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Marita Husso

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Book reviews

Elsbeth Probyn, *Blush: Faces of Shame*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005. 197 pp. ISBN 0816627215, £14.00 (pbk), £37.00 (hbk)

Admitting shame is often a complex process. In most societies shame is not openly talked about, and most people prefer not to draw attention to it. In spite of recent scholarly interest in shame, the body and emotions, much of the research remains abstract and impersonal. Elsbeth Probyn's book *Blush: Faces of Shame* is an exception: the book emphasizes the importance of examining specific affects happening to particular bodies in particular places.

Probyn begins her book with the argument that only something or someone that interests you can produce a flush of shame. Drawing on the work of psychologist Silvan Tomkins, the link between shame and interest is the common ground that links the different variants of shame explored in Probyn's book. Interest involves a desire for connection, communication, touch, lines of engagement and reciprocity. Shame illuminates our intense desire to be connected with others, and the knowledge that we sometimes fail in our attempt to maintain those connections.

Combining cultural theory, sociology, psychology and personal narratives, Probyn studies shame as an affect and explores its effects. The book investigates several areas of shame: body and shame; the shame of being out of place; politics of shame and shaming; shame of past and shame of generations; and shame and writing. Probyn pursues a sociological and cultural explanation of shame within the body and its habitus, but does not give up the physiological level of shame (p. 40). She writes about the shame of being out of place, and narrates a moment of shame that she felt when she first experienced the awesome power of Uluru in Central Australia. This variant of shame, the feeling of being like a fish out of water, is something the body registers in social and cultural contexts in which it does not belong. Probyn draws on Bourdieu's concept of habitus, highlighting the ways in which we embody history, and how our bodies continually speak of their pasts in everyday actions such as gestures, manners and ways of being. Habitus delimits how and in which spaces we can move. When a body knows it does not belong within a certain place, in Bourdieu's terms, there is a schism between the habitus and the

field. This is where shame often erupts. Through feeling shame, the body inaugurates an alternative way of being in the world. Shame, as the body's reflection on itself, may reorder the composition of the habitus, which in turn may allow quite different choices (p. 56).

Blush is an exciting invitation to join the author in exploration, rather than a dissertation. Probyn argues persuasively that one of the most frustrating aspects of reading studies on emotion and affect is their tendency to speak in general terms. In contrast, after reading *Blush* it seems self-evident that affects have specific effects and it makes no sense to approach affects outside this understanding. Shame works over the body, but it also reworks how we understand the body and its relation to other bodies or to the social. This matters at the level of theory, and in terms of what we want writing to do (p. 137).

The most important contribution of this book is to underline how essential it is to think of what shame does to bodies and what connected bodies do to the organization of the social. To be more concrete, Probyn asks, what is the effect of shame on individual and collective action, power relations and human capabilities? In particular, shame produces interest that overwhelms the possibility of remaining in ignorance (p. 106). Shame produces individual as well as collective effects and demands acknowledgement. It raises questions of great and enduring interest concerning what it means to be human. In addition, shame makes us feel more fragile in ourselves. This acknowledgement of fragility may serve as a basis from which to evaluate one's existence and open up views of emancipation. In Bourdieu's terms, this kind of rupture and loss of assurance when one is thrust into another field may begin the processes of change (p. 64).

Social change is one of Probyn's major themes in the book, but she also calls for theoretical and epistemological changes and challenges. With her analysis of shame, Probyn opens out the possibility that finally, social and cultural theories may begin to deal with the relations between the physical and the social. Regarding the body as involved with its physicality is a very welcome rethinking of body and materiality. Recently, many researchers working on questions of embodiment have expressed their frustration with analyses that see gender, the body and power as well as any other phenomena, represented and interpreted as merely discursive. It would be fruitful to set Probyn's ideas of shame in a more explicit dialogue with the analysis of how shame is gendered and culturally and socially produced. *Blush* provides an excellent foundation for this crucial project.

Marita Husso
University of Jyväskylä, Finland