Shifting Identities through Shame

There is a growing literature in racial justice circles calling for an attention to affect, and affect’s role in creating positive antiracist cultures. Thinking about this literature brings to mind conceptual artist Adrian Piper’s performance piece “My Calling (Card) #1” (1986-1990). This piece serves as a pre-printed, written intervention in racism manifest in social settings. It reads, in part,

Dear Friend, I am black. I am sure you did not realize this when you made / laughed at / agreed with that racist remark… I regret any discomfort my presence is causing you, just as I am sure you regret the discomfort your racism is causing me. (Piper 1999: 135)

I am interested in this piece because it both highlights and creates gaps in the naturalized perception of race through shaming. It does this by re-identifying its interlocutor. My Calling (Card) #1 is a discursive performance that makes an intercession in the nondiscursive – in the performative – through shame.¹ It deploys a call to a new identification in the process of identifying a particular act – laughter, agreement – as racist and thus shameworthy. Much of Piper’s work on and around race similarly calls for a similar anti-racist re-identification, which shifts the grounds of identity.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s rich work on shame illuminates some of the dynamics of shame in Piper’s work. Sedgwick reads queer performativity in particular, and identity formation in general, in relation to the affect of shame, arguing that shame expresses a failure of recognition, and, in that failure, a deep relationality. Shame marks a double movement toward “painful individuation, toward uncontrollable relationality” (36). Shame, Sedgwick argues, “floods into being as a moment, a disruptive moment, in a circuit of identity-constituting identificatory communication” (36). Such communication makes shame “integral to and residual in the processes by which identity itself is formed” (63) and thus a useful site for thinking about identity politics.

If Sedgwick is right to think that shame is a method of identification, can it also enable a kind of re-identification? Insofar as one feels shame, it seems that there is
a movement on the identificatory level – shame reveals something deep inside us. This pervading quality is one of the powers of affect. Because identity is fluid, the moment of shame cathects and refines an already-present pattern that manifests as a solid identity. It may also be particularly able to reveal the fluidity of ostensibly solid identity formations. Because one has just been something one does not want to be, the possibilities and actualities of being otherwise are manifest and foreshadowed. Shame turns on an inter- and intra-subjective hinge, which is to say that I see myself in relation to others. I feel towards them – perhaps even when the feeling I manifest in relation to people who have shamed me or towards whom I feel shame is anger or resentment. Shame always relates to others – it marks one site in which we have been formed by the look and the presence of others. What might attending to shame as an always intersubjective, always other unease tell us about identity formation? What might a story of shame as identity constituting tell us about the racial formation of identity? Thinking about racialised shame can play a key role in two important projects: first, in thinking about identity, identity politics, and identity formation and, second, in working against racism.

Adrian Piper’s performance, theory, and art objects stand as examples of how one might affect racialised internal conceptual frameworks.² I read the objects and performances she produces as aiming to effect deep identity shifts on the level of “race.” Some of Piper’s work articulates and deploys the affect of shame toward anti-racist ends. She moves toward these ends in at least three ways: her work confronts the viewer in a way that shames, it enacts shameful situations through their depiction, or it interpellates the viewer as the shaming agent. Each of these modes indicates a vector along which we might pursue an anti-racist subjectivity through shame-induced re-identification. I here take three groups of work as evocative and expressive of how Piper’s work deploys shame. In each case, the affect of shame differently highlights identity formation and expression as deeply intersubjective.

Shaming Confrontation: Calling (Card)

My thinking about how the self is intimately connected to others begins at the site of the Calling (Card). This piece is an example of a performance shaming its viewer, who automatically becomes much more than a viewer. The calling card shifts the social space it enters by revealing the armature of that space – a social framework that is noticeable through being other than how the people involved had understood it.³ This framework is made up of the relations that delineate it, and the selves formed and reformed in those relations. Piper says about this piece:

_the situation is one in which I find myself in otherwise exclusively white company at a dinner or cocktail party, in which those present do not realize I am black. Thinking themselves in sympathetic company, they (or any one of them) proceed to make racist remarks_. . . . (Piper 1996)