by contemporary life-writing is the inclusion of dialogue (Felski 1989, 89), an addition that adds a fictional element to the text in its reproduction of spoken language. Supported by Nicholas Coles and Janet Zandy's insistence on the diverse aesthetic approaches of multivocality within the working-class literary canon (Coles and Zandy 2007), Tea alters the conventions of dialogue in two distinct ways, and for two varying but connected political projects. The first intervention Tea performs is the refusal to use quotation marks: italics instead mark her reflections on the spoken language of others. This move refutes the formalism of high literature, a staunchly poor and working-class aesthetic that refuses to elevate the speech of others above her own written discourse. It also grounds all forms of illocutions as within Tea's control, making transparent their utterance on the page as subject to her deliberate and conscious reinscription of them. This strategy increases both her narrative agency in the recollection of dialogue, and asserts her confidence in her own intellectual processes.

The second innovation Tea performs with dialogue is the absence of possessive pronouns or nouns attached to illocutionary phrases. Instead, the difference between speakers is determined by the contrast to Tea's own speech acts, signified through the capitalization of each word in Tea's phrases. This action is a provocative feminist reformation of language through an insistence on the autonomy and strength of Tea's speech acts against those she engages with. These repetitions of chains of capitalized words effect a form of urgency, and power, in Tea's statements. This capitalization

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enriches her own language with the sense of always being "greater than," thus increasing the legitimacy and force of her locutions. These small, yet committed, transgressions on the conventions of grammar are subversive acts that disrupt the boundaries of what dialogue "should" look like in literature, and particularly what kind of agency poor and working-class queer female subjects possess (as writers and as written subjects).

The form of Tea's prose also aligns itself with a tradition of the litany, or list, a stylistic element commonly found in poor and working-class women's writing. Karen Kovacik describes working-class women's poetry as a kind of "witness[ing]" or "activism" that through the litany "pushes the lyric poem beyond an individual speaking subject" (Kovacik 2011, 78). Tea's literary voice is arguably generated by her desire to give "witness" to the circumstances of her life and her varying social locations. As the formal function of a paragraph is to contain an idea or event within a visual parameter, Tea's use of excessively long paragraphs demonstrates a refusal of the working-class female writer to be contained or limited by convention. This also suggests the tangled excess of the events and descriptions within each paragraph, reifying that neither poor and working-class female experience nor identity is singular or discrete. Rather, the writing flows within the paragraphs as if Tea is performing a form of discursive call and response between her memory and the page; one thing leads to another, and nothing leads to an end.

As Tokarczyk insists, working-class texts are "motivated not by aesthetics alone, but by a desire to render the material conditions of working peoples' lives in an aesthetically pleasing manner" (Tokarczyk 2008, 24). The project of working-class women writers, Tokarczyk emphasizes, is to describe power relations and experiences beyond the simple categorical imperative of "labor" (13). Thus, although Tea's descriptions take the form of litanies of objects and feelings piling up against one another with defiant strength, they rarely gesture toward a contained kind of class or labor knowledge (particularly as demonstrated in her accounts of sex work). Rather, through the effusive run-on quality of Tea's paragraph forms, these descriptive passages are sites of complicated avowals and disavowals, linking embodiment with exteriority and an always self-reflexive consciousness of the self in intimate proximity to broader workings of gender and class power.

Memoir can make visible the historical and social location of the narrator, and can expose the effects that context has on subjectivity (Smith and Watson 2001, 198). Thus, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson suggest that two kinds of lives emerge in the iteration of the subjective narrator of memoir: the historical self that is observed by and connected to others, and the internal self that only the narrator has access to (5). This framework for approaching subjectivity has particular bearing on how a lack of class power can affect the self-articulations of poor and working-class female subjects, particularly in whether shame will limit or encourage cultural production. In resisting the common-sense response to "cower in shame" from poverty and instead mobilizing shame as an affective mode of seeking legibility, poor and working-class female life-writers expose shame in their texts, putting to work its ambivalent and sometimes productive effects. Although the literary self-

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representation of poor and working-class women may achieve at least symbolic visibility—but not necessarily economic gain—this act may also conjure up the "shame of being made visible and admitting powerlessness" as a poor or working-class woman (Rimstead 2001, 143). Reading this shame requires an oppositional lens, which I will return to in the following sections.

The subjective "I" that emerges in Tea's memoir is constrained by, resistant to, and conscious of her lack of class power—and the shame this lack engenders. The act of writing a memoir is a physical act that performs a kind of written subjectivity that offers the potential to illuminate the conditions of Tea's embodied and felt experience within self-created representations that mark her as poor and working-class. Zandy charges that it is specifically this working-class consciousness that urges working-class writers to move their knowledge outward (Zandy 2001, xiv). However, Tea's consciousness is not limited to class, and her orientation to the world and to her texts is also structured by whiteness, queerness, and femininity, all of which contribute to her particular feminist politics. The complexity of Tea's subjectivity thus troubles an easy incorporation into a single ideological project, and urges a broadening of both feminist and working-class conceptions of subjectivity, particularly in relation to shame. As Sara Ahmed reminds us, emotions both constrict and enable the possibility of transformation (Ahmed 2004, 171).

Classing the Shame Framework

Shame is often externally ascribed to the poor and working-class subject (as in the performative injunction "Shame on you [for being poor, for failing to succeed, for living in that neighborhood, and so on]!"), and it can be internalized through what Patricia Hill Collins has called the power of "controlling images," whereby marginalized people identify themselves within derogatory cultural stereotypes (Collins 1999). As Nancy Eisenberg's recent monograph details, America has long promoted interlocking historical, ideological, material, and representational projects of racial and economic inequality, only one of which is the persistent devaluation of the white poor (Eisenberg 2016). Simultaneously, there can sometimes be positive and generative associations between shame and poverty, specifically in the defiant sense of pride that emerges from the self-naming of individuals associated with impoverished and racialized groups (for example: "white trash" and "hillbilly"), as well as the possibility for collective solidarity around these identifications. This is, then, an ambivalent relation. Rimstead reflects on this ambivalence: "The experiences of shame and resistance are often complexly intertwined, if not inseparable. Resistance often grows out of shame. Both emerge as powerful elements in subversions of negative constructions of identity" (Rimstead 2001, 26). This ambivalent connection of shame to sites of poor and working-class identity-making and resistance also resonates within queer and feminist politics.

Recently, queer and critical race theorists have engaged with affect theory as a way to explore the relevance of negative emotions without moralizing or re-entrenching subjects in restrictive ideology or biology (Eng 2000; Sedgwick 2003; Ahmed 2004;

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Edelman 2004; Gilroy 2005; Ngai 2005; Ghandi 2006; Clough and Halley 2007; Love 2007; Snediker 2008; Berlant 2011). Despite the seeming "newness" of the attention given to affect at the turn of the century, Clara Fischer argues that this interest in affect has a distinct history in feminism, thus extending from and contributing to an interest in the emotions and materiality long pursued by feminist scholars (Fischer 2016, 816). Indeed, questioning how affect traffics within feminist politics continues to captivate queer feminist reflections on subjectivity and feminist praxis (Hemmings 2011; Cvetkovich 2012). Weaving together queer theory's deconstruction of the assumed link among queerness, negativity, and shame, feminist theory's reflexive attention to affect in the construction of subjectivity, and working-class literary theory's commitment to making class visible, I insist on the significance of class as an index of identity as essential to unraveling shame's story within Tea's *The Passionate Mistakes*.

Pursuing this often neglected index as foundational to the meaning-making and world-making of diverse subjectivities, this essay insists on foregrounding how classed experience—which is often made audible only through expressions of *lived experience*—matters to those queer and feminist subjects whose discourses become the very objects of feminist scholarship. In line with Rimstead, I argue that it is politically important to provide close reading of women's "poverty narratives" in order to include poor women's knowledge in literary scholarship (Rimstead 2001, 123), particularly in the feminist project of understanding gender and shame. If we take seriously the consternation that poor women's writing is "not a luxury" but is an act of resistance (Lorde 1984, 37), then we need to do more than simply recognize poor and working-class women's contributions—we need to theorize, learn from, and integrate their lessons into the feminist vision of social justice.

An oppositional reading strategy attentive to poverty narratives can augment the recent attention to shame in queer theory. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's foundational work on shame has directed my thinking here, particularly in her exploration of how shame is connected to identity and her sense that shame is potentially productive. Sedgwick claims that shame is the place "where the *question* of identity arises most originarily and most relationally" (Sedgwick 2003, 37; emphasis in original). While refuting that identity is something stable, inherent, or even knowable, Sedgwick nonetheless advocates for an interpretation of shame as an affect with the potential to enrich the ways in which the political—and deeply personal—investments in identity are approached. Shame performs what Sedgwick calls a "double movement" of creating an awareness of the self while simultaneously drawing the self toward another (37). This emphasis on relationality as a determinant of identity in Sedgwick's description is drawn from the mid-century work on affect by psychologist Silvan Tomkins. Tomkins's writing is perhaps so appreciated by contemporary queer literary critics because of its "resistance" to dualistic or "heterosexist teleologies" (99). With this background in mind, it is Tomkins's teleology of shame that most informs my close reading of *The Passionate Mistakes*.

Tomkins describes shame as "an experience of the self by the self .... Shame is the most reflexive of affects in that the phenomenological distinction between the subject and object of shame is lost" (Tomkins 1995, 136). This "phenomenological

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distinction" between the self and the other is the moment of "interrupting identification" to which Sedgwick refers above. Key to both Sedgwick's and Tomkins's description of shame is that it is an instance where the *difference* between the self and the other is accentuated. Shame forces an awareness of the boundary of the self specifically in relation to the boundary of an other. Tomkins links shame to the positive affect of interest, claiming that "the innate activator of shame is the incomplete reduction of interest or joy" (134). Significantly, this reduction of interest must be incomplete in order for shame to occur; shame is the self-debasing response to a desire to reconnect with the object. Thus, shame "makes identity" in an interrupting moment between interpreting the self in a negative way in relation to an object of desire. This link between a negative interpretation of self and a sustained desire for the object is a "paradoxical consequence" of how "the same positive affect which ties the self to the object also ties the self to shame" (138).

This bond between shame and desire is palpable throughout *The Passionate Mistakes*, a relation I read through a lens of attentiveness to how poverty works *vis à vis* gender and sexuality in life-writing. That the feeling of shame is important to this text might be gestured to by the foregrounding of the knotty relation between desire and regret in the text's title, which names the text as an affectively loaded, powerful turning back on a life, to assess how "I" happened. In this assertive link between "passion" and "mistakes," Tea sutures these positive and negative emotional states, capturing the ambivalence intrinsic to the experience of shame. Indeed, Tomkins describes the shame response as "a deeply ambivalent act," as a "turning of the eyes away from the object toward the face, toward the self" (Tomkins 1995, 137). Sedgwick in turn links the physicality of shame (eyes averted, head down) to the act of reading (Sedgwick 2003, 40). In extending the shame response from reading to the act of autobiographical writing, I offer Tea's memoir as an example of working through shame via making external those experiences that would otherwise be felt as deeply private and relegated to the body. As Ahmed insists, "the challenge for feminism"—and I would add, for feminist literary scholars—"is to accept that the conditions in which we speak are not our making" (Ahmed 2004, 177). Despite a range of material obstacles to entering literary discourse, poor and working-class female authors might be able to "move beyond shame to a place of resistance" in the act of writing memoir (Rimstead 2001, 143). Tea's text signifies a performative act of transformation and resistance that moves shame outward; the affective and material acts of working through, writing, and releasing this "passionate" poverty narrative into the public sphere exposes a range of shame's powerful—and at times productive—effects.

Reading Shame Oppositionally

The third chapter in *The Passionate Mistakes*, "Get Used to It: Boston, 1991," marks a turning point in Tea's development as a feminist, queer, and poor and working-class subject. The previous chapter detailed her break-up with her first serious boyfriend, Ian, and a short affair with a working-class closeted lesbian, Kelly, leading to Tea's

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tentative identification as queer. I argue that her class identity becomes compromised and subjugated in order to accommodate this burgeoning queer sexual identity. In joining her local chapter of the activist group Queer Nation[1]—and experiencing the kind of politicized and nonnormative queerness it espouses—Tea finds a new form of belonging and freedom via relationships with women who possess greater social and economic privilege than she has. At an abortion-clinic defense rally, Tea describes meeting the enigmatic Liz, a radical and confrontational third-wave feminist whose lesbianism has yet to move beyond the theoretical (Tea 1998, 89). In Tea's relationship to Liz, identification and shame function in a new way that is crucially linked to Liz's upper-class social location and its marked difference from Tea's poor and working-class background.

Tomkins describes "a special type of shame which is evoked by barriers to interest or enjoyment" wherein a "barrier to identify with or act like" the other becomes "a major source of shame" (Tomkins 1995, 153). Class functions as one such "barrier" to Tea's identification with Liz, and sets the tone for Tea's increasingly damaging relation to shame in proximity to Liz. Tea's initial recognition that "they all had had different lives" is carefully negated through desire when Tea is invited to go away with Liz and Liz's friend Teri to Teri's parents' summer home (Tea 1998, 89). Tea cannot reconcile "the cost of maintaining all these things" with the knowledge that her own family "didn't own their own home" let alone "an entire furnished home that sat vacant for most of the year" (89). However, Tea's awareness that Liz is interested in her sexually enables her not to "feel too uncomfortable" (89), and the "great" and "amazing" novelty of being Liz's "first girl" trumps her skepticism and results in their immediate solidification as girlfriends (90). The prickle of class shame is temporarily warded off by focusing on their mutual desire.

Tea's attempts to identify with Liz are constantly challenged through her lack of class power, instigating a feeling of shame that is disavowed and forestalled through a negating of the issue of class. Marveling at the lushness and luxury contained within Liz and Teri's downtown Boston apartment, Tea suppresses an impulse to "ask questions" about where their money comes from, reflecting that "some people had money and some people didn't" and that she just "wouldn't understand" (Tea 1998, 104). Tea stubbornly defends her inherited lack of money and privilege by expressing a lack of "interest" in theirs (105), but her feelings of exclusion are evident in her admission that "it was like Liz and Teri were from another country and this was the stuff of their culture" (104). However, Tea's awareness that her proximity to these new forms of upper-class leisure and pleasure are temporary and dependent on her connection to Liz is captured in her reflection, "Tell me, what is the opposite of slumming? Vacationing. I was on vacation" (106). In order to be with Liz, Tea must present herself as "like" Liz, which for Tea requires an abstraction from her own life and identity, a form of self-alienation that deepens as Tea struggles to maintain Liz's interest in her and to ward off the harrowing effects of the classed shame circuit in which she becomes caught.

The class barriers to Tea's identification with Liz are in some ways resolved through a yearning for the freedom that Liz represents, rather than the objects she possesses. This channeling of desire toward a way of being rather than toward the

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products that surround a form of being is dependent on Tea's class-consciousness and is a strategy of resistance Tea deploys to ward off shame. Discussing the role of affects as motivational, Tomkins writes, "a human being thus becomes freer as his wants grow and his capacities to satisfy them grow. Restriction either of his wants or abilities to achieve them represents a loss of freedom" (Tomkins 1995, 36). If freedom can be conceptualized as participating in the multiple forms of belonging that characterize hegemonic capitalist culture through an ability to satisfy wants and desires (including the privileges to consume, to be educated, and to own property), then being poor and working-class implies an "unfreedom" in the exclusion and alienation from these objects that appear as "wants." In proximity to Liz, both Tea's desires and her ability to fulfill them expand. As Donna Allegra argues, "one of the functions of class has to do with limiting what people believe they're entitled to reach for" (Allegra 1997, 211). Against this limitation, Tea seeks to circumvent the restrictions of her class position through the investment of positive affect in Liz.

Tea recounts how her desire for Liz is channeled into a desire to emulate Liz, that is, to occupy the freedom that she possesses. Following Tea's revelation that Liz works as a prostitute (Tea 1998, 106), their shared relationship to desire, sex, and money intensifies as Tea lives vicariously through Liz's financial freedom. Tokarczyk's suggestion that a "freedom from fear" is one of the benefits of being upper-class is demonstrated by Tea's descriptions of Liz, and the awe that her freedom inspires in Tea (Tokarczyk 2008, 19). Tea is "excited" and "thrilled" by Liz's confession of her job, and her adoration for Liz "grows" into the "stature of myth," designating Liz as "tough," "fearless," and "smart, "all the things a whore should be" (Tea 1998, 106). Reflecting on the poor women who had done sex work in her own family, Tea shifts her perception of these women and of prostitution to accommodate the esteem she ascribes to Liz (106). Tea expresses a keen awareness that Liz's sense of sexual and economic freedom is more clearly rooted in the privilege and entitlement of her upper-class Connecticut upbringing than in her job as a prostitute. But this knowledge does not interfere with Tea taking advantage of the experiences that proximity to class freedom affords, and the initial summer of their relationship is spent like "two rich daughters" (114), a "couple of goddesses down from the mountain for some fun in the slums" (115). Tea is "enchanted" with Liz's obvious narcissism, and in identifying with and as Liz, "soon" Tea "started to act like" Liz and "believed it," too (115). As Tea's efforts to be as "fearless and desirable" as Liz directs them toward a triangulated sexual encounter with a man (117), Tea's grip on Liz as her "lesbian" girlfriend becomes more precarious, and Tea's investment in Liz as both her object of desire and shame increases.

As Tomkins has explained, the irony of how shame works is that it links the object of shame with the object of desire (Tomkins 1995, 138). When Tea intensifies her investment of positive feelings in Liz, Liz increasingly disidentifies with Tea in acts of shaming disregard, neglect, and eventual abuse. Liz's sense of feeling "unashamed" hinges on her ability to produce shame in Tea through exploiting the class difference between them: "Liz would smile with all the happiness of not being me and say *I'd rather suck a big dick for a hundred dollars and be done with it*" (Tea 1998,

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114). In part to sustain Liz's interest and to ward off the class shame she feels in their differences, Tea decides to quit her "practically minimum wage food service job" and start working as a prostitute, too (123). Against the stigma that circulates around prostitution is the sudden potential for "cash" and "limitless free time, oceans of it" (123), both classed barriers to Tea's firm identification with Liz. Tea's initiation into sex work involves "the beginning of a certain ritual"; by donning Liz's make-up, clothing, and perfume, she literally transforms her image to mimic Liz: "I did not look like myself and it made sense" (124). In what becomes a steady subjugating of her own identity in a sustained effort to keep her object of love close, Tea's identification with and as Liz extends to her entire sense of her own subjectivity: "I felt like Liz's life was mine" (141). However, the cruel shame-invoking ability of Liz's love ensures that Tea is always aware that she is a "guest" in Liz's life (141), and thus installs Tea in a vicious shame circuit wherein she feels like Liz has "created" her (140). Tomkins stresses that the peculiar "response to shame" requires that "self consciousness is heightened by virtue of the unwillingness of the self to renounce the object" (Tomkins 1995, 138). Despite numerous self-preserving attempts to break up with Liz and the positive and damaging affects Liz inspires (Tea 1998, 139), Tea's decision to work as a prostitute thwarts these efforts. Engaging in sex work both enlarges her investment in Liz and enhances her identification with Liz, while it simultaneously functions as an attempt to mitigate the specifically classed shame their differences evoke.

I want to be careful to stress that it is not sex work in and of itself that inspires shame in Tea's memoir; rather, Tea's text contributes to a robust Western feminist theoretical tradition that critically examines prostitution as one kind of economic option under varied and historically specific manifestations of patriarchy and capitalism (Brock 2009; Ross 2009; Bell 2010; van der Meulen, Durisin, and Love 2013). As Jo Doezema describes, although "prostitution has been a deeply contentious issue for feminists," the analysis that prostitution is "*a matter of personal choice and a form of work*" has specifically arisen from sex workers themselves (Doezema 1998, 37–38; emphasis in original; for foundational texts from the perspectives of sex workers, see also Bell 1987; Delacoste and Alexander 1987.) Indeed, Tea negates the easy slippage between shame and sex work by linking prostitution *as a kind of sexual labor* to the feeling of shame induced by obligatory sex in general, and in particular experienced in her previous heterosexual relationship with Ian. Tea actively writes against the assumption that sexual acts need be connected to love; her sexual relationship with Ian is one such proscribed combination of "this thing" she was "supposed to love" despite her "hate" and "loath[ing]" for it (Tea 1998, 123). It is the varied yet expected forms of heterosexual labor required of women, regardless of their desire, that produce feelings of shame in Tea and that lead to her eventual disidentification with Ian and heterosexuality. In reflecting on the unvalued sexual labor of her previous relationship, she positively reframes sex as a profitable commodity; "it did not need to damage you" (123).

More crucial than my own refusal to link sex work with shame is Tea's own explicit resistance to this too-easy attachment, evidenced throughout the memoir. The

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passage that most clearly elucidates this politics is one in which Tea describes her first client from the escort agency. Tea writes,

> I couldn't believe I was having sex with this man. It was like a movie. Thinking of it like that made if kind of funny, and the more I thought about it the funnier it really was until it was hilarious, that a girl could sink to this, the ultimate depths of femininity right, the worst case scenario of womanhood, and that it meant absolutely nothing, this was funny. And strangely liberating, not in a I've-Reclaimed-My-Sexuality way because there was nothing of mine to be claimed here. It was the feeling of another societal myth shattering in my cunt, hitting bottom only to discover there was no bottom, only me. (Tea 1998, 126)

Tea's recognition that the framing of prostitution as "the worst case scenario of womanhood" is "another societal myth" enables her to resist the shameful and stigmatizing insistence that transgression makes identity (126). Instead, Tea insists that at the "bottom" of her experience and the discourse of shame surrounding prostitution is "only" her self (126). This is a profoundly powerful refusal to be objectified as a particular thing or stereotype and a recasting of that experience inwards; against the often anti-poor and anti-women rhetoric of why or how prostitution functions, Tea staunchly confesses there is in fact "liberation" in the *lack* of meaning that having sex for money provides (126). In this moment, engaging in sex work does not constitute a new form of becoming or identification, but is rather a disavowal of shame and a disidentification with the pejorative archetype of the "fallen woman." This passage speaks to the liberatory feeling Tea experiences early on in her job as a sex worker, as she expresses a sense of greater agency over the enforced conditions of heteropatriarchy and economic inequality that structure her life.

Later in the chapter, Tea recounts her participation in sex work as an increasingly ambivalent experience, one that exacerbates her relation with shame in multiple ways, particularly in her recollection of childhood abuse. As Tea elucidates, "This is a hard story to tell, everything being tangled up in every other thing" (Tea 1998, 130). Tea's insights on her labor suggest that women from different class backgrounds unevenly acquire and benefit from access to money, and that the material experience of labor, in this case in the sex industry, must be contextualized within their overall class experience. Rather than increase the ease with which Tea can identify with Liz and her inherited class freedom, Tea's experience of prostitution exacerbates her own lack of class power. As Susan Raffo insists, class is more than "a social system and a function of institutions" as it has an "actual effect on individual lives and individual methods of survival and interpretation" (Raffo 1997, 3). Being poor and working-class is not simply about a lack of money, but it determines access to a safety net and to social capital (Tokarczyk 2008, 18). Thus, when Tea starts accumulating money from sex work, she experiences shame in her inability to conceptualize how to use the money or to actually transcend her social location. Tea describes feeling "confused" and "terrified" by the mass of money, "afraid" to leave it anywhere and "guilty" about her own family's continued economic lack (Tea 1998, 131). Unable to attach value

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to her labor because the compensation "came so quickly" (131), Tea's devaluing of her labor alienates her further from her self.

The deepening inequality in her relationship to Liz signifies Tea's insights that sex work functions differently to a poor and working-class woman than it does to an upper-class woman, specifically addressing how claims to power and privilege extend beyond an actual material accumulation of money. While working at the escort service and in between calls, Tea identifies with a poor woman on television who is arrested for prostitution, observing, "the less shame you have the less weapons people have against you" (Tea 1998, 126). Against this resistance to shame surrounding sex work, Tea's increased "panic" (129, 130), and the "hoard[ing]" of her economic gains to financially support Liz (144), create the "stress" of "living a double-life" (144). Despite her accumulated capital, and as a consequence of her relationship with Liz, Tea finds herself ensnared in Liz's reality, where her own lack of class power and lack of resources are exacerbated. Caught up within increasingly fraught attachments to both Liz and sex work, Tea feels her sense of identity unraveling in the final pages of the memoir. Relentlessly taken advantage of emotionally and financially by Liz—who unabashedly lives off of Tea's hard-earned money as she herself quits sex work (179), and then proceeds to cheat on Tea with a man in Tucson (183)—Tea painfully recognizes the cost of sustaining her attachment to Liz. Crucially, the memoir doesn't work to resolve either the relationship between Tea and Liz, or Tea and her labor; rather, the reader is left to grapple with the complexity of Tea's ambivalent investments in both.

Transforming Shame

Why might the attachment to shame, specifically in the case of poverty and queerness, be a useful relation? As Rimstead suggests, "It seems that the mundane and messy sphere of material struggle, class identification, complicity, and the complexity of life in the concrete world have not been able to emerge through the highly abstract language and theory of literary discourse—whereas these subjectivities are palpable in testimonies about the lived experiences of class and poverty" (Rimstead 2001, 137). I argue that one productive effect of Tea's memoir is bringing into feminist literary discourse these knotty entanglements of desire, identity, class, and shame through both testimony and witnessing. Although it is important for feminist scholars to engage with affect, there is a responsibility to attend to the social dimensions that inform affect (Pedwell and Whitehead 2012, 122); as I have argued throughout, an important index of affect is class.

Ahmed claims that emotions can be "transformed" through their movement into the "public domain" (Ahmed 2004, 173). In *The Passionate Mistakes*, Tea reanimates her experiences of poverty, queer desire, and sex work, a queer and feminist performance of transforming shame through its movement from the internal to the external in memoir. Transforming shame is not at all transcending it, but instead signifies the working through of new relations to it. This analysis also resists the common-sense

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notion that acquiring capital immediately transforms one's class position, material reality, or labor conditions. The connection of poverty to subjectivity is deeply entrenched, and despite positive or negative identifications with loving or shaming others, lived poverty does not lend itself easily to new material possibilities, including class transcendence. My reading of Tea's memoir offers that class, desire, and identity are tangled up in one another, brought to light through a careful tracking of their connection to shame.

Sedgwick, too, surmises that in autobiographical writing, "the speaking self... does not attempt to merge with the potentially shaming or shamed figurations of its younger self... its attempt is to love them. That love is shown to occur both in spite of shame and, more remarkably, through it" (Sedgwick 2003, 40). These insights suggest that the act of writing about shame might offer some relief from it, while also shedding light on shame's potential to be a precursor to—in this case, artistic—production. The possibility that Michelle Tea's memoir is written as a gesture of self-love softens, if not incubates, the corollary of painful affects and experiences the memoir gives voice to, specifically her deeply ambivalent relationship to shame. In operationalizing Rimstead's oppositional reading strategy (Rimstead 2001, 145), I have encouraged an engagement with the text that insists on Tea's conscious and critical distance from its content. This distance breathes space into the possibility that the text's urgency is not only emotionally but politically motivated, as *The Passionate Mistakes* both resists and aligns itself with shame.

Notes

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1. See Lisa Duggan for her discussion of Queer Nation as an alternative to mainstream lesbian and gay organizations in the US that became renowned for their activism, in particular the "outing" of celebrities (Duggan 2004, 54–56). In taking queerness public and refusing discourses of tolerance and assimilation, Queer Nation also inevitably reproduced forms of cultural hegemony in its elaboration of nationalism as a precursor for an imagined queer community.

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