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The eyes are the abode of shame.
Euripides, Cresphontes

If shame is present, it means that we cannot hide what we should like to hide.
Emmanuel Levinas, On Escape

I escape the Other by leaving him with my alienated Me in his hands.
Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness

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TOWARDS AN ETHICS OF SHAME

When addressing the emotions in relation to rhetoric and their ability to affect our judgement, Aristotle inquires about the nature of shame in terms of "the things that cause these feelings, and the persons before whom, and the states of mind under which, they are felt" (72). Although the terms within which the definition of shame is sought by Aristotle are aligned with his applied pragmatics of political rhetoric, they nevertheless indicate the complexity of its theoretical implications that have historically informed our understanding of shame. Shame is seen as an affective experience, referring to the "states of mind," presupposing both an other "before whom" I am ashamed and an intentional structure, the fact that I am always ashamed *of* something, "the things" causing me pain. Different disciplines and traditions of Western thought determining the significance and narrative history of shame have always afforded weight to different aspects of shame. Clinical psychology, for instance, in the variety and polyvalence of its discursive practice, tends to focus on the psychopathology of shame and its affective impact as "a primary source of human discomfort" (Nathanson 1). Indeed, since Aristotle, who, having set the terms of his inquiry, defined shame "as *pain* or *disturbance* in regard to bad things, whether present, past or future, which seem likely to involve us in discredit" (72; emphasis added), shame has been considered as equivalent to trauma, an affective watershed that drains our agency and sinks us to the bottom of the world. In the discourse of psychoanalysis, shame is also seen as an inhibitive power of disturbance, "a force that stands in opposition and resistance to the libido," according to Freud (252). It is either considered a remnant of the Oedipal dynamic in the Superego, or one of "the repressive forces" (91) that Freud, together with "morality" and "disgust," refers to as "*reaction-formations*" built up "during the period of latency" (23), or even as a pseudo-

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metaphysical justification of social taboos, and religious and moral dogmas, damming the tides of libidinal energies but bursting elsewhere in neurotic disorders. "Our study of perversion," as Freud writes in his seminal work *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, "has shown that the sexual instinct has to struggle against certain mental forces which act as resistances, and of which shame and disgust are most prominent" (254). Shame is thus a dominant motif and constituent of repression in the aetiology of sexual neurosis that inhibits "the course of the sexual instinct and, like [a] dam […] restrict[s] its flow" (261). Indeed, there seems to be nothing redeeming about shame that is usually felt like a denuding sickness when it strikes despite our efforts to disavow its presence by hiding it. Although it can be seen as "vital" in its capacity to check what Nathanson considers to be "the psychopathology of our times" defined by narcissistic delusions,[1] shame is still a negative affect that completely disables our initiatives:

> If distress is the affect of suffering, shame is the affect of indignity, of defeat, of transgression and of alienation. Though terror speaks to life and death and distress makes of the world a vale of tears, yet shame strikes deepest into the heart of man. While terror and distress hurt, they are wounds inflicted from the outside which penetrate the smooth surface of the ego; but shame is felt as an inner torment, a sickness of the soul. It does not matter whether the humiliated one has been shamed by derisive laughter or whether he mocks himself. In either event he feels himself naked, defeated, alienated, lacking in dignity or worth. (Tomkins 118)

Whether it be seen as a universal affect or as an internalized response of cultural history and normative social practice, shame seems inadmissible to the Ego while, at the same time, being indispensable to the Ego in so far as it limits its arrogative demands. This ambiguity of shame, seen as a destitution we cannot do without, "a sickness of the soul" necessary to the soul, not only further compounds the burn of its venom but also introduces ethical material in the experience of shame that is yet to be adequately determined. Psychoanalytic register, although sensitive to the ambiguities of shame and its affective impact on subjectivity,[2] is yet unable to account for this material since analysis intends to gather the Ego back to its agency that shame not only seems to attenuate, as it disables the Ego's claims on the world, but circles back to offset, emerging, instead, as the very limit of psychoanalysis. In *Lacan: The Silent Partners*, Žižek writes: "The final aim of psychoanalysis, it turns out, is the production of shame" (91). This may well be the aporetic closure and the tragic opening of psychoanalysis, the liberating epos of the Ego that, in the end, reinforces its confinement: "The seamy underside of psychoanalysis, the backside towards which all the twists and turns have led, is finally shame: that affect whose very mention brings a blush to the face" (ibid.).

Recent theoretical developments, however, that will be critically considered below, have focused on the normative content of shame and its implications for our political and social practice, in particular, its instrumentality in relation to the structure and formation of identities. Tracing both its production of normative geographies that regulate our social life and the positive impact it may have on the notions of social and political responsibility, what has been overlooked, however, in the different strategies that articulate the political implications of shame, is the properly ethical material it introduces in the field of our subjective realities. Using Levinas's ethical register, I will try to show that new analytic possibilities can be broached in relation to shame whose general significance goes beyond the politics of affect and its implications for our normative social practice that has been the primary focus of recent critical concerns in the context of shame. Levinas's corpus offers concepts emerging from the viscera of felt human experience where shame also belongs and have a critical power vigorous enough to both further develop our political understanding of shame by reinvesting it with its ethical significance and, by the same token, point to its limitations. The undertheorized idea of sincerity is one of these concepts that I

will use in relation to shame precisely because it reaches beyond the reserve and the vigilance of subjectivity that the political at bottom implies and thus points towards a different order of experience older than politics. The fact is that we feel ashamed because we are not alone. The "sickness of the soul," which Tomkins refers to, the exposure and indignity of the self, the "inner torment" (118) is, by the same token, the reflection of our humanity, the recognition of our indiscretions and the fact that the world is not first ours to appropriate.

Even when most lacerating to the integrity of the subject, I will argue, shame still maintains the relation of constitutive openness to the other and testifies to the originary inability of the subject to close in upon itself. This inability, however, that emerges from time to time, buried in the exposure of a blush, and despite our powerless efforts and our pains not to show it, is nothing but the fact of our *being-alongside* that structures our subjectivity even before we emerge as subjects in the commerce of rights that animates our political existence. The experience of shame points to a different sense of what constitutes our subjectivity in its relation to others and it is this sense, buried alive in all the discursive structures of shame, that I wish to explore further and that should be understood as a more fundamental structure of subjectivity than its political articulations. Sincerity revealed in shame, where the Ego is fazed by its own prerogatives and doublebacked against the primary vulnerability that constitutes it head to toe may be at the edge of the experiential frame of humanity today but it is also an attestation to the singular demand of ethics seen as the coring out of the Ego's substantial plenitude by the exorbitant responsibility for another's loss.

In order to approach an understanding of shame that, beyond the significant complicities it shares with other critical discourses, also reveals its ethical intrigue as the primary structure of all social relations, the phenomenological experience of shame will constitute the critical mainstay of the analysis. However, as indicated above, the irreducible complexity of shame should also call for an imbrication of different fields within which it is often theorized. Since shame, as Metcalf contends, "is not simply a belief or the inchoate germ of a belief, but rather is a complex of belief, emotional affect, social sensitivity and self-awareness" (3–4), an integrated approach to address the internal tensions constitutive of subjectivity in shame should also contribute to a better understanding of its relation to ethics and to its subtle but necessary distinction from the dynamic of guilt.

However, before the intentional structure of shame as the watershed of its phenomenological significance is fleshed out, focusing on its political and social significance first will also tentatively broach the general concerns of its relation to normativity and to ethics. In terms of its political significance, shame will be considered through the theoretical and structural lens of Foucault's biopolitics and Butler's performativity. Although not explicitly concerned with shame, their hermeneutics of normativity and critique of political structures that participate in subject formation can provide leverage for seeing how the experience of shame regulates and determines our social existence. In this context, shame has also recently been charted by an alternative interventionist route where it can be seen as a positive affect of proximity, enabling political agency and critical reconsideration of our normativized identities. Ahmed's work on cultural politics of affect (2004) and Probyn's more affirmative consideration of shame as the collective catharsis of the social body (2005) will provide instances of this new affective topography in the politics of identity formation in which the issues I intend to pursue will emerge rather as omissions or absences, indicating also the limits of the political appropriations of shame. The transformative power of shame, if there is any, emerges from the Other alone, in the "before whom" of Aristotle that determines its primary structure, and the exigencies this places on the Ego is what constitutes the gravity of its ethical significance.

the politics of shame

Shame by Sartre is seen as the birth of the social, an originary and incontestable attestation to the

fact of the Other *alongside* us. In more explicit phenomenological terms, shame testifies to our being-in-the-world.[3] Indeed, the primary relationality and social significance of shame that phenomenology first opens up, its further impact on the relations of power and its implications for the inequities that riddle our social universe, is the pivot of our political understanding of shame. The fact that the judging gaze of the other seems always presupposed in the very experience of shame is revealed to me only in so far as I am already caught in the discursive politics of shame that both determines its meaning and legitimates its distribution by valorizing social and cultural practice. The politics of shame, the fact of its social emplotment as an exclusionary/inclusionary intensification of power that disciplines social relations and participates in the production of normative spatialities, also implies its cultural and historical contingency.

Although a universal affect, the expression of shame and its meaning are part of what Foucault calls the "social bodying" of the subject (*Discipline and Punish* 213), where the panoptic eye of the public is the power gaze that shames in order to assimilate difference. The social articulation of shame is thus always subject to binarisms and projects of exclusion within the coercive systems of power that produce non-normative subjects. Shame is thus implicated in the modality and distribution of power that invariably determines its history and its meaning.[4] It is part of Foucault's disciplinary social projects and biopolitical "unitary technique[s] by which the body is reduced as a 'political' force at the least cost and maximized as a useful force" (221). Shame is reintegrative and politically "useful" because it renders my agency politically useless. However, in this respect, shame is far from being considered as an expression of reactionary political interest alone since the collectivist and communitarian discourses are also implicated in its affective economy. Politicizing shame in Foucault's terms, in other words, does not imply political partisanship as much as it reveals its relation to the institutional regimens of power and disciplinary biopolitics that, in maximizing life, renders certain lives unlivable. Shame, as a "naturalized" social practice, is instrumental in what Foucault calls the "*anatomo-politics of the human body*" that disciplines and thus authors the subject by ensuring "the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility [and] its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls" (*History of Sexuality* 1: 139). Rather than "natural," then, shame should instead be understood historically, since it is productive, an agent of social control in the interstices of political power and its affective economies vested in the very same regulatory "techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations" (140), which, for Foucault, characterize biopolitics. Shame could even be seen as the hinge that interiorizes Foucault's disciplinary power within the social field itself. If biopower is seen as the power immanent to the social terrain, supervising life from within rather than being imposed on life from without, then shame is what enables the reactivation of the institutional typologies of power by the subjects themselves. I am ashamed of who I am only in so far as I have internalized the power structure that articulates me as its constitutive outside or, in other words, in so far as I am the living matter of abstract systems of power whose binaries are announced and effectively sustained by the burn of my shame. It is through affectivity that the tyranny of power can rule democratically, that it can be articulated by the entire body of social relations.

In this sense, shame is coextensive with normativizing discursive regimes and iterative hegemonic practices that produce marginalized identities. For Butler, who further extends the poststructuralist critique of the integrated subject, emphasizing instead its discursive formation through performativity of regulatory norms, the production of "abject" identities and "unlivable" lives is required for the subject to be able to "circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life" (3). Seen in these terms, as the "reiterative" discursive

practice "by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (2), shame becomes constitutive of the normative subject formation through the very disavowal and abjection of the other:

> This exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet "subjects," but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject. The abject designates here precisely those "unlivable" and "uninhabitable" zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the "unlivable" is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. (3)

Indeed, the entire narrative of "moral development," as Ahmed further contends, "is bound up with the *reproduction* of social norms" (106; emphasis added). The affective power of shame can then be harnessed as an inhibitory, homogenizing agent to extort obedience whereas shamelessness would imply precisely the failure to understand the very premises underlying shame, the social and cultural imperatives that participate in subject formation:

> Shame can work as a deterrent: in order to avoid shame, subjects must enter the "contract" of the social bond, by seeking to approximate a social ideal. Shame can [then] also be experienced as *the affective cost of not following the scripts of normative existence*. (107)

Non-normative subject formation is thus both constituted by and constitutes the limit of relationality traced by the burn of shame. The abject other is held hostage by the power of the collective gaze that assaults the core of being by stripping it of its possibilities and "the [very] difficulty of moving beyond shame is a sign of the power of the normative" (ibid.), but also, and by the same token, the affirmation of what is an incontestable desire to belong to it, to become its positive expression. In this sense, shame becomes reintegrative. According to Ahmed, I am only ashamed in so far as I already confirm the very power that disempowers me and "despite the negation of shame experiences, my shame confirms my love, and my commitment to […] [the normative] ideals in the first place" (106). My shame is my failure "to approximate 'an ideal'" (ibid.) that I have internalized and my burn is nothing other than the excruciating pathos of my desire to reappropriate it.

As a dissociative affect, shame is *ec-static*, tearing the subject away from itself, riveting its inside outside itself, but it cannot be limited to the non-normative experience alone, as Ahmed's critique of valorized shame, "entertained" by the normative subject, implies.[5] The ecstasy of shame can also overwhelm the privileged subject. Despite myself, I can feel ashamed for the arrogating power of my own gaze when it represents the normative panopticon. In other words, one may be committed to an ideal against the norm, so that participation in the norm engenders shame. The fact that I am the closure of my own community, that I am the immanent expression of its totality – which may be identified by different normative mythogenies of birth, origin, nation, race, sexuality or any other tropological reinscription invested with the phantasms of *essence* that would constitute it – can nevertheless induce my shame. I can feel its burn in the face of another's suffering, in the face of naked poverty and longing I witness in the beggar's eyes but suppress, averting mine, in the face of war-torn tears whose prayers I pretend not to hear, of refugees and their blasted lives whose pieces, like shattered glass, I try to avoid for fear of cutting myself to feel their pain, in the face of young, unnameable loves victimized by heterosexist regimes and their whispered ecstasies I dispassionately turn away from. The ecstasy of this shame deconstructs, in fact, the politics of my subjectivity by revealing its discursive articulation within the grammar of power and its normative investments. In other words, it articulates me as robbed of myself, reveals me to myself another. Shame in this case becomes a dissociative interruption of myself, of my being caught

in the loop of a narcissistic synecdoche where my body is the performative attestation of the social body. The political and social legitimacy of all the expressions of non-normative pride have their origins in this kind of dissociative shame where the residues of its burn persist to traumatize the complacency of the privileged subject and the torsion towards ethical agency it may initiate could be seen as an affective articulation of Spivak's call to the exigency of "un-learning our privilege as our loss" (9). This "un-learning," however, can begin only when politics finds itself exceeded by ethics, when the excess of the world located in my relation of responsibility for the other's frailty moves me to recreate the world. This is the same movement that Levinas calls "*ex-cendence*," or a movement "towards the Good" that exceeds being, that is "a departure from Being and from the categories which describe it" but that nevertheless has "a foothold in being" (*Existence and Existents* xxvii). Ethics is a relation that exceeds the world, that tears me up from the world and determines *me* as an irrecusable response to the appeal of its hunger. The dissociative shame that I can feel at the exorbitance of my privilege is a trace of an older, originary alienation of my subjectivity that precedes all politics of subject formation. It is a *response* of "a being torn up from oneself for another in the giving to the other of the bread out of one's own mouth" (Levinas, *Otherwise than Being* 142). This, Levinas continues further, is not "an anodyne formal relation, but all the gravity of the body extirpated from its *conatus essendi* in the [originary] possibility of giving" (ibid.).

Politicized within its heteronormative context, Ahmed, however, is more hesitant about the implications of this kind of valorized, "liberal" shame, which she sees as a "form of discomfort with the comforts of inhabiting the normative" (121), since it seems to reaffirm the privilege of the normative in the first place, for which I am then ashamed. The "exercise" of shame, in other words, becomes the "exercise" of my own privilege. When publicly manifested, shame does indeed assume the grandeurs of pride and, far too readily, becomes part of the self-congratulatory politics of the liberal subject. However, the burn of shame I feel still interrupts the immanence of my identity and the exultancy of my own spontaneity, the freedom that my privilege affords me. It shatters, even for an instant, the structured economies of the Ego by making me contain more than I can, the very suffering that is not mine, it "drives me outside of the nucleus of my substantiality" in Levinas's terms (*Otherwise than Being* 142), and, qua shame, testifies to structures of subjectivity that its politics cannot account for.

The homogenizing and regulatory power of shame that reintegrates alterity by disavowal and that, for Butler, essentially "creates the valence of 'abjection' and its status for the subject as a threatening spectre" (3), inscribes belonging in the very structure of abjection. What causes the burn is the fact that belonging, as the primary psychological structure of subjectivity, is revealed to me as a privilege to which I am *not* entitled.[6] In his recent study on queer youth suicide, Cover suggests that irrespective of

> the extent to which queer sexualities are deemed tolerable, to be positioned as uncommon, legitimate-but-not-as-legitimate-as-heterosexuality or even exotic and a spectacle does not eradicate the role of shame in subject formation. Being categorised as non-normative – even in positive and pride-inducing ways – extends to how belonging operates as a basic but not universally-available requirement for subjectivity. (100)

Apart from creating topographies of "livability," shame also "vulnerabilizes" subject positions. The vulnerability of "unlivable" subjects, in other words, becomes the dominating identificatory signifier of their "difference." This vulnerabilization abrogates not only the possibility of agency and the continuous struggle to negotiate and affirm the legitimacy of one's experience but it also conflates heteronormative prejudice with the vulnerability of the non-normative identity itself. Considered in Butler's terms, shame would thus power "*the regulation of identificatory practices*

such that the identification with the abjection […] will be persistently disavowed" (3). This also implies that the abjection does not precede but would first emerge with shame, seen as the reiterative discursive practice that produces unlivable lives.

In shame, my awkward flesh is thus abandoned to judgement and tyranny of others but, as even Sartre suggests, its "vulgarity" and its "awkwardness," manifested to me only in and by the appearance of the other, "could not lodge there potentially; for they are *meanings and as such they surpass the body and at the same time refer to a witness capable of understanding them and to the totality of human reality*" (246; emphasis added). Even in Sartre, this implies not only the presence of an other who reveals an aspect of my being to me but also the fact that the experience of shame is a rigorous attestation to a discursive order, seeking to reassert its legitimacy by disavowal.

In the act of shaming, I look at you with all the prerogatives and birthrights of history that constitute the legitimacy of my authority. My gaze becomes the expression of my community's deepest desires and whispers of bloodlines that my flesh accrues through phantasmatic investments and I demand that you answer for your right to be, which you are powerless to do. You are the indiscretion of my history and I no longer look upon you as a worthy challenge coming from your height *alongside-me* but denounce you with my coldblooded gaze that reflects your failure to maintain its authority. You are the indignity of my humanity, which, because of you, I can no longer acknowledge as mine and your inability to meet my gaze is the only proper response that confirms the fact that we are not the same. Furthermore, the process of disidentification that my gaze initiates establishes the irrecusable triumph of the historical narrative that I represent. In the act of shaming, you no longer share the power of my history but are subject to it and your subjection affirms the prerogatives of my power. To humiliate in shame is self-affirmative. It makes me emerge as a social body in the community of shared prejudice by the very act of making you kneel outside it. My abiding right to be is further manifested in the sensation of your blush, your averted look and your hidden face, whereas you, you want to be elsewhere and, above all, be otherwise than being but are unable to, which leaves you ambushed in being what you cannot assume. Yours is an excruciating encounter with power backed up by social fantasies, national narratives and sedimented collective memories that regulate and historically legitimate the community of my gaze. But your shame is in no sense tragic. It is not a question of moral transgression and the recrimination that follows it but rather of shame for your very inability to maintain and share my past, my suffering or my present. It is an assault on your very being, on your right to be, and it can be excused by neither punishment nor absolution since shame is not guilt you can expiate for. On the contrary, it is what still remains after the expiation of guilt. It is what outlives all your confessions and what still persists beyond my forgiveness. Shame emerges beyond the limits of your guilt. It cuts deeper wounds than life itself is capable of sustaining. There is "no claim," Tomkins writes,

> which man makes upon himself and upon others which matters more to him than his essential dignity. Man above all other animals insists on walking erect. In lowering his eyes and bowing his head, he is vulnerable in a quite unique way. Though not so immediately strident as terror, the nature of the experience of shame guarantees a perpetual sensitivity to any violation of the dignity of man. Men have exposed themselves repeatedly to death and terror, and have even surrendered their lives in the defense of their dignity, lest they be forced to bow their heads and bend their knees […] Many have had to confront death and terror all their lives lest their essential dignity […] be called into question. Better to risk the uncertainties of death and terror than to suffer the deep and certain humiliation of cowardice […] How can loss of face be more intolerable than loss of life? How can hanging the head in shame so mortify the spirit? (132–33)

Shame is an outrage of dignity, according to Tomkins. In shame, I am backed up against

my own terror of losing what my life cannot recover. I am fazed by my own being, powerless to reclaim the loss of myself while being equally bound to myself. The fact that my being defaults in relation to itself, that I am less than myself while, at the same time, being shorn of my capacities or initiatives to gather myself in *conatus* is what, for Tomkins, compounds the burden of my shame. Although shame belongs to the same affective cluster for Tomkins as guilt, this is, in fact, also what accounts for its distinction from guilt where the affective burden is signified by my relation to what I have done rather than by the default of my relation to my own being constitutive of shame. This default of being that is ontological and that shame so acutely manifests can be seen in the victims of crime who, having done nothing wrong, can yet experience shame in relation to their being. Shame can thus emerge in the absence of guilt just as it can persist beyond its remission in the case of the guilty. "In contrast to all other affects," Tomkins writes,

> shame is an experience of the self by the self. At that moment when the self feels ashamed, it is felt as a sickness within the self […] [where] the phenomenological distinction between the subject and object of shame is lost. (133)

The burden of my own being, in other words, is *me*. The upsurge of another as this accusative "sickness" within me which I both claim as irrepressibly mine and as that which escapes me, is *not* me, is further revealed in the exposure of the face. The fact that shame is always "shame of *self*," as Sartre notes (285), that it cuts so close and initiates an ambiguous relation of proximity to oneself, is because "the self," which is exposed defenceless in shame, "lives in the face," Tomkins suggests, "and within the face the self burns brightest in the eyes" that seek cover. "Shame," he continues, "turns the attention of the self and others away from other objects to this most visible residence of self, increases its visibility and thereby generates the torment of self-consciousness" (133). The exposure of the face in shame is also the exposure of my inadmissible vulnerability, the flight of myself from me that I cannot yet must assume. Sartre speaks of it as an "internal hemorrhage" (285) of the subject, seen initially as the *for-itself*, where I am now carried away alienated from myself by another's gaze that shifts the world and in which I remain jealously unrevealed to myself.

However, shame does not only reveal the weight of the normative order and the collapse of subjectivity no longer able to support it, but, by the same token, also manifests the expression of a community's desire to reaffirm its values and consolidate collective identity against the challenges that may threaten its integrity. In other words, shame is also a unifying idiom of social sanction coextensive with collective responsibility and the communitarian sense of belonging. "Just as contempt strengthens the boundaries and barriers between individuals and groups and is the instrument par excellence for the preservation of hierarchical, caste and class relationships," Tomkins writes, "so is shared shame a prime instrument for strengthening the sense of mutuality and community whether it be between parent and child, friend and friend, or citizen and citizen" (216). As suggested above, to shame is to assert one's own emergence within a community of equals and it could be considered as a normalizing power of biopolitical schemas for social (re)integration. Shaming practice can then be seen as a substitute for violence, and a means of delaying recourse to it. Indeed, as Nussbaum suggests,

> shaming penalties are frequently defended as valuable expressions of social norms by political theorists whose general position might be described as communitarian, in the sense that it favors a robust role for strong and relatively homogeneous social norms in public policy. (3)

The act of shaming, in other words, reconstitutes the social fabric. It implies, in fact, that the "communitarian moorings" and "a shared sense of shame at bad practices" (ibid.) that used to tether the community have been lost, but its political value resides precisely in the

attempt to recover them and reassert their validity.

Although Nussbaum targets the specifically American judicial and social milieu, the revival of shaming as a political and cultural practice to re-establish the lost *mythos* of collective identity through ethical investments could be seen as part of a general resurgence of doctrinal thought, reductivism and moralizing discourses in liberal democracies. Valorized relativism that arguably plagues liberal societies could be offset by repossessing our lost sense of shame. Blushing together can indeed be seen as the re-emergence of a new-found confidence in bankrupt cultural identity and civic responsibility. In an increasingly undecidable landscape of radically plural, cross-cultural and hybrid rationalities, we are set "adrift without a moral compass, in large part because we have lost our sense of shame" (175). Our shared social history whose frontiers shame used to trace may have been displaced by globalized cultural shifts but shame can also be harnessed to take possession of it and recover our common sense of destiny. "The pedigree of this view about shame," as Nussbaum writes, is undeniably "conservative and it does end up defending entrenched social norms as good sources of both behaviour and law" (ibid.). However, in so far as it solicits a renewed call for decency, charity and generosity of spirit, it can also mobilize resistance to political self-interest and the "callous behavior on the part of the dominant classes" (ibid.). After all, privilege confers licence or, which amounts to the same thing, shame with moral impunity. The elision of shame, associated with the loss of community and the collective spirit, opens the floodgates of desire and liberates the subject from the claustrophobic embrace of social custom but, on the other hand, it also paves the way for the unrestrained tyranny of pragmatism and the abuse of power.

Shame can also be seen as affirmative in terms of its broader social implications and global political significance. When related to the universal ideals of relative intrinsic value, the implications of shame can come to question not only the prevalent social and cultural practice but the entire historical conscience of a nation. Human rights, despite the fact that they represent the political and cultural heritage of the West, are yet a universally declared ideal calling upon all nations to recognize their intrinsic significance. For the Member States of the Human Rights Council, they carry a universal exigency placed upon the conscience of "all peoples and all nations."[7] As Hunt indicates, the Declaration of 1948 "expressed a set of aspirations rather than a readily attainable reality. It outlined a set of moral obligations for the world community, but it had no mechanism for enforcement" (204). The very fact, however, that the thirty Articles of the Declaration lacked the power of enforcement was not only what enabled their approval by the General Assembly but it is also what still makes the Declaration a moral document rather than a judicial document. Moral obligation as opposed to legal obligation is not only distinguished by its universal appeal but, above all, by the fact that it is an authority without power and, in so far as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights remains powerless in these terms, it is also what constitutes its ethical eminence. There can be no legal responsibility for the violation of human rights, strictly speaking, only shame. Shame is thus implicated in the very structure of human rights as an exigency of responsibility one cannot shirk without shirking one's own humanity.

Proceeding from the lack of recognition and observance of the fundamental freedoms warranted by the Declaration, shame may very well induce an anxiety in national identity regarding its alleged self-image, instigate a reappraisal of moral inheritance and social policies, and lead to political and social transformations. In this case, shame becomes a testimony to the presence of others whose rights and suppressed cries for recognition manifest the failure of our responsibilities. It cuts a wound of ethics in the skin of a nation closed in upon its own *mythos* and summons it to solicitude in which the suffering of others emerges as the persecution of its own history and the upsurge of a national conscience. The entire nation is then sensitized

and exposed as a nerve end, held to answer and expiate for the hurt and freedom of another.

This conspiracy of ethics that shame can foment in the collective social body has recently been considered as an interventionist and politically necessary form of remittance for the reconstitution of the national spirit devoted to transparency and democratic integrity. When reconsidering shame from moral reproach to transformative agency, in *Blush: Faces of Shame*, Probyn addresses the public manifestation of shame in Australia prompted by the Stolen Generations report *Bringing them Home* issued in 1997 by the Human Rights Commission. The report considers the systematic and comprehensive nation-wide policy of separating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, which was still prevalent in the 1970s. "A common practice," substantiated by a number of witness accounts, as the report states, "was simply to remove the child forcibly, often in the absence of the parent but sometimes even by taking the child from the mother's arms."[8] The initiative of forced separation without parental consent or court order was an institutionalized attempt by the Aborigines Protection Board to deracinate the native population and sanitize the Australian past by the assimilation of its black shame. The irremissible injustice revealed in the Human Rights Report caused a general outcry and a call for a public expression of national shame. Following the Australian Reconciliation Convention held in Melbourne shortly after the report was released, "shame was everywhere," Probyn writes.

> Pronouncements of shame on the part of ordinary Australians could be heard in letters to the editor, talk back shows, and literally on the street […] It seemed sincere, it seemed to be different from guilt. It was profoundly disturbing. It drove a wedge between previously sanctioned ignorance and newly owned knowledge. This played out in tortuous attempts to find the right analogy. Where do you find the words with which to speak new knowledge, a new emotion? (97)

Probyn reveals shame as an assault of history and the suffering it represents on one's own ignorance of it. Emerging at "an intersection of ignorance and knowledge," shame "rendered obvious and painful the nature of white relations to Indigenous Australians" (98). The public manifestation of shame exposed an abeyant national neurosis and a deep-seated desire to come to terms with an unacknowledged past of Australia that could finally reveal its black history. It allowed for "white ignorance to be accepted" (99). It "opened the way for a momentary reckoning" by exposing "the ignorance the public was forced to contend with" (100). However, it is not in the revelation of ignorance that shame takes hold but rather in the fact that one already knew. The fact that one knows what one buries alive and jealously hides is what provokes shame, which is further compounded by our ability and our resourcefulness to hide that very knowledge behind the ignorance. In other words, the revelation of "ignorance" only belies the depths of our complicity that shame makes manifest. Rather then "allow[ing] people to own up to their ignorance," as Probyn suggests (99), the public acceptance of shame finally allowed everyone to own up to their knowledge of what knowledge cannot admit to. Shame then rather emerges as an epistemic disjunction of knowing what is inadmissible to knowledge, of what is buried alive in the integrity of a nation. In the last instance, shame is a provocation of ethics that precedes knowledge and it is at the intersection of the epistemic and the ethical orders that shame finds its place. Indeed, my inability to articulate it, to "find the right analogy," and "the words with which to speak new knowledge" (97), signifies the lack of alibis knowledge provides in order to excuse suffering. What finds expression beyond all expression then, when language stutters breathless, is the fact that suffering is inexcusable. And this silence, charged with hurt, is the sole revelation of shame. Backed up against language that has run out of excuses, my humanity stares back at me and makes me kneel in front of it in a revelation of my inability to be its equal. But this inability can only emerge against a prior subjection to its ascendancy that is older than the knowledge of my incommensurability. I am only ashamed in so far as my forgotten humanity

bursts open and towers above the politics of subjectivity and the structures of economy that advance the drama of the Ego. There is a primary allegiance to Goodness that shame reveals before its obfuscation in the economies of rights and obligations. From the very first, I am an ethical rather than an economic animal. Shame thus reveals a temporality prior to all contracts, where I am pledged to the other beyond and above all interest. An instant of shame is an instant out of time which preoccupies my efforts *to be*, an epiphany of consciousness indebted to the other's vulnerability older than the order of politics.

Imbricated in the political structure of shame lies the experience of ethics which alone can account for its transformative possibilities. The politics of shame, without the interruption of ethics, can only continue what Levinas calls the drama of "being's interest," as the effort of "egoisms struggling with one another, each against all […] and thus together" (*Otherwise than Being* 4) in the commerce of rights and concessions. Shame can only emerge in sincerity of an ethical relation where the frailty of the other reflects my own inhumanity. Although a cursory sensation, a blush, in fact, implies the torsion of my whole universe that pivots away from me to you. Ethical consciousness, older than the commerce between me and you, abrogates all my efforts in shame and bends my initiatives back in an exposure that is now for you, alone.

the ethical intrigue

As one of the deepest and often unspoken expressions of community, shame manifests our inability to hide ourselves from others. The final miscarriage of solipsism is painfully revealed in a blush. By the same token, however, so is our continual evasion and our desperate rear-guard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves. Shame reveals us as willing captives of others but to disclose to others our own infirmities, to finally manifest ourselves in sincerity, is too formidable a possibility. Shame, then, is both the supreme possibility and the utmost impossibility of being oneself. It is auto-affective and dis-affective at the same time, both what signals my being-for-myself and my being-for-others.

Although invested with considerable social and moral significance, the affective experience of shame is also eminently private. Its ontological structure, as Sartre claims, is decidedly mine: "Its structure is intentional; it is a shameful apprehension *of* something and this something is *me*. I am ashamed of what I *am*. Shame therefore realises an intimate relation of myself to myself" (245). Agamben, in his reading of Levinas, also insists on the primacy of the ontological relation in our understanding of shame. It is my being riveted to myself *despite* myself that constitutes the very experience of shame. The fact that my skin burns with a desire to leave it is equally matched by the impossibility of deserting it. In shame, the very fact of my existence is exposed naked.[9] My being is thus experienced as objective and independent of my initiatives, as an encumbrance that I undergo against myself. Shame, Agamben explains, "does not derive, as the moral philosophers maintain, from the consciousness of an imperfection or a lack in our being from which we take distance" (104). It is thus not an epiphany that allows me to gather myself as a subject in concession, but

> is grounded in our being's incapacity to move away and break free from itself. If we experience shame in nudity […] it is because the unrestrainable impulse to flee from oneself is confronted by an equally certain impossibility of evasion. Just as we experience our revolting and yet unsurpassable presence to ourselves in bodily need and nausea […] so in shame we are consigned to something from which we cannot in any way distance ourselves. (104–05)

It is this inescapability of one's being manifested in the experience of shame, the fact of being cornered in and by one's own being, or as Levinas says, being "ill at ease" in the skin "that is already too tight" (*Otherwise than Being* 108) and at "the point of breakup, fission, openness" (107), that Agamben relates to the fundamental structure of subjectivity.

In shame, the Ego is powerless to turn away from its own disappropriation. Impoverished and backed up defenceless against its own passivity, it is yet imperially summoned to *assume* the very impossibility of being itself. I am both subjected to the loss of the Ego in a delirium of sincerity that is at the same time also "an extreme and irreducible presence of the 'I' to itself" (Agamben 106). Shame thus emerges in the absolute coincidence of self-detachment and self-attachment, of breaking up of inwardness and its atomic tightening, and this "double movement" is what constitutes the internal tension of shame: "In shame, *the subject thus has no other content than its own desubjectification*; it becomes witness to its own disorder, its own oblivion as a subject. This double movement, which is both subjectification and desubjectification, is shame" (ibid.; emphasis added). Although the imbrication of "servitude and sovereignty" that the experience of shame implies and that, for Agamben, reveals "the fundamental sentiment of being *a subject*" (107), could be related to the aporias of the political structure of subjectivity,[10] what is at stake in this movement between dis-affection and auto-affection is the very intimacy of the Ego that, in its deposition, posits itself beyond politics as a subject ravished in sincerity. The fact that I am exposed, hands tied, and backed up, without recourse, against my own incapacity to evade myself in alibis that knowledge provides, thus, yet again, finding refuge for my own interiority, is the fact of holding nothing back. Sincerity now turns my inside out, as it were, in absolute sensitivity, open to "wounds and outrage," that for Levinas constitutes the very psyche of the subject approached in ethics (*Otherwise than Being* 138). What abdicates in the experience of shame is the Ego in its attempt to retain its imperialism. The Ego is finally stripped of its subject positions, its postures and all its histrionics, wedged and held tight against the bottom of its being that it persistently covers up in stratagems of dominance: vulnerability, mercy itself. This is why shame is always *despite* oneself, despite the economy of Reason that can never suffer gratuitously, that can only reap benefits in martyrdom or sacrifice.

However, this resistance has another intrigue plotted by ethical relation that puts egology out of phase. The experience of shame is the experience of Levinas's ethical consciousness divested of interest and traumatized to the marrow by a failure of responsibility. For Levinas, subjectivity is persecuted by responsibility to the point of expiating for others, but without the grandeur of martyrdom. Persecution, or my substitution for the other, "is the passivity of a trauma" where

> the persecuted one is liable to answer for the persecutor […] To undergo from the other is an absolute patience only if by this from-the-other is already for-the-other. This transfer, other than interested […] is subjectivity itself. "To tend the cheek to the smiter and to be filled with shame" […] is not to draw from suffering some kind of magical redemptive virtue. In the trauma of persecution it is to pass from the outrage undergone to the responsibility for the persecutor, and, in this sense from suffering to expiation for the other. (111)

Subjectivity signifies a passage from outrage by the other to expiation for the other in shame. Responsibility is first an outrage of the Ego because it is *despite* myself, incumbent on the plenitude and fullness of my complacency, as it were, but I am nevertheless destined to assuming it by the Good that, according to Levinas, elects me as irreplaceable in my responsibility prior to my free commitment. Violence inflicted on me by another's need is also my shame of living, shame of the Ego and its irremissible demands that living nevertheless has to accommodate. But this violence is *better* than the violence of my own living, where *better* carries all the weight of ethical injunction. It is *better* because the Good redeems it. "In this trauma," Levinas writes, "the Good reabsorbs, or redeems, the violence of [my] non-freedom" (123). Shame signifies the Ego's entry into the world, it is my *being-alongside*.

Although Levinas does not account for the ethical significance of shame and even contests

its moral implications in favour of phenomenology in his early writing,[11] subjectivity for Goodness is subjectivity in shame. The experience of shame is the exposure of subjectivity in sincerity of an ethical relation where the traumatic passage *from the universe for-myself to my universe for-the-other* is painfully announced. It is a passage of absolute heteronomy seen as an abrogation of the Ego in its ethical ex-position that reverses its mastery back to its vulnerability:

> Vulnerability, exposure to outrage, to wounding, passivity more passive than all patience, passivity of the accusative form, trauma of accusation suffered by a hostage to the point of persecution, implicating the identity of the hostage who substitutes himself for the others: *all this is the self, a defecting or defeat of the ego's identity*. And this, pushed to the limit, is sensibility, sensibility as the subjectivity of the subject. It is a substitution for another, one in the place of another, expiation. (Levinas, *Otherwise than Being* 15; emphasis added)

It is a denuding of the Ego in its most radical sense that announces the emergence of ethical consciousness but also, and by the same token, the emergence of shame for one's very exposure in sincerity that goes beyond the politics of abjection and desire – although the political is set in motion by the desperate struggle to cover oneself in evasions of rage or apology.[12] It is in the experience of shame that the ethical consciousness can first emerge as expiation, as being delivered over before gathering itself up. In so far as shame is an affect sustained by a conflict whereby the Ego becomes a burden unto itself, fatally consigned to what it cannot assume, shame appears to be a concern for my being alone and yet it is only by virtue of another that the intimacy of this concern is revealed to me. "In fact," as Sartre writes, "no matter what results one can obtain in solitude by the religious *practice* of shame, it is in its primary structure shame *before somebody*" (245). The other is thus presupposed by the very structure of shame in which I am concerned with myself as a subject only in so far as I am already consigned in responsibility to the other. What shame seems to reveal, then, is that I am for others before I am or I belong; therefore I am. In other words, the ontological structure where my being is a concern for me only ever emerges against the irrecusable gravities of my commitment to others that does not wait for my consent. Shame is then the epiphany of my responsibility that devolves on the subject as its primary structure of being in the world. The fact that shame manifests our frailty by revealing the absolute necessity of our faith in others, our dependence and our attachment, is, after all, also why we desperately attempt to hide it, being ashamed of our shame.[13] The Ego resents the fact of its own vulnerability, the fact that we are born helpless, which also means that we are destined to love helplessly, that we are consigned to others without reserve introduced by the politics of subjectivity. What constitutes the aporetic nature of shame is the fact that it is a residue of our love, that it reveals the miscarriage of love and our misery for having failed to keep it at bay, but the misery we feel only testifies to the gravity of its triumph.[14]

Shame is thus an experience of ambivalence that tears into subjectivity's deepest recesses to reveal the possibilities of giving oneself without measure. In its politics, where measure is introduced, it is manifested as an intensification of power that includes by exclusion, but shame, as I have argued, is also an ethical index of the subject's constitutive openness to others. The ontological fact that tethers me to myself and that shame seems to bear witness to belies also a trace of originary vulnerability in shame that contests all solipsistic affirmations and introduces ethical material into the vulgate of *conatus*. In all its awkwardness, but in all its passion, a blush signifies the very humanity we are desperate to hide but that yet emerges, from time to time, even if we are ashamed of it. What is due in shame

> goes beyond having, but makes giving possible [...] In it the body which makes giving possible makes one *other* without alienating. For this other is the heart, and the

> goodness of the same, the inspiration or the very psyche in the soul. (Levinas, *Otherwise than Being* 109)

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notes

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1 "Shame," Nathanson writes, "is a vital aspect of the psychopathology of our times, of what has been called 'an age of narcissism.'" It is "a response to exposure," he continues. "[B]y forcing attention to the self it protects us from narcissism, as when we are made to accept that the viewing other does not share our opinion of ourselves" (5). Narcissism, then, implies the disavowal of shame, which, indeed, is seen as a malady of our time even when considered by politically progressive discourses, as we shall see below.

2 Tomkins defines shame as inhibition of interest or joy that remains incomplete, which is precisely what creates ambivalence and tension between the positive affect and the negative awareness of its inhibition. Interest or joy, in other words, is not completely renounced, although there is a recognition of their indiscretion. "The shame response," says Tomkins,

> is literally an ambivalent turning of the eyes away from the object toward the face, toward the self. It is an act of facial communication reduction in which excitement or enjoyment is only incompletely reduced. Therefore it is an act which is deeply ambivalent. This ambivalence is nowhere clearer than in the child who covers his face in the presence of the stranger, but who also peeks through his fingers so that he may look without being seen. (See Tomkins 123, 136–37)

3 See Sartre 243–327, in particular.

4 Even Nathanson argues for "the inherent variability of the shame experience," suggesting that, in the analytic idiom, the fact of shame being

> a universal experience is both a boon and a hindrance to our understanding of it. While it is true that each of us "knows" what it feels like to be embarrassed or to be humiliated, we do not know with any certainty what another person means to express when using these words.

In order to unravel what could be seen as the lexical ambiguity of shame that seems to disarticulate our very experience of it, Nathanson suggests using Wurmser's approach (1981) when considering the "cognates" of shame and speaks rather of the "'shame family of emotions'" that may include "disgrace, dishonor, degradation and debasement" but even "shyness" or "modesty" and other analogues that "imply the acute lowering of self esteem." What we may see as "mildly embarrassing," he continues,

> is treated as abject shame by another […] So variably are shame words used by the population at large, so different is the perception of these emotion states that it is not possible to use these names with any confidence that another person knows precisely what we mean when we talk about shame. (See Nathanson 3–4)

5 See Ahmed 108–13, in particular.

6 This also suggests the need for projecting an "ideal belonging" beyond and above actual existent belongings, which is coextensive with Levinas's notion of prophetic politics where existent normative and political structures are always open to perfectibility in view of the ethical responsibility for the other that always exceeds them. See Caygill 69–93, in particular.

7 The preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states unequivocally that the Declaration of Human Rights represents

> a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and

> freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction. (United Nations, "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948" quoted in Hunt 224)

8 See Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, "Scope of the Inquiry" in *Bringing them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* (Sydney: Commonwealth of Australia, 1997), <http://www.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/content/pdf/social_justice/bringing_them_home_report.pdf> (accessed 4 Oct. 2017).

9 In *On Escape*, Levinas uses nausea and shame in order to reveal the horror of being that persists against our initiatives to transcend it. Being is seen as an unbearable weight and a fatality that chains me to myself and condemns me to immanence. Heidegger's notion of being as its possibilities is reversed by Levinas. I am paralysed by the brutal fact of being myself that shame manifests and "the ground of its suffering consists of the impossibility of interrupting it, and of an acute feeling of being held fast." This, for Levinas, implies the exigent need to get out from under ontology and "*to break that most radical and unalterably binding of chains, the fact that the I* [*moi*] *is oneself* [*soi-même*]" (52, 55).

10 In other words, the fact that I am both subjected to the political power while being an agent reproducing it is the political double bind of being a subject.

11 See Levinas, *On Escape* 63, in particular.

12 Shame, however, is precisely the impossibility of apology that a blush symptomatically reveals by concealing, an incapacitated, speechless rage turned against the Ego itself. "The persecuted one cannot defend himself by language, for the persecution is a disqualification of the apology" (Levinas, *Otherwise than Being* 121).

13 The seemingly ceaseless, specular nature of shame in what becomes a bottomless *mise en abyme* structure is teased out by Derrida in his sudden revelation of shame when caught stark naked by the gaze of his cat, "shame that blushes for being ashamed" (see Derrida 4).

14 In terms of affect theory, this ambivalence is betrayed in our reluctance to renounce the object of interest that shame has revealed as out of our reach. "In shame," Tomkins writes,

> I wish to continue to look and to be looked at, but I also do not wish to do so […] Because the self is not altogether willing to renounce the object, excitement may break through and displace shame at any moment, but while shame is dominant it is experienced as an enforced renunciation of the object. Self-consciousness is heightened by virtue of the unwillingness of the self to renounce the object. In this respect it is not unlike mourning, in which I become exquisitely aware of the self just because I will not surrender the love object which must be surrendered. The ambivalence in shame is clear when it involves a curious child confronted by an interesting stranger, or a reluctant lover confronted by an exciting love or sex object. (Tomkins 137)

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