

The Social and Political Life of Shame in the U.S. Presidential Election 2016ⁱ

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What we say and what we do ultimately comes back to us, so let us own our responsibility, place it in our hands, and carry it with dignity and strength.

Gloria Anzaldúa, 2003, p. 87

During a decade of focus on the U.S.-Mexico border and the internal borders in our communities between Anglos and Mexicans, one of the issues I have been most struck by is the deserved shame that Anglos and the U.S. have harvested from the seizure of Mexican lands, the lynching of Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the southwest, the continuing exploitation of Mexican workers, and the unjust criminalization of forced migrants.ⁱⁱⁱ This work, presented in *Up Against the Wall: Re-Imagining the U.S.-Mexico Border*, helped me clarify the difference between undeserved shame and deserved shame and the importance of reintegrative and generative paths of working with deserved shame.

Briefly, we experience undeserved shame when we are treated shamefully by others and internalize the shame, as in situations of rape and racist diminishment. Deserved shame is a different animal, and grows as we treat others with disregard, violating our own standards. Deserved shame can accrue to an individual and also to a group in which we have membership. In the latter case, it can possibly be the start of a pathway to collective remorse^{iv} and reparation.

While most would agree that this political season has been painful and disturbing and that we are eager to put it behind us, before we do so we need to understand the

landscape that has been ripped open to our viewing by the Trump phenomenon. Shame that has been largely out of our view is now exposed, and as we know shame will soon seek hiding once again. Before it does, we need to turn our understanding toward it, in the hopes that we might contribute to affective practices with shame that bring us closer together, rather than so divisively separate us. In this short talk, I want to address the social and political life of shame, deserved and undeserved, as a way into understanding some of our current political divides. At the end, I want to bring into focus a special way by which psychologists and psychoanalysts can become more proficient in metabolizing our own shame as a living model, and I will propose that wealth shame, in particular, can be a generative pathway to doing so.

Donald Trump is a handler and a broker of shame for whites who find themselves “strangers in their own land,” the title of a remarkable book by sociologist Arlie Hochschild (2016). Trump removes shame from one group and places it onto others, gaining affection, respect, and political power from the first group. While it seems clear that his narcissism serves to largely defend him from his own shame, what is noteworthy is that he has attuned himself to a group of people quite unlike himself, except for their sense of shame. He offers to them a means of relief from their shame, a means that unfortunately encourages their bypassing of shame and their substitution of “humiliated fury” (Lewis, 1971) for a more thoughtful examination of the historical psychosocial dynamics that have subjected them to prolonged exposure to being shamed. We need to turn to history to recognize that the handing off of shame is a pathway to fascist power. I am going to limit myself to the Deep South, but similar analyses are possible in Appalachia and the rural midwest.

Poor whites in the South during and in the aftermath of slavery were precariously poised socially between the white plantation lords and African slaves. They identified with the white planters and aspired to rise to their economic stature, but had little means of doing so. The best land was taken for the plantations, and they were left to eke out a living for their families on poor land. They were disparaged and shamed as poor and uneducated. Later, during the Civil Rights era and even today, many of their descendants are labeled and stigmatized as “racists,” “crackers,” “dumb,” “rednecks,” “trailer trash,” and “ignorant Southern Bible-thumpers” engaging in “backward” religion. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1965) understood this and said, “the Southern aristocracy took the world and gave the poor white man Jim Crow....No matter how bad off he was, at least he was a white man, better than a black man.” Michelle Alexander (2010) continues, “time and time again, poor and working class whites were persuaded to choose their racial status interests over their economic interests with blacks, resulting in the emergence of new caste systems that only marginally benefitted whites but were devastating for African Americans” (p. 243).

After slavery, formerly affluent whites suffered the shame of defeat, as well as a decisive downward turn in their economic position which for many was doubly sealed by the Great Depression. These same people and their descendants also struggled with being devalued, looked down upon, and shunted to the side in a nation that discredited them and in which they felt they had little say.

Alexander argues that when the Civil Rights Movement failed to adequately promote the linkage between the poor and working class whites and African Americans, their efforts at affirmative action “was like salt on a wound as African Americans

leapfrogged over working class whites to Harvard and Yale and jobs in police and fire departments” (p. 246).

In her stunning and revealing portrait of Louisianan members of the Republican right Tea Party, Arlie Hochschild (2016) describes what she calls their “deep story”:

You are a stranger in your own land. You do not recognize yourself in how others see you. It is a struggle to feel seen and honored. And to feel honored you have to feel— and feel seen as— moving forward. But through no fault of your own, and in ways that are hidden, you are slipping backward. You turn to your workplace for respect— but wages are flat and jobs insecure. So you look to other sources of honor. You get no extra points for your race. You look to gender, but if you’re a man, you get no extra points for that either. If you are straight you are proud to be a married, heterosexual male, but that pride is now seen as a potential sign of homophobia— a source of dishonor. Regional honor? Not that either. You are often disparaged for the place you call home. As for the church, many look down on it, and the proportion of Americans outside any denomination has risen. You are old, but in America, attention is trained on the young. People like you— white, Christian, working and middle class— suffer this sense of fading honor (Kindle Locations 2435-2442).

In that story, strangers [African Americans, other minorities, immigrants, and women] step ahead of you in line, making you anxious, resentful, and afraid. A president [Obama] allies with the line cutters, making you feel distrustful, betrayed. A person ahead of you in line insults you as an ignorant redneck,

making you feel humiliated and mad. Economically, culturally, demographically, politically, you are suddenly a stranger in your own land. The whole context of Louisiana— its companies, its government, its church and media— reinforces that deep story. So this— the deep story— was in place before the match was struck [the match of the Trump campaign]. (Kindle Locations 3642-3654).

“Shame-provoking inequalities” (Gilligan, 1997) also register in the body. Sexton (2016) reports rising mortality rates for white middle-aged men “with most of the fatalities coming from what experts are calling “despair deaths.... Our economy has left many of these men behind. White men, statistics show, have borne some of the worst of the effects of globalism and the Great Recession, and still suffer from the [largest shortfall](#) of jobs.”

Working class and poor whites have been tutored by right-wing media and politicians to think in racial rather than in class terms, to identify with their racial status rather than their working class status that they share with many people of color. Many are convinced that their interests are pitted against those of color in a zero sum game. A sense of felt superiority due to racial identification has been used by all too many to mitigate against the psychic and very real daily assaults of working conditions and poor economic status. For those who hold economic power, it is advantageous to split less privileged whites from communities of color, and to ensure that they think the American Dream is possible to achieve if only it weren't for the interlopers; that getting rid of the interlopers will bring them closer to their own ascendancy to economic and social superiority. Through fostering their identification with privileged whites, the effects of neoliberal global capitalism on their lives does not come into focus. Indeed, as

Hochschild reports, Louisianan Tea Party members claim their love of capitalism and think that whatever measure of success they have achieved is attributable to its virtues. The ravages of the housing debacle and the pollution of their waters and bodies from fracking and oil processing chemicals—byproducts of capitalist extremes of profit seeking—pale in comparison to the threat of migrants and refugees who are seen as living off of their taxes and bringing down their culture.

Through his decades of therapeutic work with violent offenders within the Massachusetts prison system, psychiatrist James Gilligan (1997) has offered us an understanding of the linkage between shame, anger, and violence. Those who are most vulnerable to being undermined by feelings of shame are those who have little or no nonviolent means to ward off or diminish these feelings, such as education and adequate employment, and limited emotional capacity to experience guilt and love as inhibitors of violence. In the face of shame, they are more at risk for resorting to violence to establish their personhood and to attempt to claim “respect” (p. 112). Gilligan argues that all violence has as its aim the achievement of justice for oneself or those on whose behalf one thinks one is acting. For many men it is also about the “maintenance of manhood.”

Gilligan (1997) understands collective violence, as in the Holocaust, as resulting from many of these same factors. Hitler rose to power in 1933 on the heels of the Depression and promised to reverse the “shame of Versailles.” According to Gilligan, members of the lower middle class joined Hitler in an attempt to retrieve themselves from feelings of shame suffered due to unemployment, loss of homes, and downward social mobility (p. 67).

The members of this group felt in danger of losing their capital and suffering a

loss of social and economic status, a degradation, by becoming part of the humiliated, inferior, poverty-stricken lower class, or felt they had already suffered that humiliating sea-change into something poor and strange, and were eager for revenge—for a way of re-establishing their status or power. (p.67)

Hitler also was a handler and a broker of shame, shifting it on to the Jews, blaming them for this threatening situation. A call to cultural superiority and to an imagined racial superiority appears to alleviate the experience of shame.

Sadly, in the United States there are many whites who are presently in a position similar to lower middle-class Germans in the 30's. They have lost their homes and their jobs, or fear being on the brink of this. They and their children may have suffered inadequate education and healthcare. They no longer have adequate retirement funds, or the hope of attaining them. Their desire for an adulthood of success, security, and self-respect feels no longer achievable, and for this they feel ashamed. Their shame is easily experienced as personal failure due to the ideology of American individualism, where we lay on each person's shoulders the responsibility to succeed by their own efforts, regardless of the tilt of the playing field. The scapegoating of people of color, immigrants, and refugees is a skillful sleight-of-hand deflecting attention from the actual dynamics and results of "vulture capitalism" and excess greed that have undermined the life savings, housing, retirement, and employment of millions of Americans.

Adam Haslett in an article in *The Nation* crystallizes the oft-described reasons for shame and anger:

How did it come to this? The most common explanation given is that decades of technological advancement and automation, neoliberal trade and labor

policy, and stagnating real wages have effectively disenfranchised huge numbers of Americans by cutting off access to a decent, stable life for themselves and their children. Vast inequality in wealth, combined with demographic change and residential segregation along racial and ideological lines, has fostered mutual suspicion and resentment among those who see their place in the old social hierarchy eroding.^v

Hochschild concurs and describes how Tea Party members aspire to the American Dream, to economic superiority and security, while finding themselves falling backward in wage earning and social status. They feel invisible and devalued. In the U.S., as well as throughout Europe, this situation of precarity has given rise to increasing xenophobia and fear of the loss of culture and language. These Anglos fear the Hispanization of the United States, and of finding themselves a minority in their own country. The “call to restore honor,” engineered by conservative radio talk show host Glenn Beck, bespeaks the loss of a sense of respect, a loss that is an ingredient of xenophobic racism.

Trump is even able to take away the shame felt from needing and using government benefits.

[Regarding government benefits,] Trump adds a key proviso: restrict government help to real Americans. White men are counted in, but undocumented Mexicans and Muslims and Syrian refugees are out. Thus, Trump offers the blue-collar white men relief from a taker's shame: If you make America great again, how can you not be proud? Trump has put on his blue-collar cap, pumped his fist in the air, and left mainstream Republicans helpless. Not only does he speak to the white

working class' grievances; as they see it, he has finally stopped their story from being politically suppressed. (Hochschild, 2016b)

Unexamined and unacknowledged shame travels on subterranean routes. When it is imposed on one group and not consciously worked with and understood, it can be projected by them onto others with a marked ferocity. For instance, Mexican migrants and African Americans become cast as lazy, stupid, parasitical, and, even, criminal. Shame is transferred, enabling whites suffering precarity to feel superior in their character and morals: hard working, persevering, generous, God-loving, and survivors—not victims-- of travail.

This is the backdrop of the stage for our current political spectacle, one where we need to attune to shame. When we do not learn to recognize and then to reflect on feelings of shame, they can easily become the stuff of projective identification, a part of our feeling that we intrude into others. The unacknowledged and unclaimed shame of one or some becomes the felt shame of another or others. Both deserved and undeserved shame can travel quite directly from one heart to another, from one body to another.

In the 2nd presidential debate, Trump deflected any shame from his assaulting women and his bragging about it to his explicit shaming of Hillary Clinton: “She brings up words that I said 11 years ago — I think it’s disgraceful, and she should be ashamed of herself, to tell you the truth.” In another context, as a reporter questioned Trump about women’s claims of his sexual assault, he lashed out, “You are a disgusting human being.”^{vi} Colin Powell announced that Trump “has no shame.” Indeed, he has outsourced his shame, and feels shameless.^{vii} Haslett calls Trump the “shamer-in-chief,” a “weaponizer” of economic, ethnic, and personal shame.^{viii}

Indeed, his skill is precisely this: to create an entire national theater of shame in which he induces that very emotion in his followers, on the one hand, while on the other saving them from having to acknowledge its pain by publicly shaming others instead. This has been the central action of his campaign from the outset.

How are we, as psychologically-minded people and professionals, to respond? As individuals and as a profession, we must make the countercultural move of even more concertedly turning toward feelings of shame, welcoming them out from hiding in internal landscapes and ferreting them out from the social and political shaming of others. In a shame-aversive culture, psychoanalysis needs to take a decisive stand to bring more attention to the psychological work with shame that is necessary to back off from the precipice of fascism and crippling division.

We would do well to begin by borrowing from other cultures' long history of venerating shame as a noble emotion. For instance, for the Maori people, shame is said to be one step removed from heaven. In the Korean system of understanding emotions, shame is seen as a differentiated feeling as opposed to a basic emotion (Chodorow, 2009). "The *capacity to experience shame* 'in recognition of one's error,' is the first of four noble qualities leading toward the development of compassion" (p. 5). For shame not to predispose us to demeaning others, to defensive depression or rage and violence, we need to bring consciousness to it so that we can use it as a path to guilt when appropriate, to meaningful remorse, and to more empathic connection and compassionate action.

John Braithwaite (1989) in *Crime, Shame, and Reintegration*, focuses on what I am calling "deserved shame." He argues that it can be used to nourish "personal

obligations to others within a community of concern” (p. 84).^{ix} To do so we must be sincere in re-including the person or persons into the social fabric as they grapple with what is shameful and make the changes that will ensure that their future actions toward others will cleave more closely to their ideals. For deserved shame to be reintegrative it is important that while the offense is denounced, the offender is not. Braithwaite carefully describes shame as a feeling that does not have to foreclose people from human relatedness. For it not to do so, we need to give attention to creating rituals for apology and remorse, *and* paths of restitution and reparation that would allow the one suffering deserved shame to become better integrated into the common human family. Apologies alone will not suffice. Restorative processes are inclusive and call the person back into a welcoming and supportive community. They offer an alternative to withdrawing and hiding in the face of shame. This is the basis of restorative approaches to justice.^x

Psychologist Helen Merrell Lynd in *On Shame and the Search for Identity* (1958) underscores how feelings of shame, when “fully faced,” “may throw an unexpected light on who we are and point the way....[They] may become not primarily something to be covered, but a positive experience of revelation” (p. 20)—“a revelation of oneself, of one’s society, and of the human condition” (p. 71). Deserved shame announces to us when we have fallen short of a treasured goal, and, in doing so, underscores our deeper held values and aspirations. It is, she says, “a wound to one’s self-esteem” (p. 23) to fall short, not only in the eyes of others, but, perhaps most importantly, in one’s own eyes. When experienced, shame involves the whole self. It can be difficult to communicate, and will require time to sort through its implications.

Almost 60 years after Helen Lynd wrote on shame, Christopher Lebron (2015) in

The Color of Our Shame: Race and Justice in Our Time argues that shame “is a powerful state of being. It can be self-admonishing, but importantly it can be redemptive as it alerts us to the potential to be better than we are. It can be deeply personal and directed toward the self, but it can also be public and expressed toward and on behalf of others who stand in some important relation to us” (p. xv). Lebron argues that “we ought to feel shame for being in possession of bad character, and, in light of that, it seems necessary for our society to embrace practices that cultivate moral excellence at both the level of institutions and persons” (p. 2). “Shame,” he says, “allows our moral sense to tune in to the beacon of goodness and justice (p. 7). Shame “prompts reflection upon where we have gone wrong as moral agents and brings into view the principles we affirm but which we have violated” (p. 13).

Before we begin our discussion, I want to offer four actions as possible points of discussion, arising from my remarks.

--*Attune to and track social and political shame*: When shaming becomes the currency in political life, we need to look closely at its historical tributaries upstream. I believe we need to understand the shame of the descendants of those who suffered defeat in the Civil War and empathically address their present-day concerns so that they can feel a sense of communal inclusion.^{xi}

--*Resist social and political shaming even in self-defense*: We need to carefully resist shaming those who feel on the outside of the political process, and instead listen even more closely to their concerns.^{xii} For instance, at Trump Towers in New York City during a pro-Trump rally, a pro-Clinton passerby yelled “Go back to your trailer.” Clinton

herself, I believe, took a profound mis-step when she called half of Trump supporters “deplorables.” Some Tea Party members countered by creating t-shirts that called themselves “Adorable Deplorables.” When in a debate she later quipped that Trump would evade paying taxes if possible, he passed on being humiliated and instead declared out of turn, “You are a *nasty* woman,” attempting to shame her in return.^{xiii}

When Obama turned the tables on Trump at the Press Core dinner by publicly humiliating him in order to pay back the humiliation of Trump’s claim that Obama was not born in the U.S., he got back more than he bargained for. Roger Stone said in an interview for Frontline (Kirk, 2016) that this was the night that consolidated Trump’s decision to run for the presidency. This trading in shame by the Right and the Left is dangerous and needs to be refused.

--Listen to and act inclusively to those you experience as abject politically and socially.^{xiv}

The abyss between Trump-supporting whites and left-leaning whites is damaging our country. While the attention of liberal whites has been rightfully aligned with marginalized groups of color who have suffered and are suffering from the worst discrimination in our country, we have often continued to heap shame upon our white counterparts who are afraid of and opposed to a country where whites are in the minority. Generalizing, we have forgotten this portion of the population, and when we remember them, it is most often done derisively. Just as anthropologists have been urged to come home and study their own social groups or “study up” the ladder of power, white psychologically-minded Left-leaning people need to expand our empathic attunement to people we have abjected. Is not listening into those most difficult to hear and attempting to understand them part of the essential calling of psychologists? It is only in

understanding the experiences of those on the other side of the political spectrum that we can begin to create, in Hochschild's words, a more shared "deep story."

--Consider professional engagement in psychosocial accompaniment, a more public practice of psychology, where we are useful in a wider arena and are less defended against our own social, environmental, and wealth shame that may arise: When we engage in private practice primarily with individuals who share our own socioeconomic and racial positionality, class and wealth tend to be naturalized and often go largely unquestioned. When we work in the wider public sphere, we are confronted more directly by the destructive effects of neoliberalism and racism, and we are exposed to our own possible shame over our relative privilege and security. In Latin America some psychologists engage in what is called "psychosocial accompaniment" of individuals and groups who do not have access to therapy, but who have suffered from significant collective traumas (Watkins, 2015). Such work shares attributes of psychotherapy, but exceeds it by trying to help with some of the most urgent needs of a particular group. The accompaniment is done alongside the person, collaboratively, and is rarely sequestered in a private office. I believe this more "public practice" of psychology can help us find our place amongst others, not only healing some of the fractures created by the bystanding of catastrophes, but creating a psychosocial practice of accompaniment that is more adequate for the complex problems people suffer^{xv} In psychosocial accompaniment, when one steps into the situations in which people are directly suffering the effects of collective trauma, the defensive distance of bystanding may collapse, baring a vulnerable self—ourselves-- that may be suffused by shame. Christopher LeBron in *The Color of Our Shame* argues that normative practices of segregating ourselves serve to protect us from

feelings of social shame. This segregation creates what he calls a moral disadvantage that compromises our lived integrity.

One of the hindrances to shifting our modes of engagement is wealth shame. When we work with people under severe economic and social strains, we can often acutely feel the shame of excess relative wealth.^{xvi} Rather than bypass such shame through avoidance of the work contexts where it may arise, let us work together to examine these kinds of effects of neoliberal capitalism on our own psyches and living, and clarify restorative pathways to work with shame and its relationship to our profession. If we do so, I believe we will personally become more attuned to the social, economic, and political life of shame. This will enable us to better create and engage generative pathways for its transformation within therapy and within the wider culture.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Some portions of this paper are drawn from my chapter "The Souls of Anglos," in E. Casey & M. Watkins, *Up Against the Wall: Re-Imagining the U.S.-Mexico Border* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press).

^{iv} Gilbert describes membership remorse as a group member's remorse over the act of a group of which he or she is a member. The group member needn't have directly perpetrated the acts or even known about them at the time. Gilbert (2001) says that group "members all bear some relevant relation to the act of their group" because of their "participation in the underlying joint commitment" (p. 227). It may be suffered secretly, she says, with others not knowing.

Membership and group remorse not only pave the way for “backward-looking forgiveness but a renewal of forward-looking trust” (p. 218). To move from shame to remorse allows the shift from defensive and hostile relations to the possibility of a desire for making amends, restitution, reparations.

^v Hochschild’s analysis adds to this: “Putting the 1860s and the 1960s together, white men of the South seemed to have lived through one long deep story of being shoved back in line. If in the nineteenth century the big planters had reduced the lot of the poor white farmer, twenty-first-century corporations had gone global, automated, moved plants to cheaper workers or moved cheaper workers in, and deftly remained out of sight over the brow of the hill. Some 280 of the most profitable American companies had dodged taxes on half of their profits, according to a 2011 study, but in the history-soaked deep story, you couldn’t see that. You were left to imagine it, to feel you couldn’t do anything about it. And to make matters worse, it was your sector, the free market, that was letting you down. Meanwhile, white wages leveled or sank and welfare expenditures rose. The Honor Squeeze So for older white men, the 1960s presented a delicate dilemma. On one hand, they did want to stand up, come forward, and express an identity like so many others had done. Why not us too? On the other hand, as members of the right, they had objected in principle to cutting in line, and disliked the overused word Russell Hochschild, Arlie. *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (Kindle Locations 3542-3550). The New Press. Kindle Edition.

^{vi} He has described women as “disgusting,” “fat pigs,” as having “the face of a dog,” as a “piece of ass”; Mexicans as rapists and criminals; African Americans as lazy by inborn trait. Trump has run his campaign on shaming immigrants, people of color, people with disabilities, and women, in an effort to lift up whites who feel betrayed by the government, left behind, and over run and out run by minorities on the brink of majority status.

^{vii} Lynd (1958) emphasizes that while we may strive to be guilt-free, we would not strive to be free of shame. She quotes Zephaniah 3:5, a minor prophet in the Hebrew Bible: “The unjust knoweth no shame.”

^{viii} Haslett (2016) continues, “This is the divide. This is the choice. Make shame—your own and others’—into a weapon, as these men have done, and you get the closest thing to fascism we’ve had in this country since the 1930s. Create the room for shame’s articulation, and therefore a recognition of our commonality, and you have at least a shot at the working basis for an ameliorative democracy.”

^{ix} Societal conditions that favor communitarianism at the societal level and interdependence at the individual level of analysis are most conducive.

^x Restorative justice is upheld by three pillars (Zehr, 2002): harms and related needs, obligations that have resulted from harms, and engagement of victims, offenders, and the community.

^{xi} Arlie Hochschild engaged in a process akin to that advanced by the Compassionate Listening Project (<http://www.compassionatelistening.org/>), a process of listening closely to members of both sides of a conflict who do not talk directly with each other.

^{xii} A group process called “Deep Democracy” by Jungian analyst Arnie Mindell proves a format for this kind of listening (see <http://www.deepdemocracyinstitute.org/deep-democracy-explained.html>).

^{xiii} Thomas Scheff has noted that bypassed shame involves excessive thought and/or speech, but little feeling (Lewis, 1995).

^{xiv} The Public Conversation Project offers guidelines for conversations between people from different locations on the political spectrum. See “Reaching Out Across the Red-Blue Divide, One person at a Time” by Maggie Herzig, <http://www.whatisessential.org/resource/reaching-out-across-red-blue-divide-one-person-time>

^{xv} In the language of liberation theology, accompaniment can lead to conversion to those we share life with, decentering us from our earlier positionality.

^{xvi} In *Twenty Years at Hull-House* (1910, Chapter 12, para. #2) Jane Addams shared: “During the many relief visits I paid that winter in tenement houses and miserable lodgings, I was constantly shadowed by a certain sense of shame that I should be comfortable in the midst of such distress.”