Shame is a complex emotion of self-assessment that works as a hidden subtext in our ability to negotiate our identity in our relations with each other. Shame is the emotive state that most poignantly underscores the degree to which the conception of the self is a perceptual product. Forever in an interlocking relationship with the eyes of the other, shame unveils the fluidity of our identity as it vacillates dynamically between our inner (psychic) and outer worlds. It is this emotion in particular that exposes the porosity of our claim to a clearly defined and fixed self. Whether we read shame as an affect or an emotion, what becomes clear is that to read for shame is, to borrow the philosopher Martha Nussbaum’s term, to create “upheavals of thought.” Shame collapses the self/other binaries with which we are comfortable and exposes our neediness, helplessness, weaknesses, vulnerability, and mutual dependence on each other.

In my work, I am particularly interested in revealing the ways in which shame can effectively lead to more positive human experiences of selfhood rather than the debilitating and stigmatizing experience of shame from which we all seek to distance ourselves. To move in this direction, I focus on literary representations of women of color in the Black and Indian diaspora who are culturally scripted to bear shame in the private sphere. Interrogating the binary paradigm that “naturally” aligns women with emotions and the domestic sphere and men with the rational and public sphere is an essential first step toward exposing the way in which women’s perceived absence from the public and more specifically political sphere is falsely constructed in the interest of a virile uniform national agenda. In other words, to build a national identity in regions like West Africa, the French Antilles, and the Indian Ocean, fixed conceptions of femininity, and invariably masculinity, are the unchecked
formulas used to construct the concept of the nation. Women of color from the Ivory Coast, Guadeloupe, Martinique, and Mauritius do their part for national identity by remaining invisible ‘victims’ of traditional cultural edicts. Their absence from the public sphere, in which the sociopolitical issues that concern their well-being are debated, is justified by feelings like shame. These emotions are claimed to impair women’s ability to participate in those rational discourses which serve nation-building agendas.

My focus on literary representations of women of color from the Black and Indian diaspora is foregrounded by the position of the woman in History as much as in herstory. History has embedded the perception of women of color within the Western feminist framework and further complicated her status because of the colonial apparatus of oppression that has pressed her person out of being. Simone de Beauvoir’s expression “absence of response,” used to refer to articulations of the female experience, is triply charged for the woman of color. In common parlance we speak of her as twice cursed because of her complexion and because of her sex. This formula stops short, however, of the third index to her person that reveals the intensity of her dynamism: her desires. She is triply cursed because of her color, because of her sex, and because of her desires. Keeping her desires muffled is in great part modulated through the stigma of shame with which she is constantly menaced and/or forced to bear in these distinct cultural regions. Each of these layers under which she has been buried regains presence and pronounced visibility, most notably in the works of Guadeloupean author Maryse Condé, Martinican Creole specialist Raphaël Confiant, and Mauritian authors Ananda Devi and Shenaz Patel. Because shame is equally concerned with image-making, the literary endeavors of these authors are able to depict those desires that disrupt fixed representations of the Ivoirian, Guadeloupean, Martinican, and Mauritian woman.

To illuminate the shame experience in all human relations and thus do away with the false binary that situates emotions unevenly within the province of the feminine, that is to say, the private sphere, authors like Condé, Confiant, Devi, and Patel help me to reveal how the malleability of emotions facilitates the diffusion of ideologies, in terms like culture and tradition, in the service of specifically male dominated socio-political and economic interests. Looking closely at the discrete zones in which shame is said to exclusively live begins a productive process toward engaging with the emotional content that shapes the conjunctive internal-external value systems that allow us to flourish in distinct cultural climates. It is her representation that avows that shame works in a double movement as a site of social control and a site of social resistance, masking and revealing, shadowing/shading, and enlightening our mutually interdependent relationships with each other.

One of the ways in which I underscore the ubiquity of the shame experience in informing daily cultural practices is by looking at how this emotion modulates common expressions of identity through, for example, humor. In the final year of thesis writing, I was fortunate enough to receive the support of the Center for the Study of Women and the Department of French and Francophone studies to test the viability of this argument in a Caribbean conference in Lugano, Switzerland. In this forum, I presented a portion of my work on the topic titled “Slashing la logique et la raison in Célanire cou-coupé by Maryse Condé.” On this occasion I was able to engage the audience in my thought process by demonstrating how the author uses humor to transform the culturally scripted shame experiences that were dictated across gender and color lines. Recasting the present day discourses on power, gender, race, and sexuality within the context of colonization on the Ivory Coast during the 1930s, Condé
deploys her Guadeloupean female protagonist to play on all expressions of identity that concurrently compete to define a singular identity. The dynamic play between shame and humor in the narrative eventually turns on the reader in the text who becomes challenged by the multiple layers that the principal character reveals. The reader is provoked in his or her convictions by the very desire for a fixed identity that would stabilize the narrative and assure coherence. Establishing an interdependent dynamic relation between the representation of the female protagonist and the reader, Condé reveals how shame is always at work as a subtext in expressions of identity, whether we attempt to situate our identity exclusively in terms of race, gender, sexual proclivities, and/or power relations. Shame keeps the boundaries between self and other fluid because these boundaries are in fact fluid. To attempt to do away with shame, particularly through stigmatization, is to simply mask what is in fact visible and palpable to us all: our fragility, our weaknesses, our fragmented states of being, and above all, our mutual dependence upon each other as men and women across diverse and enriching cultural regions.

Karen Lindo is presently a Visiting Assistant Professor of French at Bowdoin College. This past spring she completed her dissertation thesis, "States of Shame: Women, Affect, Transnationalisms," in the Department of French and Francophone Studies at UCLA. Her advisor was Françoise Lionnet. Beyond her immediate preoccupation with the sociocultural and political implications of the role of emotions in modulating questions of identity both at the personal and national levels, Karen is equally concerned for the position and function of women and children in speaking for the cultural specificities in West Africa, South Africa, Mauritius and the French Antilles. Her other research interests include the poetics of humor and irony, gender and feminist theory and the place of ethics in literary studies.

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