

## THE HISTORIAN'S SELF-REFLECTION AND AMERICAN RACISM

In March 1997 a distinguished historian, Professor Joel Williamson of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, wrote a self-reflective essay in the *Journal of American History (JAH)* in which he examined why he, as a born and bred Southerner, could not see and in fact denied and obviated the existence of lynching in American history. The *JAH*, with an exemplary psychodynamic introduction by editor David Thelen, persuaded six referees, all distinguished scholars, four white and two African American, to waive their strict confidentiality and publish their reviews. The author published the paper as submitted, with no revisions. This unique view of the workings of the academic publication review process reveals a sharp clash in evaluation between the referees based on race and stance toward the self-reflective intent of the author.

Keywords: anonymity, self-revelation, defense

*The easy way out for the individual is for him to see the unpleasant parts of himself only when these appear in others. The difficult way is for him to see that all the greed, aggression and deceit in the world might have been his own responsibility, even if in point of fact it is not.*

—D. W. WINNICOTT (1940)

**O**ur profession is justifiably concerned with the isolation of psychoanalysis from our sister disciplines. Colleagues are arguing for greater interdisciplinary outreach to neighboring fields in the social

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sciences and humanities, as well as stressing the urgency of directly addressing the current American racial crisis and the awakening consciousness of our own implicit and unconscious racism. I wish to specifically draw our attention to two related developments of racist content and the use of psychodynamic categories of understanding to elucidate and structure their meaning in my related field, the academic discipline of history. The first is a profound effort to understand the slave experience, particularly the attempt to apply the twentieth-century historical traumas of the Nazi concentration camps to understanding the nature of American slavery. The second is the use of the psychoanalytic self-reflective method to expose and comprehend latent and unconscious racism in the historian-researcher. I privilege self-reflection as a uniquely psychoanalytic modality because it is what we seek in ourselves and in our analysands; it initiates self-insight. The sign of a successful interpretation is not assent by the analysand. It is the often small increment of deepening insight: “That reminds me of . . .” or “What about the case of . . . ?” (Michels 2020).

As recently as June 28, 2020, in order to make a strong case against slavery and slaveholders, Charles M. Blow, the *New York Times* Op-Ed columnist, invoked the horrors of the Middle Passage, in which kidnapped captured slaves were transported in ships to America in a cramped and crowded space three feet, three inches high under the main deck without light, fresh air, or latrines. Of an estimated fifteen million slaves taken in Africa (Elkins 1959, p. 101), one third died being marched to the sea, and an estimated two million died during the Middle Passage, their bodies thrown unceremoniously overboard.

Historians applied psychodynamic concepts to racism and the trauma of the Middle Passage more than six decades ago. In 1959 the historian Stanley M. Elkins (1925–2013) audaciously used the first-person psychoanalytic accounts of Bruno Bettelheim (1903–1990) and others, including Eugen Kogon (1946), Olga Lengyel (1947), Ella Lingens-Reiner (1948), Elie Cohen (1952), and David Rousset (1947), of the regressive experience of total destruction of the personality in Nazi concentration camps, to understand the experience of captured African slaves during the Middle Passage from Africa to North America. Elkins asserted that the trauma of helplessness, powerlessness, and an environment of death systematically destroyed slaves’ ability to resist and plan, thereby coercing compliance with a totalitarian order. Elkins seriously studied the contemporary

clinical research on personality, including works by Sigmund Freud (1938), Anna Freud (1936), Harry Stack Sullivan (1945), Riesman, Glazer, and Denny (1949), and John Dollard (1937). Elkins encountered serious criticism that his comparison of concentration camp inmates to slaves rendered the latter too passive, compliant, and inert.

Subsequent research by John W. Blassingame (1940–2000) noted that the function of a Southern plantation was profit, not the extermination of its laborers, who were “worth more than a bullet” (1972, p. 331). Other historians, such as Eugene D. Genovese (1930–2012), Herbert G. Gutman (1925–1985), and Lawrence W. Levine (1933–2006), emphasized that slaves had some autonomy in the slave quarters, and that slave culture in America held many remnants of African culture, including folktales, food, music, and dance, as adaptations providing agency over their lives. Blassingame pointed out that “an overwhelming percentage of nineteenth-century Southern slaves were native Americans . . . [who] never underwent” the trauma of the Middle Passage and were in a position to construct psychological defenses against total dependency on their masters (p. 47).

The problems of the conscious self-reflection on racist scotomizing by historians became central in 1997 when in a premier refereed professional journal, *The Journal of American History* (*JAH*), which all members of the Organization of American Historians receive, Professor Joel Williamson (1929–2019) publicly practiced analytic self-reflection in telling us how he, as a born and bred Southern historian, obviated and could not see lynching, which he described as “our own Holocaust,” a tragic reality of American life. Williamson was born in rural South Carolina, attended the University of South Carolina for his B.A. and M.A., and went on to the University of California, Berkeley, for his doctorate, which was conferred in 1964. He taught his entire career at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

The path-breaking, psychodynamically sensitive introduction by David Thelen (1997), then editor of *JAH*, deserves special acknowledgment by psychoanalysts. He issued a clarion call for thoughtful Americans to face their various denials of uncomfortable facts and feelings. With a lucidity few analysts have achieved, he targets the nuances of repression:

We want to find out why authors say what they say and why they shun what they shun. [Williamson] wrote about how he came to see some things while failing to see others. [He] challenges us to think about what we see and do not see, to

reflect on what in our experience we avoid, erase, or deny, as well as what we focus on. . . . He insists that the subjects of history live inside us and that we as a culture can talk ourselves into not recognizing and confronting dark emotional sides of our past, preferring to leave them silent in the shadows. . . . What looks like specialization may be avoidance and erasure. . . . The challenge for history is to face squarely the things that are so horrible that we try not to see or remember them, not to rest until we have reached the heart of darkness, especially when that heart beats within us [pp. 1217–1220, *passim*].

In his article, Williamson (1997) presents an intimate portrait of the geographical and cultural setting of his home in Anderson County, South Carolina, just across the Georgia state line. “I grew up with a vague awareness that white men had lynched black men at some time in the past. A hanging tree still stood that marked the spot. . . . I never bothered to find the tree” (p. 1229). “I was the prisoner of my birth and rearing” (p. 1249). Williamson effectively did what many Americans are only now beginning to talk about—he examined his own racial blind spots, denials, repressions, obviations. As a life-long committed student of Southern history, he publicly exposed his scotomization. Unlike the Nazi extermination camps, lynching was not a secret. Lynching was publicly talked about and featured widely in the press and in political life. After 1889, lynching occurred nearly every other day. Seven presidents between 1890 and 1952 asked Congress to make lynching a federal crime. From 1882 to 1968, nearly two hundred antilynching bills were introduced in Congress, of which only three passed the House of Representatives. Not one bill was approved by the Senate, due to the powerful opposition of Southern senators who adroitly used the filibuster to talk the bills to death. Williamson could not and did not “see” the lynching of African Americans, a public fact described in newspapers and openly discussed, in the context of that history. “Like segregation, lynching had always been there. . . . I . . . had passed over the ground without seeing it” (1997, p. 1246). In his first footnote, Williamson dares to express the self-reflective hope of a subjective reader’s response: “Possibly . . . the reader sees herself or himself” (p. 1221). He also acknowledges that he did not do enough with sex and gender in his scholarly work. “Many older historians would have denied the ability of historians to use psychology in their studies at all” (p. 1247). Williamson closes his essay with an observation reflecting on the imperative of disciplinary openness to new categories of thinking and scholarly exploration: “It seems inevitable—and appropriate—that we

begin to recognize that ‘gayness’ and ‘queerness’ have been important elements in our history and heretofore almost totally absent from scholarly considerations” (p. 1251). The trenchant point of Williamson’s article is that he, and presumably all scholars, experience different levels of *knowing*: “As a child I learned that somewhere [in my home town] an oak tree still stood that marked the spot [of a lynching]. I never bothered to find the tree” (p. 1229). Williamson characterizes our American history of lynching as “a wound that will not heal, a wound, in fact, that we whites recurrently feel but prefer not to see” (p. 1232).

The *JAH* editorial board did something that has never been done before or since. They solicited and received from the distinguished referees waivers of the sacrosanct confidentiality of the traditional review process and published, as a sort of “round table,” seven scholarly reviews with the article.<sup>1</sup> This meant that Williamson waived his conventional right to revise and correct his work after considering the referee’s reports. The journal “froze” the documents in the form received and published with each review a photograph of its author, to leave no ambiguity regarding ethnicity. Significantly, four white scholars enthusiastically urged the publication of Williamson’s essay, while two African American scholars urged rejection. In addition to possible name recognition, contemporary readers can easily infer the race of the African American reviewers from the emotional tenor of their messages. The African American reviewers, who were aware of increasing interest in and scholarship on lynching, gave no credence to the self-reflective purpose of the article. The reviewers’ spectrum of opinion is stunning. Most scholarship presumes to be “objective,” but here is a rare case of fully exposed personal subjectivities in the scholarly literature. The cloak of an “impartial” jury evaluating a submitted manuscript is here torn away to reveal that the jury are merely human beings with a scholarly patina, and all of their cultural and personal experiences, prejudices, narcissistic wounds, and professional injuries, rivalries, and envies come openly into play.

In the graduate and postdoctoral seminars I teach, I often use this unique case of exposed reviewers to show potential scholars what a

<sup>1</sup>I will consider only six of the reviews here because the seventh was written after *JAH* accepted Williamson’s paper and that referee had access to the other six referees’ reports. The referees’ comments appear on pp. 1254–1267 of *JAH*, vol. 83 (Ayers et al. 1997). The institutional affiliations of the authors are as published in 1997, except those I have updated because I was aware of the author’s new institutional affiliation.

subjective gauntlet the publication review process can be. While authors might blame the inadequacies of their work for its being rejected, and invariably there *are* substantial areas for improvement, an internal look at the review process discloses that in fact they have run into the anonymous reaper of others' subjectivities. Every profession has its configuration of scholarly and political power structures. The referees are each situated in a unique professional and personal setting, a psychosocial emotional field and culture that is specifically reflected in their evaluation. The referees bring not only their prejudgments but also their specific individual private history and cultural baggage, as Williamson demonstrates in his case.

The first referee, Professor Edward L. Ayers of the University of Virginia, had this to say:

I am embarrassed to admit how much I like this essay. It seems to me just the sort of thing historians, especially senior historians, should be writing, both for our leading professional journals and for a general readership. . . . I found myself pulled along by this essay's momentum, by its revelations and emotional power [p. 1254].<sup>2</sup>

Professor David W. Blight of Yale University judged the paper to be

a provocative and extremely interesting piece. . . . Williamson . . . says that he can "rattle" his own "gender cage" but not really escape, given the assumptions and mores with which he grew up. . . . [Williamson delivers] "a nice reminder of how southern racial "Conservatism" wrought a strategy of avoidance and forgetting. . . . Williamson's aim: to show in retrospect how American historians didn't or couldn't see lynching in their developing visions of the past. This is the theme, I think, that makes this piece important [pp. 1255–1256].

Professor George M. Fredrickson of Stanford University endorsed the self-reflective mode:

It is a highly personal, partially autobiographical statement. . . . It is . . . intelligent, incisive, and full of interest for anyone concerned with southern history. . . . my view is that essays of this kind, if they possess the authority and quality found here, deserve a place in the *Journal*. In this postmodern age, it is becoming increasingly acceptable for historians to adopt a "reflexive" mode of presentation. . . . the personalized, confessional mode does not seem to me objectionable

<sup>2</sup>Here and in the following excerpts from the referees' reports, paragraph breaks are omitted for ease of reading.

when used in historiographic essays that involve the author's own work. In fact, a good argument could be made that such disclosure is not only appropriate but highly desirable" [pp. 1257–1258].

Professor Robin D. G. Kelley of UCLA was aggrieved and sharply critical, viewing Williamson as a “distinguished historian of the South” who neglected African American historians and their scholarship:

It does not advance southern history or the scholarship on lynching. . . . I'm appalled at how easily the author, as a historian writing in 1996, uses the pronouns “we” and “us” to refer to “Americans.” . . . Williamson cannot and should not say “we” unless he specifies who he is talking about. If he's talking about white WASP men, mainly from the South, then he should say so. “We Americans” is deeply flawed. . . . His rhetorical devices, in my opinion, smack of essentialism: that [Justice Clarence] Thomas “knew about lynching in his bones” or that “black culture” actually speaks. He takes for granted that he (Williamson) learned about lynching through research and that black people just had it in their bones. . . . he doesn't mention any African American historians in his description of the “slavery” wars—not even [W. E. B.] Du Bois or John Hope Franklin. . . . How could anyone write an essay like this and act as if African American historians don't exist or are tangential?” . . . If he was trying to demonstrate the lessons he learned along the way, then perhaps I might look at it differently. But there is no self-critical reflection and no new statement. Reject [pp. 1260–1261].

Scholarly views, as well as other opinions, are modulated and often change over time with varied life experiences and historical developments, as do the people holding them. No one should be “frozen” to opinions expressed twenty-four years ago. I asked Professor Kelley for his judgment of a draft of this essay. His reply, dated December 20, 2020, follows:

Thanks for sharing a draft of your paper. It's really great and will be an important contribution. Re: description of my response, I think it is fair although I would not have characterized my response as combative. Sharply critical, for sure. I was the youngest in the group by a long shot and sharp, blunt critiques were second nature for our generation. Aggrieved, yes! Combative, not so much. I do remember writing it and sending it very quickly because I had so much on my plate. I never read my manuscript reviews after writing them—one draft and then send.

I concurred with his reservation regarding the description “combative” as fair enough and altered the text to his suggestion of “sharply critical.”

Professor Kelley then went into his files and came up with an original first draft of his referee's report, which by his description "was indeed 'combative' or more so than the published version." For example, Kelley wrote in his first draft with passionate resentment: "Maybe the real lesson here is about how Jim Crowed the profession really was and how it impoverished the work of white historians" (personal communication, R. D. G. Kelley, December 29, 2020). The 2020 reflections of Professor Kelley note his relative youth among senior scholars, and his haste under the duress of time, certainly not then knowing his words would be made public. The fledgling scholar of 1997 has developed into a mature major figure in African American historical studies a near quarter century later.

Professor David Levering Lewis of New York University was critical and sardonic, judging the essay to be "one of the most troubling essays I've read in a good long while. It seems to me to be conceptually wrong-headed. . . . It had not come to my attention that the *JAH* was in the business of opening its pages to memoirs of distinguished historians" (p. 1261). Williamson (1997) charts a "vast physical change in relations between blacks and whites in the South between 1889 and 1915," behind which lay "a radical and devastating change in white thinking about black people. In those years millions of southern whites in the black belts came to think that black people freed for a generation from the necessarily stringent controls of slavery were 'retrogressing' (their word) to their natural state of savagery" (p. 1236). The key indicator was "the frightful increase of rapes or attempted rapes by black men on white women" (Ayers et al. 1997, p. 1262).

Lewis takes this as the author's position, and, being understandably offended, asserts that "the evidence for this is nowhere provided by Professor Williamson" and expects it would be "grossly exaggerated" if supplied (p. 1262). He objects to Williamson's referencing the same "retrogressing" citation that Williamson had indicated was "their word" in the *JAH* essay (p. 1262). Lewis questions 1915 as the end date of lynching, pointing out that "lynching and its associated barbarisms continued almost unabated well into the midtwenties and beyond. Why else did the NAACP expend so much capital and energy on pushing a federal anti-lynching bill in Congress during the early thirties?" (p. 1263). "I fail to see why we should really care to read about an interpretive counterfactual in the *JAH*," he wrote (p. 1261); . . . "I fear Williamson has privileged a utilitarian group psychosis" . . . (p. 1262). And finally, "I see that I have

delivered myself of a considerable amount of spleen. . . . I believe this to be a weak and wholly inappropriate essay for the *JAH*.” (p. 1263).

Lewis questioned the assumptions and particularly the ugly racist sexualized language quoted in Williamson’s monograph *The Crucible of Race* (1984), referenced in his *JAH* essay. In *Crucible* Williamson published excerpts from an 1897 Tybee Island speech he had discovered in his archival research on Rebecca Latimer Felton (1835–1930), an inflammatory Georgia populist, feminist, and racist. Felton dramatically played the lynching theme by portraying Southern women as needing protection “from drunken, ravening human beasts.” She called on “good men to do their duty. . . . I say lynch a thousand a week if it becomes necessary.” She recalled a year later that hundreds of “good true men cheered me to the echo . . .” (p. 129). Williamson makes his position clear in *Crucible*: “To our minds, educated away from this peculiar mode of licensed lawlessness, Felton’s words are shocking” (p. 128).

Professor Steven M. Stowe of Indiana University was admiring of Williamson’s submission:

This is an unusually compelling paper, joining a historiographical essay on race in America to a personal meditation on doing history. . . . It is both a historiographical moment and a moment of self-realization; this is the mixture that makes this essay so powerful. . . . I tend to agree that lynching’s violence—and, more crucially, its linking of violence and sex—reveals how and why we do not seem to be able to look frontally at the history of race relations. . . . what the author is so good at suggesting is how *mis*-seeing or *mis*-taking lynching exposes the fact that we live “within a culture that [is] amazingly effective in erasing some parts of its history and creating others.” . . . the most powerful parts of this paper are when the author speaks most personally of his own struggle to understand. I am moved by what he learned: when we ask certain questions we lose sight of the questions we aren’t asking. . . . Learning how we run away from, as well as make, our histories—our research and writing and thinking—seems to be the central (and autobiographical) message of this paper [pp. 1264–1267].

The contrast in evaluations between the four white reviewers and their two African American colleagues and peers is a function of what each was most sensitively responsive to. For editor David Thelen and the four white reviewers, the central valence was Williamson’s project of internal subjective questioning: Why could I not see, why did I so successfully obviate the horror of lynching from my view of the South, from

our history and consciousness? For the two African Americans, lynching and its causes, scholarship, and interpretation was the loaded issue carrying the focus of meaning in the article.

Psychoanalysts are too often uninterested and not cognizant of developments in the humanities and social sciences. Here we have two cases—the flawed comparison of slaves with Holocaust victims and the laying bare of the *JAH* peer review process—in which a sister discipline opened itself to a scrupulous scholarly exploration of its practitioners' subjective self-exposure of latent unconscious racism. From these we may learn to see our own disciplinary unconscious racism and to use psychoanalytic self-reference as a tool of cognition in addressing the most heated social and political issues of our time.

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