



Honor Bound: Race and Shame in America

David Leverenz

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As Bill Clinton said in his second inaugural address, “The divide of race has been America’s constant curse.” In *Honor Bound*, David Leverenz explores the past to the present of that divide. He argues that in the United States, the rise and decline of white people’s racial shaming reflect the rise and decline of white honor. “White skin” and “black skin” are fictions of honor and shame. Americans have lived those fictions for over four hundred years.

To make his argument, Leverenz casts an unusually wide net, from ancient and modern cultures of honor to social, political, and military history to American literature and popular culture.

He highlights the convergence of whiteness and honor in the United States from the antebellum period to the present. The Civil War, the civil rights movement, and the election of Barack Obama represent racial progress; the Tea Party movement represents the latest recoil.

From exploring African American narratives to examining a 2009 episode of *Hardball*—in which two white commentators restore their honor by mocking U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder after he called Americans “cowards” for not talking more about race—Leverenz illustrates how white honor has prompted racial shaming and humiliation. The United States became a nation-state in which light-skinned people declared themselves white. The fear masked by white honor surfaces in such classics of American literature as *The Scarlet Letter* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and in the U.S. wars against the Barbary pirates from 1783 to 1815 and the Iraqi insurgents from 2003 to the present. John McCain’s *Faith of My Fathers* is used to frame the 2008 presidential campaign as white honor’s last national stand.

Honor Bound concludes by probing the endless attempts in 2009 and 2010 to preserve white honor through racial shaming, from the “birthers” and Tea Party protests to Joe Wilson’s “You lie!” in Congress and the arrest of Henry Louis Gates Jr. at the front door of his own home. Leverenz is optimistic that, in the twenty-first century, racial shaming is itself becoming shameful.

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