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Just over twenty years ago, I joined the Brown University Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice (CSJ). It was an exciting moment. Brown had a relatively new president, Ruth Simmons, who had already inspired many of us faculty to think more broadly about what scholars could do for the intellectual life of the university and for the larger communities around us. The CSJ represented, in part, President Simmons leading by example. Unlike similar initiatives at universities, like one at Yale a few years earlier, this project was the result of a call from the administration. (As David Blight details in *Yale & Slavery*, the 2001 endeavor at Yale was initiated outside of the administration, even against the administration.) Indeed, it was the first administration-instigated investigation into ties between slavery and a university at an American academic institution. I was proud to have my name be one of the many attached to the 2006 publication that resulted, *Slavery and Justice: Report of the Brown University Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice*.

One of our hopes was that the report would inspire other college and university presidents to launch similar self-studies. Early signs were not auspicious. A few days after the report's release, at a public event featuring the president of an Ivy League university (not Yale), an audience member asked if the university intended to do something similar to what Brown had done. The president responded that there was no need to, as Black slavery had played no role in the history of this particular university. It was a jaw-dropping moment. Anyone with even a vague knowledge about the founders of that university knew that many had made their money through investments involving the forced transportation of people from Africa and the Caribbean to North America. The university president in question had assumed that complicity extended only as far as an institution's use of enslaved Black people as chattel and labor.

Today, such a narrow view is inconceivable. In the eighteen years since the publication of the Brown report, about 200 colleges and universities have engaged in self-studies. These typically examine not only the ownership of enslaved people and the use of their labor; they also interrogate endowments and gifts entangled with slavery as well as the words and deeds of institutions and their members in the service of proslavery and anti-abolitionist politics. A few of the university self-investigation initiatives were particularly remarkable. Princeton's project—notably not called for by the administration—was unprecedented in its thoroughness and the level of scholarly inquiry. The Georgetown study was distinctive for the

unique, horrifying story at its center: the sale of 272 enslaved persons by Jesuit leaders to keep the university solvent in 1838. Georgetown University took a further step: it tracked down descendants of the 272 enslaved people who had been sold in order to acknowledge directly what had been done to their forbears and to explore steps toward reconciliation. By 2021, fifteen years after Brown had issued the CSJ report, universities' confrontation with their past in relation to slavery had become widespread, sophisticated, and bold in ways that went beyond anything we could have hoped for when our report was released. It was possible to imagine that the study of slavery and the university had reached a crest, or at least a plateau. Was there anything new that a university could do to detail its engagement with slavery that was not merely a *pro forma* effort or an imitation of initiatives launched by other such institutions?

The answer turned out to be yes, and the evidence is the book *Yale and Slavery*, authored by Blight, a renowned Yale historian, with the assistance of the Yale and Slavery Research Project. This is the most comprehensive, deeply researched, and powerfully written self-study of an institution's engagement with enslavement that has ever appeared. Two aspects of the study immediately catch the eye. First, it is a *book*. Online essays, data-collections, and videos, all linked to the Yale and Slavery Research Project, complement the study, but at the heart is a physical monograph, the medium that signals serious study and a continuity with a long, scholarly tradition.

Second, the book is "A History." It contains itself to a finite set of historical topics: the existence of slavery in North America (mostly Black enslavement, with some discussion of the enslavement of Native peoples); the involvement of Yale and its community members in slavery and its abolition; and the memory and forgetting of that involvement in the six decades following the formal end of slavery during the American Civil War and Reconstruction. As "A History," the book does not delve deeply into the thorny issues of the present and future. It does not weigh in on how the university should go forward in such matters as renaming buildings, attempting reconciliation and repair, and memorialization. (Brown University, by contrast, incorporated such matters alongside history in its report.) Inquiries into these issues are ongoing at Yale—they were launched even before the publication of the book—and their existence allows Blight and the research team to concentrate almost exclusively on history.

The focus on history was a deliberate choice. In 2020, former Yale president Peter Salovey, like many university presidents beforehand, declared that "moving forward requires an honest reckoning with our past." Instead of combining the topics of history (slavery's past), legacy (slavery's present), and repair (slavery's future) into one report, Yale separated out the history into a stand-alone

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project. The result is a history book that describes the past in the past's own terms, in all its complexity and contradictions, without being bogged down by highlighting only those aspects of the past that link to specific phenomena in the present or recommendations for the future. The choice here was anything but a dodge, some sort of act of misdirection to turn readers away from difficult discussions of the current moment. Yale's engagement with issues of legacy and repair are too numerous to detail here, and the book's Introduction and Epilogue mention a number of them. The Epilogue goes so far as to ask the question that, for me at least, represents the most difficult yet essential challenge for any community judging its engagement with slavery: "What, indeed, might we be

doing today that will be judged in similar ways a century from now?" (p. 337)

Critics may question Yale's choice to produce an old-school monograph that adheres to the form and methods of one discipline over others — that of History. But they cannot question the result. This is history at its best. Indeed, if there were only one book that I would recommend to a student interested in slavery and antislavery in the United States, it might be this one. Yale University connects the different parts of the narrative, to be sure. But the narrative as a whole, reaching from the colonial period to 1915, a year that may well have been the high-water mark of the country's willful forgetting of slavery, deserves to be read and reckoned with by *all* Americans.