

Jill Locke

Democracy and the Death of Shame: Political Equality and Social Disturbance
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Shame seems to have become ubiquitous in public life. Public shaming through tabloid news outlets, social media, and even criminal justice has become commonplace. We seem to have become inured to the spectacle of shame on reality television, along with the threat of shame that lurks in advertising, fueling insecurity-consumption cycles. We are all very familiar with the contours of this contemporary shame: the pervasive sense of inadequacy; the dread of exposure; the fear of being caught out for not being *enough*: good enough, rich enough, healthy enough, educated enough, white enough, and so on. However, despite the seeming ubiquity of shame, many recent discussions about shame in contemporary life and politics, in fact, lament its absence. Contemporary commentators, politicians, critics, along with some philosophers, argue that a lack of shame pervades contemporary culture. They contend that the confessional shame spectacles we routinely witness are a symptom of a pervasive *shamelessness* where declining moral values, consumeristic hedonism, and rife secularism have eroded the principled, respectful shame that in the "good old days" served to protect common decency, self-restraint, and civility. This nostalgia for shame as a regulating moral force within social relations and politics has become widespread, and points to a series of tensions regarding the contours of shame within social life and democratic citizenship. Shame is ambivalent. It is necessary; we (as individuals and collectively) cannot live or grow without it. However, at the same time, shame can also be deeply harmful and pernicious; it routinely leads to (and is a symptom of) political injustice, marginalization, and discrimination.

Jill Locke's recent book *Democracy and the Death of Shame: Political Equality and Social Disturbance* tackles head-on the ambivalences of shame as they are implicated within contemporary shame nostalgia, or what she refers to as "*The Lament That Shame Is Dead* . . . a nostalgic story of an imagined past that represents a longing for a mythical place and time when shame secured and regulated social life" (18). In this book, Locke offers a genealogy of *The Lament* tracing it through the ancient Cynics,

to revolutionary France, right through to nineteenth- and twentieth-century political thought. The far-reaching scope of her analysis serves as a foundation from which Locke offers a novel theory of a form of democratic action that she terms "unashamed citizenship" (37), a response to recent critiques of identity and recognition politics that, in part, depend on the public confessions of wounded subjects as a means for emancipation and political empowerment.

Democracy and the Death of Shame is an important contribution to the feminist literature on the politics of shame, and my overall of assessment of the book is positive: it is persuasive, well-written, well-researched, informative, and nuanced. Locke has clearly engaged with the contemporary philosophical and political literature on shame, and her theoretical insights negotiate a complex terrain of competing accounts regarding shame's positive and negative potentials. My primary reservation about the book regards the wide range of examples that Locke discusses to make her point. The chapters range from an account of the Cynics' "shameless" rejection of inherited hierarchies in ancient Greece, to Rousseau and the entrance of "literary low life" into the revered "republic of letters" in eighteenth-century France, to nineteenth-century American politics and the ascent of the "ill bred" man in Andrew Jackson's presidency, to an account of Hannah Arendt's response to desegregation in US public schools.

In each of these examples, Locke relates events to a broader politics of shame and shamelessness, demonstrating that an "anxiety" about a lack of respect for the "borders and boundaries of the political community" (73), along with "the anxieties about loss of manners, civility, reticence, [and] reverence" (93), have been recurrent throughout the ages. Shame is invoked as a tool of social control when these anxieties arise. It is summoned to provide a "brake or boundary that limits what one can say and do" (152). In fact, the disparate array of examples in the book is intended as a genealogical account to illustrate Locke's point that *The Lament*, as she refers to it throughout the work, is not a symptom of our contemporary moment, but rather has been present in social and political commentary for centuries. Certainly her argument regarding *The Lament's* recurrent nature is convincing. However, the wide array of seemingly unrelated subject matter gives the reader a sense of a post hoc justification for bringing these disparate accounts together, along with a sense of disorientation when reading the chapters sequentially. However, despite this criticism, this is a compelling and well-researched book with original insights that engage with the ongoing disputes in contemporary scholarship regarding the political usefulness of shame and shaming.

Ultimately, Locke argues that the sort of shaming that occurs as a result of *The Lament* is unproductive. Usually this shame is invoked by those with social power to punish, and, as a result, further disempower, those who occupy marginalized positions within social relations (for example: judges shaming criminals or upper classes shaming the poor). As Locke argues, "The Lament deflects one's own shame by focusing on the shamelessness of another member of the body politic" (37-38). This move is unlikely to build ethical solidarity, ameliorate injustice, or "orient your politics toward those who are least advantaged and most often fall under the shadow of shame" (38). Furthermore, the positive moral effect of this sort of shaming is questionable. The moral awakening, and subsequent regulation of behavior, that invoking shame will supposedly inspire, is, as Locke forcibly argues, a "fantasy"

(168). Here Locke intervenes in contemporary feminist debates regarding the utility of shame and shaming in cultural politics. Some feminist thinkers have recently argued that shame can be productive when applied to those with social power and privilege when considering social inequalities such as racism or poverty. However, for those who already occupy a marginalized position in social relations, shaming is unlikely to be salutary and can lead to a range of negative reactions, such as anger, aggression, apathy, and increased shamelessness. And, in fact, even for those who wield social power, shame is unpredictable and volatile; shaming can backfire and lead to more blame and scapegoating. As Locke rightly argues, "shame cannot be counted on and it is not felt equally: a shaming campaign offers no guarantee that its subjects will respond in a particular way" (163).

However, it is not possible to eliminate shame from social or political life, nor should we want to. As Locke notes, "A life *without* the vulnerabilities that develop through negative emotions would be bereft of human connection" (39). Shame is always circulating, and necessarily so. It is how we harness shame within politics and citizenry that is in question. Rejecting the tendencies of shaming that arise out of *The Lament*, Locke offers an account of what she terms "unashamed citizenship" as a means to navigate the ambivalences in contemporary shame theory regarding the usefulness of shame in democratic citizenship. Unashamed citizenship, Locke argues, "emerges from within the experience of shame, which it names and politicizes in order to activate a set of political demands and practices" (37). Distinct from the confessional and therapeutic shame displays often attributed to recognition or identity politics, unashamed citizenship involves "a political language of authenticity" along with "public disavowals of the requirements of shame" in order to "draw attention to injustice" (39). Through exposing the "invisibilities, dominations, and inequalities" that are naturalized in social relations through sedimented normative structures that regulate social and political life, unashamed citizens "unsettle the symmetry between regimes of power and domination and moral and aesthetic appeals to civility and shame" (171). In other words, unashamed citizens call out the shame that is (wrongly) imposed on them and, in doing so, act as "radically democratic" agents who "resist and disavow the terms of shame" (173) to agitate for more inclusion, compassion, and justice.

According to Locke, unashamed citizens are important figures in democracy, as they reveal and unsettle our complacency. However, it is worth mentioning something that Locke doesn't consider fully in her account. Namely, although unashamed citizens may deal with shame productively, many who are affected by the politics of shaming may not have the social capital nor the material or psychological resources to effectively name their shame in order to resist it. Those unashamed citizens who, as Locke contends, "do not fear appearing disrespectable and . . . are not afraid of behaving in ways that will be decried as fomenting civilizational decline" (171) are probably those who have sufficient material privilege and a sense of physical safety to feel able to take political risks. And when considering the material conditions of many marginalized individuals or groups--who may lack citizenship rights, may be denied access to social services, or may simply be burdened with stresses resulting from poverty, ill-health, or routine discrimination--there are perhaps few who feel they can take these risks. Leaving the burden of social and political justice within democracy to unashamed citizens risks falling into a politics of personal responsibility where those who experience injustices are responsible for their own amelioration. Locke's

contention that as "long as people who have been historically excluded and dominated enter the stage of politics as citizens or potential citizens" (176) overlooks the difficulties that many marginalized individuals would have in even accessing the so-called political stage. Although I agree that it is "the business of everyday actors to engage in and change [the world]" (176), a more nuanced account of who unashamed citizenship is available to, and who would be excluded from such efforts, would strengthen Locke's contentions. However, I read her account of unashamed citizenry as operating as a form of "radical activism" (171) within an already justice-seeking democracy where (ideally) shame is not deployed as a political tool to invoke conformity. Unashamed citizens, in this account, may act on behalf of others who may not have the social power to call out their shame and to resist prevailing social dictates.

As I noted above, *Democracy and the Death of Shame* is an insightful and timely work, engaging with many contemporary debates regarding the politics of shame. It will be of interest to feminist scholars, political theorists, and philosophers who are concerned with shame and its role in history and politics.