

Blushing

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A lot of people have asked me what an inaugural talk is and what it inaugurates. One non-academic friend asked if it was my ordination. These strange academic occasions are precious and quite rare. Here, surrounded by friends and colleagues,¹ relaxed with wine and canapés, it seems that I'm allowed to hold forth about me, or at least about my research (which, as those who know me will attest, sometimes amounts to the same thing).

I'm going to talk about some of my recent research on shame but first I must admit that I've never given an inaugural lecture before. Many years ago when I was interviewed for a job in the United Kingdom, a very high and mighty professor of sociology ponderously asked me a question that has stayed with me. 'Professor Probyn', he intoned across the rather kitsch boardroom, 'if' and the if lingered long, 'if you were to be appointed professor at this university and if you were to give your inaugural lecture on the state of sociology, what—what pray tell—would you say?'

I waffled on about how my research connected with the field as his eyes glazed over. I'd convinced myself that I was too young, too queer and much too colonial—Australian, Canadian *and* Welsh—to get the job, and wasn't terribly surprised when I didn't.

Now that I'm not so young, perhaps I can respond to the challenge of placing my research trajectory within a context of the fields that have informed me. After a rather unremarkable undergraduate degree in French literature, I wandered the world working in bars until my grandfather, Tom Clarke, kindly left me enough money to undertake graduate studies. I was lucky to find

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media and communication studies, and all of a sudden I knew I was where I wanted to be. It was a great time to be in the field. The discipline in North America isn't as young as it is here, and in Canada we had a legacy of the great Harold Innis, an economic historian who pioneered new ways of thinking about the role of communication, which he understood in the broadest of terms as the transport of information, people and ideas. From the papyrus to the train, he made me understand the economic, social and cultural implications of such a view of communication.

At the time, in the mid-1980s, debates were burbling: feminism, poststructuralism, and then postmodernism had us arguing around seminar tables, spilling into the bars of Montreal. Quebecois nationalism and Canadian postcolonialism were mixed in, and as the debates roared, I knew that the question of identity was both academically exciting and very real to people outside academe.

Because I spent so many years when I was a student mixing study with the financial necessity of working in bars, and because I was nurtured on a philosophy that puts trying to understand the lived experiences of ordinary individuals foremost, I've long known that it matters to try to make ideas matter to people, whether or not they be couched in high theory or in newspapers or in classrooms. It has taken me a while to write in a less dense manner—as my partner tells me, 'stop hiding behind et al.'—but the subjects that have driven my interest tend to be about everyday life. My first book² developed ideas about the role and the uses of the self and personal experience in academic thinking, especially in feminist and cultural studies. I was lucky in that, in a small way, it was the right book for the times. It developed my passion for certain ideas, especially those formulated by Michel Foucault, and allowed me to elaborate on questions of subjectivity and the self as a personal yet fully social form. In some ways, it provided a basis from which much of my work has proceeded. My next book³ was about identity and the longing to belong. It engaged with the heady debates about queer theory but also explored notions of desire as a positive force that fuels ways of being. It was also written out of Montreal, a city that compels

complex thinking about identity. As a project it covered the time when I decided to emigrate here because of the offer of a position at the University of Sydney, and the last page was written in Sydney.

Following from that book, I took up Deleuze and Guattari's claim that it is the combination of what they call sexual and alimentary regimes that form us in modern society. *Carnal Appetites*⁴ used food and eating as an alternative optic into the regulation of modern culture. If Foucault famously argued that from the nineteenth century on sexuality ruled us, it seems to me that for many eating constitutes the most pressing problem and even the greatest taboo in our society. Across these research projects, I have been concerned with how we make meaning in our lives through different cultural practices. Big or small, questions about the lived textures of lives are what make us human.

My most recent project, which I want to outline here, continues the general thrust of my inquiry. As my writing has moved from the abstract conceptualisations which marked my early attempts, I've become more and more interested in how to capture and convey the textures of life. An attention to the emotions, or what are called the affects in more scientific literature, has become pressing on at least two registers. On the one level, there is the undeniable fact that as a species we have had a tumultuous time of it lately. Even before the tragic events of 11 September, the tenor of the epoch has been fraught. The unavoidable fact, and recognition, of the past injustices of governmental and imperial rule has been voiced loudly, most touchingly by those who have had little opportunity and few forums in which to do so. The enormous changes in industrial life have meant that whole segments of the population feel disenfranchised. And, lest we get too caught up in a parochial timeframe, those who battled in World War II remind us of how long and painful is the shadow of that war. For instance, the experience of my father, now in his eighties, reminds me of the depth of fear and grief caused by World War II. If, as I'll talk about later, shame can be seen as a gift passed down through the generations, my father's legacy

reminds me of the precariousness, and hence preciousness, of life.

On another register, within gender and cultural studies there has been—arguably—a move to a level of high abstraction that has rendered some analyses far removed from reality. Increasingly I hear the ‘so what’ question rattling in my brain. So what? Why does this or that beautiful theory matter? I’m certainly not against theoretical and conceptual thinking but equally we need to ask ourselves why this or that idea matters.

My interest in shame is positioned between and fed by these two registers. I first became fascinated with shame during the events surrounding the Reconciliation Convention in Melbourne in 1997 and the fall-out from the report, *Bringing them Home*. As a new Australian I was transfixed by the public’s reaction to the publication of what we knew—that the practices of the removal of especially ‘fair’ Aboriginals continued up into the early 1970s. Attending the Convention, I was amazed by the courage and bravado of those who turned their backs on John Howard—one of the more obvious ways of shaming someone. But I was also ashamed of my ignorance of Australian history, and perhaps also by my decision to leave my native land as if I could shed my white Canadian skin, and my family’s implication in a history of white/Indigenous Canadian relations, as easily as a snake. As I walked the streets of Sydney, and my home in Redfern, public expressions of shame were everywhere—shame was written on walls, and could be heard in the voices of the famous, and seen in the downcast glances of ordinary Australians.

I soon found myself immersed in the literature on shame. While often only fleetingly referred to, shame pops up in a vast number of disciplines. My wont to plunge into whole new fields is sometimes foolhardy, but when you get very interested in something, it quickly seems that the whole world is revealed in its light. Falling in love is a good example. As I was writing this book, a phrase echoed in my brain like a pesky tune (what the Germans call an ‘ear worm’): ‘shame in love’. It’s ambiguous; it could refer to the shame that attends being in love, or to being in love with shame. Of course, being in love offers endless

possibilities for shame. But I've also been uneasily in love with the idea of shame. It's an uneasy affair because shame is not usually thought of in a positive light. It's like falling for a seemingly reprehensible person and having to convince your friends that the loved one has hidden merits. Along the same lines, I want everyone to understand that shame is interesting and important: we cannot live without it, and nor should we try.

Shame is the most personal of feelings, but also, as many argue, may be what makes us most human. As I wrote *Blush*,⁵ moments of shame erupted. An email arrives from a respected colleague. She's angry at a newspaper column I've written. She writes: 'Loyalty? Shame? Irony?'. In front of my computer, and a hemisphere away from her, I blush. Thoughts of denial flit across my mind, but are pushed away by the visceral feeling of having done wrong. What can I say but that I'm sorry? It seems such a paltry word compared to the shame that covers me. And I don't. Or at least not immediately. I waffle in reply about how I shouldn't think out loud in print.

Another moment returns with a blush, and I am back in time. I've made a girl cry. We must have been about eight years old. I tease her about not having the same name as her mother. She starts crying and the nuns at the school chastise me. I'm ashamed, even without knowing what I've done. I couldn't have known that when her mother remarried she'd taken another man's name. The ignorance doesn't stop me from blushing. Now I feel a deeper shame at the thought of that little girl crying from the pain of her parents' divorce.

Why is it that the mere recollection of a shameful moment can cause you to blush? Distanced in years, an incident returns with intensity, and one relives that horrible feeling. As Kim Scott, the Aboriginal novelist, writes, 'bury memory deep in shame'.⁶ The shame buried in memory seems to erupt, having lost none of its sharp pain. And you blush; the only feeling that physically covers the face. In French, one blushes to the whites of the eyes, to the ears and to the roots of one's hair. The tentacles of the blush, of blood rushing to the face, attest to the inner cringe.

Blushing feels bad, and it's a reaction that cannot be faked or brought on without experiencing or remembering the feeling of shame. Shame makes us feel small, and somehow undone. It's no wonder that in most societies, shame tends not to be talked about, let alone vaunted. Other negative emotions, such as anger or rage or guilt or sadness, are regularly discussed in both popular and academic accounts. But shame only makes an appearance in discussions about pride, and then only as a shameful feeling. National pride, black pride, gay pride, and now fat pride are all projects premised on the eradication of shame. As political projects, they clearly, and often with very good reasons, denounce shame. Increasingly, there is a sense that pride is an entitlement, a state we will all achieve once we have overcome our nagging feelings of shame, and once society becomes a place where no-one shames another.

It's hard not to concur with such hopes—to aspire to live with only good and pleasurable emotions. There is nothing pleasurable about shame, but there is something immensely interesting about shame in all its expressions. Certainly, compared with guilt, shame constitutes an acute state of sensitivity. Guilt is easier to get rid of, and once dealt with is forgotten, whereas shame lingers deep within the self. It carries the uncertainty about oneself, the world is revealed anew and the skin feels raw. Shame makes us quiver. In his psychoanalytic investigation of shame, Gerhart Piers cites this remarkable passage from Hegel:

Shame does not mean to be ashamed of loving, say on account of exposing or surrendering the body ... but to be ashamed that love is not complete, that ... there [is] something inimical in oneself which keeps love from reaching completion.

Piers follows with the observation that:

Behind the feeling of shame stands not the fear of hatred, but the fear of *contempt* which, on an even deeper level of the unconscious, spells fear of *abandonment*, the death by emotional starvation.⁷

These descriptions brutally expose the significance of shame. Shame emerges as a kind of primal reaction to the proximity of

self and other. The fear of contempt and abandonment is experienced as intensely personal, but it also operates at a societal level. For many, shame is understood as 'a sickness of the self'. In Hegel's words, we hear the anguish of not loving enough, of not being lovable. For Piers, the immensity of the social comes crashing through. Shame brings the fear of abandonment by society, of being left to starve outside the boundaries of humankind. In these descriptions, it is a capacity for shame that makes us such fragile beings. They suggest that shame may provide a key to the question that is now again gaining urgency: what is it to be human?

I've fallen hard for some of the ideas about shame that I convey in my book. The compelling notion of shame's productive role I take from the American psychologist Silvan Tomkins (1911–1991). In the 1950s and 1960s, Tomkins elaborated a complex set of ideas about shame and other affects such as joy, anger, disgust and contempt. It is from Tomkins that I take the initially startling idea that interest and shame are intimately connected. Shame, he argues, 'operates only after interest or enjoyment has been activated'.⁸ Once you think about it this becomes obvious. Only something or someone that has interested you can produce a flush of shame. Someone looks at you with interest and you begin to be interested, only to realise she's looking at someone else. Or as Tomkins notes: 'one started to smile but found one was smiling at a stranger'.⁹ If you're interested in and care about the interests of others you spend much of your life blushing. Conversely, if you don't care, then attempts to shame won't move you.

Shame highlights different levels of interest. Shame puts one's self-esteem on the line, and questions our value system. The things that make me ashamed have to do with a strong interest in being a good person. What that means is normally quite nebulous, but once I've felt that hot blush I'm reminded of what it is that I hold dear—not hurting people unnecessarily, being generous in my ideas and care for others, and so on. My list will be different from yours. What shames me may not shame you. But whatever it is that shames you will be something important, an essential part of yourself.

What makes shame remarkable is that it reveals with precision our values, hopes and aspirations, beyond the generalities of good manners and cultural norms. For instance, sexuality is widely held as an area ripe for shame. But it's not a site of shame, or not the same site of shame, for everyone. I don't think I've ever been shamed for not being a heterosexual, but I have been shamed for not being a good homosexual. In other words, banal things that are supposed to make us ashamed quite often don't. And those things that do make us ashamed reveal deep worries and concerns for us as individuals and as a society. Again, interest is the key to understanding shame, and shame reminds us with urgency of what we are interested in. Shame reminds us about the promises we keep to ourselves.

Interest involves a desire for connection. At a basic level, it has to do with our longing for communication, touch, lines of entanglement and reciprocity. Consider this passage from Tomkins:

If you like to be kissed and I like to kiss you, we may enjoy each other. If you like to be sucked and bitten and I like to suck or bite you, we may enjoy each other. If you like to have your skin rubbed and I like to do this to you, we can enjoy each other. If you enjoy being hugged and I like to hug you, it can be mutually enjoyable ... If you enjoy communicating your experiences and ideas and aspirations and I enjoy being informed about the experiences, ideas and aspirations of others, we can enjoy each other.¹⁰

The cadence of the writing bathes the reader in a warm bath of love reciprocated. At the same time, it conjures up the terror of love and interest not being mutual. The wording captures the knife-edge of falling in love: 'we *can* enjoy each other' jostles with 'we *may* enjoy each other'. Interest is always hedged by the conditional 'if'. That 'if' contains the seeds for shame. Tomkins follows with a description that speaks of what happens when interest falters:

[Y]ou may crave much body contact and silent communion and I wish to talk. You wish to stare deeply into my eyes, but I achieve intimacy only in the dark in sexual embrace. You wish to be fed

and cared for, and I wish to exhibit myself and be looked at. You wish to be hugged and to have your skin rubbed, and I wish to reveal myself only by discussing my philosophy of life ... You wish to communicate your most personal feelings about me, but I can achieve social intimacy only through a commonly shared opinion about the merits of something quite impersonal, such as a particular theory or branch of knowledge or an automobile.¹¹

The acuity of this description is painful as Tomkins describes how shame can only appear once interest and enjoyment have been felt, and when they have been ripped from you. At that moment the sheer disappointment of loss translates into shame that attacks your sense of self: the entrails of who you thought you were suddenly displayed for all to judge. In Tomkins' description:

The innate activator of shame is the incomplete reduction of interest or joy. Hence any barrier to further exploration which partially reduces interest ... will activate the lowering of the head and the eyes in shame and reduce further exploration or self-exposure.¹²

Tomkins' insistence that shame flags 'the incomplete reduction of interest and joy' is a crucial insight that propels my own argument. It describes shame as an ambiguous state of feeling, emotion and affect. It gestures to shame as the fine line or border between moving forward into more interest or falling back into humiliation.

While some will find that the ideas I cite resonate deeply, others might find it hard to fathom why shame should be considered productive. On a basic level, shame always produces effects—small and large, individual and collective. Shame demands to be acknowledged. As we blush, we are made visible at the very moment we want to cover our faces and hide. But, equally, shame compels an involuntary and immediate reassessment of ourselves: why am I ashamed? Why did I say or do that? Can I rectify the actions which have either brought shame upon myself or caused someone else's shame? Shame in this way is positive in its self-evaluative role; it can even be self-transforming. This is only possible, however, where shame is acknowledged. Denying or

eradicating shame, whether by an individual or a community, seems futile to me. It is also a waste of an important resource in thinking about what it means to be part of human society, and what we want that society to be.

That shame is seen as deeply shameful has important implications for what we, as individuals and as a collectivity, can do with shame. My argument seeks to investigate why it is considered shaming to admit to shame. After all, people freely admit to other negative affects, such as anger. Compared to anger, which can lead to violence, admitting shame is much more likely to spur consideration of why one feels ashamed. Shame, it is argued, can entail self-evaluation and transformation. To consider shame is not to wallow in self-pity, nor in the resentment that accompanies guilt. It is to recognise that the reduction of interest that prompts shame is always incomplete. As such, shame promises a return of interest, joy and connection. This is why shame matters to individuals. And it is why studies of shame are important. This is also why it is so important that shame be talked about openly in our society.

Different disciplines have thought about shame in different ways. On the more scientific side of psychology, shame tells us something about how our bodies dictate what we feel. In anthropology and sociology, studies of shame provide fascinating glimpses into quite different ways of managing social life. I think that we need to be more open to ideas that seem to be beyond our intellectual comfort zone.

Across my career I've experimented with different academic styles. Increasingly all I want to do is to tell stories, sometimes my own, and sometimes those of others. The emphasis on narrative is important when you're dealing with new ideas and new ways of being. With something as sensitive as shame, it's foolhardy to weigh in with ready-made theories or pronouncements. So I try not to. My stories are told in the spirit of experimentation: wouldn't it be interesting if we could all talk about shame in more productive ways?

My research on shame also extends a rich tradition of feminist

research on embodiment, which has preoccupied me for years. In this, I have been inspired by the philosophical approaches of Moira Gatens and an important strain of Australian feminism on corporeality. The deep-rooted mind/body split in our culture continues to reverberate. Over the years many feminists argued for a cultural conception of the body and a critique of biologism. Given how often women are subsumed in the body and how a cultural dismissal of the body has allowed for certain forms of discrimination, the attack on biology was necessary. However shame has renewed and redirected my interest in the body and more precisely in the physiological. Shame experienced in the cringing blush reminds us that we experience a multitude of sensations and receive so much more information from the body than our continuing emphasis on cognition can allow for.

For instance, in my book, *Blush*, I narrate a moment of shame I felt when I first experienced the awesome power of Uluru. Coming across the sight of that monument of nature and of Australian Aboriginal culture, I was physically struck by a variant of shame I call the shame of being out-of-place. This is the feeling the body registers in social and cultural contexts when it doesn't belong. When you feel like a fish out of water, your body reacts in shame. I draw on the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's thoughts about habitus—a term he uses to describe how we embody history. The body is a repository for the social and cultural rules that, consciously or not, we take on. Our bodies can also tell us when we have stumbled into other people's history, culture and beliefs of which we are ignorant. Through my own story and those of others, I explore how the shame of being out-of-place can ignite a desire for connection. In the Australian context, that desire is called Reconciliation. It is an inspiration for modes of co-existence between non-Indigenous and Indigenous that can only succeed if we acknowledge different types of shame and interest.

Shame always moves from the individual body into the body politic. While shaming people is a powerful and potentially destructive and violent way to patrol the borders of normality, in

some societies it has been used to good effect to manage anti-social behavior. It all depends on the structure of the society and how it uses shaming. John Braithwaite,¹³ who has made shaming an important topic within criminology, bases his theory on a Maori tradition of shaming members of a community who break its rules. His ideas about reintegrative shaming have influenced policy in several contexts. Some of these are questionable—does shaming as a tactic for punishment and deterrence work in a western context where community bonds are not the norm and there is often little desire to be reintegrated into a community? These questions demand precise and grounded studies which are beyond the scope of this talk. However, Braithwaite's ideas spark off thoughts about forms of shaming: who is shamed and who is the shamer. I use them to consider how in popular perception feminism has taken the moral high ground in order to shame men, and sometimes women. It's a rough critique, but I stand by the argument that any politics not interested in those it sees as outside its ken will ultimately fail to interest and engage.

I've also used shame to mine what psychoanalysts call 'ancestral shame'. I mentioned earlier the idea that shame can be gifted down through the generations, which came from my thinking about the shame that has shadowed my family as we traipsed across various British colonies. Years ago I came across a poem written by my grandmother, Elspeth Honeyman-Clarke. My grandfather was an engineer who was busily paving over the land and sometimes the cultures of the Indigenous people in northern British Columbia, and she wrote and published her poems while living in tipis and educating my uncle and mother. The poem in question is called 'Half breed' and as you can imagine I was shocked and experienced a sort of vicarious familial shame. However, as I read and researched shame, I became interested in how the individual and the historical can be rethought. When very different people and ideas are brought together, sometimes in violence, and less often in affection, powerful emotions are produced. In my grandmother's poem I found types of shame that might be used to produce an intimate history of shame.

Along with red hair, I think that I inherited from her a sensitivity to shame and a desire to explore its effects. I certainly got her itch to write.

The last point that I'll raise has to do with my interest in writing, in genres and in learning to write well. I've come to think of this within the rubric of 'writing shame', and the possibility of a shame-based ethics of writing. My argument is that a form of shame always attends the writer. Primarily it is the shame of not being equal to the interest of one's subject. Thinking about writers as diverse as Stephen King, Gilles Deleuze and Primo Levi, I realised the different ways they tell us about the seriousness of writing, how writing shame radically rearranges bodies, and the precision and passion that constitutes honest writing. As I mentioned earlier, it seems to me that sometimes cultural theory gets carried away, forgetting that theories and theoretical writing are of interest for what they can do, what they let us understand, and what they make us question.

I realise that I've travelled quite quickly and in insufficient detail across a number of concerns. But that is probably what has marked my career. Its positive side is that it allows me to continually question a number of preoccupations—such as subjectivity, feelings, the body and writing—from a number of angles: always asking, I wonder what it would look like from here, or from there.

I feel immensely fortunate in my chosen career. Sure, there are annoying aspects of our jobs, but really how lucky can one get to be able to read and think widely, to have students and colleagues with whom to discuss ideas. And then to cap it all off, one has occasions like this. So my thanks to you all for coming to listen to me ramble across my life and career.

Notes

- 1 My thanks to the wonderful crowd of friends and colleagues who came, to Angus Martin, Elizabeth Webby and Catharine Lumby.
- 2 *Sexing the Self: Gendered Positions in Cultural Studies*, London and New York, 1993.

- 3 *Outside Belongings*, New York and London, 1996.
- 4 *Carnal Appetites: FoodSexIdentity*, New York and London, 2000.
- 5 *Blush: Faces of Shame*, Minneapolis and Sydney, 2005.
- 6 Kim Scott, *Benang: from the heart*, South Fremantle, Western Australia, 1999, p.31.
- 7 Gerhart Piers, 'Shame and Guilt: Part I', in G. Piers and M. B. Singer, eds, *Shame and Guilt: A Psychoanalytic Study*, Springfield, Illinois, 1953, p.16.
- 8 Cited in Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank, 'Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins', in Sedgwick and Frank, eds, *Shame and its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, Durham, 1995, p.5.
- 9 Sedgwick and Frank, p.4.
- 10 Sedgwick and Frank, p.4.
- 11 Sedgwick and Frank, p.4.
- 12 Sedgwick and Frank, p.5.
- 13 John Braithwaite, *Crime, Shame and Reintegration*, Cambridge, 1989.