

Book review

Embarrassed to be White!

The Black History of the White House and *Elizabeth and Hazel: Two Women of Little Rock*

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I have just completed reading two important books that were scheduled for review in JSWVE. They are:

[Margolick, D. \(2011\). *Elizabeth and Hazel: Two Women of Little Rock*. Hartford: Yale University Press.](#)

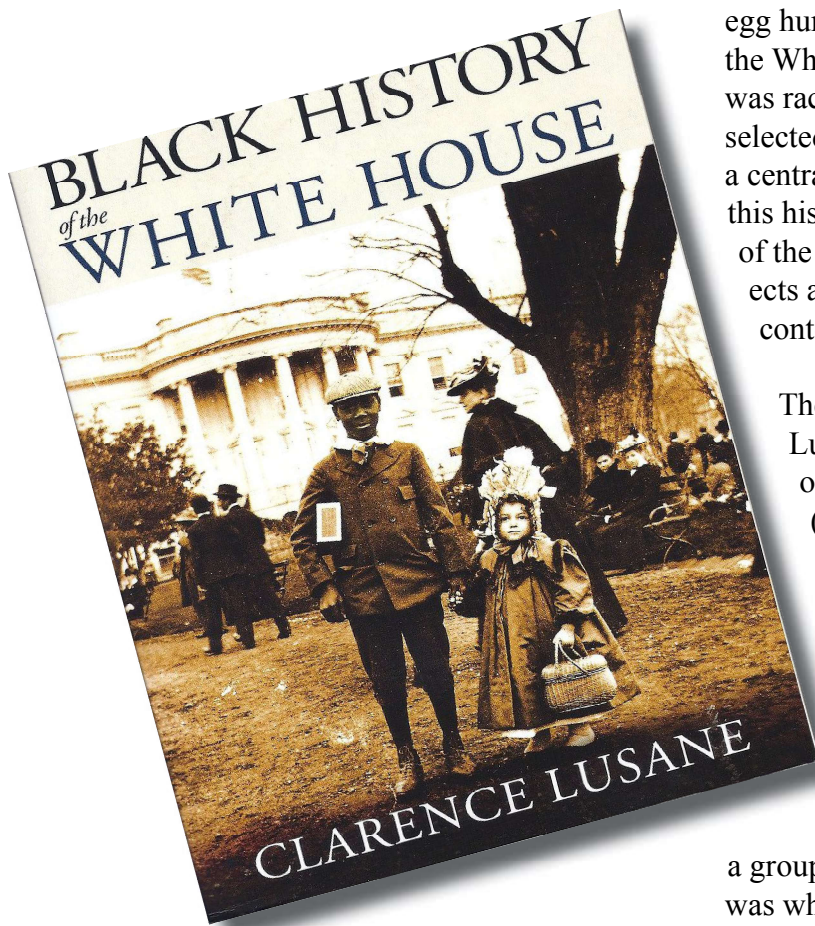
[Lusane, Clarence. *The Black History of the White House*. San Francisco: City Lights Open Media, 2011.](#)

If the reader happens to be white, I suspect that feelings of gross embarrassment and perhaps anger will emerge during and after reading these excellently written books. Because of my shared emotional reaction in response to these books, I am reviewing them together under the heading “Embarrassed to be White!”

I was introduced to Clarence Lusane’s work entitled, *The Black History of the White House* while watching Q & A on C-Span (August 28, 2011). This program is available online at <http://www.q-and-a.org/Program/index.asp?ProgramID=1354>. After seeing the program, I emailed the publisher and requested a copy to review for JSWVE. For those who have a continuing interest, the program is well worth the hour of time. In addition, reading the book would make a *great* homework assignment for BSW and MSW students. Frankly, anyone who watches the program will want to immediately read the book.

I almost lost interest in the book while reading the introduction entitled, “Black People, White Houses.” Anyone with a BSW degree would immediately realize that there was nothing new to learn within these pages. The contents include nothing more but information acquired as part of most liberal arts degrees in *any* social science major. Thus, skip pages 15 through 34. However, the rest of the book is mesmerizing and provides a critically important dimension to a well-informed social work practitioner and educator.

As a white man, I found myself embarrassed and angry as I read the historical patterns found within the histories of the presidents between John Quincy Adams and Abraham Lincoln. The level of viciousness, heartlessness, and corruption among these men propelled me to wonder how our nation could survive under the stewardship of these _____ [insert your favorite and appropriate curse word here]. I do not feel that I am exaggerating or attempting to add a dash of humor when I note, *these men make President Nixon look like a saint*. I do not accept the position that these men were a product of their time. Some of these activities are nothing less than evil within *any* timeframe of our history. When a president hides his action that is unrelated to national security, we know that he knows he did wrong. To me, what is absolutely unforgivable is the intentional malice directed toward slaves. It is bad enough for a president to be a passive observer to social injustice. It is a thousand times worse for a president to actively participate and create severe hardships on a population that already faces severe hardships.



Lusane organizes his work chronologically, starting with the well-known debate regarding the Declaration of Independence. Although all of us are acutely aware that “All men are created equal” does not really mean “All men are created equal”, Lusane provides a new insight to the debate. In my initial study of the Declaration of Independence at Bishop Watterson High School, I noted a critical wrinkle but did not give it sufficient reflection. Lusane offers a level of charity that should be included in American History textbooks.

Although one cannot judge a book by its cover, the cover of *The Black History of the White House* is worthy of some commentary. The photo was taken in 1898 by Frances Benjamin Johnston. Other than the photographer’s name nothing else is known, but it appears to be a photo of a father

and daughter at the annual White House Easter egg hunt. Although Jim Crow was alive and well, the White House was one of the few places that was racially integrated. The author and publisher selected this photo because the White House plays a central role in Black History – no suggestion that this history is positive. Regardless of the rationale of the publisher and author, the book cover projects an accurate image of the theme of the book’s content.

The historical patterns elucidated within Lusane’s work will have a profound impact on the perceptions of social work students (BSW and MSW). Concepts of race relationships will be altered. In addition, I found that the biographical sketches are reminiscent of Kennedy’s *Profiles in Courage*. They become a model for students and professors. Immediately after reading the book, I shared the content with a large group of freshmen. I do not recall ever witnessing a group of freshmen as mesmerized as this group was when I retold these stories. I found that Lusane’s work facilitates students’ ability to have a deeper appreciation for theories found within Human Behavior and Social Environment courses. The book will be a great asset to the intellectual and emotional development of social work students.

I was introduced to David Margolick’s work entitled, *Elizabeth and Hazel: Two Women of Little Rock* while watching Book TV on C-Span2 (November 6, 2011). This program is available online at <http://www.booktv.org/Program/12892/Elizabeth+and+Hazel+Two+Women+of+Little+Rock.aspx>. After seeing the program, I searched for it on Amazon and acquired the Kindle version of

the book. This will be the first time I have read an entire book on a Kindle. It was a GREAT experience and I recommend it to others. Like the Q & A program noted earlier, the Book TV program is well-worth the hour of time for those who have a continuing interest. In addition, the program would be a *great* homework assignment for BSW and MSW students.

This photo documents the immorality of the integration event at Central High School in Little Rock, it could be found on the front page of most newspapers across the world. Hazel is the white 15-year-old on the left, screaming “Go home n****r!” Elizabeth is shown on the right, attempting to be strong. This photo caused the US to lose some international prestige. The USSR employed the photo to demonstrate the hypocrisy within the US’s international position on human rights.



The entire event began with an unfortunate mistake. Elizabeth did not receive the message informing her of the proper location to meet the rest

of the group. As a result, she found herself isolated. Elizabeth had been told by her mother, if she was ever in a situation where she was being threatened by whites she was to find an elderly white woman and ask her for help. Elizabeth found that the authorities would *not* protect her. In fact, they were egging-on the near-riotous group. As instructed, Elizabeth went to an elderly white woman and asked for help. She spat in the 15-year-old’s face. The entire event lasted approximately a half hour, but had long lasting effects on both the micro and macro levels.

On the macro level, the event induced an incredible embarrassment among whites in the North and many quasi-racist whites in the South. At the time, it appears as if racist attacks on African American adults were forgivable while racist attacks on African American children were not. The photo generated support for the civil rights movement amongst whites. After seeing it, few white parents could be neutral.

The implications for the micro level are complex, but critically important to the education of clinical social workers. Every Monday, I am in my doctor’s office getting 4 allergy shots. After getting the shots, my doctor monitors me for 10 minutes. On one such occasion, I had my Kindle with me. I showed my doctor the photograph and described Elizabeth’s emotional state since the epic event. My doctor replied, “It sounds like she is experiencing PTSD.” I learned later that Elizabeth had been diagnosed with PTSD. As a white guy, I ask myself “Can racism be the catalyst for an emotional

trauma severe enough to induce African American young adults to give up before they have a chance to start their lives?” While I was working in the prison system with young African American in-

mates, I noticed none would say their names loud enough to be heard. The entire affect suggested people who were ashamed to be alive.

Elizabeth and Hazel: Two Women of Little Rock is the BEST source I have ever read able to facilitate the application and understanding of the Ecological System Model, which is so often used in social work curricula. This book offers a GREAT platform to demonstrate the linkage among various social forces and the impact found on both micro and macro interactions. This book offers a level of profound insight that will not be achieved by reading a textbook.

I end these book reviews by quoting Frank Zappa who once cried out, "I'm not black, but there's a whole lots a times I wish I could say I'm not white."