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Introduction: Risking Feeling: Alice Munro's Fiction of "Exquisite Shame"  
Amelia DeFalco and Lorraine York

We can pinpoint the origins of this collection with unusual precision. In 2003, in an essay entitled “The Baby or the Violin? Ethics and Femininity in the Fiction of Alice Munro,” Naomi Morgenstern observed that “Munro’s stories have much to contribute to contemporary efforts to think about literariness and ethics.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, though previous critics of Munro had by no means ignored the ethical—or the affective—dimensions of her work (Redekop, Howells, Heble), the steadfast focus on these dimensions afforded by the affective and ethical “turns” in literary studies during and since the time of Morgenstern’s comment has allowed, and indeed called out, for a dedicated analysis of Alice Munro’s stories from the intertwined perspectives of ethics and affects. Indeed, in that same 2003 essay, Morgenstern’s perception that “Munro’s stories represent the risks of the ethical”<sup>2</sup> made it clear that the affective dimension—risk and its associated feeling of vulnerability—is fully engaged in any discussion of the ethical. The two can hardly be disarticulated for, as Brian Massumi pronounces, “Ethics are about how we inhabit uncertainty together.”<sup>3</sup>

The title of this introduction is inspired by the story “What Is Remembered” (2001), one of many Munro stories suffused with duplicitous, conflicting, often mysterious affects, most prominently, a seductive, but unbearable, erotic, yet despicable, “exquisite shame.”<sup>4</sup> The story is a compelling entry point for an investigation of affects and ethics via shame since the word itself occurs no less than five times in the twenty-four-page story. Indeed, shame is in many ways central to the story’s exploration of marriage, motherhood and infidelity as experiences of embodiment intricately bound to affect, aging, and mortality. The story concerns Meriel, a young wife and mother chafing at the strictures of heteronormative family life: “Young husbands were stern, in those days. . . . Off to work every morning, clean-shaven, youthful

necks in knotted ties, days spent in unknown labors, home again at suppertime to take a critical glance at the evening meal and to shake out the newspaper, hold it up between themselves and the muddle of the kitchen, the ailments and emotions, the babies.”<sup>5</sup> This vision of “ailments and emotions” as the unseemly, contagious burden of cohabitation and home that masculine power erects bulwarks against is central to our collection, which considers how illness, disability, and affective embodiment destabilize the illusion of the able-bodied, masculine, rational, *unaffected* subject that underlies neoliberal political discourse. Meanwhile, in Munro, the wives of these young husbands, thrust into the “stunning responsibility” of wifedom and motherhood succumb to, balk at, and shirk, sometimes simultaneously, the oppressive demands of femininity, indulging in “dreamy rebellion, subversive get-togethers, laughing fits” that threaten to transgress the “newspaper” barriers that their husbands have erected.<sup>6</sup> Shared, “subversive” ribaldry is just one of the many radical, even dangerous affects that permeate Munro’s fiction. In Munro, affects expose and destabilize, threaten and transgress prevailing gender and sexual politics, ethical responsibilities, and affective economies. Munro’s characters grapple with the risk of emotionality, the undertow of affect that can, at its most extreme, produce selfish and cruel indulgences of desire and “ugly feelings”: disgust, shame, repulsion. At the other end of the spectrum is the exercise of self-effacing “prudence” that maintains affective economies, as Meriel does, despite her fleeting indulgence of extramarital desire. In the end, she pursues “some economical sort of emotional management” that carefully balances risks and rewards, forgoing the radical happiness that suffused her, momentarily, in her brief affair.<sup>7</sup> The problem of affectivity recurs throughout Munro’s oeuvre, which pays close attention to the economy of emotions. As the character

Joyce muses in the more recent story "Fiction" (2009): "It almost seemed as if there must be some random and of course unfair thrift in the emotional housekeeping of the world, if the great happiness -- however temporary, however flimsy -- of one person could come out of the great unhappiness of another."<sup>8</sup> Affects are never solitary, never without consequence, never apolitical. They are always shifting, transmitting, transforming, at once exposing and creating dense, unpredictable, invisible but palpable networks between bodies. Affects are, in effect, always *affecting*, at once noun and verb, being and doing simultaneously.

In "What is Remembered," Meriel's brief evasion of the "stunning responsibility" of wifedom manifests in an unexpected, thrilling sexual infidelity with a stranger she meets at a funeral. Guilt<sup>9</sup> and shame are the dominant affects associated with the "power and delight"<sup>10</sup> of the escapade. The association between eroticism and shame is not unusual, but Munro complicates the straightforward shameful thrill, and thrilling shame, of illicit sexual adventure with intimations of aging, disability, and death. The opportunity for infidelity is afforded by Meriel's plan to visit her elderly namesake, Aunt Muriel, in a nursing home on her way home from the funeral. The stranger, an unnamed bush pilot and doctor who treated the deceased, offers to drive her there. Despite her cataracts, Aunt Muriel easily recognizes the frisson between the pair, responding to the invisible "transmission of affect" described by Teresa Brennan.<sup>11</sup> "I could tell," Aunt Muriel tells the pair, "I used to be a devil myself."<sup>12</sup> The magnificent tension between the narration's first description of Aunt Muriel's pointedly ailing body – "swollen and glimmering" under her asbestos blanket, smoking a cigarette alone in a "dim corridor" painted a "liverish" colour; her skin covered in "dead-white spots," her hair "ragged, mussed from being rubbed into pillows, and the lobes of her ears hung out of it like

flat teats”<sup>13</sup> – and the licentious stories she tells of sexual adventure, the wild parties where people would “Just meet for the first time and start kissing like mad and run off into the forest. In the dark,”<sup>14</sup> reanimates the story’s initial reference to the feminized space of the home, here transformed into the nursing home, as an unseemly space dominated by “ailments and emotion.” The concurrence of morbidity and “decline”<sup>15</sup> with sexual vitality and adventure asserts the persistence of affective embodiment, the often troubling unpredictability of human embodiment as a site of combined vulnerability, power, and risk. The masculine order that seeks to disavow this precarity, to confine “ailments and emotions” to the feminine space of the home, is a futile rejection, a false imposition of order that cannot be sustained: Meriel’s husband, Pierre, like all the story’s men, succumbs to illness in the end, though he strives to maintain masculine order throughout his illness. When Meriel reads *Fathers and Sons* to him during his convalescence, the couple argue over the novel’s depiction of gender and romance. According to Pierre, Anna cannot respond to Bazarov’s declaration of love because of the risk of “shame and rejection. She’s intelligent. She knows that,” argues Pierre. “Intelligence makes her cold. Intelligent means cold, for a woman.”<sup>16</sup> Though he clarifies that he is speaking of nineteenth century tropes, his reading echoes the earlier description of male breadwinners seeking to protect their rational world (with newspapers, no less) from the disarrayed emotionality and embodiment of the feminized space of home, a re-articulation of the notion that rationality and embodied affects cannot cohabitate. The either/or fallacy of reason versus emotion cannot be consigned to the past, as Meriel’s story of passion and prudence makes clear.

This persistent fiction – that emotions, embodied vulnerability can, indeed should, be controlled and contained, limited to appropriate sectors and zones of life -- haunts Munro’s characters, who can only experience emotions as dissonance, as the disorienting conflict of “exquisite shame,” or “morbid, preening excitement.”<sup>17</sup> This dissonance and its oxymoronic stylistic vehicle are characteristic of affect as theorized by Silvan Tomkins; shame, he observed, is not walled off from affects thought to be positive, such as interest/excitement or enjoyment/joy; indeed, it is, in his words, “produced by the incomplete reduction of the positive affects of interest and enjoyment.”<sup>18</sup> Recalling the brief affair with the doctor years, even decades later, Meriel experiences “the raw surprise of her own body, the racketing of desire.”<sup>19</sup> The story’s only mention of entirely positive affects -- her body “packed full of happiness, rewarded as she would surely never be again, every cell in her body, plumped up with a sweet self-esteem”<sup>20</sup> -- is delivered as the (potential) rationale for suicide. A barely entertained idea she takes from romantic fiction, “a certain kind of story—not the kind that anybody wrote anymore.”<sup>21</sup> All-consuming pleasure, the kind that affects every cell in the body, is such a rarity that it becomes a kind of inverse trauma, a haunting recollection that takes her body by storm again and again in the decades that follow.

“What Is Remembered” draws our attention to the inextricable entanglement of gender, bodies, affects and ethics in Munro’s work. Margaret Atwood has described Munro as the preeminent writer of shame: “I can think of no other writer who returns to the emotion of shame so frequently and meticulously as Munro.”<sup>22</sup> However, as our contributors demonstrate, shame is only the beginning. Munro’s stories explore the wide range of shifting, contradictory embodied affects, at once perceived and mysterious, felt and disavowed. The discussion of

affects is, we suggest, always inevitably a discussion of ethics since the way bodies register and create affects, and how those affects initiate, or often fail to initiate action in the world creates a tangle of causes and effects. Munro's stories explore the connections between negative affects – shame, disgust, guilt – and negative, cruel, even homicidal actions in often discomfiting detail. The dismissal of emotions and emotionality as frivolous, “feminine,” without consequence, as somehow removed from the masculine domains of politics and work is a ridiculous, yet dangerously persistent conviction. As these explorations of Munro's fiction make clear, emotions are powerful, productive, and always political.

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The following essays explore how the denizens and readers of Alice Munro's fictional worlds “inhabit uncertainty together” as they come up against the manifold challenges of living in the world. As Claire Omhovere reminds us, the term ‘ethos’ first meant “dwelling place.” Being in the world becomes, in Munro's fiction, a matter of considering the degree of habitability the world affords us and how “open” to that world we can be. As several of our contributors note, in the case of characters who find themselves on the lower rungs of social hierarchies of gender, class, age, or (less often) race, the degree of choice about how open they can be to the world and its harshness or pleasures is seriously compromised. Some of that harshness comes from the confrontations of ethics with morality, and its associated values of resoluteness and certitude. The following essays ponder the collision of ethics as “dwelling”—as a place one can or cannot “inhabit”—and the “uncertainty” that attaches itself to our (differently) embodied experiences of the world.



Embodiment is, for several of these critics, a dwelling too, and a conduit by which the particularities of the everyday resist the grander narratives of morality and Enlightenment individualism. In these essays, the authors explore the consequences of unruly embodiment that interfere with gendered identity and humanist conventions of the human based on reason and rationality. For Sara Jamieson, the embodied dailiness of breastfeeding offers one site at which Munro's women can depart (or not) from a timeless, transcendent-seeming moral realm of "good mothering." For Marlene Goldman, that most Munroian affect of them all—shame—brings subjects back to their inescapable, vulnerable corporeality. Writing out of her own embodied experience of chronic pain, Amelia DeFalco shows how those affects that are visibly embodied in Munro's characters are precisely those that are socially denigrated, for they transgress cultural privilegings of autonomy and individualism. Several contributors examine Munro's use of animal metaphors as a means of signaling this denigration; Heidi Tiedemann Darroch, for example, notes the way in which the possession of "reason" is often cited as evidence in favour of animal rights: an argument that has the effect of disenfranchising cognitively impaired people as full subjects. As she points out, philosophical discussions of cognitive impairment as test cases for viable or worthwhile lives have the same effect. Munro's characters whose embodied affects place them beneath consideration have a richly troubling philosophical context.

In similar fashion, many of these readings of Munro's stories probe the psychic dynamics by which such denigrations operate. As Darroch argues, those Munro characters who recoil from disabled people may be operating out of envy for those who may lack self-consciousness about their refusals or failures to follow social scripts. To be "shameless" is

subject, in Munro's fictional world, to a complicated mixture of desire and repulsion. In analyzing the extreme case of the urge toward repulsion—murder—Susan Warwick sees it as the ultimate test case for the ethical choice between “repudiation and responsibility” that is endemic to the encounter with the “other.” Amelia DeFalco sees the origins of that choice in our very openness to the world, for it entails risk (the risking of affect); the desire to limit that risk that many of Munro's characters feel is, in effect, a refusal of ethical encounter. Like the phrase, “exquisite shame,” her description of this “affective dissonance and ethical unease” syntactically balances and intertwines the affective and the ethical.

Human encounters often form the tacitly assumed ground zero of ethical criticism, and yet both the burgeoning field of animal studies and the wider examination of the more-than-human world offer salient correctives to that tendency. In Claire Omhovere's essay in this volume, for instance, landscape is not the usual reflective metaphor for human ethical encounter but it becomes, instead, the very locus of ethical and affective negotiation. Landscape, in the form of those frequent references to geological change and the recurring figure of waste in Munro's stories, is a site for a phenomenological being-in-the-world: a mutually constitutive relationship between a vulnerable environment and its vulnerable human inhabitants.

Omhovere's phenomenological language finds resonance in other essays in this collection that take phenomenology in a more feminist, performative direction. Judith Butler opened her pioneering essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” by thinking about feminist reimaginings of phenomenology, specifically de Beauvoir's revisions of Merleau-Ponty. Butler's understanding of the way identity is forged in repeated mundane acts depends upon a

sense of embodiment that grows out of Merleau-Ponty's concept of the body as an historical idea rather than a transhistorical essence. So too, in these readings of Munro's embodied affects and their ethical implications, several of these critics emphasize the repeated, performative nature of ethics. In her earlier essay, Naomi Morgenstern asks why, in Munro, the central ethical insight—i.e., the existence of the other beyond the self—needs to be repeatedly rehearsed. In the essays that follow, critics have much to say about this iterative, performative nature of ethical behavior. Katherine Sutherland argues that Munro's retrospective narratives of childhood often detail the breakdown of affective relations between children and adults that are in a state of constant becoming. So, too, Goldman, examining "the performative nature of shame" stresses iterative mimicry; shame, she concludes, is the consequence of an inability or unwillingness "to mimic the norm." In a similar vein, Lorraine York explores Munro's own performance of public affects, and how her performance of reluctance has been subsumed within a larger national mythology of Canadian humility. Despite this normalization and apparent acquiescence, Munro's reluctance manages to maintain its roots in ambivalence and unease as a way of "tarrying with" difficult, negative, often ugly emotions.

Affective performativity in (and by) Munro, like performativity in general for Butler, opens up the possibility of departure from social scripts, even though there remain social punishments for not performing according to those scripts. Accordingly, a number of the contributors to this volume approach the question of hope amidst sometimes painful, difficult, affective and ethical exchanges: is there a possibility for subversion of the hierarchies that are tied to embodied affects, to those shamefully visible performances of affect in Alice Munro's stories that lead to betrayal, inhibition, self-denial, "royal beatings," and even murder?

Goldman identifies “socially transformative performative utterances...alternative, gestural forms of communication and mimesis”: in a word, play. Ana Fraile Marcos sees shame as potentially enabling the workings of what Winfried Siemerling calls *re/cognition*: moving beyond the capacity to see the other in the self, and the self in the other, which arguably involves assimilating the unknown to the known, and, instead, accomplishing the more refractory, difficult work of cognitive and ethical change. Such a possibility is active in Silvan Tomkins’s theorizing of shame as intimately intertwined in “a relationship of mutuality,” for the shame that Tomkins associates with the physical act of averting one’s face and gaze from the source of humiliation or judgment bears “the residual positive wish...not only to look at the other rather than to look down, but to have the other look [back] with interest or enjoyment rather than derision.”<sup>23</sup> Warwick, considering the ultimate breakdown of ethical exchange or “gaze”—murder—perceives hope even there: the response of shame at such a failure can bring with it a deeper understanding of the responsibility we bear for each other.

Closing out our collection, Naomi Morgenstern’s new essay offers radical and nuanced grounds for hope. Morgenstern proposes that the posthumous existence of Munro’s women characters who live on, endure, survive, says something profound about Alice Munro’s ethical world. Living on in the aftermath of death, abandonment, pain, she suggests, is a deeply “relational” act. Like Omhovere’s musings on “wasted” landscape as a refusal of the economies of utilitarianism, Morgenstern’s life-left-over challenges the teleology of the life narrative as ending in death and presents us with a moving sense of life itself as posthumous. In seeing Munro as the chronicler of women’s affective lives-after-life that take shape in narratives that are always attentive to the might-have-been alternative narratives, Morgenstern implicitly

places her in a tradition of women's writing that has deeply examined the ethics and affects of lives that exceed conventional narrative containers. As Jane Austen's Anne Eliot declares in her (fittingly) posthumous novel *Persuasion*, "All the privilege I claim for my own sex (it is not a very enviable one, you need not covet it) is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone."<sup>24</sup>

In our own nod to the recursive performances of ethics and affects in Alice Munro, we conceive of our volume as a response to Morgenstern's "The Baby or The Violin"—the 2003 essay that issued a call for the extensive study of ethics in Munro's fiction--and we close with her critical return to Munroian ethics as gendered, relational and posthumous in Morgenstern's "Life after Life: Survival in the (Late) Fiction of Alice Munro." Within this recursive frame, the scholars who have contributed to this volume have plentifully and creatively answered Morgenstern's—and our—invitation to ponder the "exquisite shame" of Alice Munro's ethics and to inhabit uncertainty together. Munro's fiction reminds us of the consequences of everyday affects, the extraordinary ordinariness of the ethical encounters we engage again and again. In her exploration of the minutiae of the everyday, anthropologist Kathleen Stewart explains how "The ordinary throws itself together out of forms, flows, powers, pleasures, encounters, distractions, drudgery, denials, practical solutions, shape-shifting forms of violence, daydreams, and opportunities lost or found. Or it falters, fails. But either way we feel it."<sup>25</sup> Stewart's evocative description reads like an encapsulation of Munro's corpus, which delves into the affects and effects of what is often dismissively termed the "ordinary." Like Stewart and other theorists of affect, Munro's stories remind us, again and again, why and how "ailments and emotions" do not intrude *into* our lives, but rather

constitute those lives, betraying the redundancy of phrases, like “emotional life,” that imply the divisibility of the two, the possibility of some kind of non-emotional existence. Life, survival, is always, *already*, emotional, embodied, vulnerable, relational, in short, an exquisite tangle of affects and ethics.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Naomi Morgenstern, “The Baby or the Violin?: Ethics and Femininity in the Fiction of Alice Munro,” *Literature Interpretation Theory* 14 (2003): 73.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>3</sup> Brian Massumi, *Politics of Affect* (Cambridge: Polity P, 2015), 11.

<sup>4</sup> Alice Munro, *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2001), 234.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>8</sup> Alice Munro, *Too Much Happiness* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2009), 58-59.

<sup>9</sup> Munro, *Hateship*, 224.

<sup>10</sup> Munro, *Hateship*, 227.

<sup>11</sup> The oft-cited opening to Teresa Brennan’s *The Transmission of Affect* elaborates on these processes of affective communication: “Is there anyone who has not, at least once, walked into a room and ‘felt the atmosphere’? . . . The transmission of affect, whether it is grief, anxiety, or anger, is social or psychological in origin. But the transmission is also responsible for bodily changes; some are brief changes, as in a whiff of the room’s atmosphere, some longer lasting. In other words, the transmission of affect, if only for an instant, alters the biochemistry and neurology of the subject. The ‘atmosphere’ or the environment literally gets into the individual. Physically and biologically, something is present that was not there before, but it did not originate *sui generis*: it was not generated solely or sometimes even in part by the individual organism or its genes.” (1)

<sup>12</sup> Munro, *Hateship*, 229.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 227-8.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>18</sup> Silvan Tomkins, *Shame and its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank. (Durham, Duke UP: 1995), 147.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Margaret Atwood, "Lives of Girls and Women: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman," in *Cambridge Companion to Alice Munro*, ed. David Staines (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2016), 99.

<sup>23</sup> Tomkins, *Shame and its Sisters*, 138.

<sup>24</sup> Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, ed. D. W. Harding (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), 238.

<sup>25</sup> Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham: Duke UP, 2007), 29

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