

BOOK REVIEW

Stephen L. Bishop. *Scripting Shame in African Literature*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021. viii + 280 pages. Bibliography. Index. \$130.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 978-1800348431.

Stephen L. Bishop's *Scripting Shame in African Literature* is the first book-length study of shame in African literature. In close readings of old and new literary narratives written in French and English, Bishop asks what shame achieves. He explores definitions and theories of shame from Western and African thinkers, engaging the scholarship of Africanists Naminata Diabate and Cilas Kemedijo, both of whom have discussed shame in relation to African writing. Bishop's prose is academic, without relying heavily on jargon, and his analyses are well suited to readers with extensive or little knowledge of the African literary tradition. This is a book that would work very well in undergraduate classrooms.

The first chapters of the book summarize psychoanalytic and other theories of shame, omitting, however, important writing on shame by affect theorists such as Sara Ahmed and Lauren Berlant. Bishop distinguishes between Western and "Africa-focused or based" (22) research on shame and examines the emotion as it has been studied in both traditional and modern African contexts. He suggests that "shame is deeply imbricated with communal moral standards" (25), a hinge between the subject and the social which can turn toward or against dominant ideologies. For the most part, these introductory chapters set up the close readings that follow.

The analyses of African literary texts begin in chapter five. Here, Bishop argues that Ferdinand Oyono's *Le vieux négre et la médaille* and Mongo Beti's *Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba* activate shame, in the novels' characters as well as in the readers, to criticize colonial culture. Each of the chapters that follow considers shame in relation to "norms of behavior" (66), or to gender; finally, the last chapter centers on shame as it attaches to homosexuality. These readings are most compelling when Bishop examines specific iterations of the word *shame* in the writing, instances in which characters or narrators refer to shame, or describe feelings of shame explicitly. The chapter "Fanon's Shame," for example, works through Fanon's discussions of shame as an affective dimension of colonialism and racism. Tracking the term through Oyono's three-part novel, Bishop demonstrates in "Shaming Colonial Africa"

how each part of the novel structures an encounter with shame. The seventh chapter of the book, “Women’s Virtue: Engendering Shame,” illustrates that Ousmane Sembène’s *Gods Bits of Wood* uses shame “to advance the anti-colonialist agenda” (122) and to create “a link between women’s ability and right to stand up for their independence and the broader call for national independence” (129). These explications of shame and scenes of shaming in texts in which the feeling is not the “principle axis of narration” (4) create new entries into canonical African literature and invite us to think about emotion, not as isolated and personal, but rather as a social experience that might motivate political change.

The final three chapters of the book move away from close textual analysis to describe literary language and representations of violence that Bishop himself regards as “shameful.” Bishop suggests that Calixthe Beyala, Sony Labou Tansi, and Guillaume Oyônô-Mbia, whose writing is the subject of the chapter “Excess(ive) Shame and Shamelessness,” perhaps go too far in their deployment of a shocking and “shameful” literary style and, as a consequence, alienate readers or promote violence. In his penultimate chapter, Bishop discusses the representation of homosexuality as “a shameful act” (219) in public as well as literary discourses. In his efforts to dismantle homophobic responses to queer identity, Bishop criticizes anti-colonial writing that associates homosexuality with “shameful” Western influence. He also praises African fiction that normalizes queer desire and identity, but “in no way seek[s] to didactically or aggressively shame readers into accepting queer identities” (237). In these and other examples, it is Bishop, and not the writers whom he studies, who deploys the term “shame” to label actions or ways of writing, even if the things identified with shame are dissimilar or might be more accurately associated with other affects. In these last chapters, the book forfeits attentiveness to the words and language of the literature, which diminishes the distinctiveness and power of shame as suggested in earlier parts of the book.

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doi:10.1017/asr.2022.27

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