Essay

The Misogynous Politics of Shame

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Abstract: Joanna Bourke's account of the ways that changing ideas of rape reflect the gendered norms of the times, and Eric Reitan's proposal that rape ought to remain a contested concept amenable to evolving principles of ethical sexual relationships, speak to the ways that social, cultural, and political contexts influence our understanding of sexual violence. Though the criteria that are used to define rape change, one thing remains constant: the raped person is shamed. As she is shamed, she is degraded. This paper argues that until we understand the role that shame plays in enabling sexual violence by humiliating, silencing, and stigmatizing its victims, changes in our depictions of rape will neither disable the personal devastation of being raped nor dismantle the social practices and political institutions that rely on rape to maintain misogynous inequalities. Following the Introduction (Section 1) it is divided into three parts. Section 2, The Shame of Being Human, discusses the psychological and phenomenological accounts of shame. It alerts us to the ways that shame defines us insofar as it reveals the truth of human intersubjectivity and mutual interdependency. Section 3, Debilitating Shame, describes the ways that shame has been exploited to enable and enforce sexed and gendered inequalities. Section 4, Shame: Demanding Justice, examines the ways that shame, in its role as the protector of the self, undermines the effects of debilitating shame and fosters a politics of sexual integrity by affirming the dignity of the interdependencies that tie us to each other.

Keywords: human; gendered; debilitating; isolating; silencing; social force; liberating

1. Introduction

Social, cultural, and political contexts frame our understanding of what counts as sexual violence. Joanna Bourke's discussion of the relationship between definitions of rape and the gendered norms of the times (Bourke 2007), and Eric Reitan's proposal that rape remain a contested concept amenable to evolving principles of ethical sexual relationships (Reitan 2001), indicate that what is identified as the sexual violence of rape varies from time to time and place to place. Despite these differences, one thing remains constant. The raped person is shamed. As shamed, she is degraded. The assault, more often than not, is tagged as her fault rather than his crime.

This essay argues that as long as rape–shame is allowed to do its humiliating, stigmatizing, and silencing work, changes in the definition of rape will neither disable the personal devastation of being sexually assaulted, nor dismantle the misogynous social and political practices that foster sexual violence. As a species of shame, rape–shame relies on the role that shame plays in our individual and collective lives to do its misogynous work. Undoing this work requires getting to the heart of the power of shame. Toward this end, this essay is divided into the following three parts. Section 2, The Shame of Being Human, identifies the ways that shame indexes the complexities of human intersubjectivity. Bringing a feminist lens to the psychological and phenomenological accounts of shame, it exposes the ways that the psychology and ontology of shame is exploited in sexed and

gendered norms of masculinity and femininity. Section 3, Debilitating Shame, describes the ways that sexed and gendered shame has been manipulated to enable and enforce patriarchal values and violence. Section 4, Demanding Justice, argues that shame is a pharmakon. It finds that shame, as an affect that is deployed to protect the self, can undermine the effects of sexist debilitating shame and foster a feminist ethics and politics of sexual integrity.

2. The Shame of Being Human

Psychologists who study infant and toddler behavior and phenomenologists who describe us as uniquely intertwined with and vulnerable to each other teach us that though what is considered shameful differs from one historical period and culture to another, the experience of, and capacity for shame, is built into the human condition. Emerging early in life (exactly when is a matter of dispute), it remains a powerful force throughout our lives. It is often referred to as a moral emotion because of the part it plays in enforcing social, cultural, and political values, and because of its role in protecting a person's moral integrity. When collective values reinforce a person's self worth, social norms can count on the compliance of individuals. When they do not, the shame that secures the status quo can change sides. It can, in its role as protector of the self, become a force that defends the self against degradation. Recent events speak to the Janus face power of shame. Women, previously silenced by norms that shamed them for being sexually assaulted, are now shaming the men who, emboldened by perverted codes of masculinity, denigrate women's sexual integrity.

2.1. The Psychologists

Psychologists studying shame dispute the when and why of its emergence. Gerhart Piers and Jennifer Biddle find that signs of shame appear early in life. They argue that it predates and is essential to the formation of the infant's sense of self (Biddle 1997; Piers and Singer 1953). On their account, the infant's shame is a symptom of its confrontation with its ambivalent situation: a situation created by the absolute dependency of its premature birth and its desire to fend for itself. Desiring to be loved by those entrusted with its life, the infant identifies with their standards of lovability. Adhering to these standards, however, conflicts with its wish to distinguish itself from them (Biddle 1997, p. 231). Their observations indicate that shame, as an affect that predates the self, is formative of the self. As such, it cannot be disentangled from the self once it emerges.

June Tangney and Michael Lewis disagree with this account of infant shame. According to their observations, shame does not appear until the child is between 15 and 36 months, after a sense of self has been established in the child's psyche (Tangney and Dearing 2002, p. 141; Lewis 1993, p. 623). Lewis' observation that the self's shame is not caused by a specific situation but by the person's interpretation of the situation (Lewis 1993, p. 629) is crucial for understanding the role that shame plays in feminist interventions in sexist norms. His studies indicate that though the child will unreflectively interpret the situation in accordance with the shame standards of its parents and culture, the reflective adult may not. They may interpret certain shame standards as unjust. On this reading, although shame as originally experienced is tied to established norms, it can become a force for critiquing these norms once/if the situation is interpreted differently.

Whether they find that shame predates the emergence of a self or announces the existence of an already present self, psychologists agree that shame is indicative of the tension between our dependence on others and on our wish to be independent. Though shame is a feeling of self-betrayal, the self that is betrayed is ambiguous. As a social self beholden to its culture's scripts, it shames itself for violating them. As a self asserting its independence, it shames itself for betraying its principles by succumbing to the demand to conform. In the first case, shame is a powerful tool for enforcing and re-enforcing social norms. It protects the intersubjective self by alerting it to the cost of alienating itself from its community: the loss of love, and the possibility of social death. In the second case, shame is a resource for critiquing and changing established norms that undermine the ability of the self to affirm itself. Feminism and the "#MeToo" phenomenon may be seen as a model of self affirming shame that,

in the name of women's integrity as persons, critiques and rejects the social and political values that demean them. Here too, as we shall see, it is not a matter of disavowing the social dimensions of the self, but rather of creating a social world where shame does not enforce debilitating norms.

2.2. The Phenomenologists

Viewed from a phenomenological perspective, the developmental contingencies of shame, our premature birth and prolonged dependency, and the behaviors that manifest it, such as hiding for example, point to the non-contingent human condition of being a lived-body—the embodiment of a consciousness that experiences itself as an active agent at the center of the world and as a visible body-object within the world vulnerable to the power of others. Like the psychologists, phenomenologists describe us as ambiguous to capture this state of affairs.

Stressing the non-contingent nature of shame, Merleau-Ponty argued that it registers the metaphysical fact that my body is at once an object for others and a subject for me, and that, "[i]nsofar as I have a body I can be reduced to an object beneath the gaze of the other and no longer count for him as a person" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, p. 170). From this perspective, shame is a self-protective affect. It expresses a person's protest at having her ambiguity compromised in the visible part of herself, of being deprived of her status as a subject (Merleau-Ponty 1987, p. 61). By registering the inescapable reality of my visibility and vulnerability, shame speaks to the truth of my metaphysical ambiguity, for in becoming aware of my visibility, I become conscious that I am not the adequate cause of all that I am. "[M]y power for ontogenesis" is lost (Merleau-Ponty 1987, p. 61). In this account of shame, I am ashamed of a basic feature of human existence: my dependency on others and its corollary of vulnerability. Clinging to the fantasy of ontogenesis and claiming to possess a power I never had, is one way of fleeing the truth of the interdependency that is intrinsic to my humanity.

In describing the desire to be the adequate cause of all that I am as a universal human desire, Merleau-Ponty fails to notice what Simone de Beauvoir found impossible to ignore: this human desire to be seen as an independent subject is bifurcated in sexed and gendered norms of masculinity and femininity. Positioned as the Other of the Subject Man and defined as the Sex, (Beauvoir 2010, pp. 5–6) women, depending on the ways their race, class, and nationality impact their status as the Other, have either limited or no access to fantasies of ontogenesis. Being a man, however, does not guarantee that one will have access to this fantasy. It is only available to those men whose race, religion, and nationality position them as Subjects.

From a feminist–phenomenological perspective, it is more than a matter of which sex gets to live the fantasy of ontogenesis. It is a matter of which sex is recognized as fully human. From this perspective, the politics of patriarchy is the politics of ontogenesis—a politics that all but denies the fact that as visible men cannot escape the shame entailed in their dependency, and that heightening women's visibility ensnares them in the shame of dependency. By idealizing the fantasy of ontogenesis in ideals of masculine independence that are said to define those who are truly human, and gendering femininity in terms of the dependency that fails to realize this ideal, women and men are taught to see women as the inferior sex—the sex whose humanity is compromised in the hyper-visibility that over determines their intersubjective vulnerability. Manipulating the fact that a woman's body, like a man's, is at once an object for others and a subject for herself, the norms of patriarchy imprison her in a body that cannot escape the vulnerability of its visibility, and give him a body that is almost invisible insofar as it can evade the threat of being seen and objectified by others.

This threat is the theme of Sartre's ungendered account of "The Look". Sartre sets the scene in a public park. A person is strolling alone in a park. So long as he is alone, he experiences himself as a free center of the world. Passing someone sitting on a bench, everything changes. Now, experiencing himself as an object in another's world, he feels his freedom slipping away. This loss is not permanent. Returning the look, the stroller turns the tables. He situates the person on the bench in his world, reasserts his freedom, and reestablishes the world as his (Sartre 1984, p. 341).

Sartre uses masculine pronouns to refer to both the stroller and the person on the bench. If we change the pronouns, however, and identify the person strolling alone in the park as a woman and the person on the bench as a man, everything changes. It becomes clear that only equals can return each other's gaze and contest each other's claim to freedom without fearing for their lives or knowing that they will be degraded and shamed. In a world of sexual inequality, the dialectic of the Look collapses. A woman walking alone in a park who dares to return a man's Look risks being harassed, assaulted, or raped. By returning The Look, she can be interpreted as legitimating his entitlement to her body—as "asking for it". Aware of these risks, she looks down or looks away: behaviors that are indicative of shame. As the Other, her freedom to refuse to be defined by others is compromised if not foreclosed. Of course, the man on the bench and the woman walking in the park are not simply a man and a woman. Ask Emmet Till about the risks of a black man returning a white woman's look. A full description of The Look, one that would take me too far afield, must take account of the realities of intersectionality and the ways that the privileges of race, for example, interrupt the neat binary power relationships of sex and gender.

Although Sartre does not see how his account of the Look misses the power structures of the gaze, he does know that it is an inadequate account of intersubjectivity insofar as it ignores the dynamics of shame. Thus, he follows his discussion of the Look with an account of the man who gets caught spying through a keyhole. The keyhole story makes the point that although I may be able to assert myself as a subject by returning the Look, I cannot immunize myself from the judgment of others.

Sartre's story of the man at the keyhole goes like this: A man suspecting that his lover is cheating on him spies through a keyhole to confirm his suspicions. So long as the spying lover believes that he is alone, jealously is the only emotion in play. Once he discovers that he is being observed, the voyeur's attention shifts from what is happening on the other side of the door to the way he appears to those footsteps down the hall. Seeing himself as he is seen by the other—as an unsavory peeping Tom—he is ashamed of himself. Here, as in "The Look", the presence of the other moves the one being seen from the subject-center of his world into the world of the other as an object, but here, rather than challenging the other's decentering power, the subject decenters himself. He actively judges himself as he is judged by the other and feels ashamed (Sartre 1984, p. 347).

This example of shame operates on two levels: one is phenomenological, the other is cultural and moral. At the phenomenological level, shame reveals that I cannot extricate myself from the ways that I am seen and judged by others. From this perspective, shame is the non-conditional experience that shatters the credibility of ontogenesis. All of the specific social and cultural definitions of shamefulness depend on the ontological fact that I can be shamed. What is unsaid in the keyhole description of ontological shame is that it is always experienced within specific value systems. For shame to come on the scene, both the spy and the person down the hall must agree that spying is reprehensible. Both must accept the idea that the person belonging to those footsteps has the power and moral authority to pass judgment on the spy.

Phil Hutchinson's account of Diognes of Sinope, a citizen of Athens in the fourth century BCE, brings the contingencies of these power structures into focus. It speaks to the way the experience of shame depends on the status of the person who is shamed and the standing of the judge who passes the verdict. According to the story, Diognes responded to criticisms of his masturbating in public by saying that he wished it was as easy to satisfy his hunger by rubbing his belly. He refuses to be shamed. He does not deny that he is a being-for-others, but rather insists that he can only be shamed by those he respects. He reminds those who assail his conduct that they too are beings for-others—him (Williams 1993, p. 82).

#MeToo women may be read as taking their cue from Diognes. Unlike Sartre, who does not interrogate the ways the scene at the keyhole relies on the assumption that the person down the hall and the person at the keyhole agree on the legitimacy of the values that inform the shaming judgment, these women, may be seen as modern day versions of Diognes. They refuse to be complicit in their shaming. Instead of submitting to the norms that shame them, #MeToo women challenge

their legitimacy. They reject the authority of those who enforce them. Turning their backs on shame, #MeToo women de-fang its misogynous power. Discredit the norms. Turn the tables on shame.

A feminist phenomenology provides the ground for understanding the power dynamics of shaming. It shows how turning the tables is possible. It reveals that our relationship to others is always situated within social structures that code the ways that our raced, sexed, and gendered bodies place us either in the position of having the power to shame or being seen as shameful. The self that is shamed, however, is also a self that can defend itself against being degraded by shame. The woman who is shamed for not obeying her husband can, by calling on the self-affirming resources of shame, reject the legitimacy of the norm and the right of her husband to enforce it. Invoking her authority in the name of the norm of her dignity she can turn the shame of not pleasing her husband into the accusation that shames him for being an abuser. In order for this to work, however, the husband, like the man at the keyhole, must accept the validity of her charge and her authority to enforce it.

3. Debilitating Shame

None of this will be easy, especially when a woman has been subjected to debilitating shame—a self-destructive form of shame that, unlike the episodic shame depicted by Sartre, forms the horizon of a person's life. As the target of debilitating shame, she is overwhelmed by the other's judgmental look. Relying on the ways that shame is used to enforce a culture's values and the ways that these values can become part of a person's sense of self, the distorted values that demean women are internalized. As constantly demeaned, a woman comes to see herself as unworthy and inferior. The self-affirming resources of shame that, in the name of the self's integrity, might be called on to challenge these distorted values are undermined and silenced (Steinbock 2014, pp. 80, 249; Taylor 1985, pp. 64, 68; Calhoun 2004, p. 146). By enforcing and legitimating misogynous values, the invisible violence of debilitating shame sets women up to believe that they "deserve what they get" when the silent violence of their lives becomes the overt violence of cat calls, a hostile work place, sexual harassment, or rape (Bartky 1990, p. 23).

The work of debilitating shame begins early in a woman's life. Its invisible violence is integral to the ways that, in Simone de Beauvoir's famous phrase, "One is not born but becomes woman" (Beauvoir 2010, p. 283). Exploiting the psychological fact that shame is intertwined with our identity and the phenomenological fact that it is inherent in the human condition, young girls and women are conditioned to see themselves as shameful (Dolezal 2015, pp. 106–10). While boys are encouraged to see their bodies as sources of pride and power, girls are taught to view such vital bodily functions as menstruation (functions that attest to a woman's vitality) as unclean signs of their shameful inferiority. Their developing breasts expose them to the salacious gaze of men. Instead of being taught to take pride in becoming a woman, instead of being taught "to accept herself without excuses and without shame", the adolescent girl learns that as the shamed subject of the Look, "her sex condemn[s] her to a mutilated and frozen existence" (Beauvoir 2010, p. 340).

Kathy Lally, the Washington Post Moscow Bureau Chief from 2010–2014, is a woman who accepted herself without excuses and without blame. She was someone who did not allow herself to be positioned as the Other. Her description of the effects of being constantly belittled by the editors of eXile, an English language tabloid published in Moscow, however, testifies to the continued relevance of Beauvoir's assessment of the way that shame condemns women to a mutilated and frozen existence. Lally's privileged professional position did not protect her from men's taunts. It did not immunize her from its debilitating effects. She writes " . . . you don't have to grope a woman or force a kiss on her to humiliate her, to make her doubt herself, to silence and diminish her. The damaging effects of persistent denigration are insidious and difficult to root out" (Washington Post, 17 December 2017, B3).

Existing in the diverse materiality of their lived bodies, women's vulnerability to the distorted values that legitimate their degradation takes different forms. A white woman's integrity, threatened by the fact of being a woman, will be bolstered by her race privilege. The black woman's race will be used against her. A Muslim woman's religion will compound her degradation. Within the complexities

of their stigmatization, women will share this: as women, they will be demeaned as cunts who deserve to be treated like whores if they forget their proper place, however that place is defined. The white woman's race will not protect her from men's denigration and aggression. If she is judged to be attractive, she will be dismissed as a dumb blond. If she is deemed unattractive, she will become the object of body shaming. As a raced body, the black woman will, like Patricia Williams (1981), be seen as too dangerous to be allowed into an upscale New York City boutique. Gendered as a hyper-sexed body that is "asking for it", however, the black woman's sex will mitigate the idea that she is dangerous and invite men's aggression. The Muslim woman will be shunned for submitting to the authority of Muslim men by not showing her face, hair, or body in public. One would think this deference to men would be applauded. The problem is that in deferring to the "wrong" men and refusing to become a spectacle for all men's pleasure, she is denying the "right" men access to her.

Insofar as it leads women to take the practical steps of avoiding being shamed and of protecting themselves against men's violence, debilitating shame will put them in the position of confirming the distorted values of patriarchy. Take Back the Night events that assert women's right to walk on campus at any time do not make the campus safe for a woman walking alone the following evening. The invisible curfew imposed on women remains in place. No campus secures women's nightly access to the library or other campus venues by establishing a curfew for men. Men will continue to have unlimited access to all places on campus. If he is assaulted while walking alone at night, he will not be shamed for being at the wrong place at the wrong time. He will not be accused of deserving what he "got". The rules that sustain women's limited access to public places will not be applied to him.

In case debilitating shame does not succeed in getting women to police themselves and abide by the values it legitimates, in case women speak out and resist the shame that silences them, their words will be discounted. They will be shamed for being irrational, for lacking adequate self-control, and/or for being unprincipled liars. Depicted as untrustworthy for not trusting men to define them and playing by the rules of the sexist game, their status as moral agents will be discounted, demeaned, or vilified. Their "immorality" will be used to justify treating them disrespectfully and abusively (Calhoun 2004, p. 128).

Understanding the difficulty of overcoming the effects of debilitating shame and the public barriers women face in contesting sexist violence, we understand why women find it difficult to defend themselves against the invisible violence that attacks their self-esteem. There is nothing invisible about the "backlash" violence they face if they refuse to be silent. Stepping out of a "better safe than sorry" life means putting oneself in real danger.

The misogynous impact of debilitating shame is compounded by gender norms that blunt women's ability to deal with demeaning shame. Men are taught that they have a right to be aggressive and violent. Invoking this lesson they tend to react to being shamed with anger/and or violence, emotions of potency and authority that assert their self worth. Women are schooled differently. Taught to be submissive and obedient, tend to become depressed when they are shamed. They exhibit isolating behaviors of hiding and withdrawal. Rather than assaulting the codes of patriarchy that demean them, women tend to demean themselves for not living up to them. Salman Rushdie's novel *Shame* illustrates this gendered response to shame (Rushdie 2008). Though the sisters are not depressed, they isolate themselves in their castle rather than face or contest the shameful judgments of the world. The male protagonists, however, engage the world and each other. They respond to being shamed and humiliated with violence.

The isolating effects of shame are particularly valuable to the patriarchal cause. This is why it is codified in the non-disclosure clauses embedded in the settlement agreements offered to women who break the rules and confront their abusers. Silence, the legal price that individual women are forced to pay for justice, serves two purposes. First, it protects the perpetrator from being exposed, leaving him at liberty to abuse other women. Second, it ensures that other women will not discover that their abuse is not an isolated event.

Whether self-imposed through shame or legally imposed as the condition of a settlement, isolation remains a barrier to collective awareness and action. Undoing this isolation is essential for creating the sense of solidarity among those who are shamed and for bringing the institutional work of shame into focus (Bartky 1990, pp. 96–97; Dolezal 2015, pp. 96–97). Thus the importance of #MeToo, where women are finding each other and collectively protesting the distorted values that demean them and shelter their assailants. Turning their shame into a weapon against those it previously shielded, women are protesting their degradation. They are bringing their shame out of hiding, exposing its violence and using shame's self-protective powers to critique and reject the distorted values that demean them.

Attending to the self-protective dimension of shame reveals the relationship between the psychology of shame and the phenomenological account of the lived body's ambiguous life. However dependent we were on others as infants and children, as adults, we are never passively in their grip. This is the important point of Sartre's The Look. Though the phenomenology of shame cannot predict when the self-affirming power of shame will lead those exploited by debilitating shame to rebel, its analysis of the self–other dynamic indicates that a politics of revolt remains a perennial threat to the politics of debilitating shame.

The phenomenology and psychology of shame tie shame to the self. Without a self that, in the name of its worth can condemn itself, shame cannot do its work (Taylor 1985, p. 60). This means that despite the attempt to shame women into passively accepting their status as helpless victims, and despite the attempt to discredit their moral capacity and epistemic authority, shame, in requiring the presence of a self that can morally judge itself, can never destroy women's sense of self worth (Taylor 1985, p. 109). This sense of self provides a resource for protection against the other's claim that she is shameful (Taylor 1985, p. 60). The women speaking out on #MeToo speak of feeling ashamed of what happened to them. They do not, however, accept the judgment that their shame is deserved. Invoking the self-affirming power of shame, they are rejecting the values that demean them. Turning the shame that degrades them against the persons and values that legitimate this degradation, they are contesting the integrity of a culture that denigrates women (Hacker 2017, p. 172).

The current #MeToo phenomenon and the histories of slave and colonial rebellions also make it clear that individual self-affirmation is not the stuff of radical transformations. To undo the silent violence of debilitating shame, its isolating effects must be destroyed. Thus, the importance of #MeToo. Breaking their self-imposed or legally mandated silence, women, discovering that they are not alone, are becoming a collective political force. Refusing to submit to the deformed identities thrown at them, they are dismantling the social and political structures that enable the invisible violence of debilitating shame to do its self-destructive work. In the end, however, their success will depend on whether their personal escape from debilitating shame has staying power—on whether it takes hold culturally, socially and politically.

4. Shame: Demanding Justice

Everything about shame speaks to/of our vulnerability—the vulnerability of being seen and judged by others, the vulnerability of being neither self-sufficient nor autonomous. Shame announces the fact that the dependency inscribed in our premature birth is never outgrown. My I is part of a WE. The singularity of my presence in the world is tied to and supported by a community of others upon whom I depend. Endorsing shared values, supporting social norms, and participating in political institutions are some of the ways that we materialize this I-WE.

Shame is the price that we pay for threatening the security of the WE anchors of our social lives. Shame, is not, however, the robotic servant of these social world structures. As an affect tied to a person's sense of self, shame is the voice of the self—an ambiguous self embedded in its ownness and otherness. It alerts the self to its loss of dignity when it fails to live up to the ideals of its WE. It defends the I against degradation when these ideals unjustifiably attack it.

Surveying the diverse ways that shame is part of the social fabric of people's lives reveals that shame does not discriminate among the norms it enforces. Whether the social world that shame

legitimates is egalitarian or sexist, democratic or authoritarian, it operates in the same way. The integrity of the self protected by shame may belong to an Adolf Eichmann or a Martin Luther King Jr. In its concrete operations, shame appears to be bereft of evaluative criteria.

As an emotion that operates at the intersections of self and other, however, shame is an affect that registers the emotional element of the phenomenology of being-for-others and being-for-oneself that is inscribed in the vulnerability inherent in being human. From this perspective, shame may be subjected to ontological criteria for judging the diverse norms that it is called upon to serve (Hutchinson 2008). Do these norms protect the porous boundaries between the self and its others that foster the vitality of their intertwining? Do they create spaces for an ongoing dialogue between the dignity of the "I" and the integrity of the "WE"? Can they be invoked against deformed norms of the WE that threaten the dignity of the I? Will they resist an authoritarian I who attempts to destroy the community of the WE?

Seeing shame through the ontological criteria of the I and the WE, it becomes clear that seeing others merely as objects in my world is not an innocent misrepresentation of their subjectivity. It is an attempt to erase the inerasable ambiguity of their humanity and to exempt, if not expel, them from the I-WE dialogue.

The ethical demands inscribed in the ontology of shame call out the injustice of a world that reduces some human beings to objects for the pleasure of others. In protecting the self who is treated merely as an object, shame, as we have seen, carries the seeds of rebellion. It also provides criteria for judging the aftermath of the rebellion should it succeed. If those who rebel in the name of their self-worth create a world where another group of people are shamed as less than human, they will betray the principles of their rebellion. They will be sowing the seeds of their own downfall.

From this perspective, the current #MeToo movement will be judged on two counts. One, whether it accurately identifies the invisible violence and institutional sources of the debilitating shame that stalks women and undermines their sexual integrity. Two, whether it fosters the conditions that enable the I-WE dialogue of democratic justice to emerge and thrive. As a movement that upends current gendered shame dynamics, will #MeToo put an end to debilitating shame, or merely re-direct it? Will the privilege of speaking out be reserved for women of privilege, or will women marginalized by their race, class, and religion also find it safe to come forward? Will the impact of being identified as an abuser become a catalyst for reconstituting gendered norms of masculinity, or will it become the impetus for finding ways to not get caught?

If #MeToo succeeds in honoring the vulnerability of our humanity, it will reset our understanding of sexual harassment, assault, and rape. Without losing sight of the fact that most of its victims are and have been women, it will teach us that this violence, by transforming the pleasures of sexual intimacy into a source of fear, pain, and shame, threatens the fabric of our communal life, for this life depends on trust and care—both of which are destroyed by sexual violence. As a movement that says NO to degrading shame, the viability of #MeToo will depend on the ways that it is heard, as saying YES to the gift we give to ourselves and each other of affirming the dignity of our sexual integrity.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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