

# Psychohistory News

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## In the Wake of Charlottesville



12 August 2017 Unite the Right rally ends in violence

### White Supremacist Riot as Psychohistorical Condensation

by Howard Stein

One of Sigmund Freud's many fertile ideas in his 1900 *Interpretation of Dreams* is his concept of *condensation*, wherein unconscious representations of many people, affects, places, and events condense or crystallize into a single, composite image

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### Mourning a Legacy of Racial Violence:

Using narrative to heal  
intergenerational trauma

by Molly Castellou

*There is no greater agony than bearing  
an untold story inside you.* - Maya Angelou

This quote is one of several inscribed on the walls of the Brooklyn Museum's exhibit "*The Legacy of Lynching: Confronting Racial Terror in America.*" This is a narrative exhibit where

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## WHITE SUPREMACIST RIOT

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which symbolizes them. It is an instance of the principle of psychic overdetermination, in which numerous unconscious lines of thought and emotion converge into a single point that both reveal and conceal what is being symbolized. Here I suggest that the August 12th 2017 protest and riot in Charlottesville, VA, can be at least in part understood to be a *psychohistorical* condensation into a single event, ritual reenactment, and symbolic constellation.

The here-and-now historical event is deeply rooted in the unconscious group dynamics that led up to it, coalesced into it, and resurfaced in the form it took. Further, *condensation* works in tandem with a second concept introduced much later by Freud (1920), that of *repetition* in the service of mastery of (historical) trauma.

The "Unite the Right" protest, rally, and riot on Saturday, August 12, 2017, by white supremacists in Charlottesville, VA, removed any doubt what Alternate Right activists wished to do to and with America. The powerful streams of anti-black, anti-Semitic, and nativist/anti-Latino loathing converged into a single violent, inundating river of raw hate. Rally participants united in their rejection of immigrants, refugees, and racial/religious minorities *as alien and menacing races. White racism against blacks fused with many whites' hatred of Jews as an alien, despised race. While the event drew much of its energy from Southern whites, it was far from limited to a Southern uprising.*

A heavily-armed militia of white men marched with Nazi and Confederate flags, raised their right arms in a Hitler salute, shouted angrily to Jews, "You will not replace us," touted assault rifles, wore body armor, helmets, face guards, masks, brass knuckles, carried torches, and were dressed in intimidating white-hooded KKK uniforms. Ku Klux Klan terrors against blacks, Catholics, and Jews were reawakened in the memory of those who watched, whether nearby or on television.

For millions of white Southerners – though certainly not all – defeat of the Southern armies by the North in 1865 remains a festering, open historical wound that created humiliation and the desire for vengeance. The trauma was converted into a powerful *psychological representation* – what Vamik Volkan terms a "chosen trauma" – that is transmitted from generation to generation. Rather than mourn their historical loss, Southern white supremacists wish to restage it, reverse it, and magically make it as if it had never happened. There can be no new narrative; the old narrative must be preserved and restored. Shame was never fully driven underground, and surfaced in Charlottesville like an erupting volcano of arrogant pride.

Consider the motto, "The South Will Rise Again." Many white Southerners refuse to concede victory to the North in the Civil War, which they insist on calling The War Between the States. For countless poor white Southerners, "race" (in the culturally-constructed pseudo-biological meaning of the term) is the only thing or symbol they possess and cling to that allows them to feel superior to African Americans/Blacks/descendants of former slaves. On August 12th, the South did rise again, but it was far from the beginning. As David Lotto observed, the Tea Party reflected the same racial backlash, energized by the election of America's first Black president (The Tea Party and the Recent Rise of Right-Wing Racism, *The Journal of Psychohistory*, Winter 2016).

If Charlottesville *condensed* past trauma with hoped-for present triumph, it also can be seen as a *repetitive* restaging of the past in the service of reversing humiliation and shame. It is as if the psychological formula for many Southern whites is: "If the War Between the States was not lost, then blacks still might be made slaves once again. We can turn the clock back." For many poor Southern whites, *issues of socioeconomic class (poverty) become symbolized and enacted in the idiom of "race."* It is as if to say, "I may be as *poor* as blacks, but at least I am *white*, and am therefore better than them." The Charlottesville riot was for many Southern whites a kind of violent ritual casting off of socioeconomic humiliation, a public reassertion of racial superiority. Shame was inverted into virulent pride.

Moreover, the Charlottesville riot was not strictly a local event, but instead was a large group, societal event. What took place in Charlottesville was as much an act of official *national* white violence as it was of *local* violence. Indirect sanctions for the eruption in Charlottesville came from many sources. Many police in the City stood by and passively watched. Far from condemning white supremacy, President Trump insisted that “both sides” were to blame for the brutal and bloody street battles. White supremacists took this as official approval and endorsement, and boasted that the President was on their side. The nearly mathematically perfect symbolic equation was in the open for all Americans to see: “Make America *Great* Again” = “Make American *White* Again.”

In Charlottesville white supremacists openly declared that the *American* Dream was meant to be only a *white* dream. There is not a place at the table for everyone. Some belong, and the rest are cast out as despised intruders. The unconscious principles of condensation and repetition at the group level are a critical part of the fuel that burst into flame on August 12th 2017.

**Howard F. Stein, Ph.D. is an anthropologist, psychohistorian, author, organizational consultant, and Professor Emeritus, Department of Family and Preventive Medicine, University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center, Oklahoma City, OK. He can be reached at [Howard-Stein@ouhsc.edu](mailto:Howard-Stein@ouhsc.edu)**



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the arrangement of objects tells a story about our nation’s social history. Over 4,000 lynchings were documented in the United States between Reconstruction’s end in 1877 and 1950, according to historical research conducted by the Equal Justice Initiative, a non-profit organization, in Montgomery, Alabama, that provides legal representation to prisoners on death row.

As one enters the exhibit, an interactive map locates the 12 states that were the most common sites for lynchings. In recent years, descendants of lynching victims have collected soil from these sites as part of their own personal mourning process -- for remembrance ceremonies along with the placing of a memorial.

Lynchings were acts of public torture that terrorized black communities throughout the country. It was usually African-American males that were beaten, hanged, shot, dismembered in these violent acts of public spectacle, unlawful murders that went without legal prosecution. The exhibit uses the term “racial terror lynching,” which situates our understanding of these historic murders in terms of the terror many Americans feel from Islamic extremists, and as a way to better understand and empathize with the history of experience of blacks in America.

Passing through the exhibit, the spectator witnesses the transgenerational impact of lynchings on black families, as told by victims’ descendants. “Uprooted,” (2017), a 7-minute film, begins “I always hated doing family tree projects. I remember in third grade a girl won a prize for tracing her family tree back to the Mayflower... I couldn’t get past my great-grandparents.” The narrator, Shirah Dedman, speaking as an adult, continues “it was working with my mom on this project, that “I learned the truth about what had happened.” The video goes on to portray the life and brutal death of Dedman’s great grandfather, Thomas Miles Sr., a black business owner hanged in 1912 in Louisiana for allegedly writing letters to a white woman. Lynchings were usually punishment for a minor social transgression rather for a legal crime. Desman’s ancestors fled Louisiana after the murder and the viewer witnesses

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## LEGACY OF LYNCHING

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the recent trip she took with her mother and aunt down South again for the first time in over 100 years seeking knowledge about the man, the place and a loss they have never fully known.

The power of narrative is familiar to the mental health field in terms of helping the individual cope with the overwhelming emotional experience of trauma. From the Greek word "wound," trauma is a kind of shock, a disruption of feeling and incompleteness of knowing. In Freud's early description, the affect or emotional energy which accompanies the traumatic experience "remains in a 'strangled' state," and the feeling of the experience is severed from consciousness (*Studies in Hysteria*, Breuer and Freud). Some scholars argue that certain traumatic experiences remain so overwhelming they will always be beyond the possibility of symbolic representation.



Jack Whitten's *Black Monolith II*

Among the show's aesthetic works is a large mosaic black figure by American artist Jack Whitten. *Black Monolith II* (1994) is made of individual, idiosyncratic tiles embedded with organic matter and acrylic paint overlaying the canvas. The mouth of the figure is represented by a barely discernible razor-blade, literally a small cutting knife-edge that encases the central point of the canvas. This work was made in

homage to Ralph Ellison, author of *Invisible Man*, and the accompanying item description cites the artist's favorite passage from this book:

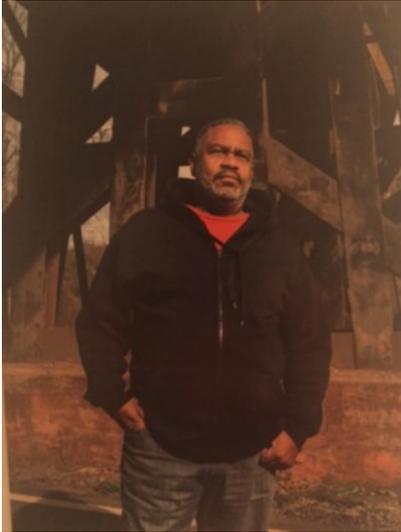
*Nothing, storm or flood, must get in the way of our need for light and ever more and brighter light. The truth is the light and the light is the truth.*

In individual therapy, a person tries to recover lost pieces of himself and acknowledge what psychoanalyst Robert Langs calls "hidden remembrances." Langs goes on: in order to learn from the past and not repeat it, "we must ferret out the part of the past that we have barred from awareness. We must reclaim that which we have obliterated or not experienced in the first place." Artifacts and aesthetic objects of this exhibit are displayed in the service of a narrative that will help enable us to recover lost pieces of our shared social history, those pieces of our national past that resist telling and are too intolerable to acknowledge in full awareness.

"Abbeville," (2017) another film, documents the mourning process of another multigenerational black family. The viewer witnesses the tragic portrait of Anthony Crawford, a prominent black landowner in Abbeville, South Carolina, who had a disagreement at the town market with a white storeowner over the price of his cottonseed and was then abducted by a mob of 200 men and lynched at the fairgrounds. Two days later the family was advised to leave Abbeville, "for the sake of peace and the best interest of the county." In the video Crawford's great-great-granddaughter Doria Johnson returns to Abbeville 100 years after Miles' death for a memorial service: "My family was devastated in 1916, our land was stolen, and we were ordered out of town by hundreds of our white neighbors... SC Governor Manning declared he could not protect us." Johnson describes her ancestors' horror over the town "ride-throughs" by the KKK at nightfall and how her surviving relatives finally fled north, her grandmother wrapped in a newspaper to protect her from the cold.

Moving further into the exhibit, the rooms illuminate how the racist attitudes that led to lynchings have, since the early 20th Century, infiltrated the administration of criminal justice by southern legislatures. One wall declares: "Slavery was never abolished, it only evolved." This is a quote by civil-rights lawyer Bryan Stevenson who founded the Equal Justice Initiative in 1989. As he describes it: "The death penalty is the stepchild of lynchings."

This screening room introduces Anthony Ray Hinton who spent 30 years on Alabama's death row for a crime he did not commit before being exonerated in 2015. Hinton tells it like this: "They went from the tree to the electric chair... They brought it inside... They took off the white robe and put on the black robe."



*Death row survivor Anthony Ray Hinton*

Indeed, states with the most lynchings have the highest rate of death penalty convictions. A now grey, bearded man, Hinton gives the viewer a sobering account of his arrest at age 29 by two white detectives at his home in Birmingham. After proclaiming his innocence, one of the detectives responded: "I don't care whether you did it or didn't... there's five things that are going to convict you. Number 1: you're black. Number 2: a white man is going to say you shot him. Number 3: you're going to have a white prosecutor. Number 4: you're going to have a white judge. Number 5: you're going to have an all-white jury. You know what that spell? Conviction, conviction, conviction, conviction, conviction." The public spectacle of lynching that diminished in the 1950s resurfaced into capital punishment administered by the state soon after, and in another form of racial persecution—the cop shootings that we frequently witness.

While this exhibit remembers Black victims and victimization, the psychodynamics of trauma also shed light on the politics of White Supremacy. Democracy is a psychic process as well as a system of government, suggests depth journalist Pythia Peay. Our inner capacity for democratic thinking is compromised when we endure trauma and dissociate

from the painful experience and erect a defensive psychic structure. In this condition, "the vulnerable parts of the self are exiled, and a survivor self is installed... One part of the psyche takes over in the interest of survival, rather than in the interest of relationship and wholeness" (Peay, 65).

"In the traumatized, fear-ridden psyche, democracy is compromised and we become intolerant of the 'other'... instead we get totalitarianism and a narrative of white supremacy." Our task as 21st Century American citizens, Peay argues, is to become conscious of these psychological processes, more reflective, and wiser. The capacity for concern for the other is foundational to our emotional maturity and health, as individuals and as a nation. "If only our wish to understand the other person was as great as our passion to be understood. If that were so we would be living in a different world" (Peay, 441).

The last room of this show is a "reflection room" offering paper, pencils and hope. It asks the visitor to contribute in their way to the ongoing moral story of our nation. To this end, the visitor is invited to imagine what justice would look like today and to make his or her own memorial. A near-by wall intones the verse of Langston Hughes:

*O, yes  
I say it plain  
America never was America to me,  
And yet I swear this oath –  
America will be!*

*The Legacy of Lynching: Confronting Racial Terror in America*, Robert E. Blum Gallery, is at the Brooklyn Museum until October 8.

### Reference

Peay, Pythia. (2015). *America On the Couch: Psychological Perspectives on American Politics and Culture*. New York, NY: Lantern Books.

**Molly S. Castelloe, Ph.D. is a scholar, author, filmmaker, and educator. Her articles have appeared in the peer-reviewed *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society*, *Clio's Psyche*, and other publications. Dr. Castelloe's film "Vamik's Room" received the *Gradiva Award for Best Film from the National Association for the Advancement of Psychoanalysis*. Visit her *Psychology Today* psychohistory blog at [www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-me-in-we](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-me-in-we)**

## PSYCHOHISTORY BULLETIN BOARD

- The Legacy of Lynching: Confronting Racial Terror in America. Exhibition at Brooklyn Museum (see Molly Castelloe's article on page one). Ends October 8, 2017; for more information, visit the museum's website at <http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/>
- The Association for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society will hold their annual Conference at Rutgers University on October 20 and October 21. The theme is "Voice: Psychoanalytic, Cultural & Social Justice Perspectives." Presenters include Judith Logue, Burt Seidler, Alice Maher, and Katherine Jenness, each of whom presented at the 2017 IPA Conference. For more info go to: <https://www.apcsweb.net/annual-conference/>
- Harvard historian Elizabeth Lunbeck has published "The Allure of Trump's Narcissism" in the August 1st issue of the Los Angeles Review of Books. The article can be found at <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-allure-of-trumps-narcissism/>
- The Psychology and the Other conference will be held from October 13-15th at Lesley University's Brattle Campus/Sheraton Commander Hotel in Harvard Square in Cambridge MA. Molly Castelloe will be showing her award-winning film at this conference. For more info: <http://www.psychologyandtheother.com/2017-conference>
- The Psychohistory Forum will meet at Fordham University Lincoln Center on November 4th. IPA President Ken Fuchsman will speak on "The Self in History and Psychology." He will be covering the nature of the self, self-knowledge, self-deception, and self-actualization. Dr. Fuchsman will show how Freud's discovery of the unconscious combined self-actualization, self-knowledge and self-deception. Contact Paul Elovitz at [cliopsycheeditor@gmail.com](mailto:cliopsycheeditor@gmail.com)
- Recent publications by International Psychoanalysis include *The Rapaport-Holt Correspondence 1948-1960* by Robert Holt, *Encounters with the Irrational: My Story* by Andre Haynal, *Psychoanalysis: Perspectives on Thought Collectives* by Arnold Richards. For information on these titles and others go to: <http://internationalpsychoanalysis.net/2017/08/29/now-available-at-ipbooks-net/>
- The National Association for the Advancement of Psychoanalysis (NAAP) holds their 45th Annual Conference at Hebrew Union College in Manhattan on November 18, 2017. The Conference theme is Leadership, Narcissism and Social Responsibility with featured speakers Otto Kernberg, Michael Maccoby, Billie Pivnick, Arthur Pomponio, and Stephen Soldz. For more info: <https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#search/NAAP/15ea44f3173d56b4>
- The Vietnam War, a film in ten episodes by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick. Available from PBS website at: <http://www.pbs.org/>

## International Psychohistorical Association Contacts

Ken Fuchsman, President [kfuchsman@gmail.com](mailto:kfuchsman@gmail.com)  
 Gilda Graff, Vice President [gildagraff@optonline.net](mailto:gildagraff@optonline.net)  
 Marc-André Cotton, International Vice President [marc-andre.cotton@wanadoo.fr](mailto:marc-andre.cotton@wanadoo.fr)  
 Denis J. O'Keefe, Treasurer [djo212@nyu.edu](mailto:djo212@nyu.edu)  
 Brian D'Agostino, Communications Director [bdagostino@verizon.net](mailto:bdagostino@verizon.net)  
 Susan Hein, *The Journal of Psychohistory* [susan.hein476@gmail.com](mailto:susan.hein476@gmail.com)  
 Paul Elovitz, *Clio's Psyche* journal and listserv [pelovitz@aol.com](mailto:pelovitz@aol.com)

### AFFECTS

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We need sustained, intimate interpersonal relationships to learn about healthy satiation, long-term pay-off and healthy moving-on to something else after satiation. Our current epidemic of addiction to opiates may be a perfect storm of a dysfunctional health care system and a population starved for good relationships and community. A striking example of the substitution of machines for social needs is a recent ad for motorized blinds: “ ‘Make yourself comfortable’ said the blinds as they closed themselves on a sunny day.” (Hunter-Douglas ads 2016) – a machine poses as a quasi-person to combat loneliness.

The special position of the US in affective impoverishment is illustrated in Harris-Gershons' comparisons of the title pages of TIME magazine for the US vs. the international market: “TIME has a history of tempting the world with crucial events, ideas or figures, while dangling before Americans the chance to indulge in trite self absorption or topics of questionable importance.” ([www.dailykos.com/story/2013/12/021259682/-TIME-Magazine](http://www.dailykos.com/story/2013/12/021259682/-TIME-Magazine)).

In order to combat these dangerous trends, we have to work to foster interpersonal interaction wherever we have a chance and protect our children's play and physical activity. We will have to correct current educational trends that force-feed very young children with rational-cognitive tasks to foster early reading while devaluing and neglecting free and physical play. We have substantial evidence that unstructured play increases the ability to learn (Goldin-Meadow 2010, Ratey and Manning 2014). Such reforms will elicit resistance from authoritarian adults, but dealing with and overcoming such resistance will be worth it for the sake of benefits at the individual, social and international levels. (<http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/1021/p09-coop.html>)

This is not to be taken as a blind aversion to industrialization per se, but a correction of our bias against nature and the gross under-valuation of the life-sustaining services we get from nature. A series of recent articles in *Scientific American Mind* (“Work Smarter, Work Happier”) shows some trends in adapting technology to biological needs. This process will be difficult but necessary. On an increasingly stressed planet we have to take the maxim “live and let live” to new heights, and we can and need to do much on the “let live” side. Cultivated biophilia (which includes cultivating our affects) can help us with that.

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***Dorothea Leicher, LCSW, BCD, NCPsyA, ICCDPD, is a psychoanalyst and social worker in private practice. She is a long-time member of the IPA and the author of numerous lectures and workshops on clinical and psychohistorical topics. Visit her website at [www.dleicher.com](http://www.dleicher.com)***

# The Role of Affects, Part I: **Reconciling Industrial Society With Human Ecology** by Dorothea Leicher

Although we may not be aware of them, our habitual affects have great power. Kelnter (2009) found that affective expression in high-school photos predicted life-satisfaction for decades. Peter Schloetter's international experiments on the communication of affect by group position provide another impressive corroboration (Bilger, 2016). "There is a hidden language in how we stand together," Schloetter told me, "a body language that's so rich and specific that even strangers can decipher it." Raitey and Manning (2014, Chap. 6) provide the biological rationale for the development of affects as a method of intra- and interspecies communication, which, by empathic identification, allows one organism to predict what another one (friend or prey) will be doing and coordinate the response. They discuss the mind-set of hunter-gatherers with their attunement to the surrounding bio-sphere.

Tomkins studied elaborations of the basic affects and arrived at "script-theory" (similar to the psychoanalytic "repetition compulsion"), meaning that we learn affective sequences in an attempt to minimize aversive and maximize enjoyable affects. These scripts are reminiscent of "leit-motifs" in music and in my experience families are their prime training ground. We can see a

parallel to language development: just as children at birth are equally sensitive to all sounds but learn to focus selectively on the sounds of their specific language milieu, so too they start out with the full range of affects but adapt to their family's affective language. If we accept that affects developed to help us protect our and our group's health (Ratey and Manning 2014) it is immediately evident that



Threat displays and other communicative behaviors may be the origin of human emotional expression.

losing signals in some areas makes us more vulnerable. Unfortunately, trauma learning, especially identification with the aggressor, can bias our affective system, due to the amount of fear involved in the learning.

Our present society does a lot of damage to our intuitive and emotional systems, because we interact as much if not more with machines as with other people. US society is at the extreme of industrialization because it did not have the long tradition of artisanal production that Europe had, and machines had to fill in for skilled labor (Burke, 1995, Chapter 5). Ratey and Manning (2014, chapter 7) believe in "biophilia," an idea traced back to Eric Fromm, that we evolved to prefer organic, alive environments over inorganic ones and developed affect/empathy to be able to resonate with their complexity and understand them. Harriet Fraad (2014) provides an excellent example of how capitalism substituted pornography for true sexual intimacy and complex relationships. I think this impoverishment holds for a lot of our interactions with our communities and our environment. For example, the decline in complex affective and cognitive processing may increase our vulnerability to addictions, which exclude consideration of long term consequences. I have found this to be true in working with addicts on dissociative features – when they started to think about their experience in a wider time-frame that included the crash from the high, it became a bad deal.

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