

“Fuck off, I’m Trying to Sleep”: Living With, and Embodying Embarrassment

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This paper is situated within discourses of phenomenology and philosophies of embodiment. I conceptualize embarrassment as trauma to open up a discussion about ways of coping with personal embarrassment. I hope to share a framework for addressing and navigating instances of embarrassment without forgetting the associated trauma and hurt in the process.

I say embarrassing things. I say things that I regret. Like many people, feelings of shame and regret keep me up late at night, even years after an embarrassing incident occurred. In those moments, I am transported back to the state of disorientation that marked the embarrassing memory—a state where I feel my goals, bodymind, and personal identity betrayed by my actions and words.¹ Feeling uneasy, I desire to literally retreat into a hidden corner of the universe and never interact with the world again.

These experiences of shame can be disorienting because they are often unexpected and juxtapose the social context in which they happen. They disrupt the smoothness of my embodied movement in the world and demand that I respond to and reconcile myself with what I have just said or done. These experiences leave me at a loss with regard to what my next action should be. Sometimes, awkward moments have ripple effects that linger and refuse to leave me alone. Other times, I choose not to forget. Although awkwardness and embarrassment are often considered to be psychological responses, it is only through a body that these feelings can be felt. By including the lived experience of being in those situations as a body, I explore the phenomenological structures that enable me to feel embarrassed. I argue that by understanding the embodied experience of feeling embarrassed and ashamed as trauma, we can develop more effective methods of reconciling our sense of self and embarrassment.

Like ‘being’ for Aristotle, embarrassment is said in many ways. The experience of embarrassment is undeniably complex and involves dimensions beyond the

associated bodily and mental responses.² I begin my discussion by clarifying and establishing the kind of embarrassment I am theorizing about. I then describe embodied experiences of feeling and recounting embarrassment. I draw on Ami Harbin’s work on disorientation to describe the unease and bodily responses associated with feeling embarrassed. I argue that embarrassment is a form of trauma by highlighting how these experiences disrupt my sense of identity and self-worth. By conceptualizing embarrassment as trauma, I show how symbolic and literal self-mutilation may become physical responses to embarrassment. Next, I explore ways of reorienting myself after embarrassing experiences, within the context of personal identities as narratives. I argue that, rather than transcending embarrassing experiences, recovery requires recognizing them and reconciling these experiences into a personal narrative. I conclude the paper with a few thoughts about regaining my orientation and relearning how to navigate the world.

Since the experience of embarrassment is complex and necessarily situated in culturally and historically contingent social interactions, I employ only my particular experiences of embarrassment throughout my analysis. I can only speak from my position as a North American university student. Although I focus on the lived experience of embarrassment, which hinges on the non-material aspect of the bodymind, I do not wish to suggest that the bodily and psychological aspects are separable or distinct from each other. Rather, experiences of embarrassment are necessarily embodied responses that are co-produced by complex social, material, and cognitive interactions, and are thus amenable to different levels of analysis.

1. Embarrassment

Embarrassment is often the result of saying something or acting in ways that are inappropriate for a social context, which then causes discomfort in oneself or other people involved. For example, imagine revealing high-

ly personal information to a stranger at a bus stop or hugging someone who does not like being hugged, and then realizing the discomfort that resulted from those actions. Embarrassing experiences happen unintentionally, and the ways that they happen can be different. One form of embarrassment arises from acting or saying something different from what one had intended, such as greeting a stranger that you mistook for someone else or introducing someone by the wrong name.³ Both of these examples are embarrassing because of mistakes in the execution of the attempted actions. Greeting the wrong person happens because of mistaken perception and introducing someone by the wrong name results from fumbling with one's words. Another form of embarrassment stems from deliberate actions or speech acts which are *delivered* as intended, but nonetheless cause unanticipated discomfort. This kind of embarrassment is characterized by insufficient thought behind one's actions, such as misinterpreting the social context and dynamics, or by not being aware of the connotations and consequences of one's words or actions. Examples might include saying a racist or sexual joke that no one finds funny or hugging someone for too long. This is often the kind of embarrassment that I remember with regret and consider to be cringeworthy. This form of embarrassment requires an awareness or reflexivity that is posterior to the actual act itself. In other words, this form of embarrassment is a feeling that results from the awareness and hindsight that what was said or done was inappropriate for the context. I focus on this kind of embarrassment in this paper.⁴

2. *No Bodymind, No Embarrassment*

In moments of experiencing embarrassment, bodily responses feel as immediate as my awareness of the situation. I feel my beating heart, the blood rushing to my face, and the chill that results from the realization that I did something wrong. In these moments, I feel time slow down and I become aware of my spatial position, as though I am looking for the closest escape route. The gaze of the other becomes an intimidating spotlight, like Sauron's eye, and I am left feeling like a turtle without a shell, desperate to retreat further into myself. Where could I go? And in that state of panic, do I not make the situation worse by hastily grabbing the nearest thing I can use to block myself from the other's accusative gaze? I become lost in the nexus of social and material interactions of the world, not knowing how to respond to the other, whom I have violated by causing *them* discomfort. The other may laugh and forgive me on the spot but trying to undo what I have done is like trying to gather up spilled milk. Even if the other did not notice my blunder, I still feel an accusative stare because I am a witness of my action.

Embarrassing experiences are disorienting because they disrupt embodied movements in the world. In her conceptualization of embodying disorientation, Harbin writes that disorientation is not always spatio-temporal—it can be an experience of unease or discomfort that disrupts our previously smooth interactions with the world.⁵ For Harbin, disorientation is not exclusively associated with the aftermath of trauma or major alterations to the body. It is also associated with a feeling that can result from minute disruptions that make us reflect on the cause of that particular disruption.⁶ After feeling embarrassed, I become more acutely aware of what I say and do. That awareness is such that I cannot simply inhabit the world the same way I did prior to feeling disoriented. I become aware of my body after I perform an embarrassing act or say something embarrassing, similar to when I unexpectedly touch something repulsive and I become aware of my hands and the sensation of touching things with them.⁷ I become aware of Heidegger's hammer not only when it is missing or broken, but also when I use it for tasks unintended for hammers. Since I am not separate from my bodymind, I become aware of my embarrassing act in the abstract form as well as in my body. This consciousness is best characterized as an awareness of my embodiment in the world and not simply as a psychological state. By understanding the disorientation from embarrassment as bodily, my desire to hide from a situation could be understood in bodily terms as reflecting my feelings of diminishment and vulnerability. In this context, space outside the bodymind becomes hostile and oppressive from all sides.

This kind of embarrassment challenges my conception of identity and self-worth by forcing me to reconcile myself with the fact that my actions caused another's discomfort. As Harbin argues, the experience of disorientation that results from embarrassment helps us to recognize the learned social norms that we live by or breach.⁸ She argues that our embodiment in the world is habituated through norms that we learn to adopt, but often we become so entrenched in certain forms of embodiment that those norms appear natural.⁹ Since, to some extent, I am the embodiment of the norms I live by, embarrassment also disrupts the set of norms that govern my sense of identity. By recognizing the contingency of one set of norms, Harbin writes that they "can also make other sets questionable (for example, disrupting the norms that harm me because my gender can help show the contingency of those that protect me because of my ability-status)."¹⁰ By realizing that I have disrupted one set of norms through my embarrassing acts, I become aware of other norms that I naturalized in the construction of myself. In this way, the experience of embarrassment challenges my conceptions of self, which may ripple into realms not immediately associated with the norms that my embarrassing actions contravened.

Embarrassment can have a dismantling effect on our sense of self that is not dissimilar to psychological trauma resulting from major traumatic events. Similar to physical trauma, the psychological harm from embarrassment is like minor injuries to the body. Embarrassment is a form of trauma or violence because it disrupts one's identity without consent, and the disruption makes it impossible to inhabit the world as before. In Susan Brison's account of surviving trauma, she writes: "trauma can obliterate one's former emotional repertoire, leaving one with only a kind of counterfactual, propositional knowledge of emotions."¹¹ Her account describes how, after a traumatic event, her experience of the world is drastically different than the one inhabited by her previous self. Embarrassment causes a similar alteration, albeit less severe—I venture to guess that after embarrassing experiences, one is rarely fearful of leaving the house, nor would they be paralyzed in ways that stunt their emotional or physical responses. Still, embarrassment and shame alter our sense of ease while interacting with others, and they give us unpleasant memories when we find ourselves in the places where the events happened. The embarrassment I am addressing is like the trauma that Brison discusses because it is the result of deliberate action in which the cause of trauma is not simply accidental. However, in the embarrassment I experience, I am the perpetrator.

Understanding embarrassment as trauma reveals contradictory experiences. First, there is that of being in control, yet not having control. In this experience, I have acted of my own accord, yet I also lack control as the person suffering the embarrassment because I did not *choose* to feel embarrassed. Furthermore, similar to Brison's account of trauma, I experience a disconnect between my prior self and the self that experiences the embarrassment. The experience of a disrupted narrative of self manifests in the bodymind as distress and discomfort due to my existence as a material body that does not express the pain of the mind.

My experience of bodily disorientation, which results from embarrassment, can be understood as redrawing the boundaries of my bodymind without knowing where that boundary ends. I tell myself that I lost control of my speech or body in my immediate attempts to justify and reconcile the possibility of my saying something or acting in ways that led to embarrassment—and later regret. Upon redrawing the boundaries of my body as the space over which I have control and ownership, I question the place for my hands, tongue, and eyes. After all, if my experience is the result of these parts acting out of my control, how can I understand them to be *mine*? If my right hand causes me to do wrong, why not cut it off?¹² The failure or reluctant inclusion of certain body parts into one's body boundary could call for the removal of that body part in order to maintain the integrity of one's embodiment in the world. Jenny Slatman discusses

two examples of people receiving hand transplants, one of which could not incorporate the transplanted hand into his bodily boundary. She writes: "it turned out that Hallam could not live with the alien, 'dull' hand, and therefore requested its amputation again."¹³ In other words, the material extension of his body did not reflect the boundaries he expected in his lived experience. We understand our bodies to have particular limits, but our expectations do not always coincide with the actual boundaries of our bodies.¹⁴ Although Slatman's account begins with a modification of the material body that demands us to reconsider our body boundaries, the reverse is also possible. The reverse is an alteration to the lived experience that begs for a change in the material body. Since neither embarrassment nor the intrusive memories of embarrassment occur by my choice, the repeated intrusions act as small cuts onto my identity. By intrusive memories, I mean the experience of remembering embarrassing moments without an active desire to remember them. For example, I often remember an embarrassing thing I said years ago just as I am about to fall asleep. Each intrusive memory bites away at my sense of self, and my embodied experience changes as my body begins to include more material than my boundary encompasses. I have found that one way to resolve this contradiction or misfitting between my experience of embodiment and my material body is to alter the material body, or to self-mutilate.¹⁵

Responding to embarrassment with self-mutilation is a way of articulating the experience of a damaged sense of self. Janice McLane argues that self-mutilation is an expression of felt violence and also an action that re-establishes firm boundaries between the self and the other.¹⁶ Her phenomenological account posits the skin of a survivor of abuse as an expressive medium when language fails to express the lived experience of violence. She describes how a survivor's narrative of abuse is often undermined by the abuser or dismissed by other listeners.¹⁷ Self-mutilation affirms the existence and experience of the survivor's pain by materializing and breaking the false unity that is presented by the unaltered body.¹⁸ Importantly, McLane argues that self-mutilation initiates recovery by validating the existence of pain, regaining a sense of control, and unifying the material body with the lived experience of that body.¹⁹ Accordingly, the use of and desire for self-mutilation is about making the effects of embarrassment visible through this unification and by regaining a sense of control. In the case of embarrassment, I am both the abuser and the abused, but I am positioned as the abused when I understand the actions and speech that caused the embarrassment as out of my control. Through cutting my skin, I employ the expressive power of my material body to affirm my ability to control and use my bodymind as my own. I thereby resolve the contradiction of being both in control and not in control of my actions.

3. *Living with Embarrassment*

As McLane argues, acts of self-mutilation do not heal trauma, but by affirming the possibility of expression, they make the articulation of pain through speech possible:

The self-mutilator hears herself and begins to heal with her violence, with her blood and burns, injury, pain, and scars. It is of course possible to lose oneself forever in this gestural articulation of violation. However, as a mouth on the flesh containedly expressing violence, self-mutilation provides the possibility of a new openness—of expressing what it is to be hurt and what it is to be aggressive—without either lying or becoming an abuser. This new possibility would not be the hand holding a razor blade which cuts across the skin, but breath being pushed across the larynx, shaped by mouth and tongue, into a spoken word.²⁰

Similarly, recovering from embarrassment does not stop at self-mutilation. And in fact, I would expect that experiences of embarrassment rarely result in self-mutilation. In terms of ways to live with embarrassment that do not involve suppressing embarrassing memories, I follow Harbin's invitation to use bodily disorientation as a tool to recognize the contingency of norms and values of society and of ourselves. Insofar as the experience of embarrassment is felt and experienced as disorienting, I suggest that *living with* embarrassment means that the resurfacing of past embarrassment will no longer disorients us.

Although self-mutilation does not heal my embarrassment, it provides a recognition of the turbulent experience of feeling embarrassed. Since moments of embarrassment are usually quickly forgotten by others and not by me, I become the sole witness of my experiences. If I seek validation of my experience through recognition, that is, if I wish for someone to affirm that my experience of embarrassment was real, I paradoxically ask myself to validate a feeling that I doubt. Through self-inflicted violence, I understand the materialized wound as a symbol of my psychological torment, and by materializing my experience in my body, I affirm the existence and validity of my feelings because it is made visible to others. However, acknowledgement of a problem is rarely a solution without follow-up action.²¹ Sometimes, self-recognition is not enough.

To reorient myself post-embarrassment, I remove the disruptive nature that these intrusive memories have by taking control *when* embarrassing memories resurface. I agree with Brison that although a complete mastering of experiences is not possible, some aspects *are* controllable.²² Recalling experiences voluntarily does not remove the embarrassment of those memories, but it does provide a sense of control that was previously

lacking. By repeatedly revisiting these memories, I gain a familiarity with these experiences which allows them to be reintegrated into my conception of myself.²³

Since embarrassment is the result of violating values that we hold, it makes these norms more apparent. By reflecting on the norms that were breached, I can adjust my behaviour and reconsider the values that I am willing to change. For example, after misgendering a person, my embarrassment and disorientation could make me aware of my assumptions surrounding cis-normativity and gender roles. It could also make me aware of my resolve to disrupt or reject a gender binary as a person who tries to respect others' choices of gender performance. Or, if I feel embarrassed after mansplaining, I may reconsider my assumptions regarding common knowledge, the situations in which it is appropriate for me to explain something, and whether my habits of speaking are worth changing to avoid this mistake in the future. By making these adjustments, I regain a sense of direction for navigating the world. Like Brison's trauma survivor, this process helps me learn to live within new limits.²⁴

Although reorientation after embarrassment does not in isolation remove the embarrassing nature of my experiences, self-recognition may help to remove the disorienting nature of remembering them. Usually, I respond to embarrassment by hoping that I will forget the event or by dissociating myself from the self which caused the embarrassment. But Brison reminds us through her account of trauma that attempts like these are usually futile and harmful.²⁵ Rather than recovering from traumatic experiences by forgetting them, she asserts that recovery often includes a retelling of a personal narrative that connects the self prior to the disruption with the self that emerged after as well as having other people bear witness and believe that narrative. However, she reminds us that the goal of the survivor is not to transcend trauma but to endure.²⁶ By reducing the disruption from intrusive memories and utilizing the disorientation, I slowly regain control over my narrative of self by stitching my prior self, the disruptive moment, and my posterior self together. Through these processes of retelling my experience of embarrassment and giving it a place in my personal narrative, I allow these experiences to re-enter my embodied being in the world. I do this neither to negate my experience of embarrassment, nor to dismantle my sense of embarrassment. Rather, I ease the disruption caused by these feelings while maintaining the integrity of my lived experience of embarrassment.

Living with embarrassment is not about overcoming the past, nor is it about forgiving or forgetting and moving on. In many cases, why would I want to forget the embarrassment that helped me examine my problematic beliefs? Why would I want to forget a transformative experience that resulted from feeling embarrassed? It is not outlandish to think that attempts to forget embarrass-

ment are a form of denial or negation of my experience. Therefore, it is appropriate to think that to live with embarrassment is to endure it. When given a space to itself in my narrative identity, I can feel that moment as a part of me, and I resolve the contradictory feeling of having something in me that does not belong.²⁷

There is still space for someone to distance themselves from experiences of embarrassment, but this distancing is and can only be partial. For example, Susan Wendell's method of distancing herself from her body allows her to manage pain by not being identified with it.²⁸ The distance between herself and her body is only partial, but it allows her to focus on other aspects of her life without feeling overwhelmed by her pain.²⁹ The same can be done with feelings of embarrassment—this means enduring and living with the experience of embarrassment but directing attention elsewhere.

4. Moving Forward

I have argued that embarrassment is embodied and affects our material bodies in its expression. Recognizing the pain and shame from embarrassment as disruptive

to our identities asks for material and bodily manifestations. In this conception of embarrassment, we can come to terms with the experience by using the conceptual tools that are employed in reconciling with trauma. Furthermore, reconciling our self-conception and our embarrassment need not be about forgetting or negating our past experience. As Brison writes, a “survivor’s bodily sense of self is permanently altered by an encounter with death that leaves one feeling ‘marked’ for life.”³⁰ Instead of an encounter with death, my bodily sense of self is marked by embarrassing encounters that will likely linger in my memory for a long time. But if I can incorporate those events into my narrative and personal identity, then when they inevitably resurface as I am trying to fall asleep, they will no longer cause the disturbance that they otherwise would have.

Because I live in a social world, I cannot doubt the possibility of future embarrassing moments. I will again feel disoriented and perturbed, but I am hopeful that I will be able to reorient myself and that I will be able to express my discomfort through a medium other than my skin.

Notes

1. In the post-Cartesian mind-body split, we often forget the material reality of the body as a constitutive part of the self. To combat this mind-body duality, which posits that the rational mind reigns over the material body, I join other theorists in using the term ‘bodymind’ to refer to all the material and non-material aspects of the person.

2. I think this is best captured by Ami Harbin’s analysis on bodily disorientation, where she writes: “Disorientations are experienced through complex corporeal, affective, and cognitive processes.” Like disorientation, embarrassment is also a complex, embodied response; Ami Harbin, “Bodily Disorientation and Moral Change,” *Hypatia* 27, no. 2 (2012): 271. doi:10.1111/j.1527-2001.2011.01263.x.

3. These examples may be closer to a definition of awkwardness that refers to actions that lack grace; Dictionary.com, “The Definition of Awkward,” accessed April 10, 2019, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/awkward>. However, since awkwardness and embarrassment are often interchangeable in colloquial speech, I distinguish between this type of awkward embarrassment and the kind of embarrassment I discuss here.

4. In keeping with my concern for the deeply personal dimension of embodied experiences, I write this paper to reorient myself after one particular embarrassing encounter. On this occasion, I inappropriately asked an acquaintance to share her “juicy slut stories.” I became appalled by what I said. I experienced multiple panic attacks and existential crises relating to my inability to reconcile what I said with my sense of self during the weeks following that encounter.

5. Harbin, “Bodily Disorientation and Moral Change,” 266.

6. Harbin, 264–66, 269–71.

7. After embarrassment from inappropriately touching something or someone, I find myself desperately washing my hands to get rid of the lingering sense of having touched an abhorrent thing. My hands are like Lady Macbeth’s hands, covered with guilt that cannot be washed away.

8. Harbin, “Bodily Disorientation and Moral Change,” 276.

9. Harbin, 276.

10. Harbin, 276.

11. Susan Brison, “Outliving Oneself,” in *Feminists Rethink the Self*, ed. Diana Tietjens Meyers, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 21.

12. “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell.” Matthew 5:29 (English Standard Version). It is also possible to read this verse as simply removing

the part of me that makes sinning possible, without degrading the body to the locus of sin.

13. Jenny Slatman, *Our Strange Body: Philosophical Reflections on Identity and Medical Interventions* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), 80.

14. Slatman, 86.

15. I use Garland-Thomson’s term “misfitting” to show a disconnect between two parts. It is not to say that one is the norm and the other is deviant, but that it is a match that does not smoothly fit; Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept,” *Hypatia* 26, no. 3 (2011). doi:10.1111/j.1527-2001.2011.01206.x.

16. Janice McLane, “The Voice on the Skin: Self-Mutilation and Merleau-Ponty’s Theory of Language,” *Hypatia* 11, no. 4 (1996): 114–15. doi:10.1111/j.1527-2001.1996.tb01038.x.

17. McLane, “The Voice on the Skin,” 110.

18. McLane, 115.

19. McLane, 112, 114.

20. McLane, 117.

21. In a parallel case of disrupting minor acts with self-injury, the use of Acceptance Commitment Therapy asks participants to take on actions that align with their goals and values to reduce the distress caused by skin picking. Reacting to embarrassment can take on a similar approach that not only acknowledges the experience of embarrassment, but provides a follow-up response, such as reflecting on a character strength after experiencing intrusive memories of embarrassment; Matthew R. Capriotti et al., “Acceptance-Enhanced Behavior Therapy for Excoriation (Skin-Picking) Disorder in Adults: A Clinical Case Series,” *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice* 22, no. 2 (2015). doi:10.1016/j.cbpra.2014.01.008.

22. Brison, “Outliving Oneself,” 24.

23. Brison, 24.

24. Brison, 28.

25. Brison, 20, 26.

26. Brison, 30–31.

27. To be clear, this is not as simple as *saying* that the embarrassment is part of my identity but *feeling* that it is. This idea is based on Catriona Mackenzie’s description of the embodied narrative of personal identities. Narrative personal identities that are enacted through embodiment are subject to habituation and entrenchment, and therefore incorporating something into an identity narrative is not as simple as saying it. Catriona Mackenzie, “Personal Identity, Narrative Integration, and Embodiment,” in *Embodiment and Agency*, ed. Sue Campbell, Letitia Meynell, and Susan Sherwin (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), 116, 122.

28. Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 174.

29. Distancing or suspending attention to pain is often beneficial for recognizing other things. For example, in first-aid training, we are instructed to do full-body surveys even if a person is only complaining about their broken leg. This is because it is common

for one injury to mask the pain of another. So, by drawing attention to other parts of the injured person's body through physical contact and asking whether they feel pain, their attention is drawn away from the pain from the broken leg without denying the existence of that pain.

30. Brison, "Outliving Oneself," 20.