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How Does It Feel To Be at University. Affect in Contemporary North American Campus Fiction

Abstract

This paper explores the role of affect in academic life, using as case studies three North American campus novels narrated from undergraduate and graduate students' perspectives. While the case studies – Sarah Henstra's *The Red Word* (2018), Brandon Taylor's *Real Life* (2020), and Juliet Lapidos's *Talent* (2019) – include humorous elements, they tend to foreground the student-protagonists' emotional responses to their precarious position in the competitive and hierarchical world of academia. In each novel, the emotional impact of academic life is additionally complicated by the students' gender, class, race, and/or sexuality. Arguably, out of the many affects young people experience every day, two play a special role in academia: interest and shame. Referring to the affect theories of Silvan S. Tomkins (2008), Paul J. Silvia (2005, 2008), Pierre Bourdieu ([1994] 1998), and Ann Cvetkovich (2012), this paper attempts to show how writers tell emotionally charged stories about campus life, structured by the interplay of interest and shame.

Keywords: campus fiction, academia, student, affect, interest, shame, resistance

How does it feel to be
One of the beautiful people

– John Lennon and Paul McCartney[1]

This foray into North American campus fiction draws on psychological and cultural theories of affect in an attempt to understand how the hierarchical yet meritocratic, traditionalist yet future oriented academic

1 If this paper had a soundtrack, it would be "Baby You're a Rich Man" (1967) by John Lennon and Paul McCartney, in which an insider from the circle of "beautiful people" seems to be addressing someone who aspires to belong but is insecure about their worth (hence the refrain "baby you're a rich man"). Though not expressly about the campus experience, the cryptic lyrics of this song are suggestive of the alternating elation and insecurity students and scholars feel in the ostensibly open and democratic space of academia, where their minds *and* bodies are subject to constant stimulation and evaluation.

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environment makes students feel, and how the affects circulating in this environment alternately foster and impede students' intellectual growth. Given its limited scope, this paper merely seeks to open up a discussion about academia as an emotionally charged space where affects – not just ideas – circulate between bodies. In a time when schools and universities worldwide are confronting a mental health crisis, campus fiction set in the highly competitive environment of North American universities provides insights into the discord between individual emotional needs and the affective range and pitch generated by academic institutions. Since the affective turn in the early 2000s, interpreters of campus fiction have occasionally referred to affect – for instance, Wesley Beal discusses shame in Tom Wolfe's *I Am Charlotte Simmons* (Beal 2024: 78–84) – but to my best knowledge this paper is the first attempt to explore campus fiction through cultural theories of affect and psychological theories of interest and shame.

Rather than focus on literature that celebrates university life, this paper examines three contemporary novels that challenge academic culture: Sarah Henstra's *The Red Word* (2018), Brandon Taylor's *Real Life* (2020), and Juliet Lapidos's *Talent* (2019), selected from a heterogenous body of contemporary campus fiction. What these novels have in common is the perspective of the most vulnerable members of any academic community – students – and a sensitivity to minoritarian identities that may compound students' vulnerability. I use these case studies to reflect on how interest circulates in academic communities, how shame associated with gender, sexual, and class difference is experienced viscerally, and how characters resist shame in order to recover interest in intellectual work and a sense of self-worth.

Most campus novels, also known as college or academic novels, are authored by former students or by academics – former students who continue to observe campus life through their daily work. In 2004, John E. Kramer listed 648 academic novels published since 1828, 319 of which were centered on students and 329 on faculty (Kramer 2004: vii). These numbers grew exponentially in the twenty-first century. Wesley Beal defines the campus novel "as one that takes place primarily on the physical sites of and primarily in dialogue with institutionalized higher learning" (Beal: 2024: 203). Setting and thematic content certainly make academic novels a recognizable if somewhat amorphous genre. Most campus fiction also belongs to one or more of such popular genres as the Bildungsroman, comedy of manners, romance, crime fiction, and gothic horror. In Jeffrey Williams's view, it is precisely the fact that the campus novel "grafts itself onto" other genres that guarantees its survivability (Williams 2012).

That campus fiction registers emotional turmoil is not an original observation. Two decades ago Robert F. Scott pointed out that, in addition to having a shared backdrop, such fiction tends to focus on "the absurdity and despair of university life; the colorful, often neurotic personalities who inhabit academia; and the ideological rivalries which thrive in campus communities [as well as] sexual adventures of all types" (Scott 2004: 82). Furthermore, campus novels "call attention to the antagonistic relationships that exist between mind and flesh, private and public needs, and duty and desire" (Scott 2004: 83). Scott thus suggested that campus novels reflect a critical stance towards academic life that belies the concept of the "ivory tower." By contrast, Wesley Beal recently argued that the campus novel has failed to reveal how drastically the ideals of "free play" and "personal freedoms" associated with academia "diverge . . . from the stressful, harried lives experienced by many students on American campuses today." In his view, the campus novel camouflages this rift because "it relies formally on private experience to represent university life." In fact, the campus novel "navigates the central contradiction of American higher learning—on the one hand, considered Exempt from market pressures as a social good generating knowledge and

nurturing democracy, and on the other, thought to serve the individual's pathway to credentialing and class stability or to provide an idealized site of free play and self-determination" (Beal 2024: 2–3). While Beal's case studies confirm his thesis, mine provide contradictory evidence, for although Henstra, Taylor, and Lapidos focus on individual experience, they reveal enough of the institutional context to undermine the belief that the university enjoys a state of exemption.

In terms of tone, campus novels range from emotional realism to satire. Even when the humorous tone dominates, "campus novels simmer with barely concealed feelings of anger and even despair as protagonists frequently find themselves caught between administrative indifference on one side and student hostility on the other" (Scott 2004: 83). Yet, despite the availability of affect research, most literary criticism has mostly left these feelings unexamined. For over two decades, the humanities have been absorbing knowledge about affect from psychology, cultural studies, and neurochemistry, so that we might better understand the roles affect plays in everyday life, literature, film, and other media. From a psychological perspective, such as that represented by Silvan S. Tomkins, affects are an innate, pre-conscious form of emotions, experienced long before we recognize them and learn their cultural meanings. But although they are innate, affects are constantly modified through our interactions with others (Tomkins I: 168–178). Cultural theorists likewise see affect as relational, but much more radically so. Expanding on Spinoza's philosophical observations, contemporary theorists Brian Massumi, Sara Ahmed, and Theresa Brennan assume that affect neither originates in the individual body nor expresses how an individual feels. It is an electrochemical impulse or a charge of energy that courses between and through human bodies (sometimes transmitted by various media) before it is consciously recognized as an emotion and named (Massumi 1995: 136, 149). Massumi, who is interested in cultural phenomena, usually treats affect as an undifferentiated intensity of feeling (Massumi 2002: 34–35, 61). Sara Ahmed distinguishes several positive and negative affects and suggests they are involved in the negotiation of boundaries between selves and others by "sticking" to certain racially-marked bodies. Tomkins, in turn, distinguishes nine basic affects and explores their variations and mutations.

In order to thrive in academia, individuals need to experience the positive affects interest-excitement and enjoyment-joy as an antidote to fear or shame (Tomkins 2008: I 151–165, 262–266). Counterintuitively, interest is an affect rather than an intellectual attitude, though it is related to cognition. It motivates humans to venture into new territories and take intellectual risks, while enjoyment builds the sense of emotional security and self-worth that make such ventures possible. Moreover, the two positive affects reinforce each other: "one can enjoy excitement, and become excited by enjoyment" (Tomkins 2008: I 201). Yet, as the novels discussed below demonstrate, while academic work requires sustained interest, the constant evaluation that characterizes the university environment may trigger shame which extinguishes interest, leading to disaffection, depression, and a retreat to the realm of the familiar. These novels, I would argue, also bring out a phenomenon that remains undertheorized: the way interest sometimes verges on or fuses with the erotic.[2] On campuses where students live, fall in love, and have sex as well as study, sexual attractiveness is evaluated as relentlessly as intellectual worth. Consequently, gender, sexual orientation, race, and class – identity categories which theoretically should not matter in the intellectual arena – are shown to interfere in the supposedly free play of intellectual interest-excitement.

2 As far back as 1964, Leslie A. Fiedler noted the proximity of interest and the erotic in the campus fiction. "When students enter at all, they enter briefly to seduce or be seduced by their teachers, thus providing erotic relief from the struggle of faculty and administrative officers at the barricades" (Fiedler 1964: 6).

Given that all three novels discussed below trace a trajectory from interest through shame to depression, I will refer to Ann Cvetkovich's work on depression as a "public feeling." Depression for Cvetkovich is "a way to describe neoliberalism and globalization, or the current state of political economy, in affective terms" and "a category that manages and medicalizes the affects associated with keeping up with corporate culture and the market economy, or with being completely neglected by it" (Cvetkovich 2012: 11–12). These ideas are useful because, although North American university campuses appear to be detached from the market economy, they are nonetheless corporations that replicate what Raymond Williams called the "structure of feeling" of neoliberal culture (Williams 1977: 132).

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu theorized interest as the motivation to do something that is profitable either in terms of material gain or symbolic capital. Humans never act in a disinterested way, he argued, though their investment in a future benefit may be camouflaged (Bourdieu [1994] 1998). By contrast, Tomkins, saw interest as an innate, pre-cognitive affect that plays a less calculated role. Without interest-excitement motivating the infant's cognition there would be neither intellectual development nor creativity (Tomkins 2008: 185–201). By conducting empirical research, Tomkins determined that interest begins to evolve in the infant-caregiver relation. The ability to hold another's interest and gaze affirms both the child's and the caregiver's sense of self-worth. Ideally, this early relation is characterized by two mutual positive affects: interest and enjoyment. Such a blissful state, however, cannot continue uninterrupted. One of the first negative affects experienced by the infant, Tomkins observed, is shame. The caregiver may evoke shame in an infant simply by looking away or walking away, acts which the infant understands as a sign of being unworthy of the caregiver's interest. Under social pressure, we begin to more or less consciously modulate or suppress our affects (Tomkins 2008: 76–77), yet even as an adult "one can be shamed by another in whom one is interested, just as easily by indifference, that is, by a failure to hold attention on one's self and/or on one's face, as by derision" (Tomkins 2008: 361).

Fostering and sustaining emotional insecurity is in the interest of contemporary academia, for it drives students and scholars to maximum exertion. The thrill of discovery and the elation upon completing a project are too rare to motivate steady exertion. Shaming has long been used to motivate students and scholars to exert themselves, strike out into the unknown, and delay gratification.[3] Academia alternately makes them feel smart and deserving yet anxious about being seen as impostors; young and beautiful yet insecure about their worth, or old and tenured yet determined to stay youthful so as not to be sidelined. Generating new knowledge requires nonconformism and originality, yet academia exacts conformity to syllabi, deadlines, publication requirements, and countless other norms. These paradoxes often go unacknowledged, as does their affective impact on the academic community. Campus novels in general, and the writings of Henstra, Taylor, and Lapidos in particular, foreground the emotional insecurity peculiar to academia and its devastating consequences.

The Red Word, narrated retrospectively by a former student, a white woman named Karen, is a satirical academic novel about undergraduate student life at a Canadian university. Henstra styled it as a Greek war epic, with each section title alluding to the Trojan War and the campus serving as a battlefield. This stylistic device distances the reader from the emotional world of the main character. An additional

3 For instance, in *Passing for Perfect: College Impostors and Other Model Minorities*, erin Khuê Ninh analyzed cases of Asian Americans college students' going to extreme lengths to avoid experiencing shame. Pressed into the Modern Minority mold, they pretended to be attending university long after droppng out, and some went so far as to commit suicide or murder their parents in order to avoid being shamed (Ninh 2021: 1–9).

distance is created by the mildly ironic tone in which Karen-the-narrator describes the antics of Karen-the-sophomore. To use Tomkins's vocabulary, Karen recalls her college experience as a series of affective scenes, in an effort to revise the affective script that cut short her education. *The Red Word* foregrounds the interplay of interest (in new knowledge and experiences) and shame (at being uninteresting to others), showing in minute detail how a young woman tries to overcome her insecurities and develop her new-found interests, only to find herself trapped in a war of the sexes, depressed, and unable to continue her studies.

Karen-the-sophomore finds university life interesting and exciting in several ways. It allows her and other students to define their identity by attending courses tailored to their individual interests and choosing who they socialize with. The campus itself generates excitement: it allows young people, unconstrained by parental supervision, to study what they want and enjoy sex. Henstra shows how the erotic spills over from the night life into daytime activity in classrooms and other spaces on campus. As a result, that which would otherwise be merely interesting becomes erotically charged.[4]

Early in the novel, the narrator decides to move out of a campus dormitory to a house off-campus run by anarcho-feminists whose quirky dress style and intellectual sophistication she has admired from afar. But her interest is not immediately reciprocated. On arrival, she is grilled by the feminists, who initially think she has come to them as a rape victim. In order to impress them, and to show she is no victim, Karen poses as more experienced and erudite than she is. In this chapter and elsewhere, Karen recalls scene after scene of feeling stupid, being inappropriately dressed, saying the wrong thing, missing the point of an exchange – in other words, falling short of the norm. She describes her brain as "lagging behind the conversation, flailing wrong-footed through its swamp of embarrassment" (Henstra 2008: 16). In one episode she is embarrassed by her "stained white shirt and [her] polyester skirt and [her] odor of kitchen grease and ignorance" (Henstra 2008: 45).

The new housemates encourage Karen to attend a course on Women and Myth, taught by an inspiring female professor, Dr. Esterhazy, who sensitizes Karen to the historical inequality between the sexes and the myths used to justify it. Later, Karen recalls the relations between the professor and her students as verging on the erotic. When she asks Dr. Esterhazy to allow her to join the class, her cheeks turn "lava-hot" and she insists she "would love the challenge." The feminist idol, "with her wide, pale eyes and her angelic hair, like an aging Rossetti muse. … cast an aura, and my roommates bathed in it." Karen-the-narrator still remembers how it felt to be admitted into Dr. Esterhazy's intellectual circle and the memory is sensuous: "'Thank you, Dr. Esterhazy,' I said. Her name folded sweetly in my mouth, and I swallowed it like a secret vow. I would learn what this wise woman knew! I would learn what they all knew, and I would know it as well as they" (Henstra 2008: 45, italics mine). "Loving" both the atmosphere and the "challenge" of novelty, Karen quickly learns to analyze Greek myths through a feminist lens.

Interest and desire become fused in other ways, too. Curiosity leads Karen to explore the world of sex, even though some of the people and practices she witnesses do not turn her on. She attends a fraternity house party, determined to affirm her self-worth through sexual initiation. Since the man she

4 Leslie A. Fiedler observed this phenomenon in campus fiction written before 1964: "the truth is, of course, that the relationship of teacher and taught is a passionate one in essence, though no official theory of education has taken this into account since the collapse of the Greek synthesis of pedagogy, gymnastics, and pederasty expounded in Plato's Symposium" (Fiedler 1964: 8).

finds most desirable is already surrounded by women, Karen becomes involved with a classmate reputed to be an A+ student. Conceited and inept as a lover, the he wins Karen by commenting on her intelligence. She willfully ignores the testimony of a young woman raped in the frat house, is herself raped, and faces "slut shaming" (Henstra 2008: 287). In due course, she is caught in a war between the fraternity, which functions as a sex club for the male students, and the anarchist sorority, which serves as a safe space for women.

Henstra describes how negative affect sweeps through the campus community like a contagious disease to which no student is immune. To use Ahmed's vocabulary, affect "sticks" (Ahmed 2004: 11–14) to gendered bodies, splitting the coeducational student body into two rival camps. Consumed by this affect, Karen-the-sophomore fails to see that in the campus war of the sexes not only the men but also the women break ethical codes. In one episode, a female mob publicly shames all the fraternity members as rapists, without waiting for due process. Finally, the feminists' compulsion to call out the group they perceive as oppressors leads to the accidental death of an innocent male student. *The Red Word* is not antifeminist – some of the fictional fraternity members do treat the female students as easy prey – but it reflects on the blind spots of identity politics and exposes Dr. Esterhazy as an instructor who exploits the erotic to interest students in herself and her course but denies responsibility for the consequences of her teaching.

Years later, Karen-the-college-dropout is home alone, photoshopping for a magazine, while secretly creating graphic art that speaks of violation. Her experience has left her disaffected and depressed. "It is customary, within our therapeutic culture," Cvetkovich argues, to attribute depressive feelings "to bad things that happened to us when we were children, to primal scenes that have not yet been fully remembered or articulated or worked through," or else genetic or biochemical disorders. She rejects such "master narratives" but she finds equally unproductive narratives of depression as socially produced, for instance by capitalism, because they "frequently admit[] of no solution" (Cvetkovich 2012: 14–15). I would suggest that *The Red Word* meets Cvetkovich's criteria for a form of "testimony that can mediate between the personal and the social, that can explain why we live in a culture whose violence takes the form of systematically making us feel bad" (Cvetkovich 2012: 15). Karen's telling of the story may thus be read as a belated act of resistance, for it shows the workings of affect both as an impersonal force and as individually felt discrete emotions that modulate each other. Both Karen and the reader are given a chance to think about how academia generates affect, and how the feeling of being unworthy of interest and "lagging behind" makes a student seek attention regardless of the cost.

The corrosive feeling of being unworthy of interest is also the central problem of Brandon Taylor's *Real Life*. Where does this feeling originate, the novel asks: in the protagonist's past or in academia? The plot of *Real Life*, a novel about graduate students at a Midwestern university, is limited to a single weekend and a few flashbacks. Wallace, the protagonist and focalizer of this third-person narrative, is a reclusive gay Black microbiology student from Alabama, who breeds and studies nematodes in a lab. The plot consists of several minor events: on Friday someone contaminates Wallace's nematode culture, wasting weeks of painstaking labor, he reluctantly joins his friends at the lakeside, attends a house party on Saturday, has sex, and fries fish on Sunday. The novel is sparse yet rich in psychological observation. Each interaction is reported in minute detail from Wallace's perspective, including his interlocutors' every facial twitch and gesture, his construal of what is happening, and how it makes him feel. Many, though not all, scenes suggest that white people read Wallace primarily through his race, assuming it defines his character and

potential. Those who claim to have his best interest at heart – friends, fellow-researchers, and teachers – act in ways that can be read as callous, patronizing, or openly hostile. At the lab, Wallace's intellectual capacity and diligence are repeatedly called into question. Friends who witness such microaggressions fail to stand up for him because they want to preserve a semblance of group harmony, which, according to Wallace, really means harmony among white people.

Real Life begins with Wallace overpowered by a sense of shame which builds up over the course of the weekend and makes him want to drop out of graduate school. At one point, he ruminates on a scene that took place in the lab some days earlier, recalling the way his white supervisor "watches him over her shoulder in an act of indifferent surveillance" and has him perform certain experiments for her own project because, "like a savant or a trained circus seal," he has the ability to make "perfect seven hundred dissections in under eight minutes." Wallace believes he is appreciated not for his observation skills and intelligence but because he "has the time to burn, time for the idle stupidity it takes to sit in front of a scope and wait for hours" for the nematodes to develop (Taylor 2020: 67–68). What stands out from this dense stream-of-consciousness passage is Wallace's tendency to read the behavior of others as motivated by contempt for him as a black man. He resents being assigned tasks involving manual dexterity rather than writing up the experiments, and though no-one actually speaks of him as a "savant or circus seal," that is how he imagines his role at the lab.

Whereas Henstra's Karen has no past prior to her junior year in college, Taylor introduces several scenes from Wallace childhood through flashbacks, not to undercut the emerging narrative of systemic racial discrimination but to draw attention to the ways in which academia reinforces (and perhaps even exploits) students' low sense of self-worth. From a Tomkinsian perspective Wallace, who has a history of childhood sexual abuse, interprets each event of that long weekend through an affective script pervaded by shame – a script that casts him as invisible to others, unworthy of their respect, interest, and love. He clings to this script until a confrontation with an equally conflicted white gay man at the end of the novel forces him to reevaluate it. Once it becomes apparent that Wallace's relations with others are guided by a shame script, it becomes possible to re-read some of his friends' and supervisors' behavior as innocuous or genuinely caring, though certain scenes continue to reek of unacknowledged racism. The most interesting aspect of the novel is that – due to the subjectivity of the narrative structure and the ambiguity of the textual evidence – each reader must decide what they feel to be discriminatory speech or behavior.

Sigmund Freud believed humans are motivated by the drives, including the sex drive. Contrary to Freud, Tomkins saw the affect system as our primary motivational system, more powerful than the drives. "One's sexual drive and one's hunger drive can be no stronger than one's [interest-]excitement about sexuality and about eating," Tomkins pointed out, turning Freud's hierarchy upside down (Tomkins 2007: 188). *Real Life* is, on one level, a story of same-sex desire that is suppressed for years by both Wallace and his white friend Miller, until it erupts in a scene of physical violence. Wallace is openly gay but is prevented from acting on his desire by shame about his fat black body, while the closeted Miller violently denies his homosexual desire and gets into fights with the men he is attracted to. That the two men come to understand what motivates them and awkwardly make love towards the end of the novel is quite unexpected. Tomkins's observation about affects and drives is borne out by scenes in which Wallace is prevented by the shame from responding to Miller's advances. Secretly Wallace watches "the muscles in [Miller's] forearm" (Taylor 2020: 11), "the pale interior of Miller's thighs" (Taylor 2020: 20), "the flex of his throat, the swallowing action" (Taylor 2020: 57), but his body does not respond in the expected

way. He "tries to will himself erect, tries to find some spark or ember of desire buried deep inside him, but nothing will come, nothing will move within him. Something necessary has died, or is unwilling to engage" (Taylor 2020: 178). The conviction that he is unworthy of interest, both as a lover and as a researcher, leads to a paralyzing shame and disaffection.

The last chapter of *Real Life* is, in fact, the displaced first chapter, depicting the moment of Wallace's arrival at the Midwestern campus several years prior to the fateful weekend. What he observes on that first day are "tall, attractive people with shining skin walking all around him, talking to each other as if they belonged to a world beyond his grasp" (Taylor 2020: 322). It is a world to which hopes to belong, for "he had considered himself a Midwesterner at heart" while living in Alabama (Taylor 2020: 322–323). The peculiar structure of the novel suggests that if Wallace were to start over knowing what he knows about the way shame distorts his relations with others, he would feel at home among the beautiful people and he would resume his disrupted study of nematodes with renewed interest. No less importantly, the displaced last chapter encourages the reader to reflect on the systemic failure of the university to support minority students like Wallace by curbing the exploitation of graduate students by their supervisors and recognizing the existence of racism and homophobia on campus.

Like the two novels discussed above, Juliet Lapidos's *Talent* serves as a seismograph of the way academic hierarchy makes one feel. The narrator of this suspenseful satirical novel, a white doctoral student named Anna, is neither victim nor predator (but perhaps both). In terms of inherited wealth Anna is privileged, for she owns the apartment she lives in near the campus, but on the campus she seems to be overshadowed by men – the arbiters of quality research and winners of tenure-track jobs. A morally ambiguous figure, Anna risks her reputation and career by committing a series of crimes in order to sustain her flagging interest in literary studies. The central conflict in *Talent* stems from the clash of two kinds of interest: the disinterested, pre-conscious, innate kind that scholars are supposedly driven by, and vested interest, which is generally seen as suspect. While Tomkins has little to say about the latter, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argues that no disinterested act is possible. "Like a good tennis player, one positions oneself not where the ball is but where it will be; one invests oneself not where the profit is, but where it will be" (Bourdieu 1998: 79). "In games where it is necessary to be 'disinterested' in order to succeed" people "can undertake, in a spontaneously disinterested manner, actions in accordance with their interests" (Bourdieu 1998: 83).

The depth of Anna's humiliation at being unable to write is proportionate to her high expectations of what she would accomplish as an academic. Once ranked the most promising students in her seminar, by the seventh year of graduate school she has written a bloated literature review on the nature of literary creativity and developed a provocative thesis, but she cannot finish writing for lack of a case study. Anna's advisor, Professor Carl Davidoff, whose framed Williams, Cambridge, and Princeton diplomas hang on "the wall above his desk" (Lapidos 2019: 21), has the power to make her feel small and he exercises this power freely. "It's a little thin," he says about Anna's dissertation, and his opinion makes Anna "paralyzed by the prospect of making a decision," even one as insignificant as whether to eat oatmeal or a Pop-Tart for breakfast (Lapidos 2019: 15). Faced with competition and evaluation, she recalls feeling a debilitating shame: "'What, still in school?' my aunts and uncles asked at family gatherings" (Lapidos 2019: 26).

At the beginning of the novel Anna languishes in her apartment, eating Pop-Tarts, prevented by shame from venturing intellectually and physically outside her current position. "I could not account for what I did all day. . . . Next to nothing. I had nothing to distract me from nothing" (Lapidos 2019: 30).

Paul J. Silvia elaborated on the basic fact that interest, a "knowledge emotion," is triggered by novelty and change (Silvia 2008: 57–60). "Once people understand a [novel] thing, it is not interesting anymore. The new knowledge, in turn, enables more things to be interesting . . . [because focusing on something intensely enables us] to see subtle differences" (Silvia 2008: 59). It is unclear whether Anna's condition has something to do with her position as a woman in patriarchal academia or with the fact that working on the same project for seven years she sees no way forward that would sustain her interest. Then an extraordinary chain of events triggers Anna's interest. At a supermarket checkout counter she meets a woman who cannot pay for her groceries, so Anna pays for them. When the woman fails to repay the debt, Anna trails her home one day, like a private detective. The woman, Helen Langley, turns out to be a close relative of a deceased author, Freddie Langley, whose life and work promise to be a perfect illustration for Anna's theories on the sources of creativity. Thus, paying for Helen's groceries turns out to have been an investment which Anna hopes to get back with interest. What Anna doesn't realize is that Helen's interest in her is also far from disinterested. Though Helen has received no formal education and inherited no money, she has intimate knowledge of her famous uncle that she hopes to trade for a favor.

Aided by Helen, Anna excitedly ventures on a treasure hunt for biographical details, marginalia, and Freddie Langley's manuscripts themselves, which are locked up in the university archives. She visits the Langley family home and persuades the current owner not only to let her in but to leave her alone in the attic supposedly to absorb the aura but really to hunt for memorabilia and steal a document. Thus it is clear that while theories stifled Anna's desire to do research, the prospect of learning about the contrary and brilliant Freddie motivates Anna to exert herself. No warning signal is loud enough to deter her from her pursuit motivated by interest whose power is proportionate to the boredom that kept her housebound. At Helen's request, she eventually steals Freddie's manuscripts from the university archive and does this so ineptly that she ends up being the only suspect. Helen absconds with the manuscripts, clearly with the intent of selling them for a profit. In the end, Anna is left without primary material for analysis and a ruined reputation. Despite there being only circumstantial evidence of her guilt, she is forced to leave academia. Lapidos's satirical portrayal of her makes it impossible to decide whether she fails as an academic because she is entrapped in a misogynist institution that stifles her creativity, or because she is unprincipled and simply not cut out to be a graduate student.

Embedded in Anna's account is the parallel story of Freddie's transition from a critically acclaimed author to an ostensibly lazy has-been who lives off his brother and dies in a car crash. It is no coincidence that Anna responds with avid interest to the story of Freddie Langley's unfulfilled potential: "In Langley I had discovered precisely what Professor Davidoff had commanded me to seek: A subject for an inspirational case study. [Freddie] was prolific, then silent. Inspired, then—there was no antonym for *inspired. Blocked. Dried up. De-inspired*" (Lapidos 2019: 38–39). Reading Freddie's notebooks, Anna finds a biographical explanation for his loss of interest in writing. As children, he and his brother were subjected by their father to a regime of labor, competition, and shaming (Lapidos 2019: 120) not unlike that which Anna is subjected to in academia. By choosing a literary career, Freddie defied his father, but paradoxically it was the father's training that allowed him to succeed. On achieving fame, Freddie apparently lost interest in writing and refused to publish another word – once again, as an act of resistance to paternal expectations.

On the surface, *Talent* seems to contrast two types of interest: on the one hand, Anna's and Freddie's supposedly pure interest in knowledge/art for its own sake, and, on the other, Helen's mercenary interest. Yet this simple dichotomy is undercut by the fact that Helen, unlike Anna and Freddie, cannot

afford to be disinterested. She has been swindled by relatives of her inheritance and intends to claim a share. Moreover, the novel makes it difficult to believe in the purity of Anna's academic interest since she is writing a dissertation to secure a lifelong career. To use Bourdieu's words, "in a spontaneously disinterested manner" she undertakes "actions in accordance with [her vested] interests" (Bourdieu 1998: 83). Arguably, then, *Talent* comments on yet another dimension of interest – self-interest – which Tomkins and Silvia passed over.

Each of the novels discussed above explores the interplay of interest and shame through a series of emotionally-charged episodes which, in light of Tomkins theories, might be read as affective scenes. Immersed in academic life, students and scholars rarely achieve the distance necessary to think about why they feel interested or ashamed. But when reading campus fiction, they may observe the way affective scripts inform the characters' behavior. Henstra, Taylor, and Lapidos suggest that for students who are not white, male, heterosexual, and well-off, being subjected to evaluation and competition with others who reinforce scripts involving shame. As an empirical researcher and practicing therapist, Tomkins observed that some scripts are hard to change, particularly those acquired early in life. "Most scripts are more self-validating than self-fulfilling. Thus, a [. . .] nuclear script which attempts to reduce shame validates the self as appropriately shameworthy more than it succeeds in freeing the individual of his burden" (669). But he also speculated that every new experience – and reading novels constitutes a form of vicarious experience – is an opportunity to revise an affective script. If that is so, then the way university makes readers feel may change over time. Exposure to campus fiction may not only spur readers to rethink their own scripts involving shame and interest, but also to seek ways of changing those aspects of academic culture that trigger shame and stifle interest.

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