

Myra Mendible

American Shame: Stigma and the Body Politic

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The twelve essays in this collection investigate cultural identities and practices in relation to shame and stigma. The chapters constitute a series of case studies, which are organized into three parts: "Scarlet Letters: Gender, Race, and Stigma," which includes an analysis of abortion, Phyllippa Schuyler (the "Black Shirley Temple"), "illegal aliens" (Latin American immigrants), and Puerto Rican political activists in New York in the 1970s, the Young Lords. In the second section, "Disciplining the Body Politic: Domestic and Foreign Policy," are case studies on suicide in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, fatness, medicalization and public health, and disability shame in schools. In the last and longer part 3, "Bodies on Display: Performing Shame in Visual Arts," are essays on women shitting in movies, collective and national shame in war movies, mental illness/psychosis in the slasher genre, cinematic depictions of women's masturbation, and finally, after all these chapters on film, a chapter on the representation of dieting by three American artists.

First, the negative: the scope of the book is diverse, and I imagine this is because the editor intended to reflect a variety of voices; this is a good aim. But sometimes this means that the book runs off in many directions, and its conceptual interrogation of shame in relation to national identity isn't always clear. An editor's job is not easy: you want to nurture the ideas that contributors have and also let them speak. This sometimes clashes with the necessity of thematic coherence. I would have rejected a couple of weak essays in this collection as not sufficiently "on topic": they ramble on in their own tight introspection. Furthermore, sometimes it is unclear whether shame or stigma is the central focus of the critical framework. Some of the chapters could have benefited from engaging more directly with the large body of theory on stigma and/or shame; in some chapters this designation is assumed and not sufficiently explained or elaborated, nor do they display deep knowledge of the field. Oftentimes, the presence of shame or stigma is assumed before the author moves quickly on; some of these authors should have been pushed to demonstrate more precisely the dynamics of how shame and/or stigma are at play in their chosen topics.

Second, all the contributors discuss aspects of American culture, but the idea of "Americanness" is frequently underexplored in many of the chapters (except, in particular, Michael Rancourt's powerful analysis of shame in Iraq war films, which draws upon the injurious national shame of Vietnam). American exceptionalism has been a given for decades, and such a key global power's relationship to shame might have been more usefully mined. Perhaps it is harder to "see" if one is a member of the society being discussed; I imagine that more international contributors might have tackled this issue more directly, as Anglo-Protestant America has much to be ashamed about and can often be seen to be reacting with defensive/hostile, shame-based behavior in the global theater. One of the explanations for the ruinous "War on Terror" is that it is basically a shame-formation reaction, writ large. Questions of national identity and national psychology are left mainly implicit, so that the title refers less to the interrogative than the descriptive. To take an analogy from cat

behaviorism: the dominant cat in any domestic group is often the most anxious one, the one most likely to show aggression to others, the animal who habitually "strikes first" in order to maintain symbolic and actual superiority. We see this most piquantly in Trump's macho posturing: much of his behavior is compensatory, his mandate for competitive aggression consolidated within a personal and national/projective disavowal of shame.

Third, and this is not the editor's fault, a complaint from those of us who are over a certain age, as so many scholars are: the type size is too small! Indiana University Press undoubtedly saves printing costs when a long (290-page) manuscript can be printed on fewer pages, but reading this book made me physically tired. As someone who likes to write notes in an academic book, an e-reader with its adjustable type is not an option, so publishers, please be kind to your older readers, and remember that we are the privileged few who still earn enough to buy your academic books!

Now I would like to point out this collection's strengths, and there are many. The first one is the inevitable counterpoint to the minus described above: its diversity of voices. The careful historical studies are replete with insight and provide a rich textile of this huge nation's minority cultures. The etiology of shame fractures into a myriad of social contexts that require separate investigation, and the collection takes the reader into corners of American life that are genuinely interesting. Mendible's intelligent introduction is a timely reflection on cultural belonging that rightly draws our attention to the exponential phenomenon of shame-as-spectacle that is now poisoning our public life. She discusses the "viral nature of moral indignation" and accurately identifies how such social emotions affect some bodies differently than others--a theme that the collection goes on to elucidate. Using feminist philosophy, Mendible identifies the misattribution of shame in what "Jean Bethke Elshtain calls the 'politics of displacement,' a strategy that uses shame to draw boundaries between full and partial citizenship" (5). Of course, shame is much invested psychodynamically in strategic displacement. Mendible draws our attention to how shame is being remobilized in the public sphere, opining that "historically the moral force of shame has tended to serve power rather than to challenge it" (6). She argues that "bring-back-shame" narratives are often a nostalgic pretext for the restoration of traditional (that is to say, reactionary) policies. The appropriation of an aesthetic of pride by minority groups, following the innovation of "Gay Pride" in the 1970s, seems to have supplied a reaction formation in privileged, normative subjects, who are now blaming national decline on those very same groups who refuse to bow their heads in shame. A shamed subjectivity yearns for consolidated boundaries; it sees flowing intersubjectivity as threatening and thus demands a rigidly defined selfhood ("I'm going to build a wall!"). What Mendible is making clear is that America's shame doesn't so much arise and sediment in its historically stigmatized minority groups who have required a narrative of pride for their social restoration, but in those who have oppressed them. Shame resides in the dominant identity, in those cats that are determined to maintain their anxious superiority, at great cost to their psychological health. (Indeed, I have a cat like this, her name is Sybil, the others flee in her presence and she is sadly isolated and perennially weary. She does not make common cause and never plays. Being Top Cat is quite draining of your psychological wellbeing . . .) This perpetual shame lodged in dominant subjectivities is disavowed and displaced, and is difficult to properly "home." It reminds me of the ex-member of the White Aryan Resistance, Tony McAleer, who is one of the pioneers of the group "Life after Hate"; Tony explains how neo-fascism attracts those people who are trapped in a cycle of toxic shame (McAleer 2017). Shame's contagious properties make it a shape-shifter, and the book is helpful in supporting the authors' attempts to locate it and name it.

Some very fine, detailed, and nuanced chapters follow Mendible's excellent introduction--in fact, one disappointment is that Mendible herself doesn't extend her Introduction further, as her writing provides acute insight into the manifestations of shame in contemporary American culture and politics. I would have liked to have read more of her informed and skilled interpretation in that critical framing. I have picked from the menu two particular chapters that I think readers of *Hypatia* might find particularly satisfying: first, Madeline Walker's essay, "Shame and Shitting: Postfeminist Episodes in Contemporary Hollywood Films," and Megan Tagle Adams's essay, "Shaming and Reclaiming Women's Sexuality through Cinematic Depictions of Masturbation."

Take first the image of women shitting: Walker reminds us that popular culture is full of references to men shitting; indeed, a great deal of male humor is somewhat homoerotically obsessed with men's excremental habits. One of the bizarre aspects of being a lesbian is that throughout my life I have repeatedly been treated as an "honorary man" in miscellaneous all-male contexts, and when it comes to observing men's distinctive banter, one noticeable discrepancy from being in similar, but all-women, spaces is how often the conversation turns to (the subject of) shit. Walker's essay, from a self-confessed coprophobic, argues that discourses of control over women's bodies have most recently turned to anal shaming, because "women are socially torqued to feel shame about their bowel movements" (169). It is hard not to be prompted at this point by Jonathan Swift's infamous poem, "The Lady's Dressing Room" (1732), in which the lover, Strephon, sneaks into his lover's dressing room and discovers her chamber pot, thus exclaiming the famous line "Oh! Celia, Celia, Celia shits!" Many have taken Swift's poem to be misogynistic, but I think this misunderstands Swift's skill as a satirist; after all, he does end the poem with the comment "He soon would learn to think like me,/And bless his ravished sight to see/Such order from confusion sprung,/Such gaudy tulips raised from dung." Tulips, are of course, common metaphorical devices for male erections. So I think there is an excremental eroticism that Walker isn't quite brave enough to wade through yet, but her exegesis of two recent American mainstream comedy films written by women, *Bridesmaids* (2011) and *The Back-up Plan* (2010), describes how representing the concomitant humiliation and containment of wayward women is effective in reminding us just how appropriate femininity is reinforced through bodily shame. Walker also provides us with perhaps the best chapter subheading in feminist criticism: "I Crapped My Wedding Dress." Using Rosalind Gill's rubric of postfeminism, Walker argues that "postfeminist sensibility [is] so salient in contemporary media culture--in which feminism is feared and attacked yet taken for granted while neoliberal values are trumpeted--is a pretense of women's 'empowerment,' with anal shaming its latest manifestation" (173). She remarks that we cannot imagine a Hollywood movie showing something so prosaic as women sitting on the toilet reading (to which my immediate response was to wonder if women really do this--aren't we too busy?). In an excellent example of low-key intersectional analysis, Walker also demonstrates the homophobic and racist undertones in these films. She concludes by claiming that "[t]he audience laughs but is warned: self-surveillant females, don't let down your guard or your anus and its activities may become public knowledge and you, too, will be shamed" (184).

Take, second, the image of women wanking: Adams reminds us that whereas for men masturbation has now come to be seen as a natural and normal aspect of their sexuality, for women masturbation remains predominantly suspicious and shameful. She argues, using Marilyn Frye, that "[w]omen who masturbate can be theorized as metaphorical lesbians because of their preoccupation with women's experience and sexual satisfaction, even if only

their own, and their attendant disregard for men's needs and desires. . . . there can indeed be an inherent queerness read in the body of the masturbating woman" (232). She argues that three tropes govern representations of women's auto-eroticism: her pleasure will be punished later as a cautionary warning to others; her pleasure will be co-opted by the male gaze; her pleasure will be read as a "journey" (247) of self-discovery (a journey of self-discovery that can too often result in self-destruction and an inevitable descent into madness). In American culture, such trajectories can result in victim-blaming and slut-shaming, and/or the attribution of freakishness. Adams describes how independent cinema productions that include representations of women's masturbation are often given restricted ratings by the MPAA [Motion Picture Association of America]. This then restricts the distribution and impact of said representations, precisely because of the socially progressive alternatives that they represent. Looking at the power of cultural institutions to proscribe such images, Adams (using Frye again) observes: "the fundamental hypervisibility of a self-stimulating woman can redirect attention to women's needs and desires. Learning that they can be seen, these women then learn to see themselves, recognizing the fragile structure of the patriarchal system that works to maintain women's invisibility" (248). Perhaps one axis that could have been further explored in this essay is the European/American one, offering through a contrast of cinematic cultures further illumination of American Anglo-Protestant constructions of identity; however, Adams also depicts how such representations of the masturbating woman are racialized in, for example, the jezebel stereotype.

In these two selected essays alone, I learned a lot about how specifically cultural forms police and constrain women's bodies through representative tropes that shame and somatize abject femininity. Overall, this collection stimulated me to think concretely about how shame's vicissitudes come to be sedimented within American cultural forms and social practices. No doubt this volume was collated and completed before Hillary Clinton's epic fall, and while I was reading it, it was to her that my thoughts continuously returned. Soon I'll be reading Susan Bordo's *The Destruction of Hillary Clinton* (2017), and Mendible's depiction of American shame will be informing that analysis too, as strings of relevance link one analysis thematically with another. My understanding of gender and shame has been broadened, and I think it will help me grasp the catastrophic turn of recent US politics, and for that I am grateful.

Reference

McAleer, Tony. 2017. Life after white supremacy: The former neo-fascist now working to fight hate. *The Guardian*, April 11. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/04/life-after-hate-groups-neo-fascism-racism> (accessed April 19, 2017).