

Shame and the Embodiment of Boundaries

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ABSTRACT

Attention to the debilitating feelings of unease, discomfort and anxiety which are the concomitants of everyday encounters and negotiations of Kooris at the mainstream interface brings an appreciation for the lived experience of the colonised minority and throws into relief complex struggles over meaning, manners, personal values, social allegiance and cultural survival. This paper focuses on the habituation and strategic deployment of shame at the racial divide. Koori subjectivities, bodily dispositions and emotional registers are found to be informed both by traditional orientations and by the hegemonic ends of the dominant order.

Keywords: shame, race, social closure, emotion.

If one is to fathom contemporary Koori¹ relations with the non-Aboriginal world, I would argue, an understanding of shame is key. This paper explores the genealogy of Koori shame and its place in the marking and making of the racial divide.

In part this paper serves to challenge the representation of shame as the anti-heroic antithesis of resistance in the writings of Gillian Cowlishaw. In her analyses, disorderly, destructive and violent behaviours of the indigenous minority are examined for their power to invert, challenge and expose the ideology and practical force of the dominant order (Cowlishaw 1988, 1993, 2004). Shame takes its place at the opposite and less honourable end of subversion, as a capitulation to the powers that be (Cowlishaw 2004:184). The present analysis provides a complement to Cowlishaw's efforts to interrogate a more complex set of causes and meanings for violence and disorderliness by examining the multivalent meanings, effects and strategic operations of shame at the black/white divide. It is my contention that shame represents, on the one hand, the painful embodiment of a social order premised on the subjection and exclusion of a black minority; on the other, a measure and guardian of Koori cultural autonomy.

My focus is the Jerrinja Aboriginal community, a settlement of some 180 people, residents of what was formerly the Roseby Park Aboriginal Reserve on the NSW south coast. Once an isolated, heavily sequestered and closely supervised government station, the community today finds itself closely enveloped within white suburbia. Twenty seven homes, the majority dating from a 1970s housing project, are arranged in suburban fashion about two deeply potholed streets. There is little but narrow grassy strips and a bellicose reputation to buffer the residents from their comfortable middle-class neighbours, yet the occupation of space in this domain takes on a noticeably different tone. Fences, originally designed to cordon off individual plots, lie in varying states of disrepair, facilitating easy traffic between the various homes, while, in contrast to the surrounding neighbourhood, the streets, gardens and verandahs of the 'mission',² serve (though decreasingly so) as social and public spaces where people sit, gather, gossip and play.

As home, Jerrinja represents a place of ambivalent values. On the one hand, it engenders feelings of familiar security and fond sentimentality; representing the space where its members live their own world-taken-for-granted. But on the other, it is felt to be the site of a desperate confinement and hopelessness in which the social burdens of their position as a dispossessed minority play out in lives much marked with trouble, conflict, impoverishment and personal trauma.

Although they maintain a sphere of life which they may call their own, Jerrinja people are inexorably incorporated within and dependent upon the institutions of dominant Australian society. By virtue of this fact, their participation in the mainstream is necessary, varied and sustained. One might expect, in an environment of such intense interaction, the lines between black and white would become heavily blurred. In fact the reverse would seem to be true. An attitude of profound shyness is typical. The everyday and mundane nature of interactions belies intense feelings of unease, discomfort and anxiety.

In the public space beyond the mission, where cultural meanings, values and modes of interaction are defined in white terms, Kooris feel themselves highly visible and vulnerable. Shame, as they call it, is the feeling of acute self-consciousness and often painful inadequacy which arises when one is exposed, in the flesh or in the anticipation, to the critical gaze of others, most particularly that experienced under the scrutiny of the 'outside world'.³ 'Shame's like it's embarrassing. Like it's when you walk in and everyone looks at you. You think "oh shame".'

Shame manifests itself in the bodily demeanour of a woman in the supermarket who – gaze downcast, shoulders hunched – waits uncomfortably at the checkout, hoping not to be drawn into conversation; in the compulsive efforts of another, visiting a relative in hospital, to tuck in her daughter's shirt; in the teacher's report that describes the Koori student as passive or the one that describes the uncontrollable child who swears abuse at her incessantly; in the lengths to which a person will go to avoid being the one who has to go to the bar for drinks; in the hostile reaction to an apparently disinterested glance – 'Haven't they ever seen a blackfella before?'

The sense of being under unceasing scrutiny lends a distinct edge and an acute discomfort to the outlook of many. Kooris frequently comment on the unwanted stares trained on them in public places, while even activity on the mission is felt to be the subject of the prying eyes of neighbours, pedestrians and passing motorists. Most would prefer to minimise their exposure; the short distance between mission and shop is traversed by vehicle, if at all possible; some spectators at the football spend the entire day in the confines of the car; forays to town are almost always conducted in the anonymity of a group, where one will not be caught 'one out' and resort is often made to the most effective measure of all, staying firmly put on the mission.

I think like that a lot, all the time mainly. Always think 'I bet they're thinking this of me or saying this about me.' I don't know what makes me think like that, which I just do. There's a lot of Kooris around that are shamed. There's heaps, heaps. That's why you get a lot of people that are quiet and keep to themselves, you know. 'Cause they're shamed or embarrassed to, you know, just go out, talk to people or socialise with other people and that...

When in mainstream settings, Jerrinja residents are inclined to gather together in tight groupings set apart from the main action; the physical spaces they occupy tending to reflect their marginalisation. One woman described the seating arrangements at a local high school meeting,

We all went there, went up to the meeting and we were sort of like....usually get that way when you see Kooris go on trips or go to meetings or places like that and they

sort of like, they're in little sort of like bunches and all that... All us Koori women were sitting together, you know, and them, all the others were sitting over that side...all the gubbahs⁴ [whites]...We were sort of like one side and they was all over the other side there. And someone asked us about that, it was one of the teachers. She asked us, 'why do you sit together like that all the time?'

The remainder of this paper will be devoted to showing the complex ways in which shame provides an answer to that question.

EMOTION AND CULTURE

In 1949 Reay recorded that, in the town of Bourke and in other north-western New South Wales towns, traditional Aboriginal languages and customs were being discouraged by the scoffing and jeering of young 'mixed bloods' ridiculing the practices of the old-timers (Reay 1949:90, 96). 'The old men complain,' Reay observed, 'that if they sing aboriginal songs openly in the camp the other mixed-bloods "might think they're rude" and jeer at them as "filthy-minded old blackfellers"' (Reay 1949:96).

If such evidence has been taken – as it has with grave consequences in the courts – as proof of a fatal disjuncture in Aboriginal culture, a re-examination of the same events focused on emotional content might lead to alternative conclusions. What role, we might ask, has shame played in this scenario and what type of 'selves', as Rosaldo has prompted us to explore, is this feeling helping defend? (1983:136). What continuities are to be found in the unbearable sensitivity of the players, young and old alike, to scorn; in the contagion felt from the image of others in the construction of self; in the deployment of shame as a technique in enforcing conformity? A focus on emotions is, as Marcus and Fischer have observed, 'a way of getting to the level at which cultural differences are most deeply rooted: in feelings and in complex indigenous reflections about the nature of persons and social relationships' (Marcus and Fischer 1986:45).

This is, of course, no simple story of sequestered cultural difference. The contours of shame mark out the difficult moral terrain in which the lives of Jerrinja's residents are lived. Contemporary Koori subjectivities are constructed in a cross-fire of conflicting meanings and values in which hegemony holds both blatant and insidious sway. Emotion then brings us not only to new worlds of meaning but to complex fields of social action and political influence. Emotions are found not only to have cultural, social and political origins but cultural, social and political efficacy (cf. Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990; Rosaldo 1984).

Two works beyond the discipline of anthropology have drawn attention to the phenomenon of shame experienced by Aboriginal people in the mainstream Australian context. Dalziell (1999) explores the place of shame in Aboriginal autobiography. Shame, she argues, arises as a response to the proliferation and practical application of white colonial myths about Aboriginality (Dalziell 1999:133). The texts, she shows, reveal the subjects' interaction with these myths, their painful subjection to the premises contained within them, the acceptance and internalisation sometimes afforded such stereotypifications, as well as their courageous resistances against them.

The linguist, Harkins has analysed semantic differences between the standard English word shame and *shame* in Australian Aboriginal English, particularly in the context of the school classroom (Harkins 1990, 1996). Harkins is at pains to show that while non-Aboriginal teachers are inclined to view expressions of shame and shame behaviours as destructive states, reflecting negative self-image and low self-esteem, which need to be overcome, *shame* viewed within Aboriginal cultural orientations may in fact be seen in terms of a developed sense of propriety dictating behaviour in unfamiliar environments (Harkins 1990:300).

Both authors illuminate aspects of Koori shame but neither an account based on the effects of racist myths nor one which seeks explanation in purely classical concepts of shame, is

sufficient to understanding the decidedly complicated nature of shame in the cross-cultural context of post-colonisation. My aim is to develop a more sophisticated understanding of Koori shame by examining in greater detail the nature of shame in the classical milieu, the operation of the colonial project upon Aboriginal people, and their complex workings out in the context of contemporary Koori life and interests.

Encompassing insights from a range of scholarly perspectives on emotion, Scheper-Hughes and Lock's (1987) conceptualisation of emotion as the 'mediatrix' among the individual body, the social body, and the body politic, provides a powerful formulation of its significance and critical effects. Keeping in mind the multiple frames within which a subject minority must operate, it is this sense of emotion's complex dialectical entanglement in the experience of the lived body, the moral constitution of self and sociality and the structures of power which I wish to retain in the following discussion of shame.

SHAME AND THE COLONIAL PROJECT

With its assaults upon the existence and integrity of indigenous life-worlds, the advent of colonisation introduced unprecedented possibilities for shame amongst Aboriginal people. Demographic stress, alienation from land, losses and changes in the resource base, disintegration and transformation of social and religious institutions, may be counted amongst the factors with serious ramifications for the achievement of creditable personhood in the post-colonisation context.⁵ Moreover, the intrusion of the colonial presence sundered, to significant degrees, the *common sense* and natural logic of the indigenous world. New standards of social and moral propriety were juxtaposed with and competed with indigenous frames of reference.

Under the colonial regime, not only were Aboriginal people cast into unequal economic and political relations but indigeneity or blackness itself was placed into symbolic relations with whiteness and heavily laden with negative connotations (see JanMohamed 1995:20; Parry 1995:36). Over time, as their economic and socio-political independence was eroded, the ability of Aboriginal people to defend themselves against the mounting weight of hegemonic discourse diminished significantly.

Messages of inferiority and undesirability were expressed not only in words but in practical interaction with whites, where social distance was signified and reinforced spatially and temporally. Their later confinement and isolation on government reserves spelled the message that Kooris were pariahs, unwanted and contaminating, better kept out of sight and mind. They, like animals, could be penned up, domesticated and quarantined. 'They had the idea', says one Jerrinja man, 'of putting (us) on a farm like sheeps and cattles'. Their dehumanisation was reinforced at picking time, when farmers herded labourers and their families from the reserve into the backs of their trucks to be driven south for the harvest.

Within the institutional environment, everyday and fundamental beliefs and practices were made alien objects of scorn, ridicule and active repression (see eg. Barker and Mathews 1977; Fink 1957; Morris 1989; Reay 1949). At Jerrinja, reference to 'the gibberish' speaks of the derision which had been directed against their language by whites, while the revulsion expressed by an older woman at the thought of eating swan meat, which she had relished when younger, leaves similar traces of white disdain.

The black members of a minority society become an object of insatiable curiosity because of the space of 'otherness' they occupy in the white imagination. Under the colonial regime, Aborigines became the objects of scientific study and increasing governmental subjugation in which the 'look' was increasingly employed as a means of control. If as previously noted, Jerrinja people should feel themselves to be under constant observation, it is hardly surprising given that surveillance by whites was an intrinsic and unpleasant part of everyday Aboriginal life on the mission for six decades.⁷ The gaze turned upon Jerrinja residents by the manager and matron - invasive of their privacy, critical, condescending, signalling disgust and rejection, threatening and

sometimes dangerous - brought them into uncomfortable self-conscious awareness. It was a look meant to inspire shame, pointedly effected in efforts to inspire reform and mainstream conformity. Behind their 'look', these authorities wielded powers to inflict physical punishment, to withhold rations, to remove people from the station or children from their parents.

Since no other white people were allowed on the mission, and because trips into town were few, many people, especially women and children, had limited experience of whites beyond the prying and critical eyes of the administration. Children, especially, came to associate profoundly disconcerting and frightening feelings with white scrutiny and with whites themselves. An older man recalls,

I can remember seeing the managers coming around the houses, I don't know, I used to get scared somehow, I don't know why. Like he wasn't looking for me or anything, but I was thinking to myself, wonder what's the whitefella man doing walking around. I can just vaguely remember that, like what was he doing there. I was about ten, about eight, about ten. I was just trying to pick it up then. I used to ask mum about it. She never used to say to me anything, she said, oh you wouldn't know son, you're too young to know.

'A form of terror', as Morris observed, became the concomitant of 'what was seen as the indiscriminate and arbitrary exercise of power... in which being Aboriginal was seen as synonymous with moral culpability' (Morris 1989:103).

In the town of Nowra, Koori interactions with whites, were marked by racial attention with race-based segregation on public transport, in cinemas and discrimination in service delivery. Of the 1960s era, a woman recollects,

And this used to happen when we started the school in Nowra. We'd get on the bus and then the bus driver'd separate us. Separate us on the bus Nat. 'You Koori people, Aboriginal people, up the front, whites up the back.' I said why were they doing this to us, you know, separating us. We're all the same, only different is the colour of us... And then I think these white people thought, like if we had a disease or something too. And it made us feel very bad about ourselves.

Racism continues to have its overt expressions. The slurs and insults, those particular public bars which make it known Kooris are not welcome, the violent assaults on young people at the local show, the hastiness to report 'suspicious behaviour', the police who call Aboriginal children black bastards and say they wonder Kooris celebrate 21st birthdays when they don't know the ages of their kids.

The absorption of messages of inferiority, of depravity, of worthlessness conveyed in word and deed, through 'myriad abuses and humiliations' (hooks 1992) led, as Fanon has famously declaimed, to the widespread internalisation of racism (Fanon 1995[1952]). Plagued by self-alienation and self-hatred, the wounded psyche of the colonised carries on, to varying degrees, the task of its own denigration.

CLEANLINESS

In this section I will take uncleanliness as a case study in the operation of negative stereotypes. Cleanliness, or their lack thereof, is an issue that has been constantly pressed upon Kooris. From the earliest days Aboriginal people were spurned as dirty, odorous and pestilent. The confinement of Aborigines on reserves was in part given reason by the public perception that Aborigines were unclean and unsanitary and that their unrestrained presence posed a public health risk. The administrators on reserves were obsessed with inculcating habits of cleanliness. Home inspections were a source of humiliation and anxiety,

You used to see the women... I can remember my mother and the other people, getting down on their hands and knees and scrubbing their floors just because the manager was coming. You know them old houses... I used to see poor E's mother doing it... you'd go along... and they'd be all scrubbing their houses, or they used to go out and get clay and do all they chimneys up inside, whiten it all up, clean it all up.

As government policy moved toward assimilation and the dispersal of Aborigines in mainstream residential areas, negative images of unsanitary living conditions, unsavoury personal hygiene and presentation were increasingly promulgated in public discourse and in the media. Considerable public hysteria developed over the pathogenicity of the Koori and the threat to public welfare. A council health inspector wrote in 1965 that the resettlement of Aboriginal fringe-dwellers in downtown Nowra 'could lead to a dispersal of insanitary conditions throughout the town instead of the present concentration' (cited Phelps 1989:34). Aboriginal children attending public schools were (and continue to be) singled out and ridiculed as the dirty purveyors of lice, scabies and other unhealthy infections. Racist slurs are commonly loaded with reference to dirt and Kooris were excluded from certain hotel bars, confined to non-white stalls in the cinema, and otherwise ostracised, ostensibly on the grounds that they were unclean. As whites recoiled from contact, Kooris were made to experience their own bodies as a source of shame. The insults weighed heavily on Aboriginal consciousness.

That a woman should, in extolling the best qualities of her deceased mother, give emphatic attention to her virtues as a cleanly person and scrupulous housekeeper, gives an insight both into the struggle fought by the mother to prove herself in life and to the continuing need of the daughter to grapple with the stereotypes understood to define their Aboriginality. Like the claims made by Sartre about the Jews, Kooris, may be seen to have been 'poisoned by the stereotype that others have of them, ...liv(ing) in fear that their acts will correspond to this stereotype... ' (Sartre 1989 [1943]).

The play of such stereotypes affects the image of past and present. When a teenager recounted the time he had been out on a heritage oriented camping trip with a group from Jerrinja, I had asked whether he got a feeling for how life would have been for Kooris in the past, 'Mmm, we did. Without washing. Like we didn't care about washing and how we looked and we were all shabby and we didn't have tents either...'

An incident which took place during my fieldstay, brought to my attention the way in which Kooris continue to understand themselves as condemned in white eyes as unclean. A guest in a family home, I was taken totally unawares one day when, after my morning shower, the female head of the household made this bitter charge: 'People who shower everyday, the dirt's in their mind.' My own daily bathing routine was clearly felt as a comment and critique directed against her personally and against Kooris generally. I had in fact no sense whatever of my host's bathing habits and if I thought anything about it at all, probably admired her housekeeping skills as far superior to my own, but I was also oblivious to the fact that my very presence in the house induced an anxiety that intimate habits were being subject to minute scrutiny and necessarily found wanting.

A person sees themselves condemned not only by their own actions but by the behaviour of others. Even in our own society, where the person is conceived in highly individualistic terms, psychologists have observed that shame can involve relatively permeable self-boundaries whereby a person may experience shame at the behaviour of others (Lewis 1971:32). In a society when the conceptualisation of self is closely bound to identity with others this is greatly accentuated. 'It's also shame job,' says a teenage girl, 'when other people, like other Aboriginal people do something wrong. They might think you do it too. They assume you do.' She recounts a discussion she had with a white man. 'He was treating me like shit, wouldn't even give me the time of day. He was saying things about other Aborigines where he lives. And I was thinking, 'I know them.' And he asked if I knew them and I said no. I felt shame. Felt shame. Just being Aboriginal. I'm sure he knew that I knew them. I felt so ashamed.'

When the local television station broadcast a story about Council clearing out fourteen truckloads of rubbish from a Koori haunt on the Crookhaven foreshore, an elderly Jerrinja woman was upset, 'They [the young Koori drinkers] got no right going down there and making a mess.' Whatever efforts one made oneself, it appears, one will always be let down by the side. In the case of Aborigines, dirt seems incorrigible. The problem being, of course, that something more than dirt and grime and broken glass lies at stake.

In the light of Mary Douglas' analysis it is clear that beneath the surface there is more concern over the purity of categories than the absence of dirt (Douglas 1966). The vehemence with which whites have pursued racial segregation may be seen to be concerned as much with the structuring of ideas as with the physical separation of bodies. Anxieties brought to the surface when a white man and Aboriginal woman shared an embrace in a Coonamble street in the late 1950s⁸ or institutionalised in the strict prohibition against entry of white persons onto Roseby Park throughout protection days, were inspired as much by the dread of mingling categories as mingling bodies. The exclusion of black bodies from white spaces (and vice versa), symbolically and practically shored up the definitions of whiteness/difference.

The operation of a logic of this type is brought to light in Reay's 1945 Walgett study. Reay noted how matters of cleanliness were central in the objections of whites to the admission of Aboriginal children to public schools and in discrimination surrounding their attendance at dances and at the local bore baths (Reay 1945:298). She found that despite their best efforts those segments of the Aboriginal population who tried to adopt European lifeways and cleave to European sensibilities, were not able to overcome social rejection but invariably continued to be spurned and excluded from white circles.

Reay also showed how differences in attitude toward Aborigines amongst the white population could be correlated to class position. The small land-owning class, she conjectured, who were in little danger of marrying across the racial divide, could afford to be sympathetic in their attitudes towards the aborigines (Reay 1945:298). It is those whites most at risk of cross-category confusion, the poor whites who share vocations, marginal living spaces and who patronise the same businesses as Aborigines (Reay 1945:296-297), who tend to hold the most rigid views.⁹ Furthermore where liaisons between inevitably poor whites and blacks took place, the outcome more often was the degrading and ostracisation of the whites involved than the uplifting of blacks (Reay 1945:296-297). This contagion constitutes clear evidence that Aboriginal people in mainstream Australia live under the sign of a stigma; a 'spoiled identity' from which it is well nigh impossible to escape (Goffman 1963).

CULTURAL CAPITAL AND THE CROSS-CULTURAL ENCOUNTER

Kooris are forever cognisant of, and challenged by, the cultural specificity of the mainstream which casts them in its shadow as deficient or deviant. The white space of mainstream public life operates on a cultural logic which remains by and large invisible to members of the dominant majority. As Goffman, following Cooley, has so poignantly discovered, judgements - manifold and minute - are constantly being made between social actors (Goffman 1997: 22). The relentless process of mutual social monitoring in which people engage is rendered almost invisible in the ordinary interactions of daily life where individuals operate in a field of shared expectations. In their engagement with the mainstream, however, Kooris are not in the habit of receiving constant affirmation for their existence. Their public presentations are marked by dispositions which bear the history of their structural position (Bourdieu 1977).

On the most general level, Kooris bring to the interface signs - revealed in styles of communication and demeanour marking disadvantages in education, income and social status that are shared with others of a lower socio-economic background. The social standing of Kooris, however, differs fundamentally from these however, for, as Fanon would aver, Kooris are the possessors of that unescapable and over-determining marker of structural inequality in colonial society, a black skin.¹⁰ Moreover, Kooris are distinguished by a habitus which is

product of an original and profound socio-cultural difference and of a very particular, and particularly malign, history.

Living on the mission, Kooris explain, people gain no experience in socialising with white people and don't know how to interact with them. 'Like you're only in the one environment when you're here, you don't really know how to approach different environments.' 'Growing up...like we just, like it was just us Koori people there. And we knew how to communicate with one another...' Jerrinja are aware of, but not *au fait* with, the social manners and small talk employed by Europeans and they perceive their own communication styles, characterised for example by swearing, as deviant within the mainstream.

The school environment is one in which the lack of cultural capital creates major problems of fit. While some students respond to their difficulties at school by playing up and swearing at teachers, to be 'shamed' is a common response:

Some like Cory swear at people but other people are so embarrassed they won't talk at all. But mine (reaction) was like, I was quiet. I was shamed. I was a quiet kid. I was ...all through high school I didn't mix in with any of them, I just sat there by myself and I still have trouble with it now, 'bout having to mix in with people. Like going up and talking to people.¹¹

Some Kooris find themselves intimidated in the mainstream by the English language. Although the features that distinguish their own internal speech forms and style as Aboriginal English are quite subtle, there is nevertheless a perception amongst many that they do not speak 'the white man's English' as well as others do. A woman told me how she gets her husband to do the talking,

I'd say, you do all the talking because, shame job, I don't know how to talk to people like that and what to say...I said, 'You know how to talk and that to people' I said. 'I don't, I get all muddled up, how to speak...'

The matter is compounded and partly caused by the physical impediments to speech, which are implicated in shame,¹²

This is how the feeling gets inside of you, where you tense up, and your brain just won't work and you think, 'Oh geez I'm ashamed, I don't know what to say, all these things come to your head... Even if you go to a hospital and the doctors ask you things or the nurses, you know, you just want to say it, you know, your brain's telling you, but when it comes out, it comes out wrong. And you think, 'Oh geez I'm an idiot, you know, and you feel like, and you just got this terrible feeling in you and you're ashamed of what you said, say and things like that. It's unreal.

Those whose literacy levels are low are especially prone to eschew mainstream interaction. They 'get frightened' or 'say shame' because they cannot read and write. Gina, a teacher's aide at the primary school explains the difficulty she has in encouraging parents to attend parent interviews,

Whereas here they can use their own language to express exactly what they feel and what they want, when they go out there they haven't got the wide variety of language, not language... [NK: vocabulary]. They're frustrated because they know what they want to say but they can't say it in the way they want to get their point across.

I contend that the difficulties Kooris experience in communicating with whitefellas are less, or less directly, about their competence in English, educational levels or unacceptable

propensities to swear, than about a deeper sense, marked by and generated by shame and shame behaviours, that one *cannot* and *should not* assume the easy familiarity which makes talking with one's kin a simple matter.

In a passage which reveals the sense of isolation and the lack of bearings for interaction in the absence of kin, and his perceived inproficiencies in mainstream sociality, a Jerrinja teenager describes his experience of shame at high school,

Well if you were separated from all your cousins when you went into class you had no choice but to sit with other people...you couldn't really mix in with the people...Like you'll just sit there like a stuffed, like a stuffed mullet in class, you couldn't socialise very well.

N.K. And why would you be like a stuffed mullet? Because you just didn't know what to say to people.

What to say. What to say to people, like how to approach them. Like do you talk like you talk to your cousins or do you talk like talking to a stranger?

I will shortly turn to exploring the crucial point of the paramount importance of kinship in ordering social relations and the lack of basis for speaking with strangers, but let me first pick up on the point that there is a way of talking to strangers that is not identical with the way of talking to kin.

At Jerrinja cursing, creative obscenities and lewd humour ride buoyantly in the flow of everyday conversation between familiars as well as spiking outbursts of anger amongst them. To my frustration, while there, I often found that my presence at a card game or other gathering led to restraint in speaking styles. Despite my repeated pleas that I thought nothing of it, people would refrain from swearing, chastise others for it or double take and apologise for their error. I observed a similar curtailing of freedom of speech at a football match, where a woman reacted urgently to a drunken in-law swearing loud abuse at her partner, 'Tell her! Talking where Gubbahs are!'

Given that 'bad language' has in the past (and today) drawn barrings from hotels and clubs, charges, fines and even incarceration, caution about swearing in public is understandable. The influence of Christian proselytisers is also evident. Nevertheless, I would argue, the circumspection that surrounds swearing in front of whites, demonstrates classical elements of restraint and a consciousness of differentially appropriate communication styles.¹³ Conversely it has been observed that the efforts by some whites to ingratiate themselves with Kooris by adopting the characteristic swearing language style is not appreciated. Read as an illegitimate claim to identity with Kooris and over-presumptuous familiarity, it provokes an agitated response. Swearing is the language proper to one's intimate familiars. In an orientation which can be seen as continuous with classical Aboriginal social mores, shame and shame behaviours – such as the restriction and modification of speech – serve to mark and inhibit interaction with certain classes of people, including strangers. Partly a product of positively engendered protocols dictating respectful circumspection of strangers (Kennedy and Donaldson 1982:7; Myers 1986:100), and partly, or concomitantly, a product of the absence within traditional society of grounds and precepts for relating with those who lie beyond the frameworks of kinship, these marks of unfamiliarity and lack of identity serve to deepen the contrasting sense of belonging and solidarity of the in-group.¹⁴

KINSHIP

Behind the introversive character of Aboriginal groups is the concomitant primacy of kin relationships in ordering the social world. Beyond the world of known kin the bearings for

interpersonal relations are absent. The fundamental social distinction in the Aboriginal world view lies between those who are kin, with whom one has a meaningful basis for interaction, and those who lie beyond that realm. In classical Aboriginal society, kinship operated not so much to divide the social universe into two, but to mark off the social and moral universe from a wilderness beyond. Howitt found that Aborigines in south-east Australia distinguished between those they referred to as men and those who lay outside that category:

Kurnai, Kulin and Murring are all synonyms meaning 'men' in distinction to other blackfellows whom (they) designate 'wild men', 'snakes', 'come-by-night' or by other similar terms of contempt or fear.' (Howitt 1883:185).

Outsiders, then, are by definition at best those with whom one has nothing in common and at worst characters of hostile or dubious intent. One's kin provide the principal sources of companionship, as well as social, material and political support. The range of behaviours surrounded by restriction and avoidance in one's disposition toward strangers – speech, sexual banter, eating, proximity – are the same behaviours which, in easy and close exchange, signal, constitute and reproduce one's relations with familiars and also provide one with one's sense of self.

To be isolated from the network of kin is for Jerrinja people alarming and disorienting. The strength of feelings of social isolation and shame are illustrated by the story told by one Jerrinja woman of how homesickness had forced her to leave her two day old premature baby in hospital in Sydney. At first, she recounted, she thought she'd be alright, but after her family left she cried and begged them to come and get her. 'It was shame for me and it was scary because I was up there on my *own*.' The baby remained in hospital for two months.

To be isolated from others is not only experienced as highly stressful. Because it is seen as a reflection of a social lack, solitude is in itself seen as shameful. A teenage girl explains,

When I go play tennis and I'm the only one on the court with this person I think, 'Oh my god, I'm by myself'. I get shame in that situation when I'm by myself 'cause other people might think 'she's got no friends, she don't know nobody.'

A fundamental source of Koori shame in the white domain, it emerges, is the separation of the individual from the corporate kin group in which the self is usually and comfortably merged. As the grounds for shared identity fall away, the self is exposed as a social isolate, producing a debilitating sense of self-consciousness and loneliness. The experience is given effective expression in the Koori phrase of being 'one out'. The feeling is not dependent on, but in contemporary contexts is critically entwined with and intensely exacerbated by, the sense of incongruency of being in an alien cultural environment and by the rejection afforded by the dominant order.

This brings me back to the question asked of the Jerrinja women by the teacher at the high school meeting. Why do Kooris 'sit together like that'? She herself offers in explanation,

Like growing up in an Aboriginal community with just Aboriginal people around you, 'specially as a kid, I was growing up and all that. And my mother and everyone else before that ay growing up on the missions. So you're just sorta like only, you sorta like used to your own, sorta like people, wouldn't ya...

A middle aged woman relates it to the historical experience of race segregation, 'But it's this...I think it started off like on the bus, where they separated us, and it stuck in our head we thought well we can't be good enough to mix with these people, you know what I mean.' She

continues with an explanation which reflects both the solace of Aboriginal sociality and the consciousness of race,

We like to have our people around where we feel comfortable and where we can open up. If you're on your own, if I was on me own now with a bunch of white people, I'd feel that out of place I wouldn't know what to talk about you know. I'd be that...saying to myself ' Oh shame job, you know, I don't think I'm good enough to be here'.

Some Koori behaviour can be explained by their sense of not having a proper place in the environment. One Jerrinja woman, newly recruited as a teacher's aide at the local primary school, goes to work at the school but declines to enter the staff room. For her this space is one belonging to teachers and to take the liberty of accessing it would be to presume a status that she has no right - and also no desire - to claim.

MORAL AND POLITICAL IMPERATIVES

An important point to be made is that far from being simply the product of exclusion and marginalisation, the social distance maintained by Kooris can also be counted as a symbolic and political assertion of Aboriginal identity and difference; a pointed assertion of belonging elsewhere. The majority of Kooris, I would argue, have no desire to be subsumed within the mainstream or identified as ordinary members of it.

Kooris operate under a moral imperative to affirm their relations with their kin, to *own* their people and to *mix it* with them and a social pressure to hold their distance from whites.¹⁵ When a young Koori girl responds to a suggestion that she might seek work in the mainstream with the comment 'shame job', this is a double-edge sword. There is shame at the difficulties to be faced in holding one's own in the white world but also shame at holding oneself apart from the group, at 'big noting' oneself.

Social distance, in space, time or in status, undermines the basis of relationships founded on shared identity.¹⁶ Such differentials are conducive of shame in the offended party. The taking up a position on the 'other side' of the racial divide, moreover, adds to the offence a perceived complicity in the denigration of Aborigines by whites, and is keenly experienced as contributing to the burden of self-depreciation,

Some Kooris that's out there now in these jobs, like they're got good jobs and they think they're too good for the other Kooris now, you know... If you're in the street or anything and they're walking past all dressed up and that they keep going. Sometimes they'll say hello, sometimes they won't, well this turns a lot of people off too you know... It's down-hearting a lot of kids too. Instead of just doing...instead of being like they always been before they get these jobs. You know they used to sit down and yarn or sit down and have a feed with you or smoke or whatever but now, I don't know, they think they're just too good for other Koori people...

The attack constituted on individuals assuming this position is quickly countered with accusations of 'flashness'. The person is shamed and feels shame for their moral culpability, for to show others up or treat them as less than equal is judged blameworthy, to be egotistical and self-promoting is considered distasteful and a failure to acknowledge, affirm and properly maintain one's relationships with kin is highly reprehensible.

At base my research indicates that shame serves, both in internal and external relations, as a profoundly felt signal of a lack of shared identity. Shame serves to discriminate between, and reproduce, structural orders of relatedness and unrelatedness, and is employed decorously to guard against improper claims to belonging and identity.

SOCIALISATION OF SHAME

The frequent public, vocal expressions of 'shame' and 'shame job' as a response to actual or imagined encounters in the mainstream are not only reflections of a felt emotion and signals of a cultural acceptance of shame as a natural response to the circumstance, but also a means by which shame is engendered and enforced as the appropriate reaction and by which interaction with the mainstream is constrained.

A shame consciousness surrounding interaction with whitefellas is actively inculcated in children both as a matter of direct instruction and sensitisation to the demonstrated discomfort experienced by significant adults and peers. The presence of non-Aboriginal people is inevitably brought to attention – 'Look at the gubbahs', 'There's gubbahs there'. The relaxed ease of a group of women and children fishing off a pier is disturbed by the arrival of a white family. 'Fuck off', the adults whisper under their breaths and mimic the conversation of the newcomers. 'Gubbahs always have to stuff it up.' The disruption to their fishing is significant but, further, the presence of whites interrupts the sense of unencumbered ease in an environment occupied only by Kooris. Attention is drawn to the young child who unselfconsciously engages in conversation with whites, 'Look at her talking to whitefellas, she's got no shame'. Children observe that the presence of whitefellas calls for self-consciousness, censorship, modification of behaviour and formality.

A negative consciousness and constraining of behaviours and associations that bring attention to themselves and their Aboriginality in the mainstream domain, is exercised.

When I'm in town shopping and you know where, you know at the car park... well that's where they all get and drink and then we'd be standing over here near the phone box and then if my daughter's with me and she's got a friend or someone sitting over there she'll go 'Come on mum, I'm going over here' and I'll say, 'Don't go over there, that's shame job, get away from them.' I'm always like that if I'm in town, even with mum when she talks too loud, or we're arguing I'll say, 'Shut up, you're shaming me, don't shame me out'. Things like that. It could be the littlest thing.

If shame works to affect the maintenance of boundaries between black and white domains, the primary site of its operation is not, I would argue, at the level of overt shaming practices. Public shaming, jokes and other articulated expressions enforcing group norms are secondary devices. Shame may more productively be considered, applying Bourdieu's theory, as an embodied disposition (Bourdieu 1977:72, 124). Historically constructed and socially instilled, the sense of shame operates to structure perceptions of circumstances and to delimit possible responses. Interactions with whites are more potently minimised by defining or experiencing the relationship itself as one attended by shame and hence by avoidance and/or other restrictions on behaviour. Liaison with whitefellas then becomes a felt matter of ill-ease and bodily discomfort; shame effectively working to electrify the racial divide.

Alcohol, it may be noted, has a strategic utility in overcoming inhibitions associated with shame, both in internal relations and at the race frontier. Being inebriated offers one the licence to indulge in freer expression without proving oneself to lack the sense of shame which is indicative of a proper degree of social propriety. Drunkenness and feigned drunkenness then is not just a symbol of defiance as some writers have argued (Beckett 1964; Reay 1945:300) but a tool of defiance; a means which allows disrespect towards whites, or kin, to be expressed without impugning one's character generally. In this regard I note my disagreement with the impression given by Cowlshaw that there are, at opposite ends of the spectrum, the fighters and the shamed within Aboriginal communities (1988:234), for very often it is the same individuals who, plus or minus alcohol, exhibit the strongest tendencies in either direction.¹⁷

THE DOUBLE EDGED SWORD OF SHAME

In inculcating an autonomic mechanism of Koori exclusion from mainstream life, Koori shame might be seen as the ultimate achievement of the dominant social order, for it has thereby saved itself the daily and dirty work of overtly repressive measures (Bourdieu 1977:190). Koori shame, however, is not signal of the totalisation of the dominant order, for in excluding Aborigines from mainstream life, it serves more than one master.

Kooris do not fully absorb the messages of shame which are foisted upon them.¹⁸ They uphold their own sense of moral order and value in the face of the ideology and practices of mainstream Australia. Koori shame should not be read simply as a capitulation to the dominant order but also as signal of the persistence of indigenous values. It may be counted, furthermore, as a form of resistance, firstly because in continuing to mark off the boundaries between black and white, it stakes a political line, and secondly because, by fostering separation, it defends a space for the survival of cultural autonomy and difference. Nevertheless, it is a form of resistance, like the violence and disorderliness documented by Cowlshaw (1988, 2004), that is dangerously double edged.

The embodied nature of shame, which makes it so highly effective in imbuing meaning with value and in compelling social action or inaction, is productive of painful and often debilitating levels of stress and distress for many Koori individuals potentially contributing to the re/production of social and economic marginalisation. A woman observes,

...I think that's why I just stay to myself when I'm here.¹⁹ Don't worry about anyone or going anywhere. ...I hardly go out... When I walk down the street here, I only look to the sides if I have to, but otherwise I'll just put me head down and just go to where I'm going, get what I have to get and then I go back home. Nothing else. I don't stop and yarn to people. You just go if you have to go, not because you want to go.

The sense of shame discourages the pursuit of entitlements such as social security benefits, prevents complaint where rights have been transgressed, and makes efforts to access services daunting. A teenager describes the difficulties experienced by some on the mission,

When it comes to everyday living, they're struggling like, for instance, if their power gets cut off they're too shamed to talk to um...Like if it's a woman, a blackwoman, she's too shamed to talk to a man on the phone...Like if someone's injured or something they're still too afraid to go to the doctors, like, cause they don't want to interact with different people...

He further reflects,

...shame is a big word and it ruins a lot of people too. People miss out on a lot of big things cause of the shame. It's a big thing, ay? Like if it wasn't there for some people they could go out and get a whole lot of things. Like 'cause they got all the brains. A lot of them have got all the brains. But it's that shameness that stops them from wanting to get out and try.

For some, shame may permeate the sense of self to such a negative degree that even the will to live wanes. Speaking of some of his young relations, the teenager observes,

Their confidence is so low, their confidence is that they don't think they're going to live to a very appropriate age. They're like, I want to die early anyway. We all gotta die. They don't really, like, have a set future. They just go, like, day by day. Take it day by day.²⁰

I have only space here to gesture to the shame-inducing effects of ‘transgenerational trauma’ (Atkinson 2002) resultant from the cumulative effects of colonial dispossession.

CONCLUSION

Cowlishaw has long argued that the substance and authenticity of contemporary Aboriginal culture in settled south-east Australia must be counted as emerging, not from the persistence of traditional forms, but from the common experience of oppression and shared struggles of resistance. Traces of autochthonous difference are found to have all but vanished under the impacts of colonisation. It is the colonial rage of Aborigines that now challenges the nation, rather than a radically ‘other’ economy, philosophy or social organisation (Cowlishaw 2004:195).

In focusing on the oppositional construction of Aboriginality characteristic of the racial interface, Cowlishaw and other resistance writers, have tended to underplay the significance of the private, comforting and demanding space of internal Koori domains. Here memory and knowledge, everyday practice and emotional disposition mark out a locus of belonging where meaning is not commandeered by relations with the mainstream. The preservation of these private domains of difference, sociability and cultural practice are far from without political import. Deep running differences underlie more public forms of distinction, constitute the source for moral judgements and critiques of the dominant order and provide the foundation for the assertion of alternative political rights.

The integrity of indigenous internal domains – and of the mainstream order from which they are set apart – depend on active processes of boundary maintenance which both exclude and contain. As I have shown, shame (like violence), works on many levels to these ends. An appreciation of the dual operations and effects of boundary-making (Barth 1970) enables one to better embrace both sides of present Australian anthropological debates over the relative importance of cultures of resistance and cultures of persistence in contemporary Aboriginal society. On one side of the coin, boundary-making necessarily involves an emphasis on opposition and distinction, ironically entailing close engagement and mutual negotiations over definitions of difference (Barth 1970:35; see also Cowlishaw 2004:4;). On the reverse, the definitive marking and patrol of the racial divide serves to open up a cloistered ‘back-stage’ space in which heterodox socio-cultural practices can be exercised and reproduced in relative isolation (Barth 1970:32).

I make no claim that indigenous cultural institutions, forms and understandings are preserved unchanged within internal Aboriginal domains. All have necessarily been transformed and newly remade in the tumultuous context of colonial claims over, and reorganisations of, land, bodies and minds. The insidious penetration of internalised racism in the construction of subjectivities and bodily dispositions has been a central focus of this paper.

In the constitution of contemporary Koori shame, indigenous and colonial worlds have been seen to collide and cross-fertilise, amplifying the experience of shame and muddying individual meanings and values. At the one time, Koori shame can be read for its continuities with classical Aboriginal social practice and for the history of post-invasion brutality, exclusion, repressive government policy and institutional practice. It can be seen as a capitulation to feelings of inadequacy and cultural incompetence as well as the sign of successful socialisation. It works to maintain the subjugation of an encapsulated people and operates as well as the strategic device which has ensured their cultural survival.

The battle to define meanings and to instate social and political orders is waged on a complex battlefield, which is at base, as Scheper-Hughes and Lock have argued, fought at the level of the individual body, which serves as:

the most immediate, the proximate terrain where social truths and contradictions are played out, as well as a locus of personal and social resistance, creativity and struggle (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987:31).

Implicated both in the continual remaking of social inequality and privation, and in the sustenance of cultural autonomy, shame, an emotion which toys mercilessly with the human body, occupies a perplexing place in that perennial conundrum which asks how an indigenous minority is to survive colonisation.

NOTES

1. Koori is a local term used to denote Aboriginal people in parts of New South Wales, particularly the mid and southern coast, and in Victoria.
2. Mission is a familiar endogamous term of reference to the place Jerrinja. The term was commonly applied broadly by Aboriginal people to institutional settlements whether or not they were actually religiously supervised.
3. This view is informed by an extensive cross-disciplinary literature particularly Lewis (1971) and including Lynd (1958), Tomkins (1964), Sartre (1989).
4. A term used broadly on the south coast, as in Sydney and other parts of the states to refer to whites. Usually interpreted to mean ghost, a story from the Burratorang Valley collected in 1900 may shed light on its origins. The local people there, she wrote, 'believed that Guba lived among the mountains. He is supposed to be a wild, hairy man, with feet turned backwards, and to have a tail about thirty feet long, by which he would hang to the highest tree, in readiness to seize any of the Aborigines as they passed' (Feld 1990:1xxi).
5. Baumann 2002 gives a detailed and insightful account of the shame attending the breakdown of subsection systems in the Katherine area.
6. See Morris for a Foucauldian analysis of the place of surveillance and information gathering in respect of the government stations in the Macleay Valley (1988; 1989).
7. Roseby Park was established as a training school in 1906 and was not relieved of white residential management until 1966.
8. Goodall recounts that an opponent of a scheme to settle three Aboriginal families in central Coonamble rested his case by recounting this scene (Goodall 1996:285).
9. Cowlshaw (2004) suggests the same contrast in sympathies between the white populations of cities and towns where contact with Aborigines is at a minimum and the white residents of towns with substantial Aboriginal populations.
10. Here black skin is a reference to Aboriginality, some may not appear literally black-skinned but are nonetheless marked with a racial stigma.
11. According to the psychoanalysts, shame may evoke hostile feelings of rage or humiliated fury toward the other but usually the feelings are redirected back accusatorily at the self (Lewis 1971:198).
12. See Lewis (1971), Scheff (1988), Keltner and Harker (1998); also the phenomenological arguments of Csordas (1994).
13. Refer to the literature on avoidance relationships. Patterns of avoidance, speech constraints and other restrictions on interaction have been well documented for remote Australia (Meggitt 1962; Thomson 1935; Tonkinson 1978). It is clear that similar prohibitions pertained in the classic traditions of the south coast (Howitt 1996:266).
14. Any simple equivalence drawn between whites and non-kin must be tempered by the fact that mixed-race marriages are not uncommon. At Jerrinja, nevertheless, the majority of such marriages involve non-Aboriginal men who have elected to commit themselves in large measure to the social mores of the community.
15. The issue of internal pressures for social conformity and the demands for the recognition of shared identity are discussed in greater depth in Kwok 2011.
16. See Retzinger for discussion of the role of the emotions, particularly shame and embarrassment, in regulating the social distance between self and other (1996).
17. The underlying presence of shame-rage might well be considered in respect of Cowlshaw's more recent studies of destructive and violent behaviour on the part of indigenous Australians (Lewis 1971).
18. See also Carter (1988) for a discussion of the inversion of meanings of racial slurs and Kwok (2005).
19. This woman was at the time living at Huskisson, a nearby white dominated township.
20. Shame was heavily implicated in the subsequent loss to suicidal death of a young member of this family

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