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doi:10.1017/S153759272400224X

I write this review of *Yale and Slavery: A History* not as a historian, but as a theorist of higher education who examines the role of the past, and the stories we tell about it, in shaping the present and the future. In particular, I reflect on the implications of the important research conducted by Professor David W. Blight and the Yale and Slavery Research Project for how we understand and act upon the contemporary ethical responsibilities of universities like Yale in light of their historical and ongoing imbrication in racial and colonial violence.

It is often implied within texts produced about universities' racial/colonial foundations that the primary barrier to confronting these truths is ignorance—and that these texts will address that ignorance. As Yale president Peter Salovey notes in his foreword, "I asked Professor Blight to organize and lead a team to explore our institution's ties to slavery and racism, and to research, understand, and communicate that history" (pp. xi–xii). But is ignorance about this history the primary problem? If it were a simple form of ignorance, the solution would be to seek out and provide more information. However, ignorance of this kind is rarely innocent.

Colonial societies like the US are founded upon what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls "sanctioned ignorances" about the extent to which they have not only *excluded* but also operated at the *expense* of Black and Indigenous Peoples. Sanctioned ignorances are shaped by political and psycho-affective investments in actively ignoring difficult knowledge rather than by its true absence. Institutions, like universities, are invested in ensuring their futurity, and thus knowledge that threatens their stability, legitimacy, and legacy is systemically ignored. Similarly, those of us who work and study within these institutions are invested in ensuring our sense of goodness and innocence, and thus, knowledge that threatens to challenge this is individually ignored.

At one point Blight refers to Yale's "willful blindness to its active participation in shaping the American story of slavery" (p. 11). Indeed, this institutional complicity has arguably been hiding in plain sight and ignored by design since Yale's founding—and others have previously pointed this out. As Blight notes, three Yale graduate students, Anthony Dugdale, J.J. Fueser, and J. Celso de Castrol Alves, highlighted this history in a report published nearly 25 years ago, yet this research is not acknowledged in the president's introduction. Yale has also ignored the descendants of enslaved Black people and dispossessed Indigenous Peoples who have no doubt held knowledge about this history for a very long time.

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So, what is the role of "truth-telling research" when the truth can no longer be plausibly denied? While documenting the truth about institutional wrongs is deeply important (and I have done my fair share of it), righting these wrongs will require more than research. We therefore face a paradox. We *cannot* not produce accounts of how individual universities have benefited from racial/colonial violence; there is no possibility of confronting the full extent of this violence without doing so. At the same time, we cannot expect this alone to lead to change. More pointedly, we cannot be certain that rigorous documentation of institutional complicity, like Blight's book, will prompt meaningful efforts to redress the harm caused.

As Sara Ahmed has pointed out, documentation of racism in universities is often treated as the end of a process, rather than a starting point. Or as Mark Lewis Taylor put it in a 2020 piece, "Seminaries and Slavery: An Abolition Struggle Paradigm for Research," "truth-telling research is seen as redress" (p. 312), in and of itself. When research is commissioned after a university's public image is disrupted by compelling calls for justice, there is also a risk it will be wielded as a form of crisis management. In particular, it may be used to reaffirm a university's claims of inherent benevolence, especially concerning its commitment to "the truth." For instance, as Blight notes in the introduction, "This is a history, and history can instruct, inspire, and sometimes give us truths with which to make a better day" (p. 12). He returns to the importance of truth in the epilogue, suggesting we might "do this history simply because, in our best traditions and however painful its lessons, it is both good and true" (p. 337).

Yet, while truth-telling is essential, it cannot stand in for the wider work of material and relational repair. We have ample evidence that people can know the truth on an intellectual level, yet continue to deny its implications in practice. How we tell the "truth" also impacts how we understand its implications. For instance, *Yale and Slavery* stopped in 1915. While Blight asserts that another volume about the last century is needed, this timeline nonetheless conveys a sense that racism and slavery were less important in the more recent past. Not only is this not the case, but the past also shapes the present in tangible ways. To take a clear example, slavery and colonialism formed the basis of Yale's endowment, which stands at over $40 billion today. What are Yale's responsibilities for addressing the enduring impacts of its complicity in racial and colonial violence, especially given that it continues to benefit from the wealth and power accumulated through this violence? What are Yale's responsibilities to the descendants of those impacted by this violence and to other residents of New Haven who are negatively impacted by its presence, as Davarian L. Baldwin asks in his 2021 book, *In the Shadow of the Ivory Tower*?

Yale issued an apology in early 2024 "for the ways that Yale's leaders, over the course of our early history,

participated in slavery." This apology was accompanied by commitments to "actions based upon the Research Project's findings and our university's history by focusing on systemic issues that echo in our nation's legacy of slavery—specifically, increasing educational access and expanding educational pathways for local youth in the New Haven community." The extent and impact of these commitments remain to be seen, but if the actions of other implicated institutions engaged in similar efforts are to be any guide, we should not expect a substantive shift in how the university approaches its responsibilities or its institutional wealth.

Although questions about Yale's responsibility for redress and reparations are not the focus of Blight's book, readers can nonetheless approach it with this in mind. In that case, we might be prompted to situate this book as one *indispensable but insufficient* element of a wider ecology of interventions that would be required to heal the root causes and impacts of universities' historical and ongoing role in racial and colonial violence. Notably, such an approach would require us to dispense with the illusion that these institutions, and those of us within them, can transcend our complicity in the harm they have caused without giving anything up.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S153759272400224X