THE LEGACY AND FUTURE OF *OUR BODIES, OURSELVES*
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The Feminist Work of Unsticking Shame: Affective Realignment in the 1973 Edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*

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Abstract: This essay focuses on a distinct feature of the 1973 publication of *OBOS* that is not similarly maintained in later editions: its deliberate acknowledgement of gendered sexual shame and its effort to undo or "unst[i]ck" (Ahmed 15) this emotion. Cultivating a rhetoric of insubordination, this early *OBOS* encourages "affective realignment" that 1) identifies the paradox of knowledge gained and epistemological ignorance of the body, 2) disrupts binary cultural scripts that call for women's sexual purity or freedom, and 3) suggests the lingering "stickiness" of sexual shame and the slow and effort-filled process of replacing shame with dignity and knowledge.

Keywords: affect, feminist epistemologies, health literacy, historiography, shame

> Picture a woman trying to do work and to enter into equal and satisfying relationships with other people—when she feels physically weak because she has never tried to be strong; when she drains her energy trying to change her face, her figure, her hair, her smells, to match some ideal norm set by magazines, movies, and TV; when she feels *confused* and *ashamed* of the menstrual blood that every month appears from some dark place in her body; when her internal body processes are a mystery to her and surface only to cause her trouble (an unplanned pregnancy, or cervical cancer); when she does not understand nor enjoy sex and concentrates her sexual drives into aimless romantic fantasies, perverting and misusing a potential energy because she has been brought up to deny it. (Preface to *Our Bodies, Ourselves* 1973; emphasis added)

The 1973 mainstream publication of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (*OBOS*), certainly a landmark manual of women's health literacy, is also a text that helps women think about the feelings of being a woman. The publication invites readers to trust in their ability to know and listen to their bodies. At the same time, it also grants them permission to acknowledge the emotional constraints that likely shaped their relationship to that body—the affective experiences that they carry and that might have carried them to this book. The Boston Women's Health Book Collective (BWHBC) calls attention to the emotional side of health literacy toward the end of its preface, excerpted above. The image that the preface authors conjure sets the stage for the project that follows; it encourages readers to grasp the range of ways that women do not realize the potential of their bodies and its desires or understand its natural processes and characteristics. Amid this picture, however, readers also are also encouraged to appreciate how feelings of shame meld with the confusion of being unaware of one's own body. I consider this invocation of a woman "confused and ashamed" to be a significant aspect of this first commercial edition of the publication—part of the "rhetorical experiment" of *OBOS* that sought to "construct a new space that opened to public discourse issues that had been consigned to individual privacy" (Wells 3). This essay questions how and why feelings of shame figure into *OBOS* and considers to what effect shame plays a role in discussions of women's sexuality as well as their physical, emotional, and social health more generally.

By focusing in on the role of emotion, I explore how the first mainstream edition of *OBOS* functions as an affectively attuned example of gendered health literacy. More specifically, I examine the text for references to and invocations of shame related to the female body (as gendered), the sexed body (as feminized), women's sexuality, and women's experiences and associations with the act of sex. Using this examination, I make a case for understanding *OBOS* as a site of "unschooling" that involves an affective realignment away from experiencing the body as a site of shame and toward cultivating associations of positivity and bodily self-acceptance. Throughout this essay, I use the term *affective realignmen*t to indicate invited or encouraged shifts in feeling that can be traced through the language and presentation of ideas in *OBOS*. These shifts pivot away from negative and oppressive perceptions of how women (and others) "should" feel about women's bodies in order to turn toward different associations and more positive feelings of bodily acceptance and love. Not a nominally apparent aspect of health literacy even for members of the collective, affective change is encouraged and warranted, given that shame's traces are present in this early publication. *OBOS* takes up this work by persuading readers of the value of emotional reorientation as part of the larger project of being "better friends and better lovers, better *people*, more self-confident, more autonomous, stronger, and more whole" (3). Women's greater health literacy, after all, needed to be premised on this more fundamental sense of acceptance and dignity of women's bodies.

I contend that, given the pervasiveness of these feelings of shame, the *OBOS* authors practice "insubordination" through their careful, slow, and intentional focus on the shame as part of a larger landscape of "gendered subordination" (Fischer 371). This attention to affect is informed by and extends the work of Nancy Tuana, who taxonomizes epistemological ignorance as practices by which not knowing occurs. Through this essay, I make a case for reading *OBOS* 1973 as a text that trains readers in affective dimensions of health literacy and for understanding this rhetorical work as challenging given deeply embedded cultural scripts of gendered, feminized sexual shame. My close reading of the first commercial publication of the book illustrates that the BWHBC's use of narration is an especially effective tactic; it opens a space for positive affective realignment to expose a paradox whereby women's knowledge of their bodies can be understood simultaneously as a site of confusion and shame. I further trace textual references to shame—what I refer to as *interstitial affective expressions*—as a method for identifying shame's figuration in *OBOS*. I then use these expressions to speculate as to the varied effects of and opportunities missed by this attention to emotion. One affordance of the expressions is the BWHBC's ability to call attention to binary cultural scripts during an era of sexual liberation that rendered many women anxious about their sexual identities. My analysis concludes by suggesting that the book prepares readers for the necessarily slow uptake of affective realignment meant to subvert long-held practices of rhetorical shaming.

By remaining attuned to the affective economy that *OBOS* illuminates and disturbs, this project considers the publication illustrative of a “rhetorical process of gendering,” or what Jessica Enoch describes as “the rhetorical work that goes into creating and disturbing the gendered distinctions, social categories, and asymmetrical power relationships that women and men encounter in their daily lives” (115). The discursive and non-discursive rhetorical processes of associating women’s bodies with shame, I will show, have long roots in political culture even though they might become manifest in women’s everyday experiences, as *OBOS* suggests. Affective realignment, then, represents a significant rhetorical goal—one that is not the central focus of the text or our celebrations of it, but one that nonetheless laid crucial groundwork for the book’s trajectory and continued development through subsequent editions. Creating affectively attuned health literacy, I contend, encouraged women to recognize and confront the notion that they had been taught to feel ashamed of their bodies, sexual knowledge, and sexual desire. Before turning to my analysis, I discuss the reasons for focusing solely on the 1973 version of the text and then provide an overview of salient aspects of shame theory as an increasingly significant site of feminist scholarship. After my three-part analysis, I conclude by meditating on the legacy of *OBOS*’s initial mainstream publication, particularly as it might relate to shame’s lingering connection to gender, power, and knowledge-formation.

Why Consider Shame in *OBOS* 1973?

Through *OBOS* 1973, we can recover a sense of the pervasiveness and intensity of shame as a gendered experience of subordination even in the early 1970s. My own attention to rhetorical shame has emerged from my examination of women’s experiences with sex and pregnancy in the decades before *OBOS*’s first publication. In my study of unwed motherhood during the 1950s and 1960s, I found that such women heard explicit messages of shame and felt unarticulated feelings of shame among family and kin, peers, school officials, and religious authorities. The pervasiveness of the alleged shame of the unwed and pregnant, often white, female body was sufficient enough to warrant elaborate methods to hide an “illicit” pregnancy (often in a maternity home) and relinquish an “illegitimate” child for adoption (often through an adoption service operating at or in close coordination with the maternity home). The 1960s marked the apex of these practices of hiding and surrender, although historians must estimate the number of unmarried women in such a situation because of the secrecy shrouding the practice. Nevertheless, a more general perception of the 1960s is that it represented a decade in which sexual shame largely dissipated (Adams). Although the initial Simon and Schuster publication of *OBOS* in 1973 does not focus on unwed motherhood as a topic, its invocation of shame helps to identify an affective trace at a time when notions of womanhood and women’s relationship to their bodies and health were undergoing a major shift. This affective trace—the evidence of a feeling made explicit through language or, here, writing—functions as a vestige of emotions held and felt but potentially distilled by other aspects of women’s health literacy and more widely circulating figurations of women’s liberation. The first commercial publication of *OBOS* provides a unique opportunity for capturing this affective trace as the collective is

1. widening their audience through “wider distribution” beyond the capacity of a regional press (Boston Women’s Health Book Collective 1), and

2. revising their early and “not final” (Boston Women’s Health Course Collective 4) papers to function as a more cohesive text (for instance, with a preface that more fully calls to readers’ minds the goal of the text, as quoted above).

By 1973 the birth control pill had been on the market (at least for married women who had access to it) for eight years and a “new candor in American culture” was allegedly taking hold (Allyn 5). The so-called sexual revolution was well underway. The U.S. Supreme Court renounced literary censorship, sexology was a growing field, nudity was introduced to theatre and film, and new expressions of sexuality were emerging among some: these are just some of the manifestations of the revolutionary spirit of the 1960s and 1970s (Allyn 4-5). To the extent that such profound change was happening in the U.S. and Europe in relation to sex, it would seem that people’s feelings—women’s feelings—about sex would also change. While this surely was the case for many women and in innumerable ways, large and small, *OBOS* helps us reconnect to a moment within this “revolutionary” trajectory and explore how, affectively, many women did not experience a sense of the embodied truth of liberation and sexual freedom. For instance, *OBOS* 1973 critiques the sexual revolution by asserting that it is premised on “alienating, inhuman expectations” that are “no less destructive or degrading than the Victorian puritanism we all so proudly rejected” (23). The authors also amplify Robin Morgan’s dissatisfaction with this milieu of change, quoting her as they continue, “‘Goodbye to Hip Culture and the so-called Sexual Revolution which has functioned toward woman’s freedom as did the Reconstruction toward former slaves—reinstituted oppression by another name’” (23-4). Later in the book, in the chapter on abortion, the authors situate the repeal of abortion laws as insufficient in ensuring that “abortions are voluntary as well as free and safe,” noting the raced and classed violences such as sterilization that were not erased with decriminalization (139). Additionally, the chapter on birth control notes that “[i]n 1973, there are some good birth-control methods to use” but that they “are not perfectly effective, they are not always available, and they tend to put the burden of choice, acquisition, use, maintenance, and risk on the woman instead of on the man and the woman together” (106). As these examples illustrate, *OBOS* can be read as a reflection of the lived experiences of many women rather than an omniscient and timeless text. As an early 1970s artifact, it helps today’s readers more fully understand how and why love was still far from being “free” for women and how a woman’s relationship to her body frequently remained a site of affective confusion and doubt.

Sociologist Kathy Davis argues that *OBOS*, as a text responsive in various editions to the changing context of historical and political moments, took up as a central concern the medicalization of women’s bodies. Davis defines this project as one interrogating “the social construction of women’s bodies as deviant, ill, unruly, and requiring constant medical surveillance” (45-6). Attending to *OBOS* as a response to medicalization emphasizes women’s relationships with their physicians, who were nearly always male at the time of the book’s first publication. Davis notes that while the initial distrust of medicalization was never entirely removed from the book, the text “became less adversarial as more women entered medical schools and became physicians themselves” (46). *OBOS* is, however, just as much a book about women’s feelings about their sexual knowledge (or lack thereof), various gendered affective expectations about sex and sexuality, and the processes whereby shame and anxiety became normalized and “correct” ways for women to experience their own bodies and sense of self.

In addition to critiquing medical orientations, the authors of *OBOS* are presenting body knowledge and sexual desire as a “new regim[e] of normalcy” and displacing shame as a perceived gendered norm (Wells and Stormer 30). By so carefully attending to body shame, the publication illuminates the prevalence of these affective alignments and thus sheds light on common gendered affects related to sex and sexual bodies at the time. By studying *OBOS* 1973 for its care in helping readers navigate feelings of shame, we can thus appreciate the text’s axiological value (Wells and Stormer 29). Through its rhetorical efforts at affective realignment, the text vestigially enables a reconstruction of sexual pedagogies as affective economies upheld, interrupted, and subordinated.

Beyond Blushing: Gender, Sex, and Shame

It is a fitting moment for turning to *OBOS* and asking questions of how the text attends to and handles shame. Shame has been of recent and developing interest among feminist scholars and contributes to what Clara Fischer refers to as a “‘new school’ of feminism made up of affect theorists and new materialists” (372). This larger turn toward affect and materiality invokes concerns of “the body, affect, and emotion, and generally present[s] feeling-states as embodied phenomena” (Fischer 372). As feminist rhetoricians also turn to affect, materiality, and the related questions of posthumanism (e.g., Barrett-Fox; Gunn and Cloud; Hallenbeck), new questions about agency, and agency’s relationship to gender and power, arise. This essay values affect as a non-discursive, embodied, and everyday emotional engagement that plays a significant role in rhetorical processes of gendering and the rhetorical artifacts—such as *OBOS*—that emerge when these processes are called into question.

Several aspects of shame—a notoriously complex and thus vexing emotion to study—will provide a basis from which to build my analysis. Although early psychological work has focused largely on the distinction between guilt (a result of bad action) and shame (a result of personal failing) (Scheff), ongoing and cross-disciplinary theory provides additional insight on this emotion that is helpful in thinking about its presence in *OBOS*. The culturally attuned work of scholars—especially queer theorists—have helped to expand the study of shame beyond the discipline of psychology and, particularly, individual psychology. Increasingly, scholars from various disciplines see shame as contributing to group identity formation— how it accretes to form a “collective politics of shame” (Ahmed 102) and how the emotion performs “cultural labor” that, in part, “attempts to mark and contain fluid boundaries” such as those of national and group identities (Mendible 9).

One commonly discussed aspect of shame relates to how we experience it on and how it becomes perceptible through physical bodies. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes that the “blazons of shame, the ‘fallen face’ with eye down and head averted” as well as blushing, are indicators of feeling ashamed (“Shame” 50). The physical response to *feelings* of shame, then, manifest in ways that are both call on the attention of others and that communicate an awareness of being ashamed. As Melissa V.

Harris-Perry explains, the tendency to “fold into ourselves” is a response to one’s “psychological and physical urge to withdraw, submit, or appease others” and a response to feeling particularly exposed (104). Feminist scholars must intellectually access the idea of shame always in relation to its embodiment, even as we consider how shame functions socially. The promise of explorations of shame’s relationship to the body—and in light of a body-oriented project of *OBOS*—is our ability to rethink sites of agency afforded and/or circumscribed through our gendered relationships with our own bodies, especially as those relationships are constituted by expectations of propriety and normalcy. In other words, as we think about, from, through, and beyond bodies, we are reminded of Jay Dolmage’s claim that “studying any culture’s attitudes and arguments about the body always connects us intimately with attitudes and arguments about rhetorical possibility” (114).

Sedgwick also argues that shame “living, as it does, on and in the muscles and capillaries of the face” is a “uniquely contagious” affect all the same (“Shame” 61).[1] This paradox—shame being experienced both in an especially individual manner but being socially shared—has been of great interest to scholars theorizing what shame *does*. Harris-Perry articulates shame’s sociality as one of its most significant features because we *cannot* feel it in isolation but experience it, rather, “when we transgress a social boundary or break a community expectation” (Harris-Perry 104). The intimacy of shame relates to its visibility and its performance on bodies that are looked upon; experiencing shame makes us seen but also confirms that we know we are seen as wrong or less than, which contributes to its threat of spreading to others. “All the blushing/flushing that marks the skin as a primary organ for both the generation and the contagion of affect seems linked to a fantasy of the skin’s being entered” writes Sedgwick (*Touching* 59).

The sociality of shame—its requirement of the idea of an intersubjective encounter, of disappointment, of failure in the eyes of another even if one is by themselves—is one aspect of shame’s “stickiness,” a quality articulated by feminist theorist Sara Ahmed. In her larger project of mapping economies of affect, Ahmed explores how emotions stick and move as feelings exist and “circulate between bodies” (4). Working with the idea that those things that are horrifying and disgusting seem to “stick” most, Ahmed theorizes that emotions are not sticky, per se, but the bodies on which they are manifest threaten to be sticky. This potential is made apparent when bodies “surface,” make contact, and run the risk of passing on shame through absorption (90). Although Ahmed’s project traces the historical contact of bodies and other carriers of emotion, my thinking about shame in the context of *OBOS* as a pedagogical intervention into women’s sense of bodily normalcy and possibility encourages me to look for affective traces that illuminate how shame has stuck to women through time—how it has been a lingering experience of femaleness that the health book collective seeks to undo.

And, finally, shame’s sociality relates specifically to its rhetoricity; it is an affect that is always contingent and ever intersubjective. Shame, much like rhetoric, simply cannot exist for its own sake, even as we understand it to operate beyond rationality or the boundaries of discreet human animals. Or, as feminist political philosopher Jill Locke asserts, shame has “no clear ontology” (19). Feminist scholars have argued that women are more prone to experiencing shame than men (Manion; Johnson and Moran) and that because of the persuasive logics that contribute to gendered shame culture, that women can be understood as being “schooled by the strictures of shame” (Stenberg 122).

Shame as a learned type of gendered experience has most recently been considered by Locke, who examines the historical legacy of *pudeur*, or feminine modesty. Locke argues that *pudeur*, a French term that in Latin translates to *pudenda* and in German Scham, is an historical cultural and political philosophy that suggests female appropriateness through sufficient covering (of the body) before others (24). The relationship among these words is revealing. According to poet and literary critic John Hollander,

> Germanic languages reached out desperately to cover the nakedness of their bodily terminology with the cloak of Latinity, even to the extent of calling sexual organs *pudenda*, paralleled by the use of shame as a noun to designate sexual parts. The Latin *pudenda*, “that of which one ought to be or to feel ashamed or, indeed, ashamed to mention,” was primarily medical usage, and almost always referred to the female genitals. (1064)

Pudeur as an orientation refers to this concept casting a long shadow. It is “as if the sexual parts of the body, like the sexual impulses of human life itself, shame the rest of the body and the life” or as if some aspects of shame extended that shamefulness onto a community or the body politic (Hollander 1064). Locke refers to *pudeur* as a “virtuous restraint” (116), and she contends that by the nineteenth century, the concept was “very much a call to action” for women who were not only expected to show restraint and demureness themselves, but also to teach this modesty to others, thus bolstering the attitude through its defense and reproduction (117).

Shame’s rhetoric-like qualities and its long, if under-studied relationship to women’s public life make it an important site of feminist investigation; additionally, there are several ways why attention to shame lends itself to intersectional thinking. Poverty as a class-status is commonly linked to feelings of shame and assumptions of shamefulness. Less apparent are other connections such as race and age. Harris-Perry’s work especially focuses on how “racial shame” is a “political emotion” (103), one that is a central feature of our understanding black women as contemporary citizens. Shame’s relationship to age—also a factor contributing to intersectional experiences—has been theorized by Neil Postman whose careful reading of ancient texts suggests that shame historically distinguished the young from the mature (9). These various perspectives all point to shame locating difference and inequity and serving as a marker of the perception and potential acceptance of one’s lower status in relation to the other. It is not coincidental that shame is addressed in *OBOS* because of the long affective imprint of *pudeur* as well as the book marking a shift in women’s liminality. In other words, insofar as the manual helped women mature into their bodies by way of greater self-knowledge, increased assuredness, and an ability to embrace feelings of worth and desire (sexual and otherwise), readers were necessarily crossing an epistemological bridge of sorts that required acknowledgement of shame’s role in this separation.

We might think of this project of unlearning shame as one type of ignorance as theorized by feminist philosopher Nancy Tuana. From her examination of the women’s health movement, Tuana has made the case for dialectically pairing the “complex practices of knowledge *production* and the variety of factors that account for why something is known" with a simultaneous examination of "the practices that account for *not* knowing" or the processes by which knowledge is unlearned (2). In what follows I track instances of shame's presence in *OBOS* 1973 in order to suggest the affective epistemological work of the book as not only that of "resistance" (Tuana 7) but of "realignment" of a sticky affect.

Unlearning Shame: Affective Realignment in *OBOS*

A close textual reading of the introduction and the "Sexuality" sections of *OBOS* 1973 enables an examination of the BWHBC's effort in identifying shame, practicing a pedagogy of insubordination in which this shame is questioned, guiding readers toward a compassionate and slow reorientation away from the emotion, and suggesting the benefits of performing such affective realignment. An affective alignment approach is notable because it is neither sentimental, in a romantic sense, nor willing to dismiss or overlook feelings of discomfort that arise from such topics. Additionally, the text is written from a woman's point of view, a characteristic that encourages the authors to fully consider the entire affective ecology that their audiences might experience when reading the book. My analysis suggests that the authors of the text are taking a clear-eyed but not overly technical approach to guiding readers toward knowledge of the female body and its typical processes and functions. I identify three qualities of this realignment that reflect the text's rhetorical possibility and strategy in terms of addressing and managing negative emotion. *OBOS* 1973 narrates an entry point for affective realignment that cultivates capacities for reconsidering ontological assumptions of womanhood, troubles binaries of sexual purity and freedom as evidenced by emotional traces, or interstitial affective expressions of varying effects, and models the effort, time, and patience required for affective realignment.

Narrating a Way into Affective Realignment

Even from the introductory page of the book, the authors of *OBOS* narrate for readers their unfolding awareness of the value of identifying and naming the feelings that emerged through the process of consciousness raising. In describing the process of developing "a course for women on women and their bodies," the authors of *OBOS* write that through creating the material, "we realized more and more that we were really capable of collecting, understanding, and evaluating medical information" (1). This point aligns with Davis's assertion, noted above, that a fundamental aspect of the book is its critique of medicalization as an often patronizing and low-information experience that happened to women at the hand of medical professionals and instead of with them. But while discussions of medicine took place, another type of awareness emerged from this group. In practicing the rhetorical arts of discussion, asking questions, and arguing with one other, the BWHBC members share that they "were equally struck by how important it was for us to be able to open up with one another and share our feelings about our bodies. The process was as crucial as the facts themselves" (1). The collective opens the book by giving equal attention to various types of truths that women experienced in relation to their bodies, creating a space for attending to affective knowledges in addition to other logic-based practices such as labeling women's anatomy and explaining how to use methods of birth control.

The authors go on to credit these facts and feelings as coming together in such a cohesive way—“in ways that touched us very deeply” (1)—so as to inspire the book being named *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. Thus, the affective aspect of the book is folded into its very title, which suggests a holistic turn inward and the goal of setting new epistemological boundaries and establishing new epistemological processes.

Having established this affective attunement, the BWHBC members attest, quite clearly, to the powerful presence of shame that emerged from this journey of self-knowledge. In the “Sexuality” chapter the authors offer a bold set of statements to this effect. “There is something shameful about our bodies. Our sexuality seems to shock and anger our parents; it scares us, and adds to the growing sense of alienation and mystery we have about our bodies” (27). We can understand this assertion as a realization of the accumulative power of shame and the amassed effects of *pudeur*. What is notable in this passage is the authors’ ability to express so concisely the communicable quality of feminine sexualized shame as an affect that threatens to stick and whose stickiness is radial, reaching out and reverberating within relationships of fear and “shock.” Shame is profoundly felt and experienced but is not readily apparent to these women, who have appreciated its presence through their collective conversation and consciousness raising efforts. Its prevalence and paradoxical elusiveness as a normalized orientation to the female body results in women’s “alienation and mystery” in relation to their own anatomy and feelings.

The introduction to the book also helps readers link affective concerns with shifting ontological awareness, assisting women in recalibrating their understanding of themselves as women. Here the effort of creating a space to value feelings as a site of truth supports what Tuana refers to as “liberatory knowledges” or those which might support an effort to “transform our knowledge of women’s bodies so as to remove oppression, to augment women’s lives, and to transform society” (2). BWHBC members share their burgeoning awareness in narrative form, demarcating early layers of awareness from later, deeper liberatory knowledge and potential. They write:

> Once we had learned what the “experts” had to tell us, we found that we still had a lot to teach and learn from one another. For instance, many of us had “learned” about the menstrual cycle in science or biology classes—we had perhaps even memorized the names of the menstrual hormones and what they did. But most of us did not remember much of what we had learned.

Here the authors portray themselves as eager and competent students, obediently “learn[ing]” discreet pieces of information presented to them. The authors’ choice to qualify the term “learned” by placing quotation marks around it quietly suggests the paradox of knowledge for their younger selves. We might consider the “learning” being recalled here as an instance of epistemological ignorance related to “*topics that we do not even know that we do not know*” (Tuana 6). Tuana attributes this form of trained ignorance to the difficulty of gaining awareness beyond “our current interests, beliefs, and theories” (6). Rhetorically, these places devoid of real understanding can be understood as effects of what Thorstein Veblen originally names and Kenneth Burke later recalls as our “trained incapacities,” or an ironic ability-based inability (Burke 7). Both Tuana’s and Veblen’s (via Burke) conceptions aid in understanding this moment of *gaining knowledge* (by learning hormone names, for instance) as one of *cultivating ignorance* or *incapacity*. The authors' admission that most of this knowledge had been forgotten testifies to its insufficiency. They go on to further narrate this emerging awareness:

> This time when we read in a text that the onset of menstruation is a normal and universal occurrence in young girls from ages ten to eighteen, we started to talk about our first menstrual periods. We found that, for many of us, beginning to menstruate had not felt normal at all, but scary, embarrassing, mysterious. (2)

Through the process of sharing personal stories, contributors displaced forgettable knowledge (e.g., scientific names) with awareness of the ubiquity of bodily function (menstruation). Such displacement encouraged reflection on the experience of transitioning from pre-menstruation to having a first menstruation and thus revealed an unreconciled dissonance: the normalcy of menstruation did not align with feelings ("scary," "embarrassing") and thus contributed to the "myster[y]" of menstruation. This story reveals that learning about terminology and processes in a scientific and disembodied way diminished young girls' capacity to really know or understand their own bodies.

From the perspective of understanding how shame contributes to rhetorical processes of gendering, one can recognize this cultivated ignorance as an expression of *pudeur*, or the need for women to shield this aspect of female physicality from public discussion and, in the process, to normalize its supposed inherent shamefulness. The knowledge/ignorance paradox, its connection to feelings of shame, and its ontological implications are most apparent as the narration continues:

> We realized that what we had been told about menstruation and what we had not been told, even the tone of voice it had been told in—all had had an effect on our feelings *about being female*. Similarly, the information from enlightened texts describing masturbation as a normal, common sexual activity did not really become our own until we began to pull up from inside ourselves and share what we had never before expressed—the confusion and shame we had been made to feel, and often still felt, about touching our bodies in a sexual way. (2; emphasis added)

This passage not only makes explicit that shame is infused in these memories, this act of experience-sharing, and these moments of realization but also indicates the materially inflected micropractices, such as tone of voice, that impart an expectation of shame. Further, this passage asks readers to consider how affective responses map onto ontological awareness. The rhetorical power of this excerpt is its ability, through an accessible and inviting story of how the authors came to write the book, to walk readers through the process of questioning, homing in on the rhetorical—if non-propositional—ways shame is imbued, and linking these affective remembrances with ongoing notions of identity and one's self-worth or self-doubt. The power of this opening for affective realignment through the text becomes most apparent as the authors assert, with confidence, a claim that frames the remainder of the book: "Our bodies are the physical bases from which we move out into the world; ignorance, uncertainty—even, at worst, shame—about our physical selves create in us an alienation from ourselves that keeps us from being the whole people that we could be" (3). One can imagine this first commercial version of the book echoing the generic scope and approach of the earlier non-commercial "course" material that was meant to be used in a group setting in order to spark discussion and additional awareness-raising (Davis 23). Ranking shame as the "worst" relationship with one's own body is both a firm assertion and, in the context of *OBOS* as a course-turned-commercial publication, an invitation for readers to grapple with their own feelings and memories to identify dissonance and, potentially, to affectively realign away from *pudeur*.

By sharing these experiences of phenomenological salience and surprise, the authors of *OBOS* name shame as a thing that is experienced, that *can* be shared through stories, and that *does* relate to women's sense of their bodies and their sense of themselves. This naming through narration can be understood as an act of subordination, for it not only fashioned arguments about feelings that women shared anecdotally but through this sharing and unsilencing it gave female readers permission to recognize and admit similar feelings and perspectives. An authoritative, permission-granting tone is detectable when contrasting the 1973 publication's origin story with that of the 1971 New England Free Press version. In the earlier text, the authors describe the development of a "laywoman's course on health, women and our bodies," and narrate how group sharing led to "collective knowledge" the group was ready to share with "other sisters" (Boston Women's Health Course Collective 1). Nevertheless, the authors write that they were "[e]xcited and nervous (we were *just* women, what authority did we have in matters of medicine and health?)" (Boston Women's Health Course Collective 1; emphasis in original). Just two years later, the same process is described without the expression of self-doubt. Instead, the authors state their awareness of a need to learn about their bodies and their decision to collaboratively research and compose their findings. "As we developed the course," the authors share, "we realized more and more that we were really capable of collecting, understanding, and evaluating medical information" (1). No longer compromised by a sense of duty and inherent intellectual inferiority, the 1973 authors are able to impart their own credibility and thus more fully prime readers to make similar intellectual and dispositional shifts.

Additionally, the emotional register and urgency of the book's message—whether in relation to shame or the various other topics discussed—suggest that *OBOS* 1973 is not a mere exposition but is an act of insubordination through its insistence that women could trust their perceptions in the slow act of unlearning shame logics related to sex. Consider the New York Times review of this edition by Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, an ostensibly open-minded audience who refers to himself as "the male [reader] in the ointment." Lehmann-Haupt's generally positive review includes several "quibbles," including an assessment that the collaboratively written book is not "refreshing" because of its ubiquitous use of the word "crucial." This mark of intensity, a word of urgency among writers working toward various realignments, is, in Lehmann-Haupt's estimation, a bothersome aspect of the composition, one that has led him to nearly "wear the last of the enamel off [his] molars." Rather than just being a commentary on redundancy in writing, this note of annoyance suggests that Lehmann-Haupt does not truly know what all the fuss is about. Indeed, he continues, "I am still trying to dovetail all the talk about 'living less in our heads' and responding 'to our feelings' with the book's overriding message that women must *know* and *think* about their bodies in order to get *control* of their lives." Affective realignment, this comment suggests, is perplexing work—what the reviewer likens to “climbing an epistemological wall.” It undisciplines logics of feminine modesty to model new approaches to doing things with feelings that result in unfamiliar ways of thinking. In this first commercial version of *OBOS*, a text now reaching a far larger readership, more women would have had the opportunity to adopt such an insubordinate attitude themselves, whether in conversation with other readers or simply by reading and engaging with the book itself. Lehmann-Haupt’s review helps us imagine that even among generous-minded others, this affective realignment through narrative might be met with exasperation, misunderstanding, or confusion.

Troubling the Dualism of Cultural Scripts through Interstitial Affective Expression

As noted above, the era in which *OBOS* emerged as a major publication is one that is largely remembered as being a time of women’s sexual and social liberation. While troubling this history is not my primary goal in this essay, I contend that there is value in pausing to trace how affective reorientation relates to the *pressures* and *anxieties* within this moment of significant change in gender relations and in understandings of sex and gender more generally. Examining *OBOS* 1973 for these traces of affect enables identifying some of the “other moves” and “other possibilities” of gendered rhetorical action that is generated through efforts that are not “discrete and organized” (Hallenbeck 16-17). Here I rely on Sarah Hallenbeck’s work to challenge the methodological boundaries of feminist recovery efforts. Hallenbeck encourages scholars to look beyond “collectives or organizations” as the site of rhetorical activity, and certainly the BWHBC represents a “normative” (Hallenbeck 11) set of rhetors insofar as they published as a collective. At the same time, identifying what we might call interstitial affective expressions—the brief but powerful references to emotional orientations that aid in cultivating cohesiveness within *OBOS*—can be a useful and non-normative analytical move because it looks at both explicit claims in the text as well as beyond and between these propositions. For instance, in the “Sexuality” section of *OBOS*, the authors reflect several times on the confusion and pressure of understanding women’s sexuality at this time. In one observation, the authors write from personal experience:

> We are simultaneously bombarded with two conflicting messages: one from our parents, churches and schools—that sex is dirty and therefore we must keep ourselves pure for the one love of our lives; and the other from *Playboy*, *Newsweek*, etc., almost all women’s magazines, and especially television commercials—that we should be free, groovy chicks. (24)

At this time of cultural change and women’s liberatory emergence, the collective chose to clarify stultifying binary options that they, as white, middle-class women felt: be pure or be free. Obviously dissatisfied with polarizing “options” that feel deterministic and disempowering, the authors name the categories of expectation by which they are “bombarded.” In protest of liberatory scripts that do not account for their lived experiences, the authors assert that “sexual revolution—liberated orgastic women, groupies, communal love making, homosexuality—has made us feel that we must be able to have sex with impunity, without anxiety, under any condition and with anyone, or we’re uptight freaks” (23). As an argument, the statement asserts a position that the BWHBC holds firmly—one that they later make clearer by admitting that they are “learning to resist this double message and realize that neither set of images fits us" (24). But as an example of interstitial affective expression, we can better account for these messages as teaching readers about the emotional *heaviness* of the perceived expectations that some women felt in the midst of a seemingly all-or-nothing sexual revolution.

Additionally, this passage—what with its reference to the binary of being completely sexually undiscerning or being labeled "uptight freaks"—suggests the crucial role affect plays in recognizing and working through an exigency that is still becoming—one that might not yet be articulated or that might not be understood in rational terms. A less *pathos*-oriented explanation of the limitations of revolutionary change might not be so compelling or persuasive, might not help readers identify or empathize. In other words, we might read these expressions not only as evidence of an argument but according to their "relevance" (Hallenbeck 18) to women's efforts in grappling with this moment of affectively laden cultural change. Instead of "relegat[ing]" this content "to the back of a study as 'context,'" or the historical backdrop *against which* women lived, a more intentional approach to surveying *OBOS* for its affective inflections reveals that such emotions are likely "vital elements in a network of material-semiotic relations within which gender is negotiated" (Hallenbeck 18). In simpler terms, the sexual purity/sexual freedom binary became manifest in daily living and fomented internal tensions, experienced by some women as an anxiety that was embodied and emotional.

Attention to interstitial affective expression can also help us identify missed opportunities for coalition building and drawing useful connections across various women's experiences. For instance, the chapter "In America They Call Us Dykes," written independently by the "gay collective" (56), is rife with queer narratives (though not named as such) of women coming to terms with their own and others' non-heteronormative identities. The perspectives included in this chapter impart emotions such as "the horror and fear with which others view us" (56) and "anger" (61) experienced by writers who share provocative "experiential accounts" (Davis 40). These are personal stories of women being "scared" (57, 59), being perpetually subjected to "insult and embarrassment" (61), and experiencing lives "controlled by the fear that others will find out" about their lesbianism (61). The chapter, as "the beginning of our efforts to define for ourselves what it means to be a lesbian in this society" (56), highlights a range of affects extending beyond shame that animate the experience of gayness for the authors of this portion of the book. But, as contributor Jesse shares, some of the ongoing anxiety of the experience comes from the expectations and demands of "middle-class movement women" (70) who upheld heteronormativity as a standard. While this tension between heterosexual and non-heterosexual women is a broadly recognized, if lamentable, part of the larger story of the women's liberation movement in its various iterations, it is striking that, given the emphasis on self-awareness and feelings of shame that are such a cohesive part of the larger *OBOS* project, lesbian experiences with bad feelings are not more explicitly taken up in the introduction or Sexuality chapter. The general siloing of lesbians within the text is made more obvious by the BWHBC's inability to recognize—or its choice to ignore—the shared stickiness of emotion expressed by various women in the book.

Another way that the book assumes a universalizing and thus highly problematic approach to grappling with shame despite its reliance on various anecdotes is its unwillingness to consider racial orientations to the emotion. Harris-Perry reminds that a cultural script of black women's reproduction being shameful was reified by the 1965 publication of *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, otherwise called the Moynihan Report (114). This document, written by then-U.S. Assistant Secretary of Labor Patrick Moynihan, offers a sweeping overview of the history of African-American experiences and ultimately points to black women, and tendencies toward matriarchal culture within black communities, as the reason for African-Americans' ongoing strife. What greater awareness could *OBOS* have cultivated if its emphasis on sexual exploration and the strictures of gendered expectations could have taken into account the highly politicized assumptions about black female sexuality circulating just several years earlier? What if shame and other feelings were explored by white women and non-white women together, in the same attempt to root out affective truth as a supplement to extant knowings and epistemologies? Rather than simply lament the whitewashed shortcomings of a nevertheless significant text, I find it more productive to ask such questions in an effort to imagine possibilities, historical and contemporary.

Modeling Affective Realignment's Slow Uptake

Finally, *OBOS* provides readers with the encouragement to recognize that affective realignment will not likely be a smooth, fast, or comfortable process. The decision to include extended personal narratives enables the authors to illustrate this point, signaling the magnitude of the sorts of attitudinal changes that the book encourages its readers to adopt. The authors preface one anecdote by commenting on the lingering effects of sexual shame, which transfer into the realm of parenting. As they explain,

> shame and anxiety also make it hard for us to raise our own children. We want to be more open about our sexuality than our parents were, but it is very hard. When our kids ask about where they came from, we use different words from those our parents used, but feelings of discomfort remain. (27)

A willingness toward affective realignment does not make such realignment easy, the authors assert. To model this challenge of slow uptake, the next passage is an experiential account of a mother who shares the experience of "taking a bath with [her] almost-three-year-old-daughter" (27). During the bath, the daughter observes, "'Mommy, you don't have a penis'" (27). In explaining male and female anatomy to the child, the daughter asks the mother to take a step beyond just naming a body part—the clitoris—but to also show her where the clitoris is located on the mother's body. The simple story performs the same sort of literacy that is advocated throughout *OBOS*: understanding the body as it is seen and felt, not only as it has been named by experts. Nevertheless, the *point* of the story rests with the mother's own affective response to the unexpected observations and questions. The mother reflects on her own anxiety at the daughter's request, noting her need to muster "courage or something" in order to respond, and her realization that the experience "didn't feel so bad" (27) in light of these fears.

The rhetorical work of this story in relation to shame is two-fold. First, it normalizes what could be an uncomfortable site of body literacy and demonstrates how to disrupt rather than extend, a pedagogy of sexual shame. In other words, by simply responding to her daughter's questions, the mother resists her initial anxiety ("Okay, now what was I going to do?") and her affective associations of shame (I "tried not to blush") in order to make the question-and-answer session seem perfectly normal. In so doing, she chooses not to teach her daughter that female anatomy is shameful or that seeing, touching, and actually knowing the body is somehow shame-worthy. In short, the mother teaches her daughter and, indirectly, readers how to occupy, touch, and name an unshamed female body.

In addition to modeling this affective normalization, the woman also encourages readers to be wary of their expectations for the time and effort needed for their own affective realignment. She continues, "At least, I feel that I can have some greater ease and openness about sexuality with my daughter than my mother had with me. It took us time to develop bad feelings about our sexuality, and we must allow ourselves more time to undo those feelings and develop new and healthier ones" (27). The stickiness of shame is not easily undone, as the BWHBC realizes. Early 1970s readers might have found themselves, like members of the collective, "left with shame and anxiety" for not having a body that conforms to the "commercial norm of beauty" (27), feeling ashamed by the shock and dismay of parents silenced by the taboo of sexuality, or having lingering feelings of shame and confusion based on epistemological ignorance of sexed bodies. In any of these cases or others like them, women were encouraged to recognize this shame as a constructed and learned attitude that could only be realigned with awareness, effort, time, courage, and patience. Or in the words of the BWHBC, "[i]t will take time to become more aware, to use our bodies better" (13).

Conclusion

I opened this essay with one of the initial images brought to *OBOS* readers' minds: that of a woman, confused and ashamed, struggling to exist in a world of gender and sex-based discrimination. The authors hold up a different image—one of hope—in those same introductory pages:

> Learning to understand, accept, and be responsible for our physical selves, we are freed of some of these preoccupations and can start to use our untapped energies. Our image of ourselves is on a firmer base, we can be better friends and better lovers, better *people*, more self-confident, more autonomous, stronger, and more whole. (3)

This essay has suggested that this reimaging and the change it was meant to cultivate can best be understood by considering *OBOS* as a health literacy text attuned to both bodies and the emotional economies into which women of this era were conscripted.

By way of conclusion, one might consider how *OBOS* 1973, what with its attention to affect and shame, contributes to the ongoing legacy and influence of feminist health literacy efforts. I contend that the slow and deliberate work of affective realignment is ongoing (as I will describe below, noting a more recent reappearance of discourse about sexual shame), but that *OBOS* created a critical space for both questioning normate affects and bringing this questioning to bear on wider conversations and efforts of personal discovery.

It is hard to imagine a time when sexed bodies have been or might be completely devoid of the awkwardness of a burgeoning awareness or exploration. We only need to think about the euphemism of “the birds and the bees” to be reminded of the level of discomfort many parents experience when discussing sexuality and sexual maturation with their children. Attesting to the ongoing challenges of these discussions and sites of self-knowledge is the 2013 publication of a feminist zine, *Not Your Mother’s Meatloaf: A Sex Education Comic Book* (*NYMM*), edited by Saiya Miller and Liza Bley. The collection gathers comics from a range of persons who address issues about sexual exploration, confusion, and knowledge-making from non-heteronormative perspectives. Susan M. Squier has examined *NYMM*, noting that it uses “personal experiences to offer an intentionally non-expert perspective on sexuality” that is meant to be shared (234). Squier also usefully situates the multiple issues of *NYMM* within a tradition of “sex ed comics” (234) providing sex education that, like *OBOS*, performs this pedagogy collaboratively and by creating opportunities for conversation (226).

Notably, *NYMM*’s education includes a need for emotional support that frames the book, as the editors provide readers with a sense of the exigence for the collection. Miller shares her disorientation, which echoes the naming/feeling disparity shared by *OBOS* contributors in 1973:

> There were many discrepancies between what I had been told about sex and what I had experienced at that point. I had been thoroughly instructed about the functions of the reproductive system, but I had very little idea of what to expect when it came to my heart and my mind. There was no chart, no map. My only reference was other people, whom I looked to for answers. (15)

While Miller’s experience of being “thoroughly instructed about the functions of the reproductive system” suggests a more robust education that the story of memorizing menstrual hormones referenced earlier in this essay, she nevertheless laments not having had a holistic introduction to sex that addressed biological functions, physical experiences, and the emotional complexity of sex as an act. We might infer that what Miller “had experienced” sexually as a young woman was different than the experiences of young women beginning to explore sexual desires and knowledges in the 1970s; nevertheless, Miller’s attention to what all she did not know in her “heart” and “mind” shows an ongoing conflation of ignorance and affective disorientation.

Bley’s introductory remarks reckon with emotion—and shame in particular—in an even more explicit way. Bley shares a story of pretending to have sex with a boy as an innocent act of make believe at a very young age. When she is playfully teased by her mother for not realizing that she did not actually have sex, Bley feels ashamed. The sting of this emotion stays with her, and she references it to explain the reason she has sought out a range of people’s experiences with sex in order to further her emotional and epistemological journey:

> Just like the little girl who was mortified about not knowing exactly what sex was, I am still embarrassed when I don’t know all the answers to my own body’s questions. After years of

> repressing my genuine emotions, it was a habit to be insincere. Compiling *Not Your Mother's Meatloaf* over the past five years has helped me remember the importance of confronting this shame. Reading other peoples' stories has a powerful influence on interpreting my own sexual experiences. (15)

Bley's rationale for creating the zine—a project that she and Miller began as undergraduates—and the perspectives of the many contributors suggest that the effects of *pudeur* and the gendered discomfort related to sexuality lingers, even among those who reject gender binaries and are otherwise open to talking, writing about, and even drawing their experiences.

Although we cannot say that Miller and Bley were inspired to create a collaborative zine project because of *OBOS*, it is promising to think that the BWHBC succeeded in creating an aperture for and model of health literacy writing created by non-experts that addressed their concerns and questions and that took seriously their own fraught emotions about their bodies and their very being. At the same time, Jenna Vinson's recent scholarship on teenage pregnancy reminds us that "young pregnant and mothering women" are often spoken *for*, figured as social problems, and subsequently seen as "emblems of shame" despite their willingness to self-advocate and write counter-narratives to these framings (3). These resonances of shame prompt me to consider additional questions: Where else might we find examples of affectively attuned feminist health writing and advocacy that echo the earliest commercial publication of the BWHBC? And why might feminists have a need to realign themselves away from shame through new writings and new forms of sharing, even if the qualities of these realignments differ somewhat over time? In short, why does this shame remain so very sticky?

Later versions of *OBOS* strike a different tone than the 1973 publication. By 1984, the topic of sexuality was embedded deeper in the text and contributed less to the framing of the book (Davis 29). As the book continued to expand in size and scope, the attention given to recognizing and normalizing shame lessens; more focus is directed to body image and other concerns such as age, nutrition, and alternative health options. These changes evidence that the authors, editors, and contributors show increasing attention to diversity of representation in the book, a needed and encouraging effort. But Miller's and Bley's testimonies above are just two indications of how sexual shame tends to persist, an unwelcome aspect of social constructions of gender difference and practices of injustice based on sex. More broadly, rape culture, the #metoo movement and backlash to it, and practices of sexual shaming on social media are indications that in our present moment, sexual shame continues to contribute to economies of power, violence, and resistance. Part of the legacy of this profoundly important feminist work, then, might be to consider what realignments are still necessary or perhaps emerging so many years after this early publication. After all, "it *will* take time to become more aware, to use our bodies better."

Endnotes

1. Blushing as a physical sign of shame is implicated in long-held notions of racial difference and

racism based on white women's "ability" to blush and, therefore according to this racist logic, experience shame. See Deidre Cooper Owens's discussion of Jeffersonian writings on race and gender (22-3) in *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynecology*.

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