

David Leverenz. *Honor Bound. Race and Shame in America*. New Brunswick, New Jersey, London: Rutgers University Press, 2012. 278pp.

Enrico Beltramini*

Royal Holloway, University of London

There is, of course, an abundance of books published each year that details the “invention of race,” which is actually the entrepreneurial dominance of one race keeping another race subordinate, all the while positing solutions on how Americans might repent for this original sin. Few books, however, offer as clear and distinct a picture of America’s broken relationship with race as David Leverenz’ new work, *Honor Bound, Race and Shame in America*, and even fewer books can come close to identify the cause of the racial divide unfortunately plaguing the country until today. Leverenz concisely sums up the thesis of the book in his introduction in which he states that, “‘White skin’ and ‘black skin’ are fictions of honor and shame” (2).

Leverenz does not discuss how this dichotomy – honor and shame, which is a realistic principle of reality generation, was actually created. For the sake of adding to the argument, it is necessary to note here that this is the aim of other, more recent magnum opuses. For example, in *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*, Willie James Jennings assumes that the invention of race is historically woven into the process of colonial dominance and colonizing missionaries. It was the output of a process called deterritorialization, and a contemporary redefinition of the identity of the natives who were taught abstract notions such as the creeds, liturgies, and practices from Europe. In other words, the loss of land was replaced by

* Enrico Beltramini’s (ebeltramini@ndnu.com) PhD thesis in U.S. History at Royal Holloway (University of London) is on the civil rights movement.

theoretical categories as the only available code to produce identity. As he mentions, “Whiteness replaced the earth as a signifier of identities.”[†]

Ideally, Leverenz’s book starts where Johnson’s ends. He takes for granted that the dichotomy – honor and shame – principle of reality generation is a matter of abstractions that pursue the unique scope to justify white people’s dominance. It turned out to be a powerful analytical tool. Through the lens of honor and shame Leverenz masterfully navigates within the last two centuries of American history and rearticulates old stories and reshapes their meaning. Then he adds to the equation the notion that defending honor, maintaining honor, or restoring honor, has been incorporated in whiteness. Consequently, the erosion of the bond between honor and whiteness opens a window for a different meaning of whiteness. The Civil Rights movement was instrumental of such erosion, as he states, “King’s strategy enacted a chiasmus by reversing white stereotypes about who was honorable and who was shameful” (56). When in the Sixties white people started to detach themselves from the honor that bound them, they reconsidered themselves as a community and began to articulate new meaning of their whiteness. As a consequence, they rethought not only other’s race but also their own. More importantly, white people became less interested in belonging to their community. The miscegenation fears declined and white people tended to abandon a strict monoracial identity based on their light-skin color, or at least to associate it with decreasing privileges and embarrassing nostalgia.

Partially history of culture, partially history of the American imagination and infatuation with the idea of race divide, Leverenz’s book investigates the nature and state of this divide. The first chapter describes how this dichotomy principle of reality generation works, that is, how honor helped create a light-skinned group called white people and shame maintained their racial

[†] Willie J. Jennings, *The Christian Imagination. Theology and the Origins of Race*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010).

privileges. In the end, honor and shame became synonyms for “white” and “black.” The second chapter describes the static situation in American race relations between Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 to the Civil Rights era. It was an uninterrupted period of American history focusing on white shaming practices. Chapter three investigates the honor-shame dynamics in different societies. It is evident that honor operates as a community building factor, as well as a moral code of action for its members. Chapter four discusses how the identification between honor and whiteness began to shake. Chapter five suggests that white America, at least from Samuel Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations* and thereafter, has redirected racial-shaming at Muslims. The next two chapters address the present times, namely, the 2008 presidential election, which seemed, at least temporarily, to be the white’s honorable last campaign. This was, finally, the backlash of the “birthers.”

The book is specifically focused on how people who think of themselves as white have tried to shame people branded black; it does not consider the other way around. This is an unfortunate, although perfectly understandable, intentional choice on Leverenz’s side. An investigation on how the rise of the black consciousness and the vilification of the “white man” had plunged white people’s self-assigned superior status, in other words, a chapter on Malcolm X and Black Power, would have probably provided a useful and eventually effective counter-chant to the main narrative of white honor and black shame. An assessment of black militant assertiveness and aggressiveness, which is an expression of racial pride and beauty, would have probably not changed the final output of the book, and would have surely added more spices to the story.