

American Slave Owners: Atrocity and Denial

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Psychoanalysts seek to grasp their patients' inner experiences, primarily through language – the dream narration, free association, the give and take of analytic dialogs. Our subject matter – streams of hopes, desires, and dread – are tides originating in the unconscious, non-verbal parts of the mind. On occasion, our analytic words – well-timed interpretations – focus the patient's attention on those tides and offer relief. On other occasions, interpretations elicit a volley of sarcasm, witticisms, and arguments that obscure their tidal origins. Below I discuss two instances of this phenomenon. One is a clinical vignette; the other comes from US jurisprudence about the treatment of enslaved persons.

I read Freud in college and vowed to become a psychoanalyst. A child of the late 1960s in the US, the primacy of sexuality seemed to be clear and 'healthy' using the language of that time. Aggression (anger, attack, 'Destrudo') seemed unfortunate and to be overcome with insight and steady progress.

Now, I see that some of my clinical errors stem from thinking that aggression is always a product of anxiety, misattunement, and the like. In clinical settings, I assume that the patient's anger – or my anger – are products of self-object failures that can be addressed and resolved. This presupposes a causal sequence that seems to me worth contesting.

Historians of the holocaust and similar bloodshed search for sociological and economic explanations of what seems so irrational just as analysts search for causes of our patients' enraged attacks on us. However, this search fails when persons find intense pleasure in aggression, domination, and attack independent of their histories. True, enraged persons tell stories – historical narrations – about why their destructive frenzy was justified. I suggest that those narratives occur after the discharge, a kind of après coup.

This defensive misdirection occurs in four or so steps.

- (1) We experience intense shame, humiliation, envy; we feel degraded and wounded.
- (2) Those wretched feelings evoke yearning to discharge them, to cleanse the self and the group.
- (3) The scapegoat emerges as an exciting target [\[1\]](#).
- (4) To justify our excitement and savor the pleasures of destroying the scapegoat, we imagine scenes of violent attacks on us, on our loved ones (or on our nation or on our religion, etc.). Bloody and 'justified' revenge quenches our longing for discharge and relief.

'Her face smashed to bits in a head-on collision'

In the late 2000s, a former patient emailed me. He blamed me for his family's current troubles. I tried to dismiss the email, but it nagged at me. Shortly afterward, I led a psychiatry case conference. I found myself describing an encounter with my former patient. I made it sound funny – or at least my residents laughed. The next day, my satire-laden summary weighed on me. Why was I so acerbic about this patient? Why did I force the vignette to sound amusing?

My patient, a middle-aged professional, could slay other people with his sharp, satirical observations. Doing so, he provoked laughter from friends and me sometimes. When my patient directed his wit (aggression) against others, I was concerned but not distressed. After all, did I not show him evenly hovering and empathically focused attention? My illusion dissolved one day. He had read a

newspaper story, with photos, about my eldest child. She was the same age as his daughter, who attended a different high school. My patient said that my daughter looked like me. Then, beaming, he asked me how I would feel to see her face smashed to bits in a head-on collision.

That was the vignette I shared with my residents. They guffawed and asked me how I responded. I mumbled something about exploring the negative transference. I did not share – because I could not access – my shock at this punch in my face. Readers of this vignette will imagine a more helpful intervention. Exposed to my patient's attack, I did not.

What happened to my psychoanalytic skills? I count four errors. First, I did not empathize with prior victims of my patient's attacks. His cheerful reports of his clever denigrations of others merited inquiry. Second, I confused clinical empathy with passivity. Clinical empathy requires us to perceive and name the full range of a patient's wishes, including exciting wishes to punish and, sometimes, annihilate others. Third, I disowned the pain he caused me – I *had*, momentarily, imagined my daughter's face smashed in a car wreck. In reaction, I intellectualized and tried to contain my shock. Fourth, I failed to denote the exciting aggression in his daydream. Not doing that, I could not help him recognize his rage at seeing my daughter, rather than his daughter, celebrated in a news story. That would have helped him trust me, become more attuned to his gleeful hostility, and supported his faltering marriage.

I mulled over my two analyses. Had my analysts colluded with me and so I colluded with my patient? I could not locate my error in their alleged mistakes. Later, I recalled my older brother, who struggled with undiagnosed dyslexia throughout school. I liked school and was my teachers' pet many times. My brother observed my advantages (and the pride that comes with them) with shame and anger. He articulated his right to punch me when he wished, except in the face because our mother would notice.

I didn't like being punched. More diffusely, I felt mortified by his mortification. I could see him tremble as he went to school. My parents did not compare my grades to his, but my mother and I had spirited, intellectual chats, and he did not. While my brother was sadistically teased by his classmates, I had lots of friends. My brother's struggles worsened in high school. He did not date, he teetered on flunking out. He was sad and angry most of the time, and I was not. I loved him, and I was afraid of him. I had no way to say that complex truth to him. So, I did not speak.

Returning to my witty patient, I did not comment on his pleasure in making me imagine my daughter's face destroyed. In his daydream, she would lose face, one might say, as he had lost face – in our transference drama – when his daughter was not celebrated. I found no way to say that without feeling that I was rubbing it in. In similar ways, I occluded my academic success when around my brother (I befriended brother-figures whom I found myself supporting academically). This became a characteristic neuroticism; compete but not too intensely; absorb aggression, deflect it with humor and wit; take the so-called higher path.

'The power of the master must be absolute, to render the submission of the slave perfect'
Reflecting on my failures to confront my patient's aggression helped me reflect on American slave owners. In brief, I argue that they also were immersed in projective processes. Using primal defensive maneuvers, they clung to ownership's financial and narcissistic rewards while they papered over their divided minds. Proclaiming themselves to be Christian-Americans dedicated to liberty, they enchained millions of human beings and their children. That many owners declared their slaves to be 'family' makes their actions almost (but not entirely) unthinkable.

To defend themselves against overwhelming guilt, owners imagined horrific scenes of violence done against their families if they were to abandon slavery. Slavery must persist else a far worse event would occur: the annihilation of white families by murderous Blacks. In a similar way, my patient's rage at me and my daughter originated in his humiliation that his daughter was not celebrated as was right and proper. I and my daughter had caused his excruciating suffering. Therefore, she needed to be annihilated and I needed to imagine her destruction. That would force me to experience his humiliation.

Most slave owners were not sociopathic. A few were persons of genius. All reaped the benefits and pleasures of ownership even as they strenuously denied those pleasures. To justify acting in non-Christian and non-American ways, they projected into enslaved persons their self-loathing and monstrosity. As receptacles of these projections, enslaved persons – who resisted degradation – loomed as dangerous, nearly demonic actors who required relentless control ranging from systemic degradation to murder.

In this scenario, owners required unbridled aggression to defend themselves. We see this explanation in the legal reasoning of a learned judge [2]. In 1829, John Mann was found guilty of assault and battery upon a female slave, Lydia. He had leased Lydia from Elizabeth Jones [3]. During the one-year lease, Lydia offended Mann; he berated her, she ran away, 'whereupon the Defendant called upon her to stop, which being refused, he shot at and wounded her' [4].

Mann lost the initial case because he was not the slave's owner. The appellate Judge, Thomas Carter Ruffin of North Carolina, focused on the question whether any owner 'is answerable *criminaliter* [criminally], for a battery upon his own slave.' Did North Carolina grant to John Mann, a leasee, the same rights granted to Elizabeth Jones, the legal owner? Ruffin argued that it did. Hence, to the degree that any owner may inflict suffering upon any enslaved person, so too could Mann.

Some apologists for slavery argued that slaves were like children who require discipline and from whom obedience is expected. Just as it is absurd to say a parent can willfully injure – or kill – a child, so too it is absurd to permit limitless aggression against slaves. In rejoinder, Ruffin opined: 'There is no likeness between the cases. They are in opposition to each other, and there is an impassable gulf between them. – The difference is that which exists between freedom and slavery – and a greater cannot be imagined.' The aim of slavery is to constrain, intimidate, and to take from slaves the fruit of their work and ingenuity in perpetuity.

To secure the obedience this denudation required, masters must have access to every form of coercion imaginable. As Judge Ruffin explained: 'The power of the master must be absolute, to render the submission of the slave perfect.' Ruffin deduced the inescapable consequence of slavery: 'This discipline belongs to the state of slavery. They cannot be disunited, without abrogating at once the rights of the master, and absolving the slave from his subjection.'

Ruffin, himself a large slaveowner, acknowledged that some actions done by masters to slaves might spur ill-informed magistrates to indict an owner for excess. However, the logic of slavery conflicts with ordinary sentiments. For North Carolina law requires a judge to protect the institution. We cannot, Ruffin said, 'allow the right of the master to be brought into discussion in the Courts of Justice. The slave, to remain a slave, must be made sensible, that there is no appeal from his master; that his [the owner's] power is in no instance, usurped; but is conferred by the laws of man at least, if not by the

law of God.'

At the root of paranoid reasoning is the conviction that an immense evil – wielding uncanny powers – threatens us. We must use violence at full strength to combat this danger. (My patient summoned up imaginary powers that would execute his order to destroy my daughter and crush me.) In Ruffin's terms, slaves must feel in their bones the hopelessness of resistance: the power of owners derives from the law and, perhaps, God. Ruffin rejected calls for emancipation, a 'fanatical philanthropy, seeking to redress an acknowledged evil, by means still more wicked and appalling than even that evil' [5].

That 'wicked and appalling' evil would be slave revolts in which waves of unstoppable criminals annihilate owners and their children. This dreadful prophecy emerges from the conviction that no other solution – such as gradual emancipation, compensation for owners, stepwise reparations – was possible. Thomas Jefferson told his fellow slave owners, 'We have the wolf by its ears.' In other words, either owners control the wolf, or the wolf will devour them [6].

For that reason, every kind of force must be expended for as long as necessary with no end in sight. This conviction appeared continuously in southern propaganda as it did in the postbellum United States.

[1] Girard, R. (1989). *The Scapegoat*. JHU Press

[2] 'A ubiquitous theme in the literature of Puritan New England and, later, the literature of the American founding era was that the American experience was analogous to that of the Children of Israel exiting slavery in Egypt.' Dreisbach, D. L. (2011). The Bible in the political rhetoric of the American founding. *Politics and religion*, 4(3), 401-427, 415.

[3] From V. P. Gay (2016/2021). *American Slavery: Privileges and Pleasures*. New York: IP Books, pp. 83-85.

[4] All quotations are from State v. John Mann. 13 N.C. 263 (1829). See: <http://plaza.ufl.edu/edale/Mann.htm>

[5] See Robert M. Cover. *Justice Accused: Antislavery and the Judicial Process*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984, p. 77-79.

[6] Thomas Jefferson to John Holmes, (discussing slavery and the Missouri question), Monticello, April 22, 1820. Jefferson used the phrase on at least two other occasions. See: Monticello, http://www.monticello.org/site/jefferson/wolf-ears#_note-0

Image: A New Orleans' woman, Mary Azélie Haydel, and an unnamed girl slave in the mid-19th century (via Wikimedia)