

Review of *Enduring Shame: A Recent History of Unwed Pregnancy and Righteous Reproduction*

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In this study of rhetorics of shame, especially as they relate to pregnant people in the 1950s–1970s United States, Heather Brook Adams adds nuance to a systemically silenced part of women’s history and shows that shame adjusts adroitly to meet changing societal parameters. Throughout each chapter, Adams illustrates how “shame does not disappear; rather, it becomes reassigned” (203). She challenges the conventional premise that shame attached to pregnant bodies has dissipated over time and instead illustrates—through interviews, archival material, and court cases—that premise as myth and shows the ways that shame has mutated and endured. The pervasiveness of a sexual double standard that removes men from responsibility for pregnancy paired with the regression of many gains for reproductive agency ensure that this recent history remains relevant and is useful for understanding current realities. Beliefs from the 1960s and 1970s “continue to shape expectations about sex today,” Adams notes, and the longevity of those beliefs demonstrates “the extent to which women’s claims over their bodies are fragile” (194). The historiographic and rhetorical analysis Adams conducts in *Enduring Shame* is useful for scholars working on shame rhetorics, reproductive history and rhetorical interpretation, reproductive justice, and the power structures that remain prescient “for all people to have sovereignty over their own sexual and reproductive lives” (6). The exigencies explored in this monograph are important for anyone studying gendered and embodied experiences of women and people with uteruses in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as shame casts a long, complicated shadow over the lived realities of so many.

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Enduring Shame uses the recent history of unwed pregnancy to explore righteous reproduction “as a gendered, racialized, and class- and ability-inflected purity code that took shape by mid-[twentieth] century and that has continued implications for how people understand, talk about, and advocate for issues of reproduction, pregnancy, and motherhood” (9). Adams considers aspects of moral and societal constructions of age, dignity, ability, neoliberal “value,” innocence, gender-based exploitation and violence, and rhetorical empowerment, covering nearly three decades of how society reacted to, treated, and defined “unwed mothers” and “teen pregnancy.” The key argument, supported throughout an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion, is that “shame related to sex, gender, and reproducing bodies remains a present, largely misunderstood, and decidedly rhetorical aspect of contemporary life” (6).

Adams performs rhetorical analysis using historiographic methodology and relies on reproductive justice and rhetorical feminism as heuristics. Adams resists “macronarratives” of the eras covered, especially the hegemonic narrative of unwavering forward progress in the women’s movement’s pursuit of the legal right to abortion. Instead, examples throughout the text illustrate that for Black and Indigenous women, low-income women, and those with less access to education or resources, the progress of reproductive rights and access looks far less even, and far less like progress, during the second half of the twentieth century.

Chapter one focuses on “radial rhetorics of shame” to explore how [primarily white] pregnant women in the 1960s impacted their family and community through the radial, outward impact of their pregnant bodies. The need to “send away” or hide a young white pregnant woman was due to societal obsession with “purity,” and such purity is “intimately linked to her gendered role in relation to others in her life” (43). Unwed mothers, rather than be seen as agents over their bodies and the decision to become a mother or not, are held responsible for the symbolic and material implications of their pregnant bodies on the entire family—and radially, her community as well. The practice of secreting an unwed mother is an extreme manifestation of an embodied shame performance (52), which Adams explores through the rhetoric of maternity homes and interviews conducted with their residents and workers. Importantly, she recognizes the violent removal of young women’s identity as mother, and the loneliness of returning to their lives post-partum and after giving up a child (often without agency in the “decision”), with the expectation that they resume life as if nothing changed. Severing both the identity of mother and the mother-child relationship are more examples of radial shame, which the women included in the chapter illustrate as a shame (often secreted) that remains with them throughout the rest of their lives.

Part of the exigency for this research is that many of the violences enacted on pregnant people sound so foreign to those who learn about these practices now. That foreignness contributes to the myth *Enduring Shame* dispels: that with time, shame rhetorics have decreased around unwed mothers and “teenage pregnancy.” Chapter two shows how “new permissiveness” was not a lessening of shame rhetorics, but a redirection of them. Through the example of two legal decisions, Adams illustrates how the shift from hiding pregnancy to social stigma sustained power over pregnant bodies during the 1970s, an era of perceived loosening of attitudes toward sex and reproduction. Despite fewer women needing to “go away,” shame had not been “washed

away by a new, culturally sanctioned, sexual permissiveness”; shame was now more publicly present through stigmatizing rhetorics (104). Chapter three focuses on reproductive agency and the stickiness of shame, especially in the face of two advances perceived historically as enabling universal agency: the development of the birth control pill and the legalization of abortion through *Roe v. Wade*. Technological and legislative advances will never work as wholesale resolutions to the limits of reproductive agency, since “agency is always contingent and contextual” (145). Adams illustrates this contingency and contextuality with specific cases and experiences—and through writings by Black and Indigenous writers and activists like Toni Cade Bambara and Katsi Cook respectively, and the group that wrote *Our Bodies, Ourselves*—that illustrate a far more complex and uneven history of sexual and reproductive agency. Those rhetors contributed to the collective work of change in a way that is harder to interpret in uncomplicated macronarratives of forward progress. However, as Adams argues, their rhetorical work was essential for shifting the ways women not only experience their bodies and reproductive lives but also how they situate those aspects of their lives against “long-held notions of sexual shame” (144).

The late '70s usher in the newly figured “teen mother” and the rhetorically shifted societal “problem” of teenage pregnancy. In chapter four, Adams shows the shifting of blame to young women and differently pathologized women (including aspects of race, class, and capitalist “productivity”). She compellingly engages epideictic rhetoric to illustrate a shift from private shame and blame to more public displays and suggests shame is an understudied subject in rhetorical theory (151). Adams observes fear over the changing idea of family units, neoliberal expectations for young people to contribute to economic agendas, and the invention of a “teen pregnancy” public health crisis that was not supported by data. This fascinating chapter breaks down the prototypical invented characters of the teen mother as manifestations of evolving societal fears: the rehabilitatable, infantilized (white) teen; the threatening, troubled, willful teen; and the willful, hyperfertile, unrighteous (raced) teen. Each construction acts as a reflection of social priorities, rather than the reality of who was having sex or getting pregnant (156). Through the texts Adams examines to explore these perceived categories, including popular magazine essays and articles, presidential remarks, and the Alan Guttmacher Institute’s 1976 report on the “epidemic” of teenage pregnancy, she illustrates a key idea of the book: blame rhetorics are persistent tools that enable public and private shame and continue even as the location and definition of “righteous reproduction” shifts.

An exigency central to *Enduring Shame* is the value in resisting narratives of “macrochange,” and the value in telling a more complete story of recent reproductive history, both for what we can understand about rhetorical practices around blame and shame, and also for how we might defend the agency of reproducing bodies. Adams is not only doing recovery work on the history of unwed pregnancy but *doing something with* the rhetorical knowledge resultant from collecting that history (189). Sitting with this complex history, *Enduring Shame* makes clear the “problem” of unwed pregnancy is “always tied to women’s social identity, worth, and rhetorical power” (193). Adams calls for feminists to more fully contend with the myriad of complexities tied to shame, public and private, and its stickiness despite perceived and real progress. Feminist scholars can “imagine and amplify rhetorical strategies for operating outside the pale of shame altogether”

(198) to move us beyond the trappings of shame detailed in *Enduring Shame*.

My own research, which invites microhistory as a methodology for rhetorical recovery work of activists who worked in the women's movement in Atlanta, Georgia, also resists macro historical narrative. I found Brook's question on what macronarratives of reproductive and unwed pregnancy history *say* and also what they *deflect* especially relevant to my own scholarly investigations. In other words, when we recover the many conflicting and complicating experiences of unwed pregnancy, scholars and the public can begin to understand the parts of the history that were omitted, and why. This work allows feminist scholars to comprehend reproductive agency more effectively for present-day exigencies and positions rhetorical feminists to consider recovery work that complicates macronarratives of this and other "secreted and misunderstood" (35) recent histories.