

**[Title] *Free Lunch with the Stench Wench*: Towards a Synaesthetics of Poverty and Shame in Catherine Hoffmann's performance**

For Catherine Hoffmann

This article originally came into being as an expanded review of a one-woman performance and gradually morphed into a trans-disciplinary discussion of gendered and classed shame, its sociocultural deployments, and the possibility of its collective overcoming through performance. Catherine Hoffmann's *Free Lunch with the Stench Wench* continues to frame and even lead the discussion, not as a narrative device nor as a dispersed interlude to theory, but because it powerfully exemplifies an intersectional feminist analysis of shame and its nexus with poverty, and suggests strategies for resistance. Hoffman's performance tables the relationship between disgust, specifically dissmell, and shame, and stages some of its thorniest conditions and repercussions, including shame's deep inscription in memories, the sensory qualities of such memories, and the relational and dynamic aspects of both creating and conquering shame. The foregrounding of artistic practice over scholarly theorisations of shame stems from a commitment to challenging the hierarchical division between theory and practice, and the recognition that writing of all kinds (including academic writing) constitutes a form of practice, while artistic practices also generate theoretical and other insights.

The article begins with a short description of *Free Lunch with the Stench Wench*, paying particular attention to the engagement of the audience's senses which, as I argue, immediately triggers discomfort while also laying the groundwork for its potential overcoming through empathy. This is followed with a discussion of the weaponisation of shame through disgust (especially dissmell) and its role in the establishment and maintenance of social divisions and inequality through sociological, psychological and artistic frameworks, such as phototherapy. In conclusion and returning to Hoffmann's performance, I explore the potential of shame to be re-weaponised against those who originally inflict it, and I finally consider the shame that haunts every creative act, especially

those with high political stakes: the failure to make a connection, the fear of being misunderstood.

**[Section title] “Good Daughters Resist” (Memories of Shame)**

“Shame becomes stored in memory in the form of scenes” (Kaufman 1996, 208)

The preview of Catherine Hoffmann’s new project at Toynbee Studios, London, on 14 June 2016 looked like it had been sold out. This was the first performance of the full version of *Free Lunch with the Stench Wench*, developed from Hoffmann’s participation at the Domestic Festival, Salford, followed by a 30-min scratch at *Whose London is it Anyway?* at Camden People’s Theatre in January 2016. Since March 2017 the show is on a UK tour with plans for further development. <1> “Expect a one woman flea circus with faded glory, austerity pants, drop scones and hot chocolate”, the venue website promised – or warned (ArtsAdmin 2016).

Hoffmann’s performance opened with the staging of what psychologists term a “governing scene”, namely a dynamic memory that compels re-enactment, “direct[s] action as well as imagination, defin[es] the good life” and also the bad (Kaufman 1996, 325). In interviews, Hoffmann identifies the scene as a turning point and the main motivation for undertaking the *Free Lunch* project, her most autobiographical yet (Frizzell 2016); she has also described the real-life events that it references as “a gift of new material I couldn’t ignore” (Hoffmann 2017a) . The resonant notion of the ambiguous gift, one that is unwanted not least because it creates an obligation to reciprocate, is reinforced in the performance in different ways. On stage, Hoffmann delivers a dead rat in her mouth and drops it at the feet of the first row of seats, like a domesticated cat who, still compelled to hunt, proudly presents its kills to its usually horrified owners. Post-performance, the audience is left with the uncomfortable memory of their *Free Lunch*, and the task of processing it in ways that transform rather than replicate or repress anew the shame that it unearths.

With the noise of chalk writing on a loop, Hoffmann appeared dressed in a fur coat and her “austerity pants”, a pair of discoloured underwear with the words “austerity pants” scribbled in indelible black marker. With her back to the audience, she wrote on a black board the first of three statements punctuating the piece: “GOOD DAUGHTERS RESIST” (the second was: “FIND YOUR RAGE” and the third: “RENOUNCE THE SHAME”). Hoffmann’s governing scene, half-narrated and half-re-enacted, exemplifies a classic instance of shame: public failure, falling tragically short of aspirations, one’s own and those of others. Having lost her job, Hoffmann became an Airbnb host and began taking pride in her positive reviews, until a rat appeared in her kitchen and fleas infested her guest bedroom. These memories, buffered in humorous self-deprecation, unlocked a stream of other older and more painful ones: of growing up in a large family with little money, arguments over food (“Who had the last fig roll?”), having to follow her parents up and down the country in search for precarious work and cheap accommodation, being humiliated and exploited, and feeling ashamed.

Despite a minimal stage set, the performance made use of some significant props, including a dead rat, a small hob on which drop scones were prepared, and hot chocolate, in which Hoffmann eventually drenched herself in an ambiguous act of self-humiliation and defiance. On stage, the rat remained at hand throughout, and served as the most (metaphorically) flexible of props: it became a phone, a pet, an infant (in the act of being born and then nursing on Hoffmann’s breast) (Fig. 1); stuffed down her “austerity pants”, it transformed the performer into her father. At the same time, the rat retained its identity as contaminating pest, dropped into hot chocolate and then disturbingly retrieved by Hoffmann’s teeth. The rat functioned as both matter and symbol and added a special meaning to the olfactory element of the performance: as Hoffmann switched on the stove, rank cooking smells began to fill the theatre, which turned from unpleasant to unnerving when the rat was dropped into the pan of hot chocolate. When I spoke with Hoffmann a few days after the performance, I had a lot of questions about the rat: she reassured me that hers was a defrosted farmed rat from a pet shop sold as food for reptiles, and thus sufficiently safe to use as she had done. It wasn’t the defrosted rat flesh but the association between the rat, infestation and deprivation that filled the theatre: this was the (perceived) stench of poverty.

*Free Lunch* was punctuated by numerous songs mostly written by Hoffmann for this performance,<2> and closed with two songs written by others: “Song on the Times”,<3> a mid-19<sup>th</sup> c. English protest song performed by Hoffmann a cappella, followed with “The Glorious Land” by PJ Harvey, played on the stage speakers. Separated by a century and a half, the two songs widen the bridge already set up between Hoffmann’s childhood in the 1970s and 1980s and her current life in austerity London even further, suggesting that “Song on the Times” remains perpetually and uncannily topical, while the irony of “The Glorious Land” subversively responds to ever-revived nationalisms. Hoffmann updated and gendered the lyrics to “Song on the Times”: the “parish pay” of the poor became “benefit”, and the call to arms was now directed to the “daughters”, not the “sons of freedom”, as in the original. “The Glorious Land” focuses on the fruitlessness of armed conflict, suggesting that war, deterrence and capitalism are in a mutually enabling relationship: “And what is the glorious fruit of our land?/Its fruit is deformed children./What is the glorious fruit of our land?/Its fruit is orphaned children”.<4>

The re-gendering of “Song on the Times” signposts a deeper concern with the gendering of poverty and shame. The “Stench Wench” is, after all, an intrinsically gendered figure: there is no direct male equivalent for “wench”, and unpleasant odours, real or imagined, emanating from female bodies have greater impact and are subject to stricter censures. Hoffmann has noted the potential for sexual exploitation as well as disgust in references to women in poverty:

the female poor are the lowest of the low. A female poor body has its own connotations. There’s a quote from the owner of a workhouse where he calls the women “dirty, saucy wretches”. I think about that a lot (Hoffmann in Frizzell 2016).

Critical literature repeatedly confirms that women, as a socially subordinate group, are more vulnerable to shame (Harris-Perry 2011), especially when it is experienced as the result of poverty (Walker 2014, 83). In the beginning of *Free Lunch* Hoffmann utters in a small voice, with difficulty and embarrassment: “Can I have a pack of extra large sanitary towels for my mum, please?” and later on, the most painful memory of shame and guilt is

revealed: pretending not to recognise her mother in the street and joining in with her friends in taunting her. If the “irreducible absolutist core” of poverty is shame (Amartya Sen cited in Walker 2014, 2) the mother-daughter plot with all its complications of ambivalence adds more pain, more shame, another turn of the screw. It was hard to hear this story and not *feel* shame, a shame all of one’s own. It is for this reason principally, as well as for its transgressive subject matter, its evocation of abjection and its potential to “confront, offend” and “unsettle” (Broadhurst 1999, 168) that *Free Lunch with the Stench Wench* can be classified as a “liminal performance”: its “lack of resolution or closure” (ibid., 71) is compiled by an explicitly political potential for intersectional empathy across class and other dividers, with shame catalysing social divisions while eroding personal resistance by compelling each audience member to “turn to his or her own life experiences” (ibid, 77; see also Machon 2009, 50-52).

Shame, especially class-related shame, is so profoundly woven into the mother-daughter relationship that artist Jo Spence and sociologist and artist Valerie Walkerdine titled a collaborative series of phototherapy portraits “Mother and Daughter Shame Work: Crossing Class Boundaries” (1988), in which they take turns impersonating their mothers and replaying family governing scenes, as Hoffmann does in *Free Lunch*. Albeit consisting of still photographic images rather than live art on stage, phototherapy foreshadows Hoffmann’s liminal performance through their shared genre-defying impetus, which is embedded in their feminist politics. Phototherapy exploits the performativity of identity and identification to feminist and gender-critical ends through a subversive repurposing of the photographic studio portrait, of which Spence had extensive professional experience, just as Hoffmann extends the interactive, intimate and empathetic potential of the one-woman monologue format through engaging the senses of and provoking gut reactions in the audience. In phototherapy, the portrait is approached as “a range of possibilities which can be brought into play at will, examined, questioned, accepted, transformed, discarded” (Martin and Spence 1986, 172). The collaborative process of phototherapy overhauls both the subjects of the portrait and the portrait as genre, and is viewed as both research into “personalised archetypal images in memory” with “vast chains of connotations” (ibid., 172), “a way of examining one’s social and psychic construction, both emotionally and theoretically” (175), and as a first step towards unravelling and shaking off the visual underpinnings of the nexus

between visual personal memories and social classifications, including but not limited to class, gender, and sexuality. Indeed, the ambition of phototherapy should not be underplayed: the aim was no less than a reinvention through reconstruction of these “personalised archetypal images” (172) and gestures “coded into our class positions” (192) that keep individuals “locked into past histories” (173) and into social and sexual roles. “[A] first step (...) towards broader social and economic change can be this facing up to the limiting defence mechanisms and blocks which we inhabit and which pattern us” (172-173). Similarly, images and gestures coded into gendered and class positions also make up Hoffmann’s raw materials in *Free Lunch*, while their constructive deconstruction in synaesthetic and affective collaboration with the audience constitute its ultimate aim. Rosy Martin, Jo Spence and Valerie Walkerdine do not mention affect as the term was not in the critical vocabulary of the time and political context of their exchange, but clearly acknowledge its importance, as long as it is paired with community organising and alternative pedagogies. Asked about the inadequacy of deconstruction as a model of analysis by Walkerdine, Spence explains her experience with critical theory as a mature student:

[A]lthough I felt in one way in total control, in another way I lost control completely. I took my belief system to pieces until I began to fall to pieces myself (...). You cannot deconstruct without a reconstruction process going on simultaneously (...). I want to be part of that area of education which encourages people to think for themselves, to understand not only the process of how the unconscious mind works, but to find out where to go for information and how to know if it is in your own and your group interests. Unless there is some notion that change is possible, then the act of destroying illusion is in itself insufficient (186).

Walkerdine continued the interrogation of embodied and memory-mediated identity formation and personal/political interpellation through the dual route of academic writing (e.g. 2011) and art practice, as has Rosy Martin in her art. In Walkerdine’s *The Maternal Line* (2014), for example, a “video installation and performance engaging with the ways in which traumatic experiences are passed down the maternal line and experienced in the present generation” (Transart 2014), the impact of earlier collaborative phototherapeutic

experimentation and an embodied and visualised research into gestures “coded into (...) classed positions” (Martin and Spence 1986, 192) is complemented with a more explicit emphasis on intergenerational transmissibility between mothers and daughters.

Transmissibility and solidarity through empathy, not only between the subjectivities in representation but also between the artist and her audiences, are fundamental to both phototherapy and particularly Hoffmann’s performance, as the next two sections explore.

### **[Section title] From Sense to Affect to Ideology: Towards a Synaesthetics of Shame**

Josephine Machon (2001; 2009) expands on the familiar definition of synaesthetics, namely “a sensation in one part of the body produced by a stimulus applied to another part” (2001) to describe an emergent performance style and a quality of audience experience. The performance style exploits the senses “in both the process and the means of production” to create “interdisciplinary, inter-textual and multi-sensational work”, while the audience experience opens itself up to a kind of generative disturbance as a “direct result of the unusual manipulation of combinations of performance elements” that move beyond vision and hearing to engage all the senses. Furthermore, synaesthetic disturbance has the potential to tap into pre-linguistic modes of communication, bears some affinity to the Kantian sublime and literary defamiliarisation (Machon 2001; 2009), and, I would add, creates an exceptionally favourable terrain for the cultivation of empathy between performer and audience. As the off-stage informal epilogue to the performance suggests, the “syn-” in synaesthetic performance should also be understood as a connector, not only a conduit between the senses or between ideas and sensations, but also as an invitation to solidarity between performer and audience, facilitated here by an offering of food to share.

The connective web between senses, affects and ideology is widely recognised in affect and script theory in psychology. Radical feminist psychotherapies offer predictably damning definitions of scripts as profoundly internalised “alienated existential blueprint[s] for the living of our lives” (Burstow 1992, 56). Originating in socialising agencies such as schools and families, these blueprints overwhelmingly represent the interests of the social elite and may be resisted by “counterscripts” from one’s own oppressed communities, in which pride often replaces shame. Counterscripts, however, do not necessarily dissolve the power of the

normative scripts. Instead, the undoing of a script involves the difficult work of articulation and analysis of the original and oppressive script as such, its testing against reality to uncover its ideological bias, and the assessment of the cost of the script to the individual and her community, all of which would hopefully lead to a conscious alteration of the script, both in one's psychical apparatus and in action (ibid., 53). In Catherine Hoffmann's words, the shameful content of her scripts is first "illuminate[d]", a term tacitly alluding to the vibrant illustrations of medieval manuscripts, in order for it to be "relinquish[ed]" (2017b). Scripts draw their power in part from not relying on words alone, as their name misleadingly suggests, but rather by presenting themselves as immersive life scenarios with visual, aural, and olfactory texture as well as touch, and imbued with the full range of affects in all their possible combinations. Interestingly, in affect theory, affects and sensations are not altogether distinct as they are both phenomenologically rather than ontologically defined (Kosofsky Sedgwick 2003, 21). Affect and script theory pioneer, psychologist Silvan Tomkins observes a "deep coherence between the differential magnification of specific affects and quite remote ideological derivatives" (1991, 232). Gershen Kaufman elaborates:

For example, if you believe that when life is disappointing, it leaves a bad taste in your mouth rather than a bad smell, then you are also likely to believe all of the following: that is it distressing rather than disgusting to see an adult cry, that human beings are basically good rather than evil, that numbers were created rather than discovered, that the mind is a lamp rather than a mirror, that the promotion of social welfare by government is more important than the maintenance of law and order, and that play is important for all human beings rather than childish (1996, 293-4).

Kaufman identifies the former set of responses with the humanistic orientation and the latter with the normative. Although each of these examples deserves consideration, what interests me here is specifically the mapping out of basic ideological tendencies onto the senses. If disappointment leaves a bad taste, the subject is implicated in its experience – they share disappointment to some degree, through empathy, even if the source and target of disappointment are external to them. Conversely, if disappointment smells bad, the subject confirms their distance from and distaste for its source and target, and their disgust is mobilised to underline their separation.



Although clearly related, disgust (in which dissmell is the defining feature) and shame are separate affects in Tomkins's taxonomy. Little known beyond certain schools of psychology until the turn of the last century when he became a key reference for affect theory mostly thanks to the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Tomkins's contribution hides unexpected and generative ambiguities beneath the superficial scientism of his system of affects, a system "analogous to the elements of a periodic table" (Kosofsky Sedgwick 2003, 24 n.1). Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank discover in Tomkins a much needed antidote to current truisms of critical theory, and a de-instrumentalising force against Sigmund Freud's model of the drives. From this perspective, Tomkins's thought is indistinguishable from the style of his writing, in which rhetorical repetition and sentences of Proustian length with multiple parallel clauses suggest something of the persistent complexities of experience that refuses to be homogenised through analytic frameworks. Another commonality with Marcel Proust can be found in their shared fascination with taxonomies but also their excited surprise at their disruptions (Kosofsky Sedgwick and Frank 2003, 98). Kosofsky Sedgwick and Frank read Tomkins "for the plot" (cf. Brooks 1984), as scholars had begun to do with the work of Sigmund Freud earlier, sharing with their readers their delight and enthusiasm for his texts while also hoping to encourage alternative readings that take similar liberties in different directions (Kosofsky Sedgwick and Frank 2003, 118). This present approach to Tomkins is motivated by and benefits from the liberties that Kosofsky Sedgwick and Frank recommend. With *Free Lunch* in mind, I find myself particularly drawn to Tompkins's description of the three interlinked affects of shame, contempt (dissmell) and disgust as activated not by an external or internal stimulus but "by the drawing of a boundary line or barrier" (ibid., 116):

Such a barrier might be because one is suddenly looked at by one who is strange, or because one wishes to look at or commune with another person but suddenly cannot because he is strange, or one expected him to be familiar but he suddenly appears unfamiliar, or one started to smile but found one was smiling at a stranger (Tomkins cited in ibid., 97).

Eliding better established models of interpreting shame developed in reference to prohibition, disapproval, alienation and repression, Tomkins opts for the strangely diffuse

idea of “strangeness” and the unsettling dynamics of familiarity/unfamiliarity, which evoke “The ‘Uncanny’”, one of Freud’s most generatively parsed texts (Freud 1990, 335-376; see also Kokoli 2016, 17-38). Tomkins’s strange “strangeness” emanates from a missed social encounter, a failure of mutual recognition and a frustrated expectation of reciprocity. Vibrating with literary polysemy, these barriers that activate shame, contempt and disgust invite both literal and richly metaphorical interpretations.

Dissmell specifically has long been identified as a sensory support for social divisions. In a much quoted passage, George Orwell reveals a shameful secret:

the real secret of class distinctions in the West – the real reason why a European of bourgeois upbringing, even when he calls himself a Communist, cannot without a hard effort think of a working man as his equal. It is summed up in four frightful words [...] *The lower classes smell* (Orwell 1975, 112, emphasis in the original).

Unlike ideas in the mind, Orwell elaborates, physical repulsion cannot be overcome by reason. The physical repulsion of the middle classes against the poor, however, can be learned, and Orwell himself was taught it as a child. Disgust is systematically inculcated as part of one’s interpellation into middle-class identity. This learned revulsion against the working class body does not only form the sensory foundation of class distinction but gives it a “chasmic, impassable quality” (Orwell 1975, 113); it supports moral judgement and political (in)action and proves a major impediment to solidarity. Writing in 2005, seven decades after the original publication of Orwell’s text in 1937 and nearly a century after the middle-class childhood that he describes, Stephanie Lawler explores the mediatization and, in some ways, the intensification of class distinction in the UK through disgust at the spectacle of “underclass ferality”. “No longer confined to the slums of the inner cities” the working class are now “both horrifically near and intriguingly distant” (Lawler 2005, 442). Lawler homes in specifically on the mechanisms of dehumanisation of one class by another through naturalised standards of taste, of which the middle class claims unique ownership. Rather than being primary, the “bad smell” of the working classes is revealed as the outcome of dehumanisation through cultural shaming and narratives of decline and lack (ibid.).

Lawler's approach underlines the relational aspect of class-ification by deliberately shifting the focus from the working to the middle classes: in her article, it is not the making of contemporary British working class-ness that is at stake but rather the production of middle-class identifications through the public expression of disgust against the poor – namely their repeated symbolic expulsion through the rigorous policing of middle class boundaries. (2005, 430-431). Beverley Skeggs eloquently discusses the workings of class production as not simply “the result of interests” but also as an antagonistic “relationship always relative to other groups” (2010, 340). “Class relations are dynamic forces that underwrite all social encounters” (ibid., 356) and such encounters have a sensory as much as a social texture. Understandings of class should be “dynamic and performative” with “fear, anxiety and disgust (...) fill[ing] categorisations of class” (Skeggs 2012, 269). Albeit rarely openly discussed, a tacit awareness of the politics of smell is widespread in both creative and scholarly practices. In “Ten Tips on Being Feckless and Poor Whilst Pretending not to be”, a pamphlet distributed before the performance of *Free Lunch with the Stench Wench*,<sup><5></sup> only one of the tips contains caps for emphasis: “3. Whatever it takes do not SMELL, STEAL deodorant if necessary.” Having summarised sociological findings and first-person accounts by working-class women feeling out of place in upmarket department stores, in which the perfume counter gets special mentions, Skeggs relates a joke she heard while she was writing her research paper “about two Essex girls (the geographical euphemism for London working-class) at the perfume counter. What is it about perfume counters?”, she wonders (2010, 357, n. 11). As well as representing improper aspiration on the part of the “Essex girls”, which should be punished, this perfume counter obsession possibly foregrounds smell as the sense that is least likely to be fooled by superficial airs and graces. Whatever “they” do, the arbiters of taste will always smell a rat. “[D]isgust is crucial to power relations” (Ahmed 2004, 88), and it is customarily weaponised in the exclusion, stigmatisation and subjugation of social groups and individuals (Nussbaum 2004; Harris-Perry 2011; Tyler 2013). Expanding on Jacques Rancière's idea that the political is always already aesthetic and Imogen Tyler's conception of “revolting aesthetics”, I would suggest that social divisions are firmly established on *synaesthetic* grounds and are inculcated through thoroughly *synaesthetic* means.

The truth of the toxic poverty-disgust-shame nexus is best revealed in fiction and on stage. It is telling that no less than two out of the eleven chapters of the book *The Shame of Poverty* by Robert Walker (2014), a definitive academic intervention from the field of policy research, are devoted to the analysis of cultural texts and artefacts, including literature, film and oral tradition, in an effort to better understand both the link between poverty and shame and its salutary rapture. This may well be due to the difficulties of openly admitting shame, an act that is itself shameful. This “double reflexivity” of shame (Walker 2014, 34) has particularly harmful repercussions and leaves the target of shaming with few options, all compromising in their own way. Either they will choose to acquiesce, itself a sign of weakness which can potentially provoke further attacks of shaming; or they will lash out in anger against their attackers, or a more vulnerable target. In the case of women, the aggressive option is particularly frowned upon and met with social sanctions and moral opprobrium for breaking gendered rules of “social class feeling” (Power et al. 2011). For the targets of shame, displaying the physical symptoms of shame becomes a social obligation, the breach of which would risk further shaming or other social penalties, and is sometimes even codified in law (Nussbaum 2004, 173-174; Harris-Perry 2011, 108). Seeming shameless on the other hand is deemed among the most shameful things of all, and assumed shamelessness is viewed as an excuse and provocation for further shaming. Shaming-induced rage is thus as justified as it is self-defeating; rather than a cycle, shame and rage form a downward spiral as its evocation of racist and classist stereotypes (the “angry black woman”; the “feral underclass”) promote the further dehumanisation of the targets of shaming (Harris-Perry 2011, 123). Shame puts its targets in a seemingly unbreakable bind, neutralising them as social subjects: neither accepting nor fighting against shame offers any relief or escape from it. Thankfully, the contaminating capacity of shame and its abjectly ill-defined borders present opportunities for subversion through reversal. Shame can ricochet and hit those who inflict it.

### **[Section Title] (Re-)Weaponising Shame**

Writing in 1837, pioneering British sociologist Harriet Martineau draws attention to a contaminating aspect of shame, in addition – and contrast – to to the admission of feeling shame which leads to further shaming: “the condition of the female working classes is such

that if its sufferings were but made known, emotions of horror and shame would tremble through the whole of society” (1837, 268). Confronting “the whole of society” with the unacceptable working conditions of its poorest and most vulnerable turns the tables on shaming and can lead to change, or at least the recognition of the need for reform. Casting her project as both sociological and political, at once scholarly and activist, Martineau performs a simple but powerful reversal by which the shamed free themselves from stigmatisation by exposing the shame of their oppression. Almost two centuries later, Catherine Hoffmann (2017a) finds the “device of shame in relation to class and economics” to still be pervasive and robust but also susceptible to exposure through sharing: interviews for the Toynbee studios performance provoked confessions of shameful secrets and memories from the interviewees. “This is not just my story or my family’s but the experience of millions in Britain” (Hoffmann 2017b). In *Free Lunch*, one such explicit act of turning the tables consists of the naming of one of Hoffmann’s family’s landlords who deliberately kept the water supply to their rented cottage shut, thus forcing Hoffmann’s parents to drive to the local garage to fill a plastic container with water every day for the whole family’s needs. The gruelling struggle for survival against such odds and the shame of exhausting the family’s resources to fulfil its most basic needs, including cleanliness, is thrown back at those responsible for making it so hard in the first place.

The subversion of shame isn’t exhausted in this reversal, effective though it may be. Returning to the governing scene of her failure as an Airbnb hostess towards the end of the performance, Hoffmann draws a link to another failure, this time a performance that did not fulfil its intention to expose shame, instead itself devolving into a shameful incident: a “show in Manchester where I made myself sit in a bath full of nappies, I am humiliating myself yet again”. Aware of the risk of repeating this misfire and living with the consequence of further shame, and worried about the ethics of revealing so much about herself and uninvolved loved ones, Hoffmann’s self-doubt threatens to take over. In this self-referential fissure, where the performer assesses her own performance practice, lies an aspect of shame that pre-emptively tinges every creative act, especially one for which the stakes are explicitly political as well as aesthetic and bear distinct ethical implications. In an autobiographically framed text about writing, especially writing on things about which one feels very strongly, Elspeth Probyn identifies “an uneasy task (...). How could it be otherwise

when it involves a body grappling with interests, hoping to engage others?” (2010, 89-90). Good writers, meaning writers invested in the effectiveness of their writing, are constantly haunted by “the blush of having failed to connect with readers” (ibid., 89); but rather than being inhibiting, the spectre of failure motivates writers to return to the task of writing “with renewed desire to do better – to get better” (ibid.). This is why Probyn describes Primo Levi’s concerns about writing (and *for* his own writing), as a prickly, unsettling but ethically necessary present: his “gift of shame” (ibid). Hoffmann’s grappling body stages a naked protest against the abjectification of its own social identity by synaesthetically sharing the scripts of its own oppression. These familiar but repressed scripts of shame are bound to trace a fine line between reinforcement and resistance through analysis. For example, Hoffmann’s contiguity with the animal in her deployment of the rat, and her transformation into a cat when she delivers its half-cooked carcass to her audience (Fig. 2) reference the dehumanisation of the poor through a dangerous embodiment that invites the viewers to unpick the abjectly absurd notion of the “feral underclass” but refrains from doing the job for them. The aesthetic risks are as high as the political stakes.

Anticipating the embarrassment of appearing naked on stage in *Free Lunch with the Stench Wench*, and, behind her nakedness, the fear or artistic and therefore also political and ethical failure, Hoffmann seems defiant: “But you know what: fuck it. I don’t care. Fuck it, fuck it, fuck it. I’m not going to hide. I am what I am. And you’re still going to accept me” (Hoffmann in Frizzell 2016). As it turned out, prideful defiance was not representative of the tone of the *Free Lunch* performance. Like *Free Lunch*, which includes no lunch let alone a free one, the closing of Hoffmann’s *Guardian* interview merely signposts a thoughtful and knowing approach to shame, in which anger is recognised as a dangerous antidote. In the end, like shame, anger transpires to be a phase to work through and overcome rather than a destination. Early in the performance Hoffmann teased the audience that if any of them (us) came expecting a free lunch, they (we) should meet her in the bar “to have a chat about nourishment, legitimacy and freedom...” But immediately she added, with a conciliatory air, that there may be some refreshments offered after all; “let’s see how we get on, shall we?” This was no throwaway comment. After the performance, Hoffmann re-emerged looking relaxed and beautiful in a cobalt blue cocktail dress and although no-one, as far as I could tell, raised the issue of the free lunch or the promise of refreshments, every table was

already supplied with a generous quantity of fig rolls, so that nobody would have to fight over the last one. In publicly re-enacting scenes of shame, *Free Lunch with the Stench Wench* fulfilled its apotropaic aspiration to shed the shame through sharing. Fittingly, an epilogue of sorts unfolded at the frayed edges of the performance, off stage and in the darkened bar of Toynbee Studios. Beyond shame and anger lay the possibility of collective resistance (“GOOD DAUGHTERS RESIST”): on stage, Hoffmann’s synaesthetic portrait of the poverty-shame nexus and its psychosocial fallout argued for its necessity; off stage, its nurturing began with a secular communion over fig rolls between the artist and those in the audience who were moved to stay.

The sweet fig rolls temporarily erased the rank smells of on-stage cooking and the rat simmering in hot chocolate; they mitigated the synaesthetically evoked stench of a bathtub full of dirty nappies. Yet their aftertaste is more ambiguous: life’s “gift of new material” (Hoffmann 2017a), developed by Hoffmann into this uncomfortable performance, is also itself an discomfiting gift to the audience (us), now faced with the obligation of fulfilling the performance’s liminal and synaesthetic aspirations. The open-endedness of *Free Lunch*, its synaesthetic outreach and the performer’s risk-taking expect to be met with some kind of engagement that goes beyond the viewers’ attention during the show. They all demand reciprocation, a suitable counter-gift of recognition and understanding, in which shame-sharing is but the first step: there is, after all, no such thing as a free lunch.

## Notes

1. The 2017 version of *Free Lunch with the Stenchwench* has undergone some very small changes in both its script and its staging and is still to some degree in flux at the time of writing (May 2017). In this article I refer to the Toynbee Studios performance of June 2016.
2. The leaflet accompanying the performances at Camden People’s Theatre, 30 March-1 April 2017, attributes the songs “The naughty little flea”, “Gresham Road Brixton”, “Playing in the park”, “Scrabbling about” to Catherine Hoffmann. In her guest blog for these three performances Hoffmann explains that some of the songs are based on interviews with family members and identifies “Gresham Road Brixton” as her “dad’s punk rock song (...) about Levi 501s and the luxury of moving into a council house in the 50s” (2017a).

3. "Song on the Times" (1840s), reportedly written after the repeal of the Corn Laws, a set of protectionist measures that favoured British producers of grain but kept prices of basic food stuffs high, was also included in the anthology *English Rebel Songs, 1381-1914* (EMI, 1988; re-released MUTT Records, 2003) by anarchist punk band Chumbawamba.
4. "The Glorious Land" is part of the LP PJ Harvey, *Let England Shake* (Vagrant, 2011).
5. A video version of *Ten Tips on being feckless and poor* is available online: <https://vimeo.com/166491491> (accessed 27 April 2017).
6. I have found analyses of the stigmatisation and shaming of women of colour (Harris-Perry 2011; Power et al. 2011) particularly relevant to my reflection on shame and poverty in Hoffmann's work and the UK, especially austerity-induced or -aggravated poverty in neoliberalism. For this reason, among others, I have avoided the designation "white working class" in this article. Hoffmann's ethnicity is brought up in *Free Lunch* but only in the context of bullies' taunts, who ask whether her family are "gypsies" and "where did you get that weird hair?"

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#### ILLUSTRATION CAPTIONS

Fig. 1. Catherine Hoffmann, *Free Lunch with the Stench Wench*, publicity photograph by Lesley Ewen, 2016. Courtesy of Catherine Hoffmann.

Fig. 2. Catherine Hoffmann, *Free Lunch with the Stench Wench*, 14 June 2016, Toynbee Studios, London. Photograph by Richard Davenport. Courtesy of Catherine Hoffmann.