

THE *SRPR* REVIEW ESSAY:
POETICS OF ENTANGLEMENT:
RECENT INTERVENTIONS IN GAY SHAME AND STIGMA

PHIL SPOTSWOOD

Stop Lying

Aaron Smith

University of Pittsburgh Press, 2023

108 pages; paperback, \$18.00

The Malevolent Volume

Justin Phillip Reed

Coffee House Press, 2020

104 pages; paperback, \$16.95

all the catholic gods

Patrick Kindig

Seven Kitchens Press, 2019

24 pages; paperback, \$9.00

The problem of inherited shame has long vexed US queer communities: How to rid oneself fully of it, if even possible? How to recognize when sexual shame interacts with other forms of identity-based shame? And if a one-size-fits-all embrace of “pride” falls short of the reality of queer existence for many, then what to make of the insidious fallout of the emotion and how it orients life?

And there is a rich history of twentieth- and twenty-first-century US gay male poets and artists taking up these questions in their work, often (though not always) alongside personal and public reckonings with the HIV / AIDS epidemic and ongoing stigmatization of the virus, both within and outside queer communities.¹ The three poets whose work I consider here join this varied tradition of managing inherited shame and stigma in tangled relation to their sexuality, gender presentation, and race. For the purposes of this review, I consider

recent poetry collections by Aaron Smith, Justin Phillip Reed, and Patrick Kindig. In each collection, the speaker grapples with shame and stigma that has been projected onto them by dominant religious and racialized cultures, as they use the field of the poem to explore how to live, fully, alongside the self-effacing emotion and structuring stigma. Though shame in queer communities certainly impacts more than gay men, I am choosing to focus on this particular group to engage a granularity of experience and work against the subjectless critique often leveled at queer theory, when “queer” is utilized to simultaneously signify a vast range of nonnormativity. Though I am invested in the expansiveness of queer as a means of marking where systems of power delineate normalcy, I am also invested in describing and learning from the particularities of social identifications and how they impact daily life.² On the other hand, I want to keep in mind Jack Halberstam’s astute critique of white gay men’s attachment to shame—namely, that it tends to stabilize the pride/shame binary as the only two ontological possibilities, and often assumes white homonormativity as the “standard” of pride.³

I believe the poets whose work I consider attempt a more nuanced approach to the management of shame, though. I am drawn to them because of (what I read as) their poetic resistance to embracing either tactic—neither a life oriented largely via pride, nor via shame, but some knotted ground informed not only by sexuality but race, gender presentation, and faith. And I find that poetry—with its attention to the generative instability of language and the capaciousness of form to hold the mess of reality—is especially adept at exploring and questioning such terrain. Though the range of their interests and positionalities are quite distinct, I find it useful to examine how Smith, Reed, and Kindig experiment with language to reorient themselves (and readers) to the orienting nature of shame and stigma. Their work, broadly, resonates with Lyn Hejinian’s description of the nature of language in her essay “The Rejection of Closure”: “Language discovers what one might know, which in turn is always less than what language might say” (48).⁴ My sense is that these poets turn to language to trace the limits and the beyond of knowledge (of self, and self-in-relation)—to describe the shape of their pain and gesture beyond its prescribed borders.

Aaron Smith's *Stop Lying*

Aaron Smith's fifth full-length collection, *Stop Lying*, takes as its chief demand the need to resist clean narratives of forgiveness, reconciliation, and pride-full closures with those who have hurt us (including ourselves). The collection is full of complicated relationships, both inter- and intrapersonal, but the central relationship explored is that between Smith and his recently-deceased mother, whose fundamentalist Christian faith instilled in him an abiding gay shame that his speakers continue to interrogate and experience alongside seemingly antithetical feelings like joy, peace, and assurance.⁵ Because Smith's poetry focuses on interpersonal relationships, his work is often narrative, and the syntax prose-like, to succinctly convey the stories that define those (intricate) relationships. However, I am constantly struck by his deft utilization of enjambment, repetition, and tightly structured stanzas—tools integral to expressing and exploring the snarled breadth of these connections. For instance, here is the poem "Afterlife" in its entirety:

Sometimes
the hardest part

is wondering
if my mother died

believing
I would go

to hell (69)

Each line is given enough weight to have its own life, it seems. It is challenging, and energizing, to read work like this that seeks to hold the mess of our relationships without tidying them up or fitting them into cleaner, progressive narratives (i.e., of pride and familial acceptance). For me, this is a main draw to Smith's larger work, its unflinching willingness to hold and breathe with constantly morphing pain, without easy solutions out of it.

"The Only Thing" appears in the first few pages of the collection, and seems at the core of the book's project to tell the truth, however it actually manifests. While shopping, the speaker remembers that his mother once read a published essay about his sexuality, then "called

my sister and cried, / begged her to ask me to take it down. // I didn't, and we pretended it never / happened" (7). Smith's lines and stanza breaks often perform, like in these lines, to allow each subject or thought to exist in its entirety, even if the following line cuts or complicates that thought. From the same poem: "She loved me without looking // at me, as best she could, and it was enough / in the end, the only thing, after the broken / years, I wanted." Smith's poems are filled with things said and not said, with averted and direct gazes, and his speakers strive to find some acceptance in the space between truth and the reality readers might expect. This poem ends: "What we never said // is forever now, and small in comparison / to the honest place we walked—." Because of my own history with inherited gay shame, I struggle with what I read as the grace offered in these lines, but I am intrigued by the em dash that carries the poem (and more specifically, the "honest place we walked") into the future, without resolution, or maybe it is a kind of complex, living resolution. Tightly crafted endings like these, that both distill and extend the poem, are a major strength of the collection that invites me back into the poem to consider how "we" got here, and where to go from there.

For Smith's speakers, managing inherited gay shame is a constant balancing act of repudiation and embrace, of pain and possible pleasure. The poem "First Word" takes this task head-on in its negotiation of the word "queer" levelled at the speaker throughout their youth. They recall:

The football players called us
queer and the soccer players

called us queer

and the closeted queers called us
queer before they palmed our heads

in the damp freshman dorm.
We let them. Thirsty (29)

Here, in the opposite of silence, the speaker insists on what *has* been said, has been used as a weapon for control. I am continually surprised by the way the repetition of "called us"—the lack of agency implied in that phrase—is flipped by the line "We let them," which sets off the

latter half of the poem. And in the latter half of the poem, what the speaker *does* with this received language, points to what intrigues me about Smith's handling of shame, how his speakers simultaneously move beyond its debilitating effects *and* recognize how it never stops informing self-formation. The poem continues:

for our mouths to be
more than a word a mouth spits out

more than what they thought
we could swallow (29)

Counterbalancing the repetition of "called us," the repetition of "more than" allows the speaker and the "we" they identify with to—through the very same language and shamed act of sex—find some pleasure or identification beyond the naming meant to constrict. Smith's choice of "more than" (as opposed to "other than" or "less than," for instance), seems to hold in tandem both the implied shame and what is beyond it, and this seems to be the nuanced truth of his speaker's relationship to the feeling. Like the speaker's relationship to their mother, their related tie to sexual shame is one difficult to face and hold the subtleties of, though one Smith tasks his poems with. In a conversation with Julie Marie Wade in the *Rumpus*,⁶ Smith talks about how his "earliest relationship to poetry was a place where anything could be said and left to stand in all its complexity, without certainty. Poetry doesn't let people—writers or readers—off the hook with clichés and easy outs." Though this belief resonates in all his previous books, I sense that *Stop Lying* speaks to this most strongly, especially the notion of poetry—if truly honored—not allowing the writer or reader "easy outs."

I'm reminded of the poem "He Lied," in which the speaker recounts all of the points of a sexual encounter in which he (the speaker) lied; though, because of the report-like tone of the poem, we are never given the reason(s) as to why he might have. Each line picks up where the title's syntax leaves off. For instance: "when the man asked if he wanted to get fucked / when the man asked if he was always this quiet / when the man asked if it hurt" (37). Because the title sets off and does not textually repeat the lying subject, and instead the lines repeat the prepositional phrase ("when the man asked"), I am led into focusing on the other man's actions rather than the speaker's. This syntactical pattern shifts, temporarily, the focus away from the

confessional subject and onto the act of “neutral” telling itself. Like many of Smith’s endings, though, the final line of this poem reorients me to truth-telling and confessionalism: “when he said the man asked if it hurt.” With the break of the set pattern and reintroduction of the poem’s subject, I am forced to contend with the reality that what I am reading is a made thing, a recounting from the hands of a human subject who (like all human beings) will lie—to protect themselves, or others, for some false sense of comfort. But poetry, even in its artifice, for Smith is a space in which “truth” might be brought richly forth, even if painful or ugly. And it is a space where some pleasure or joy might be found in the messy, “shameful” truth—not as a clean transformation from but a dwelling found within it. He ends the poem “Stupid Beauty”: “My mother / is dead. I wasted so much time. / Why is this so hard to say?” (46). In the crafting, in the telling (to a reader, to oneself), some reorientation to pain that makes room for other feelings to breathe among.

Justin Phillip Reed’s *The Malevolent Volume*

Similarly invested in grappling with the stories that shape and are used to shape us, Justin Phillip Reed carves space within (not without) white supremacist narratives that construct Blackness as monstrous in his 2020 full-length, *The Malevolent Volume*. In an essay published on the Poetry Foundation’s *Harriet Books* blog,⁷ Reed articulates his aesthetic interests in Western conceptions of horror and monstrosity: “I have no interest in discarding (for the sake of aesthetics Black or otherwise) that moral and literary tradition that fundamentally shapes the anti-Black, patriarchal, bestial-othering politics that I find myself up against; I have used it in attempts to make sense of the world around me, which is one reason these myths persist.” The speakers in his book often take on the voices and personae of Western “monsters” like the Minotaur, Medusa, and Ridley Scott’s Xenomorph; however, his speakers generally do not experience and / or express the shame which might attend monstrous figuration, but are speakers which, as he argues, “would self-emancipate, lurk and leap, bite and fight, and consume ravenously.” And because they do not understand their identities as shameful, they are able to redirect their gaze more fully towards the processes of stigmatization which structure shame in the first place. I’m

grateful to be able to read Smith's and Reed's work together, for where Smith closely attends to the thickness of interpersonal relationships, Reed's speakers often seek to acknowledge the larger stigmatizing forces shaping them, and use the space of the poem to both challenge and access some personal power among such devitalizing stories.

While not embodying the persona of a specific "monster," the speaker of "Gothic" understands herself as one of many "weird beast[s]" who, like the "fantastic creatures" adorning the cathedral in the poem, are ideological constructions of white supremacy. The poem opens with a series of nested images: "Along the walls once thought as tall as any / giant, or the giant inside the youth / who slew him, what gargoyled the centuries-old cathedral—" (20). And these nested, codependent images portray monstrosity as a human product, for it is not a giant who the walls of the cathedral are understood according to, but "the giant *inside* the youth / who slew him" (emphasis mine). And these walls are "gargoyled" by such "fantastic creatures arguably never created." The preposition ("inside") and the verbed form of the noun (gargoyle) both depict monstrosity as dependent on human manufacturing, never actually created. I am leaning on an understanding of the verb "created" as a natural act aligned with the verb "designed" used later, actions which seem distinct from other similar verbs like "imagine" and "illustrated" used elsewhere in the poem and stemming from human subjects. These distinctions seem crucial for an understanding of stigma as a *human* process of linking a surface trait with an "undesirable" characteristic as defined by those in power to maintain that power.

Within the poem's Biblical allusion to the story of Daniel,⁸ it is through the human king's religious discourse that nonhuman lions are transformed from "mouths designed / to love the meadow" to "whichever mouths will shred them," and it is only by framing nonhuman lions as dangerous that Daniel might appear "blameless" before his own god. Reed's speaker traces this stigmatizing logic further, though, in observing that the historically Israeli Daniel has been illustrated: "white Daniel, white angel, / lustrous aureoles of heavenly favor, / no margin for surprise, no queer palette, all failure"(20). Thus, an argument develops that points to a way whiteness has co-opted Biblical narrative to cast itself as—like Daniel—blameless, favored, and surrounded by "dangerous" non-white subjects. It seems crucial that Reed's speaker recognizes "the likes of my weird beast" only at

the end of the poem after it has been firmly framed within the context of whiteness, allowing them, in the space of the poem, to sidestep any feelings of shame which might attend such stigma, and to intervene in the dehumanizing process by redirecting the stigmatizing gaze. The final couplet reads: "They are looking for proof of the devil. / They have no interest in their kingdom's architecture" (20). Reed's use of "kingdom" puns with an earlier reference to the binomial nomenclature used in their childhood picture books—a scientific categorization of biological life historically used to support notions of white supremacy by stigmatizing non-white subjects.⁹ Thus the speaker marks two discourses (religious and scientific) capable of producing stigma to create and maintain notions of white supremacy, structures which white subjects either cannot or have "no interest" in comprehending; though, like the Gothic architecture of the poem's title, they are structures which have a material existence and which generate social meaning.

Like the subjects and histories in "Gothic," Reed's poetry is densely allusive and logically elaborate. The poems in *The Malevolent Volume* are twisted bizarrchitectures of sound, history, and violence; the focus is placed not just on the walls but the forces and processes which built those walls, and how the speaker (figured monstrous inside said walls) might access a complicated empowerment within them. Often, the forms of the poems collapse or merge with other forms, adding to the allusive richness of the work but also, necessarily, working to heighten the speakers' urgencies. Consider "Aubade: Apocalypse" which Reed explains in his endnotes: "employs a device I've named CASH (consonantal anagrammatic slant homeoteleuton), in which each line, or each alternating line, ends in a word or phrase composed of the same set of recycled consonant sounds, with the purpose of insinuating a sonic motif or mood" (89). As the aubade form implies, the poem depicts the speaker with a lover in the morning, though the morning they find themselves in is far from any rosy dawn. Traditionally a form brimming with assurance in the sanctuary of love, Reed's take on the form finds his speaker enmeshed in external forces which infiltrate the lovers' privacy and leaves them in "limited utility." Upon waking:

I stand watching the death of lapis,
the land sliding, the mountains infernal, another block's spill

of the evicted in a dirge across the asphalt, infections of police.
You, my surface dweller, are not above but a vessel of the pulse:
the plastic you finished inside of inside of me is a single spoil
of drilled-for explosives and a stripped tree. Everywhere, in place,

our material lives come back to be not taken for granted (32)

Recycling plosive *p*'s and sibilant *s*'s, the private bedroom of Reed's aubade implodes under the weight of man-made ecological collapse and social upheaval. His CASH device sonically brings the whispers and pleas, the siphons and withdrawals—the violence of eking out existence during late-stage capitalism—to the forefront. Reading this poem, mouthing the phonics of it, brings it into the breath as music might, where it works to unsettle relationships to form, sex, and our exploited environment. Though many of Reed's speakers do indeed "self-emancipate" (like in "Gothic"), the question of how to do so is central to this poem, in the throes of feeling such ubiquitous hopelessness. In much contemporary gay poetry, speakers figure some sense of (strained) freedom via sex acts, and Reed's speaker similarly interrogates the usefulness of sex as a personal means of accessing even a small sense of agency. His aubade ends:

Accomplice,

most we can do is use this door and swing its hinges off. Unclasp
my skin from yours like a receding season. See my waist relapse
into peak dismay, limited utility. Dick me down again. Help us (32)

But for Reed's speaker, there is no epiphany reached or material/spiritual transcendence attained via sex; yet, it does remain some kind of door or portal, even if one whose hinges must be broken. I read this image, and the whole of the poem, as an insistent ask that we reframe our understanding of rigid boundaries maintained between private actions and environmental consequences—that these boundaries are not so rigid, and that "the environment" encompasses not only the natural but the social world, our web of relations.

As Devan Schneckner notes in her review¹⁰ of *The Malevolent Volume*, the titular "volume" indicates not only the textual object of the book but the *sound* of malevolence it emerges from—the noise of historical and mythological white supremacist narratives of Blackness that Reed's speakers find purchase within. I find that Reed's

management of stigma resonates with Smith's navigation of shame in that neither artist seems interested in decoupling from or cleanly transforming out of painful histories (both personal and public), yet there is still some power to be found within their dense present as an extension of their past. For instance: in Reed's six-page "When I Was a Poet," his speaker finds that "Mine was the express mission of uncountable spirits // reaching in ceaselessly to relink their fingers. / I was architected like a multidimensional radial hemorrhage" (72) and that "I am the hydra of I / and soon I will be the next thing" (77). This poem encapsulates what compels me about Reed's handling of violent histories—through the medium of language, a reckoning and endless becoming-with. Like all the poems in the final section of the collection, this poem appears in white typeface on a black background. The visual effect is striking due to its suddenness and its flipping of tradition; and in the context of Reed's work, it is an effective reorientation for this (white) reader towards the constructed nature of whiteness, forcing me to consider how *all* social identities are made, unmade, and remade within our constantly shifting networks of being.

Patrick Kindig's *all the catholic gods*

Operating within ideological narratives of Catholicism, Patrick Kindig takes up the problem of gay shame in his chapbook, *all the catholic gods*, to rework a relationship to sex, desire, and a self informed by Catholic doctrine. In moves that resonate with José Esteban Muñoz's theory of disidentification,¹¹ Kindig's speakers reimagine various Catholic saints' lives to access and interrogate some personal pleasure and joy within their familiar narratives. Like Reed and Smith, Kindig seems invested in working *within* the ideological structures they have inherited, seeking some form of complex living despite dominant narratives that discourage their full embodiment. His collection is full of lines of sight and desire crisscrossing bodies, making and unmaking them in a constant game of tension and release that manifests in his tendency towards tight, enjambed couplets that sonically bleed into and double over themselves. One striking example of this movement can be found in "serenity prayer," after the popular Christian prayer.¹² The poem begins:

your breath made
the world made me

made the sea (*breathe*)
& the air your breath

moved (*breathe*) made
breath beget breath (5)

There is a slipperiness in Kindig's work, a sense of subjects drifting into others, to merge and depart changed. The poem ends:

as one

thing reached inside
(*breathe*) your breath

pulled my lungs
inside out. (6)

In many of the collection's poems, the speakers grapple with embracing their desire, figured abnormal in the context of Catholicism. Kindig's reworking of the serenity prayer—the central pulse of which seeks to differentiate between desire and need—with its world-creating breath moving in and out of the “wrecked // brockage” of the body, seems less interested in establishing firm boundaries between desire and need and more interested in understanding the fact of this entanglement, and how to move among it.

In a different imagining than Reed's of the Biblical prophet Daniel and his trial in the lion's den, the speaker in Kindig's “daniel” struggles to accept a body “that wanted, that wanted not / to want” (3). He re-visions Daniel in a crisis of faith, wavering between a “belief” and “disbelief” that metaphorically take shape as the story's lions. Within his dark night of the soul, Daniel touches the lions' necks and finds “the echoes there. he touched / their throats at the beginning // & the end of it” (4), an ouroboros-like gesture frequently repeated in this collection, which illustrates one of its central concerns: how to give oneself permission to pursue desires that have been ideologically refused, when that refusal (as shame) has become so entrenched in the body as to seem impossible to disentangle from. Shaped via Catholic doctrine, Kindig's speakers are wired to feel shame and (queer) desire coterminously, and his poems—with their looping syntax and delineating gestures—seek

to both describe and slip out of these scripts. At the end of Daniel's trial, refusing to be brought out into daylight:

he lay between
the flanks of two of them
& was content, held by two things
that held him as if they had made him,
held him because they had. (4)

Between belief and disbelief, between rejecting an ingrained faith and accepting it as embedded (and finding a way to thrive despite)—Kindig seems to choose the latter option, and his tapping into the latent eroticism of Biblical narratives and prayers a way of pursuing it.

Commonly attributed to St. Francis of Assisi—patron saint of animals and nature—the Peace Prayer begins: “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,” thus situating the praying subject as a conduit for God's love and forestalling their own desires.¹³ Kindig's “prayer of abasement” similarly seeks to become conduit but hungrily diverts the flow into their own desires.

i am all appetite,
lord, a mouth fumbling
its way into each dark place
it enters, searching for a man
to enter it. lord, i am full
of cum & shame. (13)

The declarative “i am” is repeated eight times in this short poem, and is a repetition that counteracts or complicates the self-effacing gesture of the prayer and the submissive position the speaker places themselves in before others. Located in the center of the chapbook's single signature (so that the pages naturally fall open to it), this poem felt like a crucial shift in the collection's project, as its speaker is the most self-affirming voice thus far—a voice it seems Kindig's earlier speakers have been moving towards inhabiting. Full of both “cum and shame,” they give themselves over to their want, allowing themselves to access their own sense of agency and empowerment within the set of beliefs

pain of shame, and some queer theorists' and activists' embrace of the emotion as a political and personal stance against Pride—an embrace which brings along its own particular pleasures and potentialities.¹⁶

For queer folks who have inherited shame and can feel the pressures of stigma surround their social identities, some management of the self-effacing emotion and cultural force seems necessary. I am grateful for the three poets whose work I have had the opportunity to review, for offering their own tangled maps and labyrinthian blueprints. The problem of shame will never be solved as long as systems of power are in place which discriminate according to social ideals; however—as Smith, Reed, and Kindig explore—some personal agency of self-determination can be wrested back from dominant narratives that once controlled self-meaning, however cleft.

NOTES

- 1 See David Wojnarowicz, Gary Fisher, James Baldwin, Rafael Campo, Wayne Koestenbaum, Eric Sneathen, for example.
- 2 For more on the efficacy of queer in this regard, see Jennifer Moon's "Gay Shame and the Politics of Identity," *Gay Shame* / (University of Chicago Press, 2009). In general, this collection has been crucial for my understanding of twenty-first-century theoretical managements of queer shame.
- 3 Halberstam: "So while gay shame stabilizes the pride/shame binary and makes white gay politics the sum total of queer critique, gay shame also has a tendency to universalize the self who emerges out of a "shame formation" ("Shame and White Gay Masculinity," *Social Text* vol. 23, no. 3–4, 2005: 223). For more on homonormativity and white homonationalism, see also Jasbir Puar's groundbreaking *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Duke University Press, 2007).
- 4 *From The Language of Inquiry* (University of California Press, 2000).
- 5 Smith's book *Primer* (University of Pittsburg Press, 2016) is another collection whose central focus seems this personal matrix of shame.
- 6 See Wade's "Beyond the Manicured Surface: Talking with Aaron Smith," in *the Rumpus*, November 15, 2019, <https://therumpus.net/2019/11/15/the-rumpus-interview-with-aaron-smith/>.
- 7 "In My Defense, Monsters: Notes on Black Poetic Grotesqueries, Composite Humanity, and Freedoms of the Horrific, Part 1," in *Harriet Books*, August 1, 2019, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet-books/2019/08/in-my-defense-monsters-notes-on-black-poetic-grotesqueries-composite-humanity-and-freedoms-of-the-horrific-part-1>.

- 8 See Daniel 6:2–24, English Standard Version Bible. <https://esv.literalword.com/>.
- 9 See Carl Linneaus and his highly influential *Systema Naturae* (1735).
- 10 See Schnecker's review "The Malevolent Volume by Justin Phillip Reed," in *Southeast Review*, September 2021, <https://www.southeastreview.org/single-post/book-review-justin-phillip-reed>.
- 11 See *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
- 12 The opening lines: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."
- 13 Full (unlined) text of the popular prayer: "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace: where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen."
- 14 For example: "thinks: some day, they will say / i let it happen" from "patrick" (16), or "on his tongue & it / remains, tastes like salt" from "sebastian dreams" (22).
- 15 For more on the question of queer pleasure and "negative" feelings, see Wayne Koestenbaum's *Humiliation* (Picador, 2011) and Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* (Harvard University Press, 2007).
- 16 This is Eve Sedgwick's central argument for the political and personal usefulness of shame, that because (she argues) it is a sort of affective substrate of queerness, it is a source of boundless energy to be tapped into for generative self-creation and political renewal. For more, see *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Duke University Press, 2003).