Honor Bound: Race and Shame in America
By David Leverenz
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Introduction
(minus endnotes)

In 1959 Bo Diddley experienced what he later recalled as the most humiliating moment of his life. When he and his band were playing in Las Vegas at the Showboat Casino, one afternoon they jumped into the hotel's swimming pool. Immediately all the white people climbed out, and an attendant put up a sign saying "Contaminated Water."

Fifty years later, Barack Obama became the forty-fourth president of the United States. Grudgingly or enthusiastically, most white people seemed to accept an African American as their nation's leader. Yet anger at his "intrusive" agenda erupted soon after he took office. There's some evidence that Obama's presidency sparked such contempt not only because he has defined himself as black, but also because many people think he's a Muslim. The alien religion augments the alarm so frequently associated with the familiar race. Many of those who want to "take our country back" or "restore honor" have said that Obama is African, not American. Except for the most bigoted of the protesters, overt racism no longer seems acceptable. Nevertheless, a black man was in the White House, and fears of a contaminated country helped to swell a roar of Just Say No.

Such fears seemed normal to white people in 1959. Now they animate only an

impassioned fringe, or the fringe of a fringe. In the last fifty years, most white Americans' fears of racial contamination have clearly declined. A young black man can hold hands with a white woman or take her to the prom, even in southern towns, and not get lynched. In 2007, when Don Imus called the Rutgers women's basketball team "nappy-headed hos," he lost his radio show, though only temporarily.

Yet in housing, in schooling, in jails and prisons, in access to money and privilege, barriers to black people remain entrenched. Extraordinary progress toward equal rights, equal educational opportunities, and workplace integration has obscured the continuities. Obama has made it to the top, but over a third of all African American males have been in trouble with the law. In some inner-city neighborhoods, 70 percent of young black men have been labeled felons, usually for drug offenses. Racial branding still has a fearful intensity when it targets poor black people, especially poor black men. As Bill Clinton said in his second inaugural address, "The divide of race has been America's constant curse."

This book explores the past and presence of that divide. My focus on fear, honor, and shaming offers some new perspectives on an old, shared problem. I argue 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 these fictions for over 400 years.

The history of relations between white and black Americans has been a story of progress and recoil. The Civil War brought the most dramatic progress, and the recoil lasted almost a century. The civil rights movement brought major progress in schools and at work. The recoil has lasted forty years, especially in suburban segregation and backlash politics, thinly masked as charges of "socialism," or giving "our" money to "them." Obama's election was a third instance

of real and symbolic progress. Then came the Tea Party recoil. The reaction time may be getting shorter, and explicitly racial attacks now can be countered. But white fears of contamination have a long half-life. Many African Americans as well as many light-skinned Americans still presume that white means honor and black means shame.

My subtitle could have been "The Uses, Causes, and Consequences of Racial Shaming by Americans Who Think They're White." I use "Race and Shame" partly to give it more zing, and partly to imply an intimate bond between the two words. As noun and verb, shame gives race its negative meanings, because light-skinned people use shaming and humiliation to make race feel like shame. The two states of self-perception become equivalent, except for those who can claim whiteness, which confers honor as well as dominance. Such shaming carries its own shame, since it springs not from prowess or goodness but from white people's fears of losing superiority. These fears aren't usually acknowledged. On the receiving end, racial shaming often produces anger, not shame. Usually, at least until the last sixty years, that anger had nowhere to go.

To make my arguments I cast an unusually wide net, from ancient and modern cultures of honor through social, political, and military history to American literature and popular culture. Sometimes it may look as though I'm trying to make ducks and cats and horses walk the same straight line. Yet I believe the straight line leads right back to honor as a key element in American racial formations. The book's interdisciplinary reach tries to show that white honor has prompted racial shaming and humiliation in many ways at many times.

This book doesn't consider how people branded black have tried to shame people who think of themselves as white. Among Latinos, Native Americans, and Asian Americans as well as African Americans, rage at being labeled inferior because of race has a long and varied history. Malcolm X's speeches eloquently tried to reverse racial shaming. Partly because that history is

more familiar, and partly to keep the book within publishable length, I focus on the dominant group's constructions of race and honor. Surprisingly, that focus encourages some long-term optimism. If I'm right to argue that racism depends on being honor-bound, then racism will decline as white people start to detach themselves from the imperatives of group honor. That process has already started to happen.

The first chapter argues that fear and honor helped to compose a group called white people, who have used racial shaming and humiliation as well as violence to maintain their privileges. That dynamic remains latent, and sometimes blatant. For example, in a 2009 Hardball episode, two progressive white commentators restore their honor by mocking Eric Holder after he called Americans "cowards" for not talking more about race. The rest of the chapter takes a long view of how "white" came to mean honor, while "black" came to mean shame.

The second chapter dips into many African American narratives to make a simple case for how fundamental racial shaming has been in the United States. Recent studies of racial dynamics have emphasized their localized complications, or what one historian has called their "situational, adaptive, contingent" aspects. Situational racism might be true for people who think of themselves as white, because the basis of their racism is intrinsically shaky and has to be continuously reconstructed. But until the civil rights movement, people defined as black experienced racism as an unchanging condition. From Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 through the 1960s, changes in white shaming practices consisted mostly of greater or lesser violence. Only in the 1960s, when the new technology of television made it possible for a nationwide audience to view racial shaming in the provinces, did defenses of racial honor start to look shameful themselves. At last "American" started to seem different from "white."

The second chapter also focuses on the miscegenation fears that prompted so many white

humiliations of black men. Those fears seem nonsensical, since white men sought sex with black women so frequently. But conjuring up "the black beast" wasn't illogical to men who felt born to rule. Partly to counter the defeats and belittlements of ordinary living, and partly to reassert their superiority, they declared themselves "honor-bound" to protect "their women." By turning black men into animalistic rapists, white men could feel like medieval knights rescuing damsels from dragons. Not coincidentally, they could also restore their rule over the damsels.

Chapter three sketches several stages in honor-shame societies, from nomadic Bedouin tribes through other Mediterranean cultures and Renaissance city states to the nation-building American elite and the plantation South. Ayaan Hirsi Ali's Infidel vividly describes the mixture of oppressiveness and protection in the traditional honor code. In all these instances, I argue, honor doesn't operate just to embolden and constrain the behavior of individual men, but also to define and protect a group. Then I take up Alexis de Tocqueville's observation that Americans changed honor from a local to a national dynamic. I add that national honor incorporated whiteness. The chapter concludes with an analysis of W.E.B. Du Bois's "The Souls of White Folk," which passionately indicts the racial "despising" that justifies white people's dominance.

The next two chapters explore the growing shakiness of the imperfect national union between honor and whiteness. After sketches of Stephen Crane's The Monster and Jonathan Franzen's Freedom, chapter four offers close readings of four canonized American novels. The Scarlet Letter uses race to undermine the honor code's patriarchal kinship relations. Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, The Great Gatsby, and Lolita show the further erosion of bonds between honor and whiteness, though they replicate the racism they seem to challenge. After Col. Grangerford's passion for honor leads to the death of his son, Col. Sherburn conflates honor with cruelty. Nick Carraway darkens the color of Jordan Baker's arms and Gatsby's car as he ages

beyond the hope of honor. In Lolita, Humbert Humbert thinks of his trapped nymphet as "my little Creole."

Chapter five suggests that at least from Samuel Huntington's The Clash of Civilizations onward, many white Americans have redirected racial shaming at Muslims. On September 11, 2001, the Islamic terrorists' attacks made that targeting seem wholly legitimate. Almost a decade later, the House of Representatives held hearings trying to brand Muslims as terrorists. Hirsi Ali and Brigitte Gabriel have given many talks opposing Islam's radical oppressiveness. Surprisingly, even when their sailors were enslaved by North Africans, early Americans were often more tolerant. The chapter contrasts the intermittent war against the Barbary pirates from 1783 to 1815 with the second Iraqi war from 2003 to the present. In the first, despite great anger at being humiliated by Barbary ransoms and white slavery, many Americans were fascinated with Arab culture. The second war sprang from vengeful contempt. As in the literary narratives, American fantasies of white honor reflect growing strains, though claims of collective humiliation continue to license aggression in the name of restoring honor. The Clash of Civilizations encapsulates the change. Five years before 9/11 and fresh from the culture wars of the 1980s, Huntington redirects othering from black people to Muslims, and rests his case for the West's superiority on Anglo-European culture rather than light skin color.

With John McCain's Faith of My Fathers as a prelude, chapter six focuses on the 2008 presidential election. McCain's candidacy seemed to be white honor's last national stand. Though the Arizona Senator may have a race-neutral sense of personal honor, his campaign encouraged voters to continue racializing national honor. His decisive loss temporarily raised hopes that such passions have less staying power than they used to. Those hopes were premature. The final chapter probes the endless parade of implicitly racial shaming in 2009 and 2010, from

the accusations of the "birthers" and Joe Wilson's "You lie!" to the Tea Party protests and the arrest of Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

"Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question . . . How does it feel to be a problem?" So W.E.B. Du Bois begins The Souls of Black Folk. With a quiet irony, he makes white people the "other." Yet his tone is not at all playful. The cadenced formality of his opening sentence contains anger, sadness, and resignation, especially in the lingering residue of "ever." It is clear that the racial divide had been continuous in his life and that he believed it would pressure him throughout his foreseeable future. In fact it did, before he finally moved his capaciously embittered self to Ghana to end his days. Today many white people continue to not-ask, "How does it feel to be a problem?"

This book tries to provide some answers to a more historical version of Du Bois's question: how did "black" get to be a problem? Fear as well as contempt lurk in that question. Race has long since been exposed as a socially imposed category of perception–"a fiction of law and custom," as Mark Twain calls it in Pudd'nhead Wilson. Nevertheless, that fiction continues to be felt as fact. It perpetuates a Them vs. Us divide in millions of Americans, not least in me. Racial shaming helped secure that divide.

But clinging tight to whiteness is slowly becoming more desperate and dysfunctional. Here I disagree with writers such as George Lipsitz and Tim Wise, who sometimes despair about the intractability of white racism. My focus on honor and shaming offers some long-term optimism. Racism counters threats to a group whose membership requires presumptions of racial superiority. Those presumptions are now questionable. The decline of white honor and white racial shaming has already started, and further decline is in the offing. Being honor bound to preserve racial privileges seems more self-constricting to more people than it used to. The group

whose members call themselves white people has less cohesion, except as a fantasy of defensive nostalgia.

To the degree that whiteness continues to confer a sense of privilege, its appeal will persist. But it no longer has to be the default position for claiming rights and securing esteem. As the 2010 federal census revealed, the number of people who have abandoned a monoracial identity based on their skin color jumped almost 50 per cent, and the number who identified themselves as white and black more than doubled since 2000, to almost 2 million Americans. For some, the choice of multiple ethnicities allows them to escape the continuing association of black identity with social shame. For many more, I think, honor no longer compels them to protect the racial group they grew up thinking they belonged to. In schools and in the workplace, the affiliations that confer respect are too diverse. The basis for bonding can no longer be reduced to light skin.

A century or so from now, dialogues about race will probably have dwindled into discussions of an absurdity that lasted for over four centuries. Future generations may play with other versions of the question that preoccupied medieval scholastics: how many angels could stand on the head of a pin? New bemusements may surface about these angels. Were they naked or clothed? Did they touch each other? What were the colors of their faces, and why did that come to matter so much?