

# Shame! Rearming, Refiguring and Transfiguring

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## Abstract

This text highlights the importance of managing the passions, affections and emotions in neoliberal Fear politics. Thanks to the thinking of Sara Ahmed who analyses how today the workings of emotions are economic, talking about „affective economies.“ The production model of the emotions of Ahmed puts forward a critique of the privatisation and the psychologising of emotions, given that emotions are performative in their circulation. Returning to the idea of affect of shame as a transformational performance of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, the text also explores the performative potential that can be deployed in a process of collectivisation of shame against the neoliberal politics of fear and hate whether that be in the context of activism, contemporary art or the production of images.

**Keywords:** Affects, Emotions, Shame, Affective Economies, Affective Policies, Hate Politics, Performativity, Fear, Neoliberalism.

## Making a refugee girl in Germany cry

Thanks to the leadership of Merkel and her finance minister in the EU, along with the European Central Bank and the IMF, we have recently witnessed an unprecedented political strategy: most of the Greek population are to be condemned, for many years to come, to draconian and unfair living conditions. This development is in the interests of certain European banks and their creditors, that were, paradoxically, partly responsible for the crisis in financial capitalism in which we are still immersed.

Around the same time, the Chancellor takes part in a TV show in which a Palestinian refugee girl in Germany challenges her:

I do not know how long I will stay here or what my future will be like. I really want to study in Germany. It doesn't seem fair seeing other people enjoy life, while you can't enjoy it yourself.

Surprised, Merkel replies:

I understand what you're saying, but sometimes politics is tough. You're a good person, but as you know there are thousands and thousands of people in refugee camps in Lebanon, and if we say: all of you can come to Europe... all of you from Africa are welcome here, we simply wouldn't be able to manage the situation.

While Merkel goes on to explain her government's immigration policy to the audience, the girl bursts into tears and Merkel goes to console her, hugging her: „Come on, you did very well. I know you're going through a hard time ... „ But the show's host clarifies, „I do not think that it has anything to do with doing well or not, Madam Chancellor. Your words have really upset her“.



Video included in “Merkel hace llorar a una niña palestina” by Luis Doncel at El País, July 16th 2015.

If we consider this little anecdote with the backdrop of the Greek situation in mind, we can come to understand how neoliberalism and its leaders are presented as kind and responsible beings, acting with determination against the „inevitable“ because unfortunately „that's the way things are.“ Yet they do not burden themselves with the consequences of their policies, and they certainly have no interest in improving the lives of individuals. However, they will do whatever is necessary to safeguard the privileges of an elite group, despite the ever growing number of disadvantaged people and struggling social sectors.

What is interesting, and very relevant to this situation, is how when the affects, the most primary emotions, explode in full view of the media at the right moment, the ensuing chain reaction is capable of unmasking many otherwise hidden mechanisms. That is, if we allow ourselves to see them.

### “Affective economies“

Certainly in our time affects and emotions emerge as key elements to understand and uncover the Power-Fear relations in the political actions which build capitalism and form our reality. From a rigorous analysis of texts of various kinds, including some from overtly racist far-right parties in the UK, such as the British National Front, Sara Ahmed explores how love, fear or hate come about, among other emotions (Ahmed, 2004). Ahmed's model for thinking about emotions does not focus on what emotions

are, but rather how they work. It is neither an „inside-out“ nor an „outside-in“ model, but it is an economic model that takes into account the movements between both. She highlights how far-right parties use the notion of „soft touch“ in relation to immigrants and asylum seekers, and how this idea takes on a character of national identity and political action. While illustrating the clear difference between fascism and neo-liberalism, Ahmed pushes us to further explore the possibility that due to changes in immigration policies this difference is not in fact an absolute. We must also bear in mind that over the last 50 years principles of multiculturalism have always been high on the UK political agenda. Proof: The British government has transformed the story of the „softly softly treatment“ into a standard, and has used it to justify the tightening of asylum policies, arguing that Britain cannot be a „soft touch“. In so doing, credit is given to what the British National Front says, and we attempt to prevent others from trying and succeeding to join the nation and have a “comfortable” life, to prevent that national body from becoming a feminised body, „penetrated or invaded by another“ (2004, p. 2). The recent changes made to immigration policy in 2015 by David Cameron’s new government confirmed that this tightening is not going to ease up, with time limits on unemployment benefit for foreigners and increased restrictions on those from abroad who want to study in Britain.

For Ahmed, affects don’t exist positively in a sign or in a commodity, hate is economic, and likewise cannot exist positively in a sign of the body, but rather occurs as an effect of its circulation. Tracking the performance of the affective economy of hate, we can understand that it boasts a number of intangible and invisible mechanisms that are socially and politically orchestrated. The dominant discourse from the ruling classes tells us that hate does not respond to a particular social policy because it is an emotion, and as such responds only to subjective and psychological logic. This generates a psychologising discourse and a privatisation of emotions that perpetuates great social violence. But hate is neither in the body of the victim nor the aggressor; it circulates between bodies in a complex manner. As it is difficult to pinpoint where exactly hate is, sometimes it seems as if it does not exist, or as if it has been erased. But it is in fact the processes of its production and construction which have deliberately been deleted.

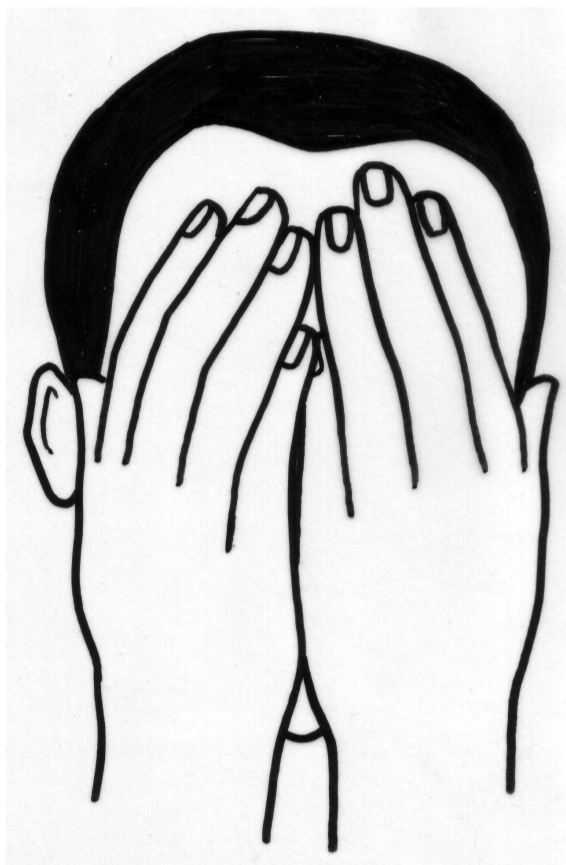
Ahmed does not offer a theory of emotions being responsible for accumulation (whether of value, power or meaning), but according to which emotions accumulate over time. To affect does not lie in an object or sign, but it is an effect of the movement between objects and signs, ergo it is an „accumulation of emotional value.“ Signs increase in affective value as a result of the movement between signs: the signs that circulate most become the most affective/effective. The circulation of hate signs involves both movement and stability, and some bodies move precisely to be stamped by other as objects of hate. Tracking the history of hate is to read the surfaces of bodies, as well as to listen to those who have been shaped by this history. Hence, the impossibility of reducing hate to a particular body allows hate to circulate in an economic sense, working to differentiate certain others from other others:

A distinction that never finish, because it waits for those who have not yet arrived. This discourse of „waiting for something false“ is what justifies the repetition of violence against the body and death of others in the name of protecting the nation (2004, p. 53).

In this way emotions are performative; they involve speech acts, depend on past histories and simultaneously generate effects. Ahmed's method is a critique of psychologising and privatising emotions, and also a critique of a social structure model that ignores emotional intensity. Paying a little more attention to affective economies would allow us to address the question of how individuals come to be invested in such social structures.

### When shame is a transformative performance

Following the same line of argument, I will underline the power of the performative nature of the ashamed subject. I would like to highlight the affect of shame



Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick recovered shame from queer theory because of its high performative capacity; for her, transformational shame is performance (Kosofsky Sedgwick, 1999). Shame is not defined by its prohibition and it is not the result of repression, but due to the politics of fear used by the hierarchies of the different churches, religions, societies and states throughout history, shame was fatefully associated with guilt and humiliation.



**IMAGEN 2: Caprichos, nº 24 “No hubo remedio”, Francisco de Goya, 1799. Museo del Prado.**



**IMAGEN 3: Mujeres republicanas rapadas por los franquistas en Oropesa, Toledo durante la guerra civil española. Autor desconocido.**



**IMAGEN 4: Carrie, un mito popular del acoso y la humillación. Fotograma de Carrie de Brian De Palma, 1976.**

However, shame operates as part of a more complex circuit, one linked to the production of identity. It is a communication system in itself, and there is an eloquence to how it operates. For instance, when a child is very young and in the process of learning how to communicate with their parents: a long face with averted eyes, blushing...these are all unconscious signals to win back intimate communication with parents, to be the centre of attention, because:

Shame shapes the identity, but without defining it or giving it content... as something opposed to guilt, it is a harmful feeling that does not adhere to what you do but what you are (1999, p. 209).

A detailed study of the devastating attacks of melancholy and depressive periods suffered by the writer Henry James, motivated by (among other things) a lack of recognition of the quality of his writing by literary critics of his time, and an analysis of his book *Prefaces*, allowed Kosofsky Sedgwick to delve further into the possibilities of shame. Processes of conscious narcissism linked to shame arise in James's writing. As a result, that narcissism and shame combine, leading to an „eroticism of shame“, so much so that what James experiences as a problem, an anomaly, emerges with its own

subjective singularity, retaining dignity when faced with figures of authority or power in the writer's social environment (i.e. the literary critics who had overlooked him). Processes of conscious shamelessness in James's writing become a force to overcome or to understand the moments of depressive destruction in his past, and so are a place of profound possibility.

Thus there is an extraordinary power in the mobilisations and demobilisations that shame produces in response to the positive affects of others, or lack thereof. That is, shame is crucial in the process of the formation of all ego or community. Therefore, we should give credit to the potential we would have if we were inclined to individual shame, but especially to collective shame, about certain events or phenomena of current neoliberal discomfort (immigration policies, policies which incite hate...) This predisposition would be the first step in establishing a platform for questioning, initiating a process that blurs our own subjectivity, either individually or collectively, in order to transform it. It involves questioning the logics and certainties that we have naturalised and come to take for granted as immutable.

Therapeutic and political strategies that attempt to undo individual or group shame are therefore absurd. Again, it is important at this point not to overemphasise certain strategies of minority groups relating to pride, and to understand shame as an enemy of pride. The potential of the metamorphic mechanism of shame is so eye-opening it would be a serious mistake not to develop it, for its ability to „rearm, refigure and transfigure“ (1999, p. 210).

What is most interesting about performativity is not its battle with essentialism, but the repressive hypotheses' alternatives to morality. One of Kosofsky Sedgwick's principal concerns is that Foucault's critique of the repressive hypothesis has been completely neutralised. Often from a certain critical perspective -which may even run through certain sectors of Foucauldian thought- there is a refusal to participate in the more complex queer performance and to experiment with its possibilities. This means that any criticism of repressive hypothesis from these sectors has, to a certain extent, become in itself a new alibi for the repressive hypothesis. These situations occur in many matters of institutional and discursive prohibitions, in celebrations of resistance to the system, etc... Kosofsky Sedgwick urges us to realise that we, as good consumers of late capitalism, persuade ourselves that by simply deciding what we do or do not like, we are actually directly intervening in production ... but, however, that this is a fallacy.

Feelings of queer shame are symptoms of how the queer subject is identified with that for which he has been repudiated by society as a subject. These identifications and emotions help us understand how some identities are deliberately stigmatised and shamed in the social order [IMAGES 5 and 6]. Queer performativity can be useful in various social contexts (including those beyond gender) for all types of performativity (acts of complex speech, coming out, working with serious illnesses related to identity, representation processes of social movements...)



**IMAGEN 5: Dorothy Counts una de la primeras mujeres negras en ir al instituto, su primer día de curso escolar en EEUU, 1957. Fotografía de Douglas Martin.**



**IMAGEN 6: Marcha del orgullo gay en Uganda donde la homosexualidad está prohibida, 2012. Fotografía de Rachel Adams.**

The harmful affect of shame, experienced as collective shame, becomes an important and an insufficiently explored route. In the state of generalised precariousness that neoliberal discomfort has condemned us to, the activation of collective shame about current malaise could be very important in deciding future ways of being.

## Collectivising shame

How can we further explore contemporary malaise through the collectivisation of shame?

On the one hand, it is still useful to challenge people in positions of responsibility, making our feelings of emotional shame known, feelings that are shared by many others, as seen in the case of the refugee girl, the TV presenter and Angela Merkel.

Another possibility, as noted by Douglas Crimp in relation to groups and communities, it is to transform grief into militancy, as some movements have effectively done in their fight against HIV (Crimp, 2002). And to re-examine the most important processes of this fight, and other tragedies of the queer community, in relation to other more collective tragedies such as the New York attacks in 2001. In this way, we can claim awareness of pain or mourning as a shared object, insisting that loss is not private property, but rather a sorrow shared by all citizens or the community.

The work that comes either from the relationship between activism and art, or from art alone, is also very important. Art allows for two distinct actions: first we can create situations and produce performances and actions that trigger a real performativity, and on the other hand we can produce images about the possibilities of this dimension of shame. In relation to the first point, of the many possible scenarios I am reminded of two in particular: *Pomaranczowa Alternatywa*, the so-called *Orange Alternative*, in Poland, where activists began making pictures of dwarves out of the paint stains that covered graffiti protesting against the Polish communist regime.



*Pomaranczowa alternatywa* at Youtube: [https://youtu.be/1DTrc\\_bYFaE](https://youtu.be/1DTrc_bYFaE)

The many dwarves soon became symbols of Polish opposition, to the point that hundreds of people dressed as orange dwarves started demonstrating in the streets, demanding things like „Gargamel’s resignation.“ Through the use of humor, allegory and metaphor, they managed to carry out many protests without running the risk of arrest. The other situation was in 2004, during the twentieth anniversary of the Bhopal disaster in India. A member of activist group The Yes Men was interviewed by BBC International. Concealing his identity, he presented himself as a spokesman for Dow Chemical.





The yes men at youtube: <https://youtu.be/SIUQ2sUti8o>

Dow was the owner of the company responsible for the chemical disaster, which had caused thousands of deaths and affected more than 120,000. In his performance, the activist said that Dow claimed responsibility for the disaster and would compensate the victims and their families. After two hours of wide-reaching coverage, Dow issued a press release denying this statement. By the time the official denial came through, shares of Dow in the stock market had decreased in value by two million dollars.

In relation to the pure production of images in situations where a particular shame is converted into performance, I think of my video *Sinuous Actions* (2010). When we hear stories about political strategies of social movements against the consequences of various types of violence: patriarchal violence, heteronormativity, intolerance of other political ideas, control and regulation of bodies by the state, a limiting of the powers of the common interest, etc... we learn that all of them have been forced to disguise, conceal or change their identity to ensure their actions are effective, or simply to fight for survival. All these narratives in my video *Sinuous Actions* are accompanied by a collection of animations representing the small acts of various people. Some of these are unconscious, for instance, an unconscious concealment of the face, others are conscious actions involving the use of makeup. For these animations I use sharp lines in black, white and grey that allow me to highlight the action of using makeup and hiding. Behind the actions we can just about see the shamed subject, in the grips of repression. On the other hand, I also develop image sequences documenting events in which some figures have overcome these enforcement mechanisms and built other strategies to reassert themselves. These subjects have turned their shame into pure action. I establish a relationship between these events with the idea of makeup as a mutation of the body and identity, in the same way that Joan Riviere added another layer of meaning to the idea of a mask, telling us that femininity does not come naturally, and that it is a mask (Riviere, 1929). And so, identity understood and problematised as a mask goes from being a hiding place to a place of possibility.

As discussed earlier, an affect cannot live positively in a sign on the body but thrives on its circulation. This circulation is presented in all its complexity due to the repetition of gestures and the power of video montage, with all their aesthetic strategies, which allow us to unite opposing behaviours that a priori we would not put together in reality. This allows us to understand that any form or body is manipulated according to the intensity at which certain emotions are circulating, generating very different effects in each individual. The video provides us with a catalogue of forms and different bodies, which in turn put other emotions into circulation when faced with emotions that only generate uniformed signs of coercion and violence.

Some notes on relevant cases:

Connie Culp, the woman who received the first face transplant in the US in 2009. Beyond the medical milestone, in an act of courage Culp made her new identity public [IMAGE 7]. Culp unwittingly became an international icon for gender abuse when her face was completely disfigured after her husband shot her in 2004. The face of another woman who had just died was used to cover the delicate bone structure of Connie's skull (which, incredibly, had survived the assault). In the lead up to the transplant, Connie had undergone about 30 unsuccessful operations in an attempt to rebuild her original face.



**IMAGEN 7: Conie Culp primera aparición pública con su nuevo rostro en 2009. Fotografía de Amy Sancetta.**

In 1972, the activists Barbara Gittings and Frank Kameny challenged the American Psychiatric Association to discuss removing homosexuality from the official list of mental illnesses. In order to do so they invited gay psychiatrist John E. Fryer, who hid his face with a mask and a wig for the discussion. He was presented in the discussion as Dr. H. Anonymous, as if he were some kind of monster or abnormal being [IMAGE 8]. Just a year later in 1973 the International Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from the list of mental illnesses.



**IMAGEN 9: Santiago Carrillo con peluca apunto de cruzar la frontera española en 1976. Autor de la imagen desconocido.**

In 1976, Santiago Carrillo, leader of the Communist Party in Spain and exiled in France, tried to cross back over the French-Spanish border. He concealed his identity wearing glasses and a wig, so that he wouldn't be denied access to his country. [IMAGE 9]. Once there, he successfully accelerated the legalisation of the Communist Party, and the transition process to democracy in Spain following Franco's death in 1975.

The drag king and Elvis impersonator Leigh Crow, also known as Elvis Herselvis, was used to transforming her identity on a regular basis for her act. In August 1996 she was invited to participate in the Second International Conference on Elvis Presley held at the University of Mississippi. Leigh was thrown out of the event by its sponsors, the EPE (Elvis Presley Enterprises), on the grounds that she was a woman trying to join a group of male performers from around the world who were invited to imitate the king of rock.

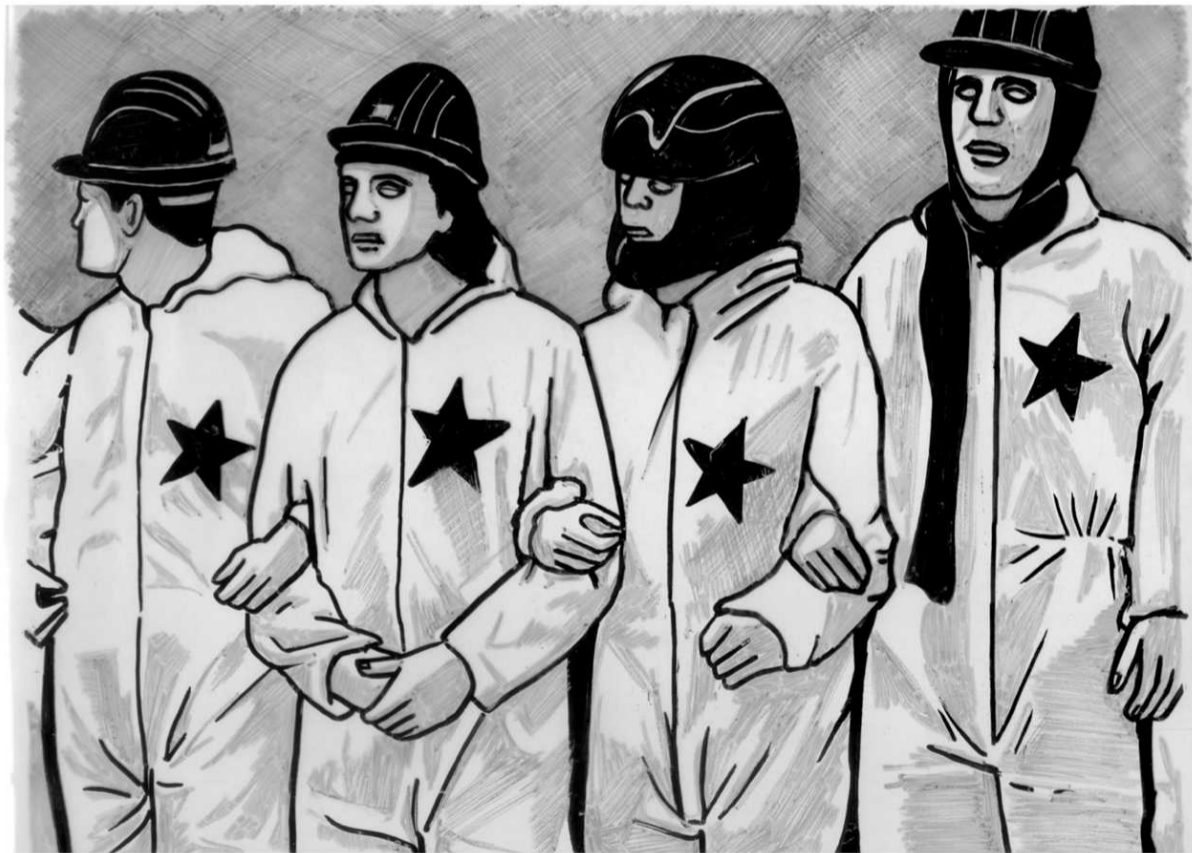


**IMAGEN 10: Elvis Herselvis en 1996. Fotograma de Acciones sinuosas, Diego del Pozo. 2010.**



**IMAGEN 11: Elvis Herselvis con una admiradora en 1996. Fotografía de Polixeni Papapetrou.**

And finally, the members of the Italian group Tute Bianche, who rallied against the G8 summit in Genova, July 20th 2001. In the demonstration they dressed in helmets, vests and white overalls, and they covered their bodies with padding, both for protection against the police and to be able to march together in large blocks. They tried to force the leaders of the summit to enter into negotiation with the antiglobalisation movement. [IMAGE 12]. Despite higher orders, a group of Italian Carabinieri charged the Tute Bianche, as was certified by a recording of a conversation between police forces. That same day Carlo Giuliani, an activist from another collective, died due to police fire in the same area.



**IMAGEN 12: Miembros de los Tute Bianche en la cumbre de Génova en 2001. Fotograma de Acciones sinuosas, Diego del Pozo. 2010.**

These collective strategies not only confirm resistance, they also confirm collective shame as an effective platform upon which to activate all the anxiety generated by the politics of fear and hate. With the recent adoption of the Mordaza Law by the PP government in Spain, it is still very important to produce actions and images that help reverse the effect that these policies have had on our bodies, and to turn their effectiveness into another affectivity; one which destabilises them.

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