

Reflection on Harvard and the Legacy of Slavery

"We cannot dismantle what we do not understand, and we cannot understand the contemporary injustice we face unless we reckon honestly with our history." - Dean Tomiko Brown-Nagin

The revelation of Harvard University's connection to slavery, brought to light by the Prime Minister of Antigua, Gaston Browne, in a 2019 speech and subsequent letter demanding reparations, sparked international attention and thrust the university's dark historical association with slavery into the spotlight. Though initially, I gave minimal attention to the story, a more in-depth exploration has led me to a somber view of Harvard's past and its implications for the present.

Responding to Browne's letter, then-President Larry Bacow initiated an exploration of Harvard's legacy with slavery in November 2019. The first phase of this initiative, guided by Radcliffe Dean Tomiko Brown-Nagin, concluded in April 2022, resulting in the publication of a report by the Presidential Committee. This comprehensive effort aimed to uncover Harvard's significant entanglements with slavery and forced the university community to confront uncomfortable and painful truths about its history.

Harvard, as one of the oldest and most prestigious institutions in the United States, has a complex and controversial legacy with slavery dating back to its founding in 1636. The university's historical ties to slavery, deeply embedded in its early benefactors and leaders, reveal a profound intersection between academia and the exploitation of enslaved individuals. The Royall family, particularly Isaac Royall Jr., a significant donor whose wealth originated from plantations reliant on slave labor, played a pivotal role in shaping Harvard's development, establishing enduring financial ties between the institution and slavery.

The report highlighted the systemic racist practices that persisted since the university's inception, shedding light on the broader historical context of the slave trade, its abolition, and the enduring impact on Harvard's practices. The institution's swift response to address these issues, especially in the appointment of Claudine Gay as its newest president in 2023, reflects a modern trend of institutions responding to public scrutiny by acknowledging past wrongs and committing to improvement.

A central issue arising from Harvard's legacy with slavery is the question of reparations, as descendants of enslaved individuals call for acknowledgment and compensation. Prime Minister Browne's letter prompted the university to acknowledge its historical connections to slavery and establish initiatives like the Harvard Reparative Partnership Grant Program. This project aims to request innovative proposals that address systemic inequities affecting descendant communities.

Harvard's legacy with slavery intersects with contemporary discussions on diversity, equity, and inclusion within academic institutions. The report underscores the historical roots of challenges related to representation and access for marginalized communities, emphasizing Harvard's commitment to rectifying systemic inequalities. The ongoing dialogue on ethical investments and endowments further connects the university's historical ties to slavery with modern scrutiny of institutions' financial practices, highlighting the ethical considerations surrounding the origins of endowments and the responsibility of institutions to align with principles of justice and equality.

In conclusion, Harvard University's legacy with slavery is a multifaceted aspect of its history that continues to shape discussions on reparations, racial justice, institutional accountability, and ethical investments. The university's commitment to addressing its past demonstrates a recognition of the role educational institutions have played in perpetuating

systemic inequalities and a dedication to fostering a more just and inclusive future. The intersection of Harvard's historical legacy with current-day trends underscores the enduring impact of past decisions on contemporary issues and emphasizes the ongoing work needed to create a more equitable society.

Reflection on Columbia University and Slavery

Columbia University, like many venerable institutions, grapples with a complex legacy tied to slavery, prompting critical examinations of its historical connections and implications for present-day discourse on racial justice. The university's involvement with slavery is multifaceted, revealing nuanced issues that intersect with broader themes in academia and contemporary societal trends.

One crucial aspect of Columbia's legacy with slavery I noted is its early benefactors and founders who were linked to the slave trade or owned slaves themselves. The university, founded in 1754 as King's College, had ties to individuals such as Samuel Johnson, its first president, who owned slaves. The wealth accumulated through these connections played a role in shaping the institution's formative years. This historical backdrop raises questions about the moral and ethical foundations of the university and its financial entanglements with the institution of slavery.

The implications of Columbia's legacy extend beyond historical recognition, impacting discussions on reparations and the responsibility of institutions to address past wrongs. Descendants of enslaved individuals, as well as activists and scholars, have called for institutions like Columbia to acknowledge their historical ties to slavery and take tangible steps toward reparations. These sentiments have been made in their slavery seminars. This echoes broader

contemporary conversations on addressing historical injustices and rectifying systemic inequalities.

The intersection of Columbia's legacy with current-day discussions on diversity, equity, and inclusion within academic institutions is significant. The university's historical ties to slavery raise questions about representation and access for marginalized communities in higher education. Understanding the historical roots of these challenges becomes crucial for institutions striving to create more inclusive environments. Columbia's commitment, or lack thereof, to acknowledging and rectifying historical injustices speaks to its role in perpetuating or challenging systemic inequalities.

Furthermore, the legacy of slavery at Columbia is intertwined with broader debates on ethical investments and endowments. As institutions face increasing scrutiny for their financial practices, the origins of endowments and the ethical considerations surrounding them come to the forefront. The university's historical ties to slavery prompt discussions about the responsibility of institutions to ensure their investments align with principles of justice and equality, reflecting contemporary trends in ethical financial practices.

In the context of academic courses, Columbia's legacy with slavery provides a rich and challenging subject for exploration. Courses in history, sociology, and African American studies can delve into the nuanced complexities of the university's past, examining the role of academia in perpetuating or challenging societal norms. These courses may also explore the ways in which Columbia's history intersects with broader historical narratives, contributing to a deeper understanding of the impact of slavery on institutions of higher learning. However, unlike Harvard, Columbia doesn't seem to approach the issue with organized veracity.

Moreover, contemporary courses on social justice, ethics, and institutional responsibility can use Columbia's legacy with slavery as a case study. By analyzing how the university addresses its historical connections to slavery, students can gain insights into the challenges and opportunities institutions face when confronted with their past. This contextual analysis encourages critical thinking about the role of universities in shaping societal norms and the ongoing efforts needed to foster greater inclusivity and justice within academic spaces.

In conclusion, Columbia University's legacy with slavery encompasses a range of important issues and themes, from historical entanglements and reparations to current-day discussions on diversity and ethical investments. Understanding this legacy not only contributes to a more comprehensive historical narrative but also informs contemporary debates on racial justice, institutional accountability, and ethical practices within academia. The intersection of Columbia's historical legacy with current-day trends underscores the ongoing work needed to address historical injustices and create more equitable and inclusive educational environments.

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