

Richard Maguire

Munt, Sally R. (2008) *Queer Attachments, The Cultural Politics of Shame*. Aldershot: Ashgate. ISBN: 978-0-7546-4923-6 (pbk). 248pp. RRP:£18.99

A few years ago in a dark corner of the now defunct gay bar, The Brief Encounter, in London's West End, I had a very brief encounter with a man in his early twenties. All we did was kiss, but his joyful enthusiasm was like a kick in the teeth compared to the jaded, posing gay culture that I was used to. *He kissed a boy and he liked it!* "It's so horny, kissing another man" he said, almost gasping for air. He'd only just come out and I was envious of his proud transgression and shamelessness recalling my own difficult teenage years kissing other boys and the accompanying shameful pain. Those early years and my attempts to 'straighten' myself out follow the familiar narrative of the coming-out story first put to paper by Edmund White in 1982.

In her latest book, *Queer Attachments*, Sally Munt examines the emotion of shame and its retinue of other connected emotions: envy, resentment, suffering and pride. As a self-confessed butch lesbian she's encountered shame often in her life; in her working-class roots, in her abortion while she was an Evangelical Christian and, in the eyes of some lesbians, in being too noticeably lesbian. (Munt 2008, 1) Though she asks whether shame is not one of the very cornerstones of a homosexual identity: 'Can there be a homosexual subject who is *not* formed from shame? In any personal trajectory, the growing consciousness of same sex-desire must, in a Western context, give rise to feelings of difference and exclusion.' (95) Instead of shunning these feelings of shame, Munt suggests that we use the emotion to our advantage. We should 'approach shame, as a potential, as a change agent for the self.' (8)

Munt considers many sites of shame in this volume from the refusal of the Irish diasporic organisers of the New York Patrick's Day Parade to allow the Irish Lesbian and Gay Organization to march alongside them, the continuing portrayal of the Irish and the working class as lazy and amoral in TV programmes such as *Shameless*, to the liberatory artworks of Tracey Emin. Within shame lies the opportunity for a re-inscription of the Social and in the case

of *Shameless*, Munt believes that instead of embodying Capitalist aspiration the poverty-stricken families on the Manchester estate move beyond the stereotype of white racist trash to symbolise, albeit briefly, a Britain that includes all races and gender positions. (156)

Despite the title of her book, her explorations into these shameful texts are not always queer. She admits as much, but sees Cultural Studies as a ‘“queer discipline” with its emphasis on collectivity, collaboration and mutuality...and its principle of ethical, public intervention.’ (15) However, I’m still not convinced with her argument that Ricky Gervais’s mock documentary/sitcom *The Office* is queer. She sees David Brent, the politically incorrect and officious protagonist as performative in a Butlerian manner, ‘as a manager in drag.’ (129) The fact that it is an exercise in shame, the viewer, ensnared by scopophilia and *schadenfreude*, watches it ‘with her own hands shamefully covering her face, her fingers parted over her eyes’ (129), Munt attests, give the text its queerness. *The Office* charts an optimistic journey from shame to joy, from melancholia to ‘successful’ mourning, as in the last episode Brent finally humiliates the man who sacked him and succeeds in ‘get[ing] a fabulous and funny girlfriend’ (129) and it’s this optimism, despite the shame, that has led to its popularity. But I wonder whether its very optimism and popularity dequeen any queer potential it may have contained.

Optimism and mourning suggest a future and it’s the future some recent queer theorists have told us we must avoid as the future is always representative of a homophobic heteronormativity. In his polemic with reproductive futurism, *No Future – Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), Lee Edelman interrogates the deathly anti-social space that queers have been historically pushed into. Instead of attempting to force our way out of this position, Edelman calls on us to welcome this death drive with open arms. While legal moves and public opinion may lead us to believe that

the future will hold a place for us – a place at the political table that won’t have to come at the cost of the places we seek in the bed or the bar or the baths...there are no *queers* in that future as there can be no future for queers, chosen as they are to bear the bad tidings that there can be no future at all. (Edelman 2004, 29-30)

Indeed, he proclaims that we should ‘insist that the future stop here.’(31) But while Munt similarly suggests that we should embrace our shame in the same way that Edelman invites us to embrace our death drive, she maintains that we should look towards a future. She is adamant that shame and its attendant emotions can transcend our exilic identities: ‘shame is a kind of imperative to the emergent self.’(Munt 2008, 89) It is by immersing ourselves in shame that we desire a ‘reconnection’ (103) that returns us to the Social, but returns us queerly. She offers two compelling examples.

The first is Stuart, the Irish gay man from Channel Four’s *Queer as Folk* (1999 and 2000). When his eight-year old nephew threatens to tell Stuart’s parents that Stuart is gay and that Stuart has molested him (Stuart hasn’t, but the nephew sees blackmail as a way to extort some money) Stuart outs himself in a powerful speech, one that I still use occasionally. Stuart says,

I’m queer, I’m gay, I’m homosexual, I’m a poof, I’m a pufftah, I’m a ponce, I’m a bumboy, batty boy, backside artist, bugger. I’m bent, I am that arse bandit. I lift those shirts...I dine at the downstairs restaurant...I fuck and am fucked. I suck and am sucked...And I’m not the pervert. If there’s one twisted bastard in this family it’s this little blackmailer here. (Quoted in Munt 2008, 96)

This speech, this eloquent rant, is, Munt says, ‘an invocation to shame, a citation of shame that through its dramatic, confrontational momentum exceeds the confessional moment and becomes a statement of being.’(96) And what is more, Stuart is able to deflect the shame on to the blackmailer. Stuart, the queer, has agency here. (96)

Her other striking example is David Fisher from HBO’s *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005). At the start of the series which begins with the death of David’s father, David is a closeted gay man, and the series then charts David’s flirtations with heteronormative respectability – he plans to become a Deacon in the Episcopalian Church – to his acceptance of his homosexuality. It’s not just a conventional conversion narrative as through his battles with shame David is able to refigure gay life, and importantly have a future. The American poet, Mark Doty in response to some graffiti announcing ‘HOMO WILL NOT INHERIT’ writes that what he *will* inherit will be

‘the margins/which have always been mine’ and the ‘impenetrable/edges no one wants’. (Doty1996, 70-1) While this peripheral politics may be an earlier strategy of resistance in a similar vein to Edelman’s, David Fisher is able to inherit the objects that lay in the centre of family life. He inherits his father’s business; he marries his Afro-American working-class boyfriend; the two of them adopt children who will inherit their names and, presumably, the business. David inherits, and will leave, a future. Munt does not see this as a homonormative move, a mimicking of heterosexual traditions, but a queer and multi-racial strategy in which homosexuality’s inner deathliness is inverted to allow the equation ‘homosexuality=life.’ (178)

Edelman may be turning in his death drive, but Judith Halberstam has also called for a queer politics that doesn’t rely on nonreproductive tenets, or as she puts it, on a masculinist archive. (Halberstam 2008, 151) Halberstam may not agree with Munt’s redemptive shame and its resulting individuation; she favours Leo Bersani’s ‘counter-intuitive but crucial shift in thinking away from projects of redemption, reconstruction, restoration and reclamation.’ (Halberstam 2008, 140) However, she believes that we ‘need to craft a queer agenda’ alongside other resistant strategies that battle against Capitalism which refuse ‘a liberal notion of progressive entitlement’ to create a ‘queer politics which is not also tied to a nihilism which always lines up against women, domesticity and reproduction’. (Halberstam 2008, 154) Provocatively optimistic, Munt’s *Queer Attachments* allows for queer theory to break its nihilistic shackles and shamefully and joyfully ‘make dancing sodomites of us all.’ (Munt 2008, 225)

References

- Doty, M. (1996) ‘Homo Will Not Inherit.’ in *Atlantis*, London: Cape Poetry. pp70-73
- Edelman, L. (2004) *No Future Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. London: Duke University Press.
- Halberstam, J. (2008) ‘The Anti-Social Turn in Queer Studies’ *GJSS* Vol. 5, Issue 2: 140-156.
- White, E. (1983) *A Boy’s Own Story*. London: Picador.