

who feels ashamed will fly into a violent rage. Exposure to shame and its negative effects depends on inherent differences of temperament and on structural realities that cause differences in vulnerability. It is tempting, but undoubtedly inaccurate, to explain individual or group behavior with a single, totalizing psychological theory. Still, even though it does not explain everything, the influence of shame on black political life has received too little attention from political scientists.

Pecola

The most comprehensive examination of the psychological and social effects of racial shame on African American women is not a work of social science; it is a novel. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, a brief and piercing work of fiction that delineates the corrosive intergenerational impact of shame, was published a full year before Helen Block Lewis's groundbreaking monograph, *Shame and Guilt Neurosis*, defined shame as a fertile field of psychological inquiry. Yet Morrison's text anticipates what three subsequent decades of empirical research have shown about the debilitating psychological effects of shame. In addition, Morrison describes the terrible damage that sustained racial shaming can cause in African American communities. She accomplishes this through the story of a little black girl named Pecola Breedlove. Pecola lives in a shabby storefront with her mother, Pauline, her father, Cholly, and her older brother, Sammy, in Depression era Ohio. She descends into madness while praying fervently for blue eyes, which she believes can save her from her life of grinding poverty, social rejection, domestic violence, and, ultimately, incestuous rape. Although Pecola's sad existence is the

motivating force of the narrative, the story exquisitely illustrates the durable, traumatic, sweeping effects of racial shame.⁹⁰

The Bluest Eye is narrated in multiple voices, but it is mostly framed by the voice of a child, Claudia, who is Pecola's classmate.⁹¹ Claudia is not sophisticated or experienced enough to understand the reasons for the awful events she witnesses, but she has unfettered emotional insight into the darkness and brutality of Pecola's circumstances and her own. By telling us this story through the eyes of a child, Morrison encourages us to focus on the emotions and moods that she evokes.⁹² We are supposed to read the heart of this story, and at its heart are many incarnations of shame.

Morrison tells us immediately that "Pecola was having her father's baby." The reader knows the awful outcome that is lurking but must struggle, along with Claudia, to understand why. The first emotion Claudia reveals is shame. She has caught a cold, and her mother's constant grumbling as she cares for her makes Claudia feel that her sickness is shameful. "My mother's anger humiliates me; her words chafe my cheeks, and I am crying. . . . I believe she despises my weaknesses for letting the sickness 'take hold.'" Claudia is receiving a lesson about the imperative of strength. She realizes she must learn not to be sick so that she does not burden others; her mother's gruffness is a lesson of shaming her toward strength. But this embarrassment at weakness is temporary. Claudia's is a loving family, and she learns that her mother "is not angry at me, but at my sickness." There is no stigmatizing shame here; with her family she is truly safe. Claudia's shame is balanced by a sense of belonging. "So when I think of autumn, I think of somebody with hands who does not want me to die." This loving context provides the sharp contrast to the painful shame that Pecola experiences.⁹³

then only to yearn for the return of her mask.” To cope with the violence in her home, Pecola learns to imagine herself invisible. She can make her entire body disappear, but somehow her eyes always remain, bearing witness to the brutality between her parents. The rest of Pecola’s world is marked by rejection. Schoolchildren torment her. Storekeepers do not acknowledge her and shudder at having to take money from her hand. Strangers lure her into acts of violence against innocent animals. In the end, her own father rapes her. All Pecola wants to do is hide. “Pecola tucked her head in—a funny, sad, helpless movement. A kind of hunching of the shoulders, pulling in of the neck, as though she wanted to cover her ears.”⁹⁵

But the shame is not really Pecola’s. It is hers only as an inheritance from her parents and community. She is hardly alone in hating her blackness. Although her fervent desire for blue eyes is the novel’s clearest example of self-hatred borne of racial shame, other black characters also find whiteness beautiful and blackness ugly. Older black women chastise Claudia for dissecting and destroying her white baby doll, lovingly given as a Christmas gift. Soaphead Church comes from a family of mixed-race ancestry who consistently and consciously marry “up” in order to move their children farther from blackness. Geraldine is a brown-skinned woman who holds on tightly to an attitude of respectability meant to distinguish her colored family from the “niggers” around her.

Pecola’s mother, Pauline Breedlove, has embraced the role of mammy for a wealthy white family. In a pivotal moment, Pauline abuses and rejects Pecola after Pecola accidentally spills a blueberry pie in the white folks’ kitchen where Pauline works. “Polly,” as Mrs. Breedlove is called by her white charge, soothes and reassures “the little pink and yellow girl” with an affection she never shows her own

Unlike Claudia’s poor but respectable family, the Breedloves (Pecola’s family) are marginal members of the community, marked by their physical ugliness, the depth of their poverty, and the inexplicably violent behavior of the father, Cholly. Morrison tells us that even when the Breedloves tried to make a life for themselves, humiliation intruded and disrupted their best efforts at compassionate love. In 1941, everyone is poor, but the Breedloves are poor in a shabby way. There are no loving memories attached to their home. As they look around their crooked room, the only emotion they feel is shame. “Occasionally an item provoked a physical reaction: an increase of acid irritation in the upper intestinal tract, a light flush of perspiration at the back of the neck as circumstances surrounding the piece of furniture were recalled.” With this description, Morrison precisely captures the physiological experience of shame. We then learn that the source of the shame is the humiliating experience of trying to buy a new couch. Two white men deliver the couch, and when they take it off the truck, it has a large slash in the upholstery. The Breedloves try to send the couch back, but the white men refuse to take it. Trying to have something new and beautiful, they receive something broken instead. It is a moment the delivery drivers will rarely think of again, but their impunity is absolute. Because they are poor and black, the Breedloves are required to accept something inferior, and their powerlessness to resist this inferiority stays with them forever. “If you had to pay \$4.80 a month for a sofa that started off split, no good, and humiliating—you couldn’t take any joy in owning it. And the joylessness stank, pervading everything.”⁹⁴

Pecola, in whom the Breedloves’ shame is most concentrated, embodies the emotion in her physical posture: “Concealed, veiled, eclipsed—peeping out from behind the shroud very seldom, and

children. These actions are inexplicable at first, but Morrison allows us to see how they emerge from Pauline's great need for love, beauty, and order. When the ugliness of her life makes beauty and order impossible in her own home, she escapes the shame by clinging to the trappings of whiteness. Pauline is not a frivolous woman. She was once a lonely young bride living in Ohio, deeply ashamed of her country manners and dress when confronted with the black women she met in her new town. Lonely and rejected, she took refuge in the movies. There, Morrison tells us, Pauline learned to adore the world of physical beauty and romantic love embodied by the screen stars. It is a vicious lesson because "in equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap." Absorbing white standards of beauty and virtue made her ashamed and unable to love herself, her children, or her life. "More and more she neglected her house, her children, her man—they were like the afterthoughts one has just before sleep, the early-morning and late-evening edges of her day, the dark edges that made the daily life with the Fishers lighter, more delicate, more lovely. Here she could arrange things, clean things, line things up in neat rows. Here her foot flopped around on deep pile carpets, and there was no uneven sound. Here she found beauty, order, cleanliness and praise." Pauline hides from her shameful blackness and poverty by embracing her role as mammy.⁹⁶

The most destructive shame of all comes from Cholly Breedlove. The reader knows from the beginning that he will rape his young daughter. Morrison does not romanticize or ask the reader to feel sympathy for him; but she does require us to understand that Cholly's violence is part of a long spiral of shame. She takes us back to Cholly's

adolescent flirtation with a girl named Darlene, leading to his first sexual encounter. It begins sweetly, if a bit diffidently. There is giggling, tickling, and exploring one another's bodies. He does not know the girl well, nor does he love her, but their encounter is affectionate, gentle, and mutual. Everything changes when two white hunters discover the young couple in the woods. They shine a flashlight on Cholly and Darlene and demand that he "get on wid it. An' make it good, nigger." Darlene's shame is absolute. She shields her face with her hands and dissociates from the experience. Cholly's shame is also extreme and his reaction is "violence born of total helplessness." Through their abusive observation, the white men make Cholly their instrument of raping the young Darlene. Their gaze turns innocence into violence, consent into force, and loving into shaming. Cholly's anger is directed toward his fellow victim. "Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were big, white, armed men. He was small, black, helpless." Instead he hates Darlene and becomes sick every time he looks at her or thinks of her.⁹⁷

Morrison needs the reader to see this moment. She wants readers to know that more than being left on a trash heap by his mother, more than being raised by an elderly aunt who dies in his youth, more than being rejected by his father in favor of a craps game, it is this moment of shame at the hands of the white hunters that sets off the spiral that eventually ends in Cholly's rape of his own daughter. Morrison wants us to know that Cholly is still reeling with shame on that Saturday in spring years later when he rapes Pecola. Perhaps even when he rapes her a second time soon afterward and she becomes pregnant with his child. Morrison teaches us that the pa-

thologies of this family are not innate to themselves. The seeds of Pecola's destruction are planted by the shaming gaze of white supremacy.

Two decades before clinical psychologists conceived a theory of the collective effects of shame, Morrison's painful tale of the Breedloves explicates the burden of shame that black girls and women carry. Through Claudia's jealous rage about Shirley Temple, Morrison reveals how black girls are forced to live in a world that declares Shirley Temple beautiful and worthy and bestows on her the chance to dance with Bojangles, whose loving, affirming glances are denied to little black girls like Claudia. Along with Claudia we can be outraged by a world that negates and erases black girls. When the community learns that Pecola is pregnant by her father, most hope that the baby will die, but Claudia and her sister don't share this desire. "Our astonishment was short-lived, for it gave way to a curious kind of defensive shame." Despite the others' wishes, Claudia "felt a need for someone to want the black baby to live—just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls." But the shame is too deep, Morrison tells us; Pecola's baby dies.⁹⁸

After the infant's death, Pecola descends into madness and spends her life walking the streets of her little town. Her utter destruction is an indictment of American racism. It is also a warning to African American communities of the consequences of internalizing "dominant standards of value and beauty with little or no inspection of or reflection on the effects to itself or to its individual members."⁹⁹ Pecola's story is not typical or pervasive: most black men do not cope with the internalized shame of racism by sexually abusing their adolescent daughters. Yet her story is instructive because it details the

abhorrent possibilities of shame. Morrison writes that her intention with the novel is to focus on "how something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female. In trying to dramatize the devastation that even casual racial contempt can cause, I chose a unique situation, not a representative one."¹⁰⁰

The Politics of Shame

At its core, shame is an emotional response to misrecognition. Research suggests that an infant's first experience of shame occurs when the beloved parent fails for the first time to recognize the child by mirroring its facial expressions and mood. In an infant's earliest interactions it discovers its power by the sustained eye contact and attention of the caregiver. The parent greets the waking baby with the wide eyes of enthusiasm. As the caregiver lifts the crying infant from the crib, he or she grimaces with concern about the baby's tears. When baby wants to play, the parent smiles and coos. Together baby and beloved create a dyad based on the caregiver's open recognition of the infant's needs and emotional states. The infant grows confident in its own worthiness because when it has needs the caregiver recognizes and meets them. Though utterly dependent on the adult for its needs, the infant comes to feel powerful through this attachment. Recognition by the adult conveys safety, worth, and self-esteem. But inevitably, the day arrives when baby's attempts to engage the parent are met with distraction or disapproval. The caregiver looks away, stares blankly, seems uninterested or even angry about baby's attempt to engage. Psychologists believe that these first failures to receive clear