



# The Shame of Servers: Inquiry and Agency in a Manhattan Cocktail Lounge

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## abstract

With the history and function of the worker's inquiry in mind, this paper presents the serving women in their own words, describing how the expectations placed on them as gendered affective laborers creates a forced, false, and relentless intimacy with customers that in turn produces a reflexive internal cycle of shameful experience and memory for a group of servers. This manifestation of shame complicates the idea of worker's inquiry because the inquiry itself further triggers the negative emotional cycle. But the peculiar insularity of shame- its potential to facilitate emotional boundaries and defensive strategies- means it can also be harnessed and utilized as a powerful tool for autonomy and emotional emancipation. With the schizophrenic nature of shame in serving work in mind, this research explores the inherent emotional risks for workers in the American affective labor economy, and how small social changes in expectations on the part of consumers of affective labor can greatly lessen these risks. The paper concludes by suggesting that sociologists critically engage with the many manifestations of shame in affective labor to expand and rethink the concept of the worker's inquiry to reflect the emotional needs of the ballooning number of service industry laborers in Western economies.

## Introduction: Shame in The Den

This article explores the function of shame in the affective service economy, specifically in the lives of 12 women working in one New York City bar – The Den. The Den is an upscale bar and lounge located in the lobby of a trendy hotel in Manhattan. Its customers are generally wealthy and sophisticated consumers of affective labour: and Den servers can look forward to generous tips, provided they comply with the specific performance of affectivity this customer base

requires. Exactly defining the scope of this affectivity is complicated, but to provide a general outline: the women who serve in The Den are expected to flirt, engage, and flatter their customers; to listen to their stories and laugh at their jokes; to furnish personal details about themselves in response to customers' inquiries; and endure proposition or harassment – harassment often encouraged by the false sense of intimacy this affective performance cultivates – with grace. This nightly expectation for affective performance generates strong feelings of shame in the women who serve in The Den. It is shameful because it compels the women to adopt a performance of emotional or sexual intimacy towards their customers that goes far beyond the customary expectations for polite service. It is shameful because it invites customers to engage in inappropriate interactions with their servers under the umbrella of this expectation. It is shameful because it authorizes customers to, at best, withhold tip money, and at worst, verbally or physically harass their server if they feel they have been cheated out of a part of their produced experience because their server does not perform to their expectation. It is shameful because the entire production of affect underscores the women's negative status as servers – women, who are paid in no small part to reify the perceived class status of others. And it is shameful because it produces in the Den women subjects who lack autonomy over their emotional performativity – who by virtue of being compelled to act with insincerity are in many ways not in control of their own emotional lives. An inquiry into these different facets of shame, and the toll it takes on the emotional health of the Den women, is the focus of this article.

I am intimately familiar with this particular bar – it is one where I myself have worked – but my reason for choosing it as my site of research is not simply for its convenience. The time I spent serving there meant that I was really able to get to know my co-workers: not as subjects, but through the solidarity of experiences that only co-workers can share. This solidarity earned me the privilege of their candour and frankness when describing the experiences that had accumulated in them over their years working in this particular service environment. This is an important point when considering the worker's inquiry as a sociological tool because the circumstances of the Den women's employment do not easily coincide with the original concept of the worker's inquiry itself. As originally designed by Marx, the worker's inquiry was a sheet of questions, to be answered by individuals in the working class to better understand the physical circumstances of their employment<sup>1</sup>. This was not a politically neutral undertaking: the goal was unambiguously to promote socialist programs and create better working conditions through solidarity. For Marx and his

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1 Marx, K. (1880) 'A Worker's Inquiry', *La Revue Socialiste*. Transcription: Curtis Price, 1997.

contemporaries, the idea was to gather information from the factory labourer under the assumption that he was being exploited by the boss or owner. But the case of the Den women is complicated by the fact that it is not the owner or boss or manager that is the primary source of the women's angst. By virtue of being hotel employees the Den women are in the highly unusual position of being serving people in a union, which advocates on their behalf and largely insulates them from abuse by management. Instead of the boss, for the Den women it is the customer who is the source of the angst and shame they experience at work, the customer who is the exploiter. The issues these women face are therefore quite divorced from the issues faced by the factory workers of Marx's time and are very much a product of the contemporary service economy. Keeping in mind workers like the Den women, who produce an intangible product, contemporary Marxists have expanded the idea of a worker's inquiry to include the figure of the *virtuoso*: a worker who does not produce a physical product, but whose labour rather is focused on idea generation, relationship maintenance, or affective performance<sup>2</sup>. For these virtuosi, the physical labour is mental labour, and the intellect or emotion that enters the public service becomes just as mundane as the repetitive physical actions of the factory worker. It is precisely because of this mundanity of emotion and intellect, however, that even a worker's inquiry that includes subjects like the virtuoso is challenged as a progressive tool for workers like the Den women. A huge component of the Den women's expectation for affective performance is interpersonal: customers ask them personal questions, and they are pressured, under the threat of being seen to be rude, to answer them<sup>3</sup>. It is not uncommon for customers to ask a server her age, her birthplace, about her family, about her dating or marital status, where she lives, what she does for fun, what her habits are, or what her goals are for her life. This relentless questioning has powerful shameful effects because the women, who are often pressed, through the leverage of the tip money that is the currency of the affective labour economy, are compelled to answer them<sup>4</sup>. I am not suggesting that a customer's prying and a sociologist's interviewing are the same.

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2 Virno, P. (2004) *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).

3 In the tipping economy, any aspect of a server's appearance or performance can be a justification for withholding a tip. In serving environments like The Den, especially when dealing with male customers, any reluctance to engage can be deemed 'rude,' and be punished with a lack of a tip.

4 The idea that Den servers have an 'other life'- a presumed other career in acting, singing, etc, that they are using their service work to support, is a frequent subject of prying among customers. Well-meaning or not, this questioning creates shame in the servers by reinforcing the idea that serving is a job only done under duress or by those in transition. If the server in question is pursuing another career outside the bar, the questioning can also shame her by reminding her that this career has not progressed enough yet to allow her to quit.

But the fact of serving's ambiguously negative status in our culture (serving is literally and figuratively *servile* work, serving is a low-status occupation, serving is for certain classes of people), combined with the stigma and assumptions often attached to it (serving people are uneducated, unambitious, unskilled, and disposable), means that for the Den women any inquiry no matter how well-intentioned, can be shameful. Which begs the question: how does the idea of a worker's inquiry become complicated when not only the circumstances and subject of the worker's employment is shameful, but also when the very fact of asking produces shameful associations with emotional and intellectual mundanity? By virtue of their union status the Den women already have many of the protections from managerial abuse that was the goal of the original worker's inquiry. For them and other workers like them, even those who do not enjoy these protections, the goal should always be to inquire after new sources of shame and exploitation without reifying this shame through the inquiry itself. In this case, my history as a known entity and a co-worker lessened the distrust and shifted the inquiry from outsider questioning and more into the sphere of co-research. But borrowing again from recent Marxist expansions of the worker's inquiry concept, another method might be to turn the focus from investigating abuses to exploring agency; from painful stories to stories of the women undercutting this pain by defying the affective expectations of the job; to stories that emphasize how the women identify and engage with their status as affective labourers by utilizing refusal as subjectivity<sup>5</sup>. Our role as sociologists interested in the emotional wellbeing of emotional labourers is to critically engage with the many manifestations of shame in affective labour, and expand and rethink the concept of the worker's inquiry to reflect the needs of the ballooning number of service industry labourers that now make up so much of the American domestic economy. I see the Den women, with their unusual protections from manager abuse and unusual vulnerability to customer abuse, as a valuable source of study in this larger project.

In an effort to explore these issues, as part of my master's thesis work I interviewed my Den co-workers in the spring of 2012. After I obtained each woman's written permission, I conducted taped interviews with 12 out of the 14 women who serve<sup>6</sup> in The Den. These interviews were mostly done in pairs over 2-3 hours, and while I had some general questions I used to start the conversation, our familiarity with each other caused the conversations to flow quite easily once the interview was underway. After I transcribed and examined

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5 Malo de Molina, M. (2005) 'Common Notions, part 1: Workers-Inquiry, Co-Research, Consciousness-Raising.' *Notas Rojas Collective*.

6 The term 'server' here will be used to describe any woman serving customers in The Den; if a specific woman is a bartender or waitress I will identify her as such.

the interviews, I organized them according to several common emotional themes, the shame that informs this article being one of them. Though I have my own wealth of experience from the time I spent serving in The Den, for this article I rely solely on the testimony of the women I interviewed to support the theoretical hypotheses I put forward here, though these hypotheses remain entirely my own. I have changed all names, including the name of the hotel and bar, to protect the privacy of the women who agreed to speak with me.

## Unmanaged Hearts

As affective labourers, the personal and social identities of the Den women have been especially conditioned by their experiences with and exposure to the shame that is the focus of this article. Among other emotions, shame is critical to any discussion of service labour because of the internalized specificity of its focus. Whereas its sister emotion, guilt, is characterized by its undermining of what one *does*, the target of shame's emotional assault is instead who one *is*<sup>7</sup>. This is particularly true for the Den servers, for whom lines of questioning on this very subject – what they do as an assumed *reflection* of who they are – often provokes shameful feelings. Shame is also critical in any discussion of service work by virtue of its inevitability: shame is intractably linked to *servile* work. With this in mind, we will examine the three most common manifestations of shame faced by the women who work in The Den: shame as *stigma* – shame's effect on social persona and interaction; shame in *revulsion* – shame's ability to both internalize harassment or humiliation and serve as a buffer against this treatment; and shame in *inquiry* – the self-doubt and anxiety that can result from the Den women having to frequently discuss the circumstances of their personal lives with customers. To facilitate this exploration, shame must be detached from its assumed role as universally negative marker of uncomfortable or repellent social interaction, and instead be recognized for its potentially critical mutability<sup>8</sup>. The experiences relayed to me by the Den women indicate that there is political and social opportunity in harnessing this presumptively negative emotion to work towards the carving out of new defensive and autonomous subjectivities. In these cases, by embracing their shame as a strategy for managing and exploring these identities, many of the women have circumvented the potential effects of this shame, both social and personal, commonly associated with servers and other expendable labourers. I argue that the Den women's embrace and harnessing of their shame has given them a means to realize their agency and an opportunity

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7 Kosofsky Sedgwick, E. (2003) *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 37.

8 Koestenbaum, Wayne, (2011) *Humiliation*. New York: Picador. 8-10.

to embody a proletarian pride in their lives as working people – to identify with a political class of workers through an active harnessing of refusal as a tool of agency<sup>9</sup>. These women have come to recognize shame as it can be critically redefined: as an expression of revulsion – not directed towards the self, but towards the shameful situation to which one is subjected. In recognizing this revulsion, the Den women are able to police the boundaries between the self they desire to embody and the affected self that is the embodied desire of their customers. For them, the establishment of this boundary – particularly one between private and public lives and knowledge – is absolutely critical. But herein lies a wrinkle in the question of shame’s potential for emancipatory social projects. What does it mean to inquire after workers when inquiry is an everyday aspect of the affective labour encounters they are expected to provide? How should it change our conception of a worker’s inquiry for those workers for whom most forms of inquiry are involuntary and invasive? How does this type of inquiry’s relationship with shame for these workers detach it from any semblance of progressivity, and instead ally it more closely with the arsenal of biopower? And finally, how can we carve out space for workers to resist these biopolitical implications, and instead achieve the kind of autonomy necessary, in the words of Arlie Russel Hochschild, to truly be unmanaged hearts<sup>10</sup>?

If, according to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, shame is the ‘affect that most defines the space wherein a sense of self will develop<sup>11</sup>,’ then it behoves us to explore the complicated role shame plays in creating and maintaining proletarian pride, and how it might further be harnessed for the political purpose of raising the status of serving people. For women like the Den servers, this inquiry must be less a questioning and more a recording and reifying of the strategies of resistance and refusal in the affective encounter – strategies that both protect the women and define them as a political class. With this in mind we must rethink and rework the idea of inquiry as directed at workers – largely by recognizing, not just as academics, but also as customers who naturally encounter serving people on a regular basis, the right to refusal in the service encounter: by allowing the server the dignity of not having to be inquired after in the first place.

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9 Malo de Molina, 4.

10 Russel Hochschild, A. (1983) *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press. 190.

11 Sedgwick, 37.

## Shame as Stigma

The most commonly understood definition of shame – as embarrassment, humiliation, and self-flagellation – is also the most commonly expressed manifestation of shame found in The Den. Shame permeates the nightly chatter between servers at work, who pepper their conversations with references to being ‘miserable,’ and dreaming of ‘a real job.’ When a server complains about poor treatment or a bad tip, her co-workers will often sarcastically remark that the reason it happened is because ‘he looked right through you,’ ‘she hates you,’ or ‘you’re just a servant, remember?’ this banter not only reflects some of the shameful agitation the women feel while on the job, but also helps deflect these feelings through the solidarity the women feel with each other. Most of the women I interviewed also said they were uncomfortable talking about their jobs outside of work – particularly with strangers, but even with friends and family. If the topic of a server’s occupation comes up, she might gloss over the specifics and instead emphasize its resemblance to more sophisticated occupations. Sophia, a bartender, explained: ‘When I tell people about our job, I always say, “It’s a hotel, it’s corporate; we have a 401k, we have benefits, stock options.” I’m definitely defending it.’ She maintained that this defence is necessary because of the prevalence of assumptions about serving work: ‘Because of the stigma, I have to be defensive.’ For other women, exercising their spending power helps to ease any public shame they feel. Working at the Den exposes these servers to an enviable class of clientele – a clientele whose lifestyle can be tempting to emulate. Many women told me they had developed a taste for designer labels or expensive foods that they never cared for or thought about prior to working at The Den. ‘We’re around high-class people,’ Carmen, a bartender, said. ‘It’s hard to hear people talk about travelling, dinners out, clothes, and not want to be a part of that.’ The adoption of the demeanour of a certain class can also serve to protect the women from any social shaming they might feel when discussing their jobs with others:

I’ll tell you, with friends, talking about working in a bar is easier when you have an expensive handbag on your arm. Like, you may have a real job, but look at this – I wear great clothes, I can go to the greatest restaurants. And look at the photos from the vacation I just went on. -Jean, waitress

While enjoying their hard-earned money sometimes helps insulate servers from the shame they feel about their jobs, displaying wealth can also cause a backlash. The women all had stories of friends or acquaintances’ subtle disapproval of their high earnings. One described a friend from home who is always needling her about how she can earn so much being ‘just a waitress’ – the implication being that it is outrageous for someone who serves to be paid so well. Another told me that her friends seem happy for her, but then wonder aloud why they don’t make

more themselves, 'because they work in offices, and went to college,' (all the Den women have college degrees, and several are in graduate school.) Overall, people tend to react to the knowledge that Den servers make more than many entry-level professionals with discomfort: a sense that it is somehow wrong, that the Den women's earnings represent an inversion of the 'proper' scaling of pay. For example, Penelope, a waitress, told me that customers often comment on her large, gold-coloured watch:

I was wearing my watch, and this woman said, 'Is that a Rolex??' in the most condescending and demeaning way. And it's not, but what if it was? She was so appalled, like 'my waitress has a Rolex?' You know, maybe I do! Am I supposed to wear rags?

Like most of the women I interviewed, Penelope told me that the indignant conversations she endures when she displays wealth as a server greatly contributes to her shameful feelings about the job. 'It makes me feel gross,' she said. 'Like, on top of all that we deal with, people expect us to be destitute. Like I don't deserve the money I work so hard for.'

### Shame as Revulsion

Another common manifestation of shame in The Den is in the form of revulsion – a repellent reaction to shaming that can be projected or internalized. The behaviour of customers is the primary source of revulsive shame for Den servers. One of the prominent features of the job is the extent to which people make no effort to disguise or conceal their activities, conversations, and opinions from Den servers. Most of the time, this behaviour is limited to the comparatively benign results of people becoming intoxicated: lingering stares, slurred words, sloppy gestures, and crude comments. The shame the women feel at being subjected to this crassness has a strong gendered element: the knowledge of shame's ability to render silent and helpless the person being shamed is often exploited by male customers<sup>12</sup>. By virtue of their uniforms (short and skimpy), their gender (young women serving professional older men), or their status (servile persons), the Den women often fall into the trap of feeling in some way that they invite this treatment: that their demeanour, their carriage, or their persona somehow indicated that they are women who deserve this treatment. When a man announces to his friends that his server is 'sexy,' has 'a good ass,' or wonders aloud whether her breasts are real, he depends on the shame his comments generate to keep her silent and him unrebuked. This is the internalized revulsion that shame generates, the shame that can be exploited.

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12 Bartkey, S. L (1990), *Femininity and Domination*. London: Routledge. 27.



But revulsive shame can also be externalized- projected back onto the shaming subject in an act of boundary-affirming agency. So while some Den women are left feeling devalued and even devastated after a shameful encounter, others harness their shame outward instead of inward, turning it back onto the person who generated it in a way that insulates them from emotional harm and attacks instead the person who is its source. The following stories from Sophia, quoted earlier, and Emily, another bartender, illustrate these differing aspects of revulsive shame. The women told me their stories together, one after the other.

Emily: One night, I was working, it was really late and I was the closing bartender. And there were all these couples at the bar, having affairs. Men with ring tans, or even with their rings still on, picking up women, making out. And I was feeling really gross about the whole thing, like, is love even real, you know? Can I ever trust anyone in a relationship? And there was one man who was sitting there all night, and kept asking for napkins. He was writing all over them. So I asked him, 'What are you writing?' And he said, 'Well, sometimes when I'm away from the woman I love, I'm inspired to write her letters.' He was this normal, nice person, and it made me so happy, like, here he is not with his wife, writing her letters. There is hope. So at the end of the night, I'm closing out my register, and he hands me a napkin that says: 'CAN YOU HELP ME OUT? \$1,000.' I tried to ignore it, and get out of the bar. But he intercepted me, and was like, 'So, can you? \$1,000?' And I said, 'I'm not a prostitute.' And he said, 'Well what about the other girls here? Would anyone be interested?' And I just shook my head and left. Because here I thought was this actual normal person, and then that happens. And then I just felt like crap, about life.

Sophia: This one night I was talking to a guy, we had this great conversation, nothing sexual at all. It was about sports, stuff going on around New York, about the drinks, whatever. And you know I don't talk to customers that often, but we talked for a long time. And he made this great impression on me; I thought he was so nice. But then when I picked up his signed check, he had left his room key in it, and a huge tip. So in that case, I didn't even flirt with him at all. He was married! He had a ring on. Which was part of the reason I felt comfortable even talking to him that long. And me just being nice to him was all it took to make him think he had the green light.

Me: Did it make you feel bad that he would think that about you?

Sophia: No. I was disappointed in him. Because the whole time I had though he was this great guy, and I had actually thought: 'his wife is so lucky.'

Emily and Sophia's differing reactions to the proposition of being paid for sex illustrate the two manifestations of revulsive shame in The Den. Emily, like several other women, admitted to me a few times that her treatment by men in The Den has at times made her question her demeanour at work – her affective performance of femininity – and whether this performance had indicated that she invited, asked for, or deserved the shameful treatment. Sophia, on the other hand, turned her encounter entirely around – rather than internalizing feelings

of shame, or self-loathing, she projected feelings of disgust and pity towards the man who would have bought sex from her. Her comment that she was 'disappointed' in him reveals that she felt no qualms about his assumptions. Instead, empowered by the shameful revulsion she recognized as universal, she expressed pity towards him, as well as a bit of woeful sadness that one of the few men she thought was a 'good guy' at the bar turned out to be like all the others.

## **Shame in Inquiry**

Making conversation with customers is a large part of the affective service expectation for Den women. But as affective labourers, even something as seemingly benign as an act of conversation can become an acute source of shame. This is because these conversations – almost always initiated and usually directed by customers – venture in topic far beyond the mechanics of taking and delivering drink orders, and are often steered instead into situations that resemble quasi-interviews: quizzing the server about her life, her habits, her relationships, her likes and dislikes. Though often well intentioned, these conversations are fraught for servers because they are compelled to be much more open to complete strangers than would be expected in normal interaction. One of the most common lines of questioning from customers – and the one most troubling to the servers – is on the subject of the server's 'other life' – the presumed other nascent career that compelled her to join the service industry in the first place. This 'other life' inquiry is shameful because of the implications inherent in the questioning itself. Peyton, a bartender, described it this way:

People assume you must be doing something else with your life. Because why else would you have this job? As though no one with a choice would ever do this. Which, like, no one asks that of the data processors, who have equally mindless jobs. So it's specific to us. There's a reason people assume we must be dying to leave.

In Peyton's example, shame is realized and reinforced by customer's assumptions that serving is a job done only under duress, and only for as long as absolutely necessary. In contrast to data processing- another job she sees as dead-end and boring – serving is stigmatized because its workers are presumed to be desperate to trade up and out. Molly, a waitress, said that her customer's comments about her 'future plans,' or 'other life,' devalued her profession by defining it as the 'thing you do when you have no other choice:'

Everyone assumes we are doing something else with our lives, like acting or singing or something. That's why they always ask, 'What else do you do?' And they're just trying to be nice. But really, is this job so terrible that no one could

want it who wasn't a desperate struggling actor? What's so wrong or shameful about it?

While the women tended to bristle at the suggestion that they must be anxious to leave The Den, it is true that most of them are pursuing outside careers that they hope will someday allow them to leave service work. But that does not mean they are keen to discuss these careers with strangers, particularly in the context of a service environment. Perhaps counter-intuitively, the women told me that the being subjected to frequent questioning about a presumed 'other life' can actually undercut and erode feelings of confidence in that life. If a woman in The Den admits when asked that she is pursuing another career, her very presence as a server can function as a measure of the progress of that career. In many cases, customers will follow up an 'other life' question with a well-meaning, if somewhat misguided and insensitive, question that serves to expose the status of that life. An answer of 'I'm an actress,' might result in the server being asked if she is on Broadway, or an answer of 'I'm a musician,' might result in a query as to which label she is signed to. Having to repeatedly explain oneself and the status of one's career (often already a source of angst) to strangers can, over time, erode a server's sense of confidence in that career. Instead of allowing the server to maintain her personal privacy, to work without being personally interviewed, the questions instead reify and reinforce the shame of her circumstance. None of the women told me they felt inherently ashamed because they were servers. But for many of the women any enjoyment or appreciation of the valuable aspects of being a server in The Den- flexible hours, free daytimes, and generous tips- might in the end be eclipsed by the conversations which serve as a constant, shameful reminder of her status, both in and out of the bar.

Faced with the repetitive intrusion of customer's questioning into their personal lives, many of the women have adopted strategies for protecting their rights to personal privacy. Molly, for example, takes an offensive approach to establishing this boundary:

Sometimes I'll go back to a table, and they'll say to me, 'What's your deal? Where are you from? What do you do outside this bar? What neighborhood do you live in? How old are you? Where did you go to school?' All these personal questions. So I've started saying, in response, 'And how old are you? Where are you from? What do you do?' It keeps things in balance. What makes people think they can ask us things like that? I mean, you shouldn't know so much stuff about me, when I don't know anything about you.

For Molly, turning the focus from herself to her customers inverts the traditional pattern in serving work by placing her customers in the emotionally vulnerable position rather than the other way around. She inverts questioning onto her customers as an assertion of her agency and unwillingness to be shamed by her

customer's inquiry. Other servers in The Den avoid the entire prospect of shameful encounters in the bar by completely dissociating from the display of affectivity in the first place. For these women, shame is both their acknowledgement of the reality that they could be emotionally hurt by engaging a customer and the motivating factor behind the avoidance that results from this acknowledgement. Penelope explained how her approach to dealing with customers has affected her experience in The Den:

I think, more than often, some waitresses are really nice to their tables, and you have to create a distance instead. It's really sad to say, but if you're really open and friendly to men, you create the illusion that you can be had. That you'll talk to them. That they can grab you. You have to be unapproachable. And several of the waitresses are really sweet, but if you give customers the impression that you are approachable, you'll get taken advantage of. They'll take it too far. You have to show people how you should be treated. It's hard to say this bluntly, and guys often say I'm not nice. They'll say to another waitress 'thank god you're here, that other girl was so mean,' but, you know, you never see me crying at the end of the night.

Penelope was one of the few women who told me that she has very few emotional issues associated with her time working in The Den. She told me she has a comfortable relationship to her job: she comes to work, makes her money, and leaves without taking anything with her but that money. Like the subjects of many sociological studies of serving, Penelope attributes this lack of angst directly to her lack of participation in the economy of affective labour, and the absorption of the shame that is its currency<sup>13</sup>. Her explanation was simple: 'I don't put much in, so I don't get much thrown back at me.' Still other Den women deal with this difficulty by effectively partitioning their lives- making The Den and their jobs there a space that largely does not include outside friends, acquaintances, or romantic partners. This avoidance of combining their work and private lives is not only a reflection of projected shame; it is also because these women feel their serving selves do not accurately represent them as people. Emily said that her self-consciousness about her job has meant she prefers not to discuss it with friends and family, or invite them to visit her at work. 'This job is a paycheck for me,' she said. 'It's not my life. I'm comfortable with it.' But if she brings up her job, she said, 'I feel like people start looking at me in a certain light, as a server. And then it's like they don't know me at all.'

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13 For other critical work on affective labour, see Paules, G.F. (1991); Gatta, M.L. (2002); and Leidner, R. (1993).

## Conclusion: Critical Shame

Emily's comment is indicative of the way that shame intersects with the theatricality of affectation adopted by many servers in The Den. And this in turn illustrates shame's utility as a tool to both understand and critically respond to the circumstances of the women working there. Borrowing from Sedgwick, shame in The Den is a schizophrenic influence; shame 'effaces itself; shame points and projects; shame turns itself inside out; shame and pride, shame and dignity, shame and self-display, shame and exhibitionism are different interlinings of the same glove'<sup>14</sup>. Taken further, shame becomes a device of critical mutability, of remaking, a way for the servers emotionally troubled by its influence to act themselves into an emancipatory response to it. The goal of any sociological project that focuses on workers like The Den women then, should always be to create the type of serving space that would allow servers the autonomy to control their exposure to shame by freely choosing their level of participation in this performativity. This is not to suggest that shame can or should be removed entirely from the affective service encounter. Shame is inherent in service work, in *servile* work that by its nature places one person, if only temporarily, below another. But we can recognize the importance of shame's positive qualities even as we work to minimize its negativities. As Sophia's example illustrates, shame can also be a reflective and reflexive tool, focusing disgust on the behaviour that generates it, and identifying the shamed person as a member of a public body unified in this disgust. For Sophia, her shame resulted in transference of solidifying empathy for those, like herself, safely inside the circle of those who do not do shameful things. The Den women's stories show us that one often recognizes that she feels something, *is something*, through experiencing this shame. And it is in this ability to help generate feelings of solidarity and strength that shame, as the primary policing force of behaviour, realizes its greatest potential for critical agency. It is imperative to preserve shame in the service encounter as a perfectly imperfect emotion: a conglomeration of conflicting pulls and pushes, motivators and devaluations; one cannot have only some aspects without the others. 'The forms taken by shame are not distinct "toxic" parts of a group or individual identity that can be excised;' Sedgwick tells us.

They are instead integral to and residual in the processes by which identity itself is formed. They are available for the work of metamorphosis, reframing, refiguration, *transfiguration*, affective and symbolic loading and deformation, but perhaps all too potent for the work of purgation and deontological closure<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Sedgwick, 38.

<sup>15</sup> Sedgwick, 63.

Trying to separate these aspects will only cause the ontological collapse of the entire metaphysical project: that is why political projects that attempt to harness agency by removing shame are ultimately destined to fail. And we should want it to fail, for in failing to be rendered impotent, shame becomes a critical tool for determining what serving people in an environment like The Den want and need to be emotionally safe. In contrast to the performative personas expected of them as affective labourers, in employing and embodying their shame women in The Den have come to terms with their unmanaged hearts – a self that is authentic, honest, and private. To return to the idea of worker’s inquiry, what shame in The Den truly teaches us is that we sometimes must resist inquiring at all, socially or sociologically. Instead, we must empower: allow workers to engage and recognize their shame- privately- and give them the autonomy to respond to it in the manner they choose. Such a project will involve the deconstruction and adjustment of much of the expectations we as consumers have of the affective labour experience. But it also suggests a purpose for the type of worker’s inquiry I undertook with the Den women. On some level, everyone is a consumer of affective labour product. If the type of worker’s inquiry I advocate is one that emphasizes stories of resistance and agency rather than inquiry per se, these projects will have little effect on worker’s wellbeing if we as consumers cannot adjust our expectations for service. As the Den women’s stories indicate, this adjustment must include a transfer of emotional agency from the customer to the server. This is a project that begins with the most basic service encounter. The task facing those for whom exposure to shame is a reality of their employment- as well as those who care about worker’s emotional health- is how best to grasp this agency, to understand and embrace this new conception of shame, as a tool of empowering refusal, before the emotional damage can run too deep.

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