

# Exploring meanings of shame in migration

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There is a beautiful fountain in Palermo, named Pretoria after the square where it lies, and dating back to the middle of sixteenth century. The fountain, however, was not always there, but used to embellish the most renowned private garden in Florence. Indeed, a few years after it was erected, the fountain underwent a real migration: it was dismantled, and its pieces were packed and shipped to Sicily. It was reassembled in Palermo almost in the same form, but with a few significant changes of both the fountain structure and the place that eventually hosted it. What is remarkable, for a fountain with such a story, is the nickname it was given by Palermo citizenry: *the Shame Fountain*, which hints at both the shameful behavior of corrupted city rulers and the indecent exhibition of nudity by the fountain statues.

This story is worth reporting as an amazing metaphor of migration passages, with inherent losses and dislocation. Just as the fountain was dismembered, partly damaged and transformed both in structure and meanings, so migration entails relinquishing original objects and links, mother tongue included, as well as the inevitable disposing of the obvious concrete and sensorial environment which accompanies our daily life and significant moments: everything we take for granted and feel belonging to us. Moreover, migratory movements also activate container-contained dynamics between migrants and hosts leading to significant changes in the receiving population.

Shame is one among a set of specific affects linked to migration, such as nostalgia, betrayal, hope and a few others: their transitional quality is crucial, in my opinion, to elaborate movements of leaving and trespassing which presuppose clear and marked spaces and times, as well as the possibility of passing through them and moving back and forth. Borders are basic issues in migratory movements, linked to individual and cultural identity, endowed with different properties of permeability, flexibility, transmissibility and sensitivity. I am focusing only on the structuring, though painful, affects, imbued with a developed and preserved ability to mourn, not on those stemming from destructive drives, and leading to different forms of rage, hate, oppression, imposition, exclusion, persecution, obliteration, devaluation, all in all to dehumanization.

Shame may be described as a border affect: it entails a seeing-showing relationship and arises at the border between self and not-self, stemming from the laying bare of the subject's somato-psychic being. Its most evident manifestation is blushing, that involves the individual's primary protective envelope, but also exposes to the outer world both his/her inner pulsional excitation and his/her narcissistic feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness. There is a short circuit between intrapsychic space and intersubjective link, as well as between narcissistic and objectual functioning. In the dictionary, shame has at least two meanings, since it refers either to an individual, subjective feeling, or to something that overtly contradicts ethic and esthetic standards, giving rise to rejection and scandal. Even time boundaries are passed through by shame, when it is handed down by a generation to the subsequent ones, possibly leading to transgenerational sufferings. Its borderline nature is also expressed by its trend to blend with other affects and not to be clearly limited to one or the other psychic instance.

Shame is often set against guilt, that is the key affect of depression: Freud himself emphasized that shame feelings are lacking in melancholy. Green (2003) defined shame a primitive affect that is tied to the gaze and precedes guilt, appearing in response to an exceedingly demanding Ego Ideal: it

stems from narcissism, and is tightly bound both to its bodily sources and to the expecting other. By contrast, Kohut relates shame to the tragic man, as opposed to the guilty man: according to him, psychopathology lies on a narcissistic wound resulting from poor early attachment. Anyway, shame points out to mother's admiration loss, and subjects dealing with their separatedness and with the exceeding excitement of their libidinal body.

The knot of guilt and shame appears in the Eden myth, with the first members of mankind feeling at the same time guilty and ashamed, and migrating as well, which involves other specific affects such as nostalgia and treason.

By contrasting guilt and shame cultures, colonial psychiatry ranked subjected populations at an archaic level of affective development: colonized Africans were considered unable to develop guilt or depressive feelings, and were therefore restricted into the domain of shame, with its perceivable and apparent features that limit individual growth and differentiation. However, in geographic and cultural areas where the individual has not such a dominant status as in current western world and where the notion of responsibility is expressed in different forms, we can observe that depression is not so tightly bound to guilt, whereas shame may have a more significant part in it. Traditional therapies, indeed, operate on thresholds, body envelopes, generational boundaries, public/private borders and internal/external relationships, aiming at changing or recovering boundaries.

Clinical work with migrants allows to observe poignant feelings of shame that spread to all family members, and surface and materialize in the symptoms of one or more of them.

Nina, thirteen-year-old, is urgently sent to me by a colleague, because of a not clearly motivated insistence by her mother. After having set our first family interview, Mrs P confronts me with her ambivalence and experience of distance, absence and death: she calls me to tell she is leaving with Nina to visit her terminally ill brother in her faraway country of origin; apparently, she cannot conceive of leaving Nina at home, but at the same time she reassures me that her daughter will keep in contact with school and homework via internet. The journey and the passing through represent therefore the family style and self-perception, which are immediately delivered to me.

After a month I meet Nina and her parents. Shame fills a key position in this family drama. To my inquiring about the reasons for their help request, Nina answers: *I think it is because I suffer much from shame*. It is the kernel of the problem, but there is also Nina's doubt about whom this feeling belongs to: her, her parents, the whole family? She is definitely the spokesperson, and she speaks to say she is spoken... Then she adds: *with people of my world*, thereby discriminating among different degrees of familiarity, but only to state paradoxically that the family world, the *Heimlich*, is more troublesome and therefore blends into the *Unheimlich*. Moreover, familiarity may mean poorly protective boundaries, that allow intrusion and indiscreet looks. While Mrs. P somewhat overlaps her worrying about Nina to a request of individual sessions for herself, Mr P intervenes: *I cannot see why she should be ashamed: I was shy, too, but this is not shame*. Thus, he positions his daughter within the space-time boundaries of his own projective identifications and of a family history that entraps into an already-known able to screen from the other's gaze. He needs to deny the stranger's gaze that can arouse only shame, and to assert his own gaze, that yet cannot see. He is also competing against his wife and daughter for my patient's role. The bodies centrality in this family manifests itself at the end of the first session, when the three of them, in turn, go to the bathroom: I recognize in this a kind of bodily transference, a need to share with me their primary needs for a reliable relationship to begin among us. In this juncture they introduce me another family member, a young pooch that expresses all members' needs for attention, care and shelter, as well as the boundaries issue with all

the related conflicts (inclusion vs exclusion, confusion vs loss): all this happens in a space (the doorway) and time (the end of the session) threshold.

The following session, with the mother in place of the couple as previously agreed, highlights how in this family sexuality, aggression and boundaries are tightly intertwined. Parental conflicts most often coincide with changes of night organization, with Nina witnessing the ebb and flow of her parents sexual life, being involved in suspects of infidelity, and experiencing confusion about her own birthday celebration and parents' reconciliation.

In Nina's first individual session, shame, that the father introduced through denial, is abruptly overturned by her: she shows me how her hands, that she used to keep hidden, are damaged by cuticle- and nail-biting. What the father, who hides, cannot see, Nina offers to my gaze, anticipating my own curiosity. She blames her shame on her too swinging and easy-going mother, who draws others' gazes making Nina feel wounded and naked. Moreover, she reports her father's opposition to her psychotherapy as a consequence of his necessity to conceal something and inability to meet her daughter's need.

During her short-term psychotherapy, Nina gradually changes into a rebellious adolescent: conflicts between parents are replaced by those among her and them, so that generational differences are restored and mother and father get closer due to their shared worries for her. In a later session she describes extensively the *quinceañera*, the magnificent party for girls' fifteenth birthday, when they *enter the adults' world but are not yet of age*: a kind of transitional dimension, where the first dance is anyhow destined to the father.

Affects have a main role in migration, due to their impact on reorganization processes and identity paths of individuals who undergo uprooting and rupture experiences. Affects do not oppose to representation functions as sheer energetic elements: they instead give expression to them and are the matrix of symbolization. The whole affect range is involved in migration, including persecutory, confusional and depressive anxieties, as well as manic and omnipotence states, both pertaining to the migrant's meeting the new world, but also to the hosts' response to the entrants.

The significant implication of boundary structures in migratory experiences requires relating elaborations and specific expressions of affects to internal and external groups which the individual belongs to and shares the migration process with. The transitional component of affects, among which I include shame, is to my mind vital, as a mobilizing, transforming and symbolizing potentiality: it can contrast the tendency to a time stop through repetition, to a fixation of borders through stiffening and sealing, and, finally, to a space shattering when unbinding prevails.

## References

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