Shame Within/Without Disabled Peoples:
Re-imagining Representations
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This critical endeavor stems from my own experience. It attempts to politicize the formation of my personal identity, the struggles I have experienced in relation to the ongoing cultivation of my way of being, and a re-learning of how to love myself. The aim of this project is to think differently and critically about disabled subjectivity and the experience of ableism through articulations of shame and notions of belonging. This paper calls into question the dominant conception of shame as an emotion that is located within an individual disabled subject. I will explore how the internalization of shame can be likened but not paralleled to processes of psychic colonization, which transfer the ideologies of the dominant into the psyche of the oppressed. This concept, in connection with analysis of how shame operates on the individual level and organizes disabled life, illuminates why disability represented as shameful is an integral part of systemic hierarchies of power and disciplinary mechanisms that maintain the oppressive status quo. In order to imagine disability and its representation differently, this paper applies Ahmed’s concept of affective economies of hate, to shame and disability. Ahmed’s contribution allows us to come to a new understanding of shame as located outside the disabled subject. This alternative reading ruptures the dominant understanding of shame as an emotion, and creates a space for examining alternative representations of disability that challenge the common acceptance of the idea of disability as shameful. Finally, I will argue that shame and pride are real human experiences. Works that examine the nuanced nature of human emotionality are necessary in order to reconsider the value of subjugated knowledges, create the possibility for representing disability differently, and offer space for redressing the role and function of shame and pride in individuals and throughout society.

The dominant representation of disability as shameful promotes the idea of disability as individually located, producing the internal feeling of shame that exerts control over the thoughts and behaviours of all people (Brown, 2010). My interest lies in how it affects those who identify or are labeled as disabled or mad. It is first necessary to understand the dominant conception of how shame operates as an emotion. Through examining the operation of shame, the social and cultural ideologies that motivate its use as a tool of oppression become apparent. Shame is revealed to be dangerous and corrosive to the need to feel love, belonging and connection. Shame is often referred to as the “master emotion” (Brown, 2010, p.40) in the fields of psychoanalysis and sociology, because of the profound and negative material and emotional consequences of this experience and psychic state. Shameful representations reiterate narratives about disabled peoples as degenerate, flawed, and undesirable. Shame is produced in the disabled or mad person, and bodies and minds can become perceived as embodiments of shame through the acceptance of these dominant ideals. The concept of shame in this context suggests emotional experiences of relational inferiority, undesirability, insufficiency or malformation of one’s being. In this vein, shame perpetuates thoughts that re-inscribe self-loathing messages as they repeatedly say, “I am bad.” (Brown, 2010, p.41) Shame is distinguished from the feeling of guilt, as it does not regard the morality of a particular action or the event in which “I have done something bad” (Brown, 2010, p.41) but instead it relates to ones very being. Guilt can sometimes become motivation, whereas shame becomes internalized as a perpetual obstruction that falsely insists that the self is fixed inescapably in an inherent state of moral wrongness (Brown, 2010). In this way the feeling of shame as internally located, supports the dominant assertion that the ‘problem’ of disability is located within.

Shame is known to lead to self-destructive behaviours in the varying forms of addiction, violence, aggression, and thrives by remaining unspoken and unacknowledged (Brown, 2010). Shame corrodes the part of ourselves that believes we are ‘good enough’ and wrestles its captives into submission and stagnation, unable to see flexibility or fluidity in their identity outside the space of seeming deficiency, lack and hopelessness (Brown, 2010, p. 42). As shame takes grip, particularly over the minds and bodies of people who identify or are taught to identify as disabled or mad, the effects of the emotional turmoil described above are endless, but doubtlessly harmful, destructive, and cyclical (Brown, 2010). Shame therefore helps maintain an internally regulated experience of inferiority in the person who fears that their differences will lead to continued abandonment and isolation; shame regulates understandings of normalcy; shame contributes in making meaning of bodies and minds that defines them as problems, flaws, and mistakes or malformation that must be
overcome, hidden or discarded in order to access the *privilege* of feeling loved and loveable.

Shame is heavily involved in compelling into consciousness the idea that disability and madness are produced and provoked in the individual, and contributes in strengthening the pervasive understanding of disability as an individual problem, thus disguising the social location of disability’s construction. Constant bombardment of shaming representations aid in the internalization of shame, and behavioural and thought patterns can become organized and controlled, however consciously or not, by this guiding principle. As an emotion, shame leads to and reinforces the internalization of self-hatred and self-loathing that spawns a phenomenon of self-surveillance. Motivated in part by the fear of being outwardly shamed, subjects pursue modification, suppression, treatment or medication of their thoughts and behaviour (Brown, 2010). The embodiment of shame then becomes a control mechanism compelling its subject to attempt to self-correct, conform, self-modify and self-negate. Consequently, this disciplinary mechanism becomes a profoundly manipulating form of psychic colonization that makes commodities of pride and shame in order to coerce and control the disabled subjects self-perception, sense of individual value, and awareness of their status within social space. According to Foucault (1980), power circulates through individuals as vehicles, and thus persons are simultaneously elements of the articulation of power, and resisting and consenting actors (Foucault, 98).

Examining shame as psychic colonization and a disciplinary mechanism reveals how disabled peoples become part and parcel of the oppressive system that organizes their lives.

The psychic colonization that I refer to is made possible because shame is a relational concept requiring an interaction between the able body/mind and it’s others, although this fact is often hidden. It is also made possible because the emotional experience or embodiment of shame, once internalized, stands independently in absence of an external person doing the shaming. In this way, its relational quality becomes lost as it is rendered into a seemingly inherent characteristic of disabled or mad peoples. The ‘shamer’ does not need to be engaged in an explicit act of shaming because of the internalized sense of worthlessness instilled in the disabled person. The individual becomes seen as the original source of shame, locating the emotion individually rather than as the result of social conditioning and interpersonal experiences. Being full of shame, fearing shame, and experiencing its power creates disconnection and desperate feelings of being unlovable, thwarting any attempt to determine one’s own worth (Brown, 2010, p. 41). The disappearing act of the agent or social construction that creates shame through continual acts of shaming, and constant shameful representation of disabled people can be compared to a psychic colonization of the mind in a similar manner to the process described by Fanon (2008) in regards to the experience of blackness.

In *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon (2008) delves into the creation of an alienated and disconnected sense of self that loathes its very being because of the inescapable (socially constructed) corporeal reality that casts blackness as inferiority. This disconnected self searches for salvation from this state through the imitation and adaptation of the supposed superiority of whiteness. Fanon (2008) further details how the being of the black man is relational “For not only must the black man be black, but he must be black in relation to the white man” (p. 90). The colonially entrenched racism, which is aimed at the delineation of exploitable bodies to serve capitalist and imperial expansion, constructs an ‘inferiority complex’ attributed to blackness that is often considered inherent in the being of the black man, and not an ascription proclaimed by superior powers (Fanon, 2008, p. 75). The burden of this imposition leads to attempts to ‘whiten’ by any means possible, a cycle that reaffirms the dominant’s social position, and represents an acceptance and internalization of colonial racial schemas and accomplishes the task of making the oppressed into their own oppressor (Fanon, 2008, p. 91). The goals of ascending to whiteness however, is an impossibility so long as colonial racism and white supremacy continue to dominate the global order (Fanon, 2008).

The self-professed superior able body/mind constructs the attribution of shame to inferior subjects, and this is often forgotten. Shame’s significance as a colonial psychic manipulation lies in the manner in which it motivates, supports, and enables continued exploitation of disabled people through medicalisation, as well as through the commodification of shame and pride that negotiates and determines a person’s value within a capitalist and neoliberal framework. Therefore, as a form of psychic colonization, shame is a tool for cementing social hierarchies and relies on attachments to ideologies of both compulsory able bodiedness as well as neoliberal capitalism (Kolarova, 2013) that continues the dominance of colonial oppressors and their claim to able body/mind-white–heterosexual superiority. The disabled person, motivated
by shame, becomes their own oppressor as they internalize the message and undertake attempts at the impossible: to achieve normalcy - a fallacious concept in itself, but also an impossibility so long as ableism and capitalist ideals about worth, value and productivity reign. But how can we break the cycle that perpetuates subordination and subjection of disabled bodies and minds, as well as challenge the broader hierarchical stratification of racialized and disabled lives? I contend that one method is through a re-imagining of shame, and reconfiguration of its location and function, as well as a more nuanced and complicated interpretation of its relation to pride and its role in all our lives.

A re-imagining of shame can be accomplished by applying Ahmed’s (2004) work on affective economies of hate, that allows for an understanding of shame as part of a dynamic structuring social process. According to Ahmed (2004), emotions move between bodies and play a crucial role in the boundaries that delineate between an individual and a collective body. This perspective contends that emotions are not a personal matter, nor are they simply from within or without, but are circulating between bodies, constituting the boundaries between individuals, collectivities, and their respective worlds (Ahmed, 2004, p.117). By examining how a particular piece of text employs emotions in particular roles, it is possible to discern how hate and love are crucial in delineating subjects from the dominant body of the acceptable citizen (Ahmed, 2004).

The letter below allows for an adaptation of Ahmed’s theory in relation to the study of shame in disability. The presence of the other, in this case the child with autism, functions as the imagined threat to the object of love (Ahmed, 2004). It is against the delineated boundary of dominant conceptions of ableism and normality that the object of love (the image of perfection and able-mindedness) is perceived as threatened by the other (Ahmed, 2004). In Ahmed’s (2004) words: “It is the emotional reading of hate that works to bind the imagined white subject and nation together” (p.118). In the example below it is the emotional reading of hate, and the deployment of shame that binds the imagined able-bodied and acceptable citizen, neighbour, or parents together:

To the lady living at this address:

I also live in this neighborhood and have a problem!!!! You have a kid that is mentally handicapped and you consciously decided that it would be a good idea to live in a close proximity neighborhood like this?? You selfishly put your kid outside everyday and let him be nothing but a nuisance and a problem to everyone else with that noise polluting whaling he constantly makes!!! That noise he makes when he is outside is DREADFUL!!!!!!!! It scares the hell out of my normal children!!!!!! When you feel your idiot kid needs fresh air, take him to our park you dope!!! We have a nature trail!! Let him run around those places and make noise !!!!! Crying babies, music and even barking dogs are normal sounds in a residential neighborhood!!!!! He is NOT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

He is a hindrance to everyone and will always be that way!!!! Who the hell is going to care for him?????? No employer will hire him, no normal girl is going to marry/love him and you are not going to live forever!! Personally, they should take whatever non retarded body parts he possesses and donate it to science. What the hell else good is he to anyone!!! You had a retarded kid, deal with it…properly!!!! What right do you have to do this to hard working people!!!!!!! I HATE people like you who believe, just because you have a special needs kid, you are entitled to special treatment!!! GOD!!!!!!

Do everyone in our community huge a favor and MOVE!!!! VAMOSE!!!! SCRAM!!!! Move away and get out of this type of neighborhood setting!!! Go live in a trailer in the woods or something with your wild animal kid!!! Nobody wants you living here and they don’t have the guts to tell you!!!!!

Do the right thing and move or euthanize him!!! Either way we are ALL better off!!!

Sincerely,

One pissed off mother!!!!! (Daily Mail Reporter, 2013, para.11)

The mobilizing of hate creates a collective body. The recognition of the disabled mind/body, supposedly explains a unified and shared “visceral response of hate” (Ahmed, 2004, p.118). In the letter from One pissed off mother!!!!!, her justifications and motivations reflect a sense of communal consensus that the presence of the child with autism represents a threat to the entire neighbourhood. In this act, the role of emotions delineates who is hated, and who is united because they hate together (Ahmed, 2004). The use of reference to euthanasia is a direct comment on the perceived worth of this
child with autism. This is an undeniable reiteration of the message of shame. Ahmed’s (2004) theory pertinently reminds us that shame is more than a personal emotion, and that it is an agent in the formation of collectivities and connectedness; part of the affective economy of hate that obstructs, excludes and endangers the lives of disabled people both physical and mental. At the same time, this delineation results in the disabled body/mind’s dispossession, disconnection and disparagement.

One pissed off mother!!!!’s rage reflects dominant cultural fears about contamination and degeneracy, demonstrating shame as an affective economy. This has become paramount in maintaining control and dominance over disabled minds and bodies. Ahmed’s work shows that it is possible to re-imagine alternative ways of representing these produced spaces and meanings, beginning with the conceptualization of shame as a social and interpersonal phenomenon. The re-imaging of shame in this way forces us to recognize and question the ways in which we form collectives, connection, and community by use of emotional strategies. Shame is deeply implicated in preventing or distorting our sense of connection and belonging (Brown, 2010), and if it can be recognized as a component of a broader affective economy of hate, it is possible that these necessary parts of human experience can be renegotiated toward inclusivity. This would entail recognizing the role of shame in corrupting how one thinks or behaves.

Shame is a feeling or fear that our being flawed makes us unworthy of love and belonging (Brown, 2010, p.39). But the experience of this intensely painful state can offer a profound space for learning as it challenges us to validate and legitimize our ways of being over temporary acceptance and acknowledgment from a collective that has been designed and purposed for casting out difference and delineating exclusionary boundaries. Privileging our ways of being means it is necessary to explore the darkest corners in which shame lurks (Brown, 2010, p.6), and to acknowledge, question, and move through it towards a deeper feeling of wholeness, integrity and connectedness.

The work of Eli Clare (1999) is a significant source for challenging representation of disability as shameful and questioning the idea that shame and pride are binary opposites. Furthermore, Clare’s (1999) work dislodges the power of shame and problematizing its familiarity and seeming regularity. In Clare’s (1999) work there is an overall theme of possibility that emerges, suggesting that disability life may become a site for more profound realization and understanding of what shame is doing in all of our lives.

Foucault (1980) insists on the importance of drawing criticism of dominant ideology from various sites of subjugated knowledge and Eli Clare provides one of these critical spaces of inquiry. Previously disqualified knowledges, deemed inadequate and “beneath the level of cognition or scienticity” (Foucault, 1980, p. 82) contain histories of struggles and pose the possibility of disrupting and rupturing tyrannical globalizing discourses that are held in such esteem and privileged regard. In Exile and Pride, Clare (1999) exemplifies what it means to own your own story as he negotiates the complexities and contradicting feelings of shame and pride:

*In the eyes of the rube, the freak show probably was one big melting pot of differentness and otherness. At the same time, the differences among the various groups of people who worked as freaks remain important to understanding the freak show in its entirety. But whatever the differences, all four groups held one thing in common: nature did not make them into freaks. The freak show did, carefully constructing an exaggerated divide between “normal” and Other, sustained in turn by rubes willing to pay good money to stare.* (Clare, 1999, p.72)

In this passage, Clare (1999) examines the freak show and its complexities, as well as how it demonstrates the construction of divisions and boundaries that Ahmed (2004) has so well described. Clare (1999) also expresses pride and identification with his historic counterparts and revels in building an appreciation of his story and the alterity of his being. In the quotation below Clare (1999) recognizes the varied experiences that encompass both shame and pride, and relates history to the present relational quality of disabled peoples who embody shame when in the company of non-disabled others:

*The history that for so long has placed us on stage, in front of audiences, sometimes in subversion and resistance, other times in loathing and shame, asks not only for pride, but also for witness as our many different personal histories come tangling into our collective one.* (p.100)

There is both a transformative and reflective possibility in representing disability as endless varieties of human experiences, and deeper understandings of commonly held fears and insecurities. I assert that moving through
shame is a powerful way to resist its strangling effects. This does not deny its existence, but mediates its power, allowing for realization of shame as a common human experience and as a socially negotiated (and therefore still negotiable) experience. Disability can then be conceived of as representative of the possibility of moving through shame, as opposed to a site requiring its rejection. Disability as shameful could be represented otherwise, and how people engage in resisting such representations could offer a radical and rewarding new site for personal development leading to social change. Clare (1999) proposes a representation of disability and madness as sites for unearthing previously disqualified knowledges about struggles that are personal and social, as well as commonly human. In other words, disability might be represented as possibility and transformation that questions the very basic binary code between good and bad that I believe plagues most, if not all people.

Shame affects all of us because of the common need to feel connection and belonging and the tendency to forsake ourselves and our ways of being as if it were possible to achieve these things through such means. Disability is therefore alternatively represented as a model for how individuals may experience a range of often-conflicting emotions, including shame and pride, without allowing it to overwhelm, and without overcompensating. Rather, with acknowledgment and a new capacity for learning about the complexities and range of human emotional connectivity and experience, disability life offers a profound space for the search and assertion of non-dominant ways of being, encouraged through the process of owning our stories (Brown, 2010). The task of this paper has been to examine the dominant construction of shame that is related to representations of disabled minds and bodies, and deconstruct how shame operates as a mechanism of self-surveillance and psychic colonization. It also sought to examine re-imaginings of shame in relation to disability and disability life, by adopting Ahmed’s (2004) work on affective economies as well as Clare’s monumental contributions to story making and expressions of ways of being. True belonging can only happen when we are present in our ways of being and ourselves, and the courage to do so requires a level of self-acceptance (Brown, 26) that is so often denied, dissuaded, or disparaged in people who identify or are labeled as disabled or mad.

References


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