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Shame and its consequences: mapping shame through the body after a traumatic rupture.

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I remember for weeks after the event how the affect leaked out of me, the shame that took hold and the silence thereafter. Harboured within the shame was the belief that I should be able to inhale it all, take it in and slowly exhale each particle of the trauma, each smoky toxic part of the memory, little by little, so as not to add to the larger drama that was unfolding (Walker, 2017).

Shame takes hold where words fail, where the difference between self and non-self exists. For this presentation I will trace the trajectory of shame through the body after a traumatic rupture, expanding upon my PhD research, which explored the tension between remembering and forgetting when recalling a traumatic event. My thesis was an auto-ethnographic unravelling of a traumatic memory to describe, understand and answer questions about the 'trauma body.' In it, I developed the idea of traumatic memories as detached memories with an emotional resonance that fixes them historically in a specific place and time, unwieldy anchors for a body that is neither here (*present*), nor there (*in the past*).

The 'gap' between trauma and its representation provides fertile ground for shame to take hold. Cloaked in secrecy and separation, we shield our shameful selves away from the prying gaze of the other, occupying an in-between or liminal space that calls out for a language of forgiveness, understanding and at times atonement. Kristeva describes, "The shame of compromise, of being in the middle of treachery. The fascinated start that leads me toward and separates me from them" (1982:2). Ruth Leys writes of the significance of guilt's replacement by shame. I am interested in exploring how shame moves close to and then retreats from trauma, its location—in and out of the body (i.e. the inter-relational space) and the relationship between shame and guilt.

Mapping Shame:

Shhh!

Shame. It lives in secrecy.

In Victoria Burrus's words:

Merely to write the words 'my shame' is to perform a subtly transgressive act, albeit one already native to writing itself. What, the reader may wonder, with an impending sense of vicarious shame, is the author about to reveal? (2008, p. iv)

To understand shame, to map it across the body, it was necessary to press up close to my own. To the wound that has been carved out on the inside disrupting my functioning, moving, expanding self. I learnt shame from my ancestors—both sides of the family. Steeped in Irish Catholicism shame simultaneously threatened and stood guard. I learnt it from the unspoken narratives that pervade our culture, the loathing of flesh and the shaming of the body, particularly the sexual body. (To quote Burrus again) A "transcendence that produces the flesh in and through shame, inscribing it as a matter of shame—the shame of matter itself" (2008, p. xi).

For Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, the unspoken can rule an entire family's history, repressed secrets passed from one generation to the next, unmentionable words "encrypted" as unprocessed and traumatic information that eventually give sustenance to a transgenerational phantom (1993). For Elspeth Probyn like Laplanche before her, shame can be passed down through generations as "enigmatic signifiers"—these can be verbal, non-verbal and even behavioural. Here, *affect* is the bodily representative of trauma charged with unconscious sexual significations (Laplanche, 1999, p. 126)¹. For the child, these enigmatic messages present an impossible task of mastery, integration and symbolisation, creating a field of trauma, a resting place of shame.

Sylvan Tomkins described shame very differently. Shame happens when good feelings are interrupted or reduced but not stopped completely. For him, the evolutionary purpose of shame defines the boundaries of positive pursuits. Ubiquitous and inevitable, it takes hold whenever a positive affect shows up. When worded differently:

¹ "For Laplanche the scene of primal seduction describes 'a fundamental situation in which an adult proffers to a child, verbal, non-verbal and even behavioural signifiers which are pregnant with unconscious sexual significations' (Martin, 2015, p.17). "Any gesture, any mimicry functions as a signifier. These originary, traumatic signifiers I propose to call 'enigmatic signifiers. These signifiers are not enigmatic by virtue of the simple fact that the infant does not know the code, which he or she would need to learn. We are well aware of the fact that the infant begins inhabiting verbal language without being provided with a code in advance, in the same way, that one learns a foreign language by simple everyday usage. That is not the point. What is crucial is the fact that the adult world is entirely infiltrated with unconscious and sexual significations to which adults themselves do not have the code." (Laplanche 1999, pp. 126-127)

shame shows up when we care intensely about something. For example, I care about how I am being received, the quality of this content, the sound of my voice, and thus, I am primed for shame. If the critical other disrupts this carefully proffered presentation I might feel shy, bashful, inhibited, embarrassed, humbled, humiliated, chagrined, disgraced, dishonoured, or even mortified. There are, as Tomkins puts it "a pluralism of shames" (2008, p. 389). On top of which shame produces yet more shame, more feeling, affect, reactions, relations, and other types of relatedness.

In response to the critical gaze of the other or as importantly the perceived critical gaze, my body will initially bear its claustrophobic weight. Under the humiliating glare as s/he looks at me with a sneering curl of the lip, or a tightly held rebuke my skin will flare into a bright pink blush, I will turn my body away, curl in on myself, lower my gaze and hide my face. The world will expand around me as I get smaller and smaller and the sounds, unbearably loud at the beginning will then fade to the whirling of blood in my ears, until all I can hear, and smell are the workings of my body. The only recourse will be to flee—retreat to the darkest of corners. There, I will feel ashamed for expressing shame in my bodily responses to the other's gaze, ashamed for a litany of things reaching all the way back to childhood and beyond. Shame, the great inhibitor, suppresses and intensifies the *affects* to which it binds. A doubled experience that involves both the self and the imagined or real witness, occupying the intrapsychic and the intersubjective.

Shame is also contagious—'sticky.'

Deleuze's description of the movement of bodies in relation to each other is useful here: "a body affects other bodies, or is affected by other bodies; it is this capacity for affecting and being affected that also defines a body in its individuality" (1988, p.123). So, in response, you the critical one, whether you wanted to shame consciously or subconsciously, will assume the stance of self-righteous indignation to protect yourself from revealing your own shame, from connecting to your deep and hidden wounds.

The *trauma-body* and the 'gap' between trauma and its representation:

And so, to the *trauma-body*, the body of affective *in-betweenness*, neither here (*present*), nor there (*in the past*). Brian Massumi describes a body turned inside out:

Brain and skin form a resonating vessel. Stimulation turns inward, is folded into the body, except that there is no inside for it to be in, because the body is radically open, absorbing impulses quicker than they can be perceived, and because the entire vibratory event is unconscious, out of mind. (1995: 89)

The *trauma-body* is the body in crisis caught up in uncertainty where any notion of safety is disrupted, any organised existence made precarious, a body teetering on the

edge haunted by the past. Where, "Everything hangs in the off-balance of the instant. The nature and duration of the agitation formatively filling the instant inflects what follows." "It is the embodied event of a life re-gathering in recoil" (Massumi, 2010: 4).

Here, trauma is an experience borne by the act of leaving, wherein the mind's coping mechanism overwhelmed by shocking external events fractures or splits. In *Unclaimed Experience, Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth writes about the impact of the traumatic event lying precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located in time and space (1996, p. 7). For Lacanian psychoanalysts, Francoise Davoine and Jean-Max Gaudilliere, it is a dissociate truth, an un-thought known (2004, p. 47), in which the subject's relationship to the history was not so much censored as erased leaving only a trace in the field or the psyche to facilitate a return to the past, a foothold back into the story that has been reduced to *nothing*.

From a modernist perspective, trauma points to an occurrence that both demands representation and yet refuses to be represented (Roth, 2012, p. 93). The intensity of the experience makes it difficult to remember, impossible to forget, and any form of recollection inadequate. Hal Foster argues: "the real cannot be represented; indeed, it is denied as such, as the negative of the symbolic, a missed encounter, a lost object" (1996, p.141). While Caruth insists on a traumatic narrative that must be spoken in a language of disruption and fragmentation. Caught in such a dichotomy the *trauma-body* perceives danger everywhere: "indiscriminate, coming anywhere, as out of nowhere, at any time" (Massumi, 2015, p. 22).

When a body kicks into a traumatic response to a perceived danger it activates mammalian defence action systems in which the brain's limbic system sets the HPA (Hypothalamic- pituitary- adrenal) axis in motion, releasing hormones to ready itself for defensive action. The hypothalamus activates the sympathetic branch (SNS) of the autonomic nervous system (ANS) provoking it into a state of heightened arousal. Epinephrine and norepinephrine are released, respiration and heart rate quicken, the skin pales, the blood flows away from the surface to the muscles and the body prepares for fight, flight, freeze or submission (collapse). The reptilian part of the brain takes over to ensure the survival of the species, conscious choice is no longer an option—behaviour and movement become instinctual. All defensive strategies are programmed into this primitive and highly effective part of the brain and when faced with survival the higher processing brain becomes less activated, behaviour becomes regressive and we hook into our evolutionary heritage of dealing with threat. Our endocrine systems, our nervous systems, our muscles reach back and pull on thousands of years of survival directing our bodies into an automated response (Walker, 2013).

My experience with post-traumatic stress (PTS) was temporarily lived and slowly resolved with support over a matter of months. The background details are irrelevant. In those initial hours of trauma, I lost the capacity to make informed choices. Functioning purely on adrenaline, with no option of freezing I went straight into fight and flight. My ability to decipher a cogent understanding of what was happening around me was severely impaired. I lived entirely in the somatic realm. Sucked into a black hole the event horizon became my only focus. I did not experience a blackout or amnesia of any kind, rather I could remember every detail of the transformation, during and after. I was clear, precise, and concise but there was no rational thought as such and no awareness of time. Through tunnel vision my goal was to flee the situation, I was under attack, I did not know who by or where the threat was coming from. I cut through my surroundings and focused only on escape. My senses were acute, heightened, I could hear the tiniest and the biggest of sounds, could smell the faintest of scents in the wind as I ran barefoot at incredible speed over cobbles, thorns, stones, it didn't matter, I did not feel pain, the aim was to get as far away from the scene as quickly as possible, after which I hid in the bushes, manically scooped out the earth and crouched down into the hole like an animal, and waited.

From guilt to shame:

This experience itself was not challenging, I had very little control or ability to regulate the affect as it was happening, this would seem to support the non-cognitive theoretical approach to traumatic affect associated with the work of Tomkins, and other affect theorists (Sedgwick, Massumi et al). It was the aftermath. I was ashamed of my complete disintegration, my lack of ability to organise my thoughts. I was ashamed at what I perceived as losing control. In: *From Guilt to Shame, Auschwitz and After* (2007), Ruth Leys tracks the general shift in recent years from guilt to shame, disagreeing with affect-theorists' disregard of psychoanalytical accounts of affect and repression, and their "belief that the affects are fundamentally independent of intention and meaning because they are material processes of the body" (2010, p.673). In her discussion of the mimetic verses the anti-mimetic she argues: "Instead of positing a traumatic-mimetic breaching of the boundaries between self and other, the anti-mimetic model enforced a rigid dichotomy between the internal and external such that violence was imagined as assaulting the subject entirely from the outside" (2007, p. 182). Such a polarised ideological position denigrates the complexity of the *trauma-body* and forecloses discussions into an either-or scenario. I would suggest that it is neither one nor the other but both, and in the tension between the two concepts (mimetic and anti-mimetic) there exists the pervasive and destructive oscillation between shame, humiliation and guilt.

If, as Kauffman suggests "psychological theorists as well as practitioners have found it both easier and safer to explore "guilty" impulses rather than a "shameful" self" (1989, 4), then Ley's focus on the transition from guilt to shame could be perceived as a willingness to address and attend to the pain of shame. For Leys, guilt concerns one's actions, what you do, or what you fantasise you should have done in a traumatic situation; shame, on the other hand, is held to concern, not your actions but who you are in all your differentness from others (2010, p. 674). (As she writes...) "In other words, what has happened in the shift from guilt to shame is the replacement of the idea of the meaning of a person's intentions and actions, which have informed theories of guilt, by the idea of the primacy of a person's affective (shameful) experience, or, as I put it, the idea of personal differences" (Leys, 2010, p.675). But this fails in its simplification. Often shame and guilt are intertwined, one consumed by the other. For example, I feel guilty for doing nothing, I am ashamed by my behaviour; I feel guilty for surviving, I feel shame about what I did to survive.

The events that triggered my traumatic episode were an accumulation of stressors that flooded my nervous system which eventually gave way. At the point of breaking there were no flashbacks of past events, there was no abreaction, there was only survival. I am a relatively balanced, functioning human being, who admittedly has lived through some stressful situations outside of the norm, nevertheless I was ill-prepared for this experience, and once the affect had *left* my body I was intrigued by the level at which the reptilian hemisphere of the brain had stepped into being, or taken over my being.

After the trauma did I return to the person I was before that episode? The answer would have to be no. My system took weeks to calm down, just 1-week later I had walled myself with my bedding into a closet in the house. I look back at that time as if it was not me and in-a-way, it wasn't, not the me that has the intellectual capacity to reason, to understand and negotiate. There was a rupture, a schism that opened and with it the realisation of a part of myself that I had thought non-existent, an aspect of my person that came alive, which absented another part of me and transformed me into a being I did not recognise then and find difficult to recognise looking back. The awakening of that wholly separate self and the knowledge of its existence prevents a return to any former self. In *Ontology of an Accident* (2012), Catherine Malabou writes:

Plasticity thus refers to the possibility of being transformed without being destroyed; it characterizes the entire strategy of modification that seeks to avoid the threat of destruction (p. 44).

Julia Kristeva discusses shame in, *The Powers of Horror* (1982). "The shame of compromise, of being in the middle of treachery. The fascinated start that leads me toward and separates me from them" (p.2). Shame and the abject are closely

interwoven. Throughout her essay, Kristeva repeatedly posits a connection between abjection and the border where abjection is that which disturbs identity, system and order. The abject does not respect borders, positions or rules. *It* is outside of, literally what is thrown away or discarded. Abjection is ambiguity arising from the impact of a rupture. The abject is neither subject nor object, inside or outside, neither here nor there, rather it is “immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles” (p. 4), “what is abject,” she writes, “draws me toward the place where meaning collapses” (p. 2). For Žižek, there is another way to deal with the abject, “to enact a split between abjectal objects or acts and the symbolic ritualisation meant to cleanse us from defilement, i.e., to keep the two apart, as if there is no shared space where they may encounter each other since the abject (filth) in its actuality is simply foreclosed from the symbolic” (2015, p.33). This would seem a far too easy solution with many repercussions: the compromise of scapegoating, excluding, ostracising or compartmentalisation. If shame comes from the inside, crosses the threshold, the border, my skin and amplifies to meet the outside, as Kristeva then asks: “Where then lies the border, the initial phantasmatic limit that establishes the clean and proper self of the speaking and/or social being?” (1984, p. 85).

Interestingly Steven Connor aligns shame with ecstasy, his reasoning:

In truth, shame is an 'outing'. This is why the experience of shame is ecstatic, for in shame as in ecstasy, one is suddenly beside or without oneself. The meaning of shame is that I suddenly am to have no innerness any more, that I am all-in-all the me that is exposed to another's gaze (2000, p. 6).

Easy to express from the place of one not actively steeped in shameful feelings, of one who is writing and voicing what it is about shame that disturbs. When I am shamed, despite the exposure, the incriminating gaze of the other I am intensely aware of myself, my body, my humanity. Which leads me to ask: Through writing and talking about shame— does it leave my body and therefore do I *shame* less? And in so doing do I become more, or less aware of my human limits, the edges of the inter-relational space? As I dangerously push up against the other through the emptying out of my shame will my anguish lessen in being so close, or increase? Shame is a border. Despite it being open to the other's gaze, it is still my edge and therefore necessary. My experiences aren't objects, they're me, they're what I am made of. To return to Massumi: "We are our situations; we are our moving through them. We are our participation—not some abstract entity that is somehow outside looking in at it all" (2002, p.11).

In *Writing Shame*, Probyn describes the writing of the shame-body as one filled with feeling, taking its toll on both the writer and the reader altering one's understanding of the self and one's relationship to history, “...shame is a painful thing to write about. It

gets into your body. It gets to you” (2010, p.89). For Deleuze, the writer does more than convey shameful moments. The body of the writer becomes the battleground where ideas, experiences and feelings collide, an essential journey to generate new perceptions, new ways of living (1997, p. 225).

So, I arrive at shame being essentially of the body, the *self-becoming-body*. Shame cannot be conceived of as an external object that could be dispassionately described, nor is it a purely personal feeling. It takes hold where words fail, in the differences between self and non-self, in the liminal place of separation and disconnect. As I confront my shame I become acutely aware of the place of intersubjectivity. In the dance of shame, I am alerted not only to transgression but to any affront to human dignity, mine and others. Shame both enlarges and reduces me. I would say, it is essential to being human. I do not deny the destructive potential of shame, especially when so closely aligned with trauma, but it can also be a source of courage and humility, and through transformation can open to compassion and grace.

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