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Confronting Academia's Ties to Slavery

By Jennifer Schuessler

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CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — In 1976, archivists at Harvard's natural history museum opened a drawer and discovered a haunting portrait of a shirtless enslaved man named Renty, gazing sorrowfully but steadily at the camera. Taken on a South Carolina plantation in 1850, it had been used by the Harvard biologist Louis Agassiz to formulate his now-discredited ideas about racial difference.

On Friday, Harvard's president, Drew Gilpin Faust, stood at a lectern under a projection of Renty's face and began a rather different enterprise: a major public conference exploring the long-neglected connections between universities and slavery.

Harvard had been "directly complicit" in slavery, Ms. Faust acknowledged, before moving to a more present-minded statement of purpose.

"Only by coming to terms with history," she said, "can we free ourselves to create a more just world."

The gathering, which featured a keynote address by the writer Ta-Nehisi Coates, drew an overflow crowd of about 500, including researchers from more than 30 campuses. Between sessions, there was plenty of chatter about grants and administration politics, as well as some wry amazement, as one scholar was overheard saying, that "something we've been talking about for 200 years has suddenly become urgent."

Alfred L. Brophy, a legal historian at the University of North Carolina and the author of "University, Court and Slave," a study of pro-slavery thought at antebellum Southern colleges, described what he called a "sea change" in attitude.

"People who engaged in this research were once criticized, or had their jobs threatened, or were rejected by their administrations," he said in an interview. "Now the people doing this work are lifted up."

The historical connections between universities and slavery first came to the fore in 2001, when a group of Yale graduate students issued an independent report aimed at puncturing what they saw as the school's selective celebration of its abolitionist past.

In 2003, Ruth Simmons, then the Brown University president, announced a major effort to research that school's extensive historical ties to the slave trade. While the move grabbed headlines, "there wasn't a single peep from another university," James T. Campbell, the historian who led the Brown effort, recalled during one panel.

Since then, scholars at Harvard, Princeton, William & Mary, Georgetown, the University of Virginia, Rutgers and numerous other schools have done research, sometimes seeing it embraced by administrators only in response to campus activism.

"One group that has helped keep the conversation alive has been students," Craig Steven Wilder, the author of "Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery and the Troubled History of America's Universities" (2013) and a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said during one panel. They are the ones, he said, who "keep us

honest."

Research on the topic has been shadowed by the specter of reparations. In his address, Mr. Coates, who wrote "The Case for Reparations," a widely discussed 2014 article in The Atlantic, recalled when whites reacted to the mere mention of reparations as if "you'd just suggested human sacrifice or something."

Drew Gilpin Faust, left, the president of Harvard, and the writer Ta-Nehisi Coates at a conference on academia's ties to slavery held at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. Tony Rinaldo

The dismissal in 2004 of a major reparations lawsuit against corporations seems to have removed the legal threat against universities, which had also been identified as potential targets. But Mr. Coates said that the moral claim was undeniable.

"I think every one of these universities needs to give reparations," he said. "I don't know how you conduct research showing your very existence is rooted in a great crime, and then you just say, 'Well, sorry' and walk away."

No other speakers explicitly endorsed financial reparations, but it was a sentiment shared by some in the audience.

One panelist, Adam Rothman, a Georgetown University historian, asked the audience if that school — which has offered preference in admissions to the descendants of 272 enslaved people who were sold in 1838 to keep the university afloat — should provide scholarships to descendants who attend other colleges. Many hands went up.

The Harvard conference, organized by the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, was an initiative of Ms. Faust, a distinguished historian of the Civil War and the American South. Last March, after student protests over racially charged symbols on campus and other issues, she published an op-ed article in The Harvard Crimson calling for fuller acknowledgment of the "mostly untold story" of Harvard and slavery.

But research goes back to 2007, when the Harvard historian Sven Beckert, inspired by Brown's effort, began teaching an undergraduate research seminar on the subject.

Mr. Beckert's research, published without any Harvard imprimatur in 2011 and now incorporated into an official university website unveiled for the conference, described the ways Harvard "was built at least partly on the violence of the slave trader, the Middle Passage, the auction block and the whip," as he put it on Friday.

There may not be an episode as dramatic as the Georgetown slave sale, but some of the stories told at the conference had the power to startle.

There were gasps when Daniel R. Coquillette, co-author of a recent history of Harvard Law School, recounted how Isaac Royall Jr., a West Indian planter whose financial gifts led to the founding of the school, helped brutally put down a slave rebellion on Antigua during which dozens were drawn and quartered or burned at the stake.

"He was not a nice slave owner," Mr. Coquillette said dryly. (Last year, after a student-led protest campaign, the law school dropped its crest, which was based on the Royall family seal.)

Other speakers brought the story closer to the present. Alexandra Rahman, a former student of Mr. Beckert now enrolled at the Harvard Business School, described how Harvard, in 1899, created a tropical research station on a sugar plantation in Cuba, owned by a planter made rich from slavery. (Slavery had been abolished in Cuba only 13 years earlier.) The plantation's owner also made significant donations to the school, Ms. Rahman said, in what was just one of many ways that slavery helped build "the vast educational resources which we still enjoy today."

The question of who gets access to those resources hung over the day's event. Mr. Wilder of M.I.T. said that research into universities and slavery can promote not just knowledge of the past, but justice and inclusion in the present.

Schools once worried that studies "would somehow tarnish our gates," he said. "In fact, they opened them."

Follow Jennifer Schuessler on Twitter: @jennyschuessler

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