

Christopher J. Lebron

The Color of Our Shame: Race and Justice in Our Time

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The book's title notwithstanding, the main emotion that characterizes *The Color of Our Shame* is hope rather than shame. Shame--more precisely, Lebron's call for American national shame--plays a prominent role in the book, but the dominant mood of *The Color of Our Shame* is optimistic and hopeful. On Lebron's account, the United States has failed to live up to the principles of fairness and equity that it was founded on, and for that reason Americans should be ashamed. Americans are committed to those principles, however, and so redemption is possible. As Lebron argues, when it comes to racial justice, Americans are not morally corrupt, but rather in moral error (41). With shame as their guide, Americans have the tools they need to correct that error and act on the ideals in which they believe.

Lebron begins with a discussion of the book's methodology, which skillfully combines ethics with politics. His primary audience on this point is political theorists, who tend to see matters of justice (the political) as separate from matters of personal and national character (the ethical). Lebron powerfully argues that this division obstructs racial justice and that justice in the United States can be achieved only if failures of character also are addressed. It is here, according to Lebron, that shame plays an invaluable role in achieving racial justice. Shame involves people's sense of self and whether they are living up to their own standards (21). When people fall away from their ideals, shame is a useful mechanism for realizing and addressing the failing.¹ As Lebron argues, "shame illuminates the temporary dark spots in our cognitive-affective capacities," not only "helping make our vision for a better way clearer," but also "help[ing] bring our deliberations and actions into coherence with our prior affirmed ideals" (23, 25).

As part of Lebron's discussion of methodology, he critically contrasts his position with those of two prominent political philosophers, John Rawls and Charles Mills. Lebron appreciates that Rawls's theory of justice as fairness provides a basic structure for justice, one that is founded on the guarantee of basic rights and equality of opportunity. In agreement with Mills and other critics of Rawls, however, Lebron argues that Rawls's theory does not do enough to address the ways that

actual society is unjust. For this reason, Lebron turns from the ideal theory of Rawls to the nonideal theory of Mills. In addition to addressing actual injustices, Mills's political philosophy is valuable because it has expanded our sense of the political to include issues of social epistemology. And yet, Lebron argues, Mills's work has too quickly or too neatly identified racial power and inequality with whiteness (for example, global white supremacy). Lebron also is concerned that Mills undercuts his work's focus on racial personhood when Mills argues for material solutions for racial injustice in the form of reparations.

What Mills would call the problem of (sub)personhood, Lebron calls "the problem of social value," rightly claiming that this problem is crucial to issues of racial (in)justice. Indeed, Lebron goes so far as to claim that the problem of social value "drives all forms of racial inequality" (42). Here Lebron's work is consonant not only with that of Mills, but also with that of Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., who argues that a "value gap" between blacks and whites is at the heart of racial injustice in the United States (Mills 1998; Glaude 2017). As Lebron explains the racialized problem of who fully counts in America, "blacks do not hold an equal place as whites do in the nation's normative framework, thus our [national] character is one that marginalizes black interests and well-being" (42). This is a problem that has a long history in the United States and that has been embedded in many of its institutions. Examining criminal justice and welfare systems in particular, Lebron argues that the problem of social value has produced national institutions that have bad character. Their character is bad because they "treat blacks in a systematically unfair manner and do so by invoking various democratic principles of right and goodness" (96). The bad character of many American institutions, in turn, harms the character of individuals by affecting their capacity for moral and ethical reasoning. Here again we can see the linkage Lebron creates between ethics and politics: racial justice must do more than address the failings of criminal, welfare, and other social-political institutions. It also must help overcome the harm done to individual people. It's not enough for institutions to become fairer, Lebron insists. Personal shortcomings also must be overcome (96).

Although those shortcomings are different for white and black people, Lebron nonetheless argues provocatively that both groups have character flaws as a result of racism. Using the 2004 film *Crash* to illustrate his claims, Lebron characterizes white people as *morally* disadvantaged by racial injustice and black people as *ethically* disadvantaged by it. Moral disadvantage is located in white people's difficulty recognizing racial injustice, including their own role in and ethical duties with regard to it (104). Ethical disadvantage, in contrast, acknowledges that black people "require better circumstances so that proper conceptions of what fairness, love, moral equality, reciprocity, and other constituent properties of justice rightly entail" (113). Lebron insists that the notion of ethical disadvantage does not blame the victim, but rather acknowledges the distinctive *ethical* burden--not just political or economic--that racial inequality places on oppressed people. Lebron further defends his provocative position by explaining why he chose the language of "disadvantage:" it enables him to deflect concerns about determinism, for example, views that white people can never recognize racial injustice and that black people have been irreparably damaged by it. On Lebron's account, people of all races and institutions of all types can be redeemed, and their redemption is mutually dependent: "a successful partnership between institutional and personal reform is fundamentally important and promising for achieving racial justice on the view of social value" (104).

The book's concluding chapter returns full circle to shame. Having examined how the character of society in the United States is "deeply troubled" on both institutional and individual levels, Lebron

argues for what he calls a "moral-agency perfectionism" that exhorts Americans to live up to the ideals we affirm (125, 126). Lebron is worth quoting at some length on this point to capture how he intertwines shame and hope. After acknowledging the failures of the United States vis à vis race, Lebron reassures his readers:

Because shame is the appropriate analytic tool to use in motivating the recovery of our moral fiber, we are not beyond redemption. An integral feature of shame is that the resources necessary for such a recovery are within our reach--we basically already affirm the right principles of social morality; they now need to guide us more consistently in the face of race. (125)

It is not surprising that Lebron then proceeds to invoke Frederick Douglass, for Lebron's project is thoroughly Douglassian without mentioning Douglass by name until the last chapter. Connecting Douglass with a democratic perfectionism that is "predicated on shaming tactics," Lebron appreciates how Douglass "expresses nothing but the deepest admiration for the [United States'] founders' identification and statement of truly just principles of political association" (135, 133). Imagining the United States as a ship that has set out to sea, Lebron agrees with Douglass that there is no need to turn the ship back even though it is an imperfect vessel. It can deliver us to a place free of racial injustice. The book ends with a final ringing question, "can we not afford to achieve the greatness within reach--the singular promise not only acknowledged by Thomas Jefferson, a slaveholder, but also Frederick Douglass, a former slave?" (152-53).

Except that the book does not end there. A remarkable ten-page epilogue follows the final chapter, set in small type identical to the notes section as if the epilogue were back matter marginal to the main body of the text. But marginalia it is not. Titled "The Agony of a Racial Democracy," the epilogue threatens (promises?) to overturn everything that precedes it. It is like a tsunami, drowning the book's hope that the United States can fix the ship and successfully sail toward a horizon of racial justice. As Lebron asks at the beginning of the epilogue--echoing, it seems, a critical reader's question after finishing the manuscript--what if "the author's prescriptive program has been taken up but has not achieved the goals under the best of all conditions? . . . What if America's race problems are so deeply embedded in our society such that no theory of justice could root them out?" (155, 156). What if, in other words, there is no hope?

Without naming it as such, the epilogue thus tackles head-on Afro-pessimism and related positions. By Afro-pessimism, I mean broadly speaking, the position that antiblack racism in the United States is permanent, resulting in the irreparable ontological/social death of black people (Bell 1992; Morrison 1992, 51-53; Wilderson 2010; Frankowski 2015; Warren 2015). On this view, no political or ethical character work will change the situation such that the social value of black people is finally recognized. To think that this could happen is a fantasy that supports rather than challenges antiblack racism. All of a sudden in the epilogue, the perplexing problem with which Lebron wrestles in the book's main chapters is (dis)solved. Why don't Americans live up to the ideals in which we believe? The simple answer seems to be that we don't believe in them. There is no inconsistency between belief and action when it comes to the United States and race, which suggests that there is no work of realignment of action to belief for shame to accomplish. Rather than address shame's ability to bring about democratic perfectionism, Lebron agonizingly asks

instead whether "democracy is used precisely to withhold democratic benefits from . . . blacks" (159).

The epilogue ends without resolving the tension between it and the main body of the book, leaving readers with "a basic yet politically terrifying question: Can our democracy die?" (165). The pain that the epilogue voices also appears in Lebron's acknowledgments section, which is placed atypically at the end of the book, prior to the index. Its last lines--literally the very last sentences of the entire book--thank Lebron's son, who "entered my life late in the project but at a time when I still had the opportunity to surrender to a kind of cynicism about people's capacity to be better. His inner beauty, perfection, and goodness are among the *last* and strongest influences on my hope that our society can achieve the goodness necessary to treat people decently" (191; emphasis added). Rebellion, contempt, cynicism, and last hopes--these are the sentiments (and actual terms) that run through Lebron's acknowledgments section, consonant with the epilogue but not with the rest of the book. I cannot help but wonder whether the unusual placement of Lebron's acknowledgments was a deliberate choice to avoid confusing the reader. Placed prior to the main body of the book, the reader would expect a text filled with pessimism, not hope. In its current position, however, the acknowledgments section functions in a different way. It combines forces with the epilogue to leave the reader existentially unsettled, unsure both whether Lebron believes that racial justice is achievable in the United States and whether he wants readers to finish his book believing it either.

Here, I would argue, is precisely where Lebron's book is most powerful. The book does not fully cohere with itself, but this is not necessarily a flaw. Its disjointed nature is best understood as a reflection of the painful and torn state of race in the United States, making *The Color of Our Shame* even more appropriate in 2017 than when Lebron published it 2013. It enacts what the American nation as a whole is undergoing: wondering if its founding principles are strong enough to support racial and other forms of justice, anxious that they are not, and above all asking whether democracy in the United States not just can, but likely will die. Put succinctly, it is a question about whether Frederick Douglass or Afro-pessimists are right. Lebron does not decisively answer that question, but he bravely grapples with it much to the benefit of his readers.

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¹ Lebron agrees with political theorist Christina Tarnapolsky that shame is politically useful because "it is not necessarily demeaning to the person being shamed" (25), a claim with which I would disagree and against which there is considerable sociological and psychological evidence (see Sullivan 2014, 117-50).