

History

THERE IS SOMETHING
IMPORTANT—**A MORAL
IMPERATIVE**—ABOUT
DWELLING IN COMPLEXITY.



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Good Question
An Exploration
in Ethics

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Good Question

An Exploration in Ethics



A series presented by the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University

QUESTION

Is writing history an ethical enterprise?

When writing about places and people in history, ethical questions arise. What are my ethical responsibilities as a writer and a scholar? The answers are not always clear.

Historians balance responsibilities to ourselves, our work, and the public. When writing about the past, we have obligations to the dead and the living: to treat historical subjects honestly, fully, and with integrity. And to our readers we also have a responsibility: to give a full sense of our subject even if we may not like or agree with all that they were about. At the end of the day, we aim to foster an informed critical engagement with the past. And, with that, enhance critical thinking in the present.

I believe that there is something important—a moral imperative—about dwelling in complexity. We should all work to face ourselves fully, as individuals and communities, and ask hard questions about who we have been and who we want to be. Writing history offers me a way to do that.

Studying history pushes you to take a step back. You have to think seriously and subtly about other people, their ideas, and their lives. You have to make imaginative and empathetic leaps in order to create explanations for why certain events in history happened the way they did. You have to see that people always work with some kind of logic, even if it seems illogical or abhorrent. You have to name contexts as the frame of both constraint and possibility. You must work with complex understanding rather than take comfort in simple explanations.

When writing about people whose thinking seems alien, you must treat them with as much care as folks who feel familiar. For example, I often quote historian Barbara Jeanne Fields, who reminds us that taking former slaveholders seriously doesn't mean taking them literally. Most of us aren't staunch defenders of chattel slavery, but we have only partially dismantled the world slavery helped to build. Fragments remain. You cannot successfully deal with people's choices and legacies if you refuse to understand them.

When I write about topics that are especially painful—violence against children, lynching, torture—clinical detachment seems both horrible and necessary. Horrible because you never want to forget the humanity embedded in your stories. Necessary

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because the temptation is to see the perpetrators as less than human. When we write about "horrible people," the reader often has the easy comfort of thinking they, themselves, could never act that way. But it is not responsible or ethical to reassure the reader that "that was then (or them) and this is now (or us)."

I try to be clear that there are few exceptional horrors or pathologies—we are connected to other things, both the places and things where we are now in time and space and the places and things that are further afield. In deciding what to make of those connections, we are shaping our ethical choices.

Adriane Lentz-Smith

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ABOUT

I grew up in Jonesboro, Georgia, a town that was obsessed with the movie *Gone with the Wind*, and still is today. We had football stadiums named after the two plantations, Tara and Twelve Oaks; a Scarlett O'Hara lookalike contest in the local mall; even a Tara Church of Christ. It surrounded us as kids. I asked myself why that fictional narrative had so much purchase and, at the same time, why the local plantation-cum-tourist-destination refused to acknowledge its slave quarters.

Jonesboro had not worked out its strong investments in the past. There were debates that people in town were not equipped to engage with and histories they worked hard to suppress. This



seemed like a problem to me. Even then, I knew that understanding our history as a nation—including all the horrors, traumas, and wounds—is key to understanding where we are today. How can you understand something that you don't even acknowledge?

In high school, great teachers made history really interesting to me. My best teachers allowed me to question. I asked my many questions, and I learned to frame them with greater precision and more rigor: "Why was this choice made in this moment by these people?" "What folks haven't made it into the narrative, and what happens when we add them?"

I built on this love of history and of pursuing answers to tough questions as a camper in TIP summer camps at Duke for four years. I took American History from Gerald Wilson and Ginger Wilson, as well as a course called "People and Power." The latter explored political theories of power starting with Machiavelli and going through to Foucault. We watched Laurence Olivier in *Henry V* and read *The Street* by Ann Petry—very different representations of how people can shape their circumstances, they both moved and devastated me.

When I got to Harvard, I thought that I shouldn't major in history because it felt too easy. So, I became a Russian and Slavic studies major. For a semester I was happy. I read some

great literature, and I gained valuable perspective on struggles for fairness and hope beyond the American experience. Ultimately, though, I came back to the subject that had always been my passion and realized that if it felt natural for me to do American history, that wasn't a bad thing.

The thing that got of me into the topic of the book I am writing now was the murder of Michael Brown. It was really born of Ferguson, that question of how did we get here? What are we as a nation of people capable of? What are we willing to accept? What must I, as a person of conscience, do? I needed to understand, and I wished to offer my skills as a writer and scholar to help us all contend with past and present with an eye towards justice.

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