HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

A Forced Reckoning

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Learning about a topic like the legacy of slavery can be overwhelming. Community Care Resources are available for members of the Harvard community seeking support for mental, spiritual, and emotional well-being.

BACKGROUND

A fictional case set at Harvard University, "A Forced Reckoning" and its companion materials help initiate discussions about the legacy of slavery at Harvard through a narrative case focused on relatable characters. The case brings up different viewpoints around a central question: What responsibility does the University have to teach this history, and what are our personal responsibilities to engage with that history?

Students settled themselves into the lecture hall as Professor Smith dimmed the lights and projected his slides for the day's History of Science lecture. After waiting a minute for the murmur to die down, Professor Smith began.

"Today, we'll be discussing the history of race science. As you should recall from the readings, our institution was, in many ways, at the forefront of the field, so we're going to focus on those ties in the second half of today's class."

Professor Smith continued his lecture by offering a broad overview of race science and its connection to the discipline of public health. He then turned to describe Harvard's direct production of race science research.

“One of the most complex and egregious cases is from the work of Professor Louis Agassiz, who was best known as an early leader in the field of natural history in the 19th century. Agassiz’s research provided supposed scientific evidence of theories used by slave owners and traders to justify the institution of slavery. For example, Agassiz defended polygenesis, a theory that each race has a different origin and that only white people are descendants of Adam and Eve. White supremacists embraced Agassiz’s arguments that the biblical creation story did not apply to non-white races and that there was a ‘natural’ hierarchy with white people at the top and Black people at the bottom.[1]

“In 1850, Robert Gibbes commissioned a series of photographs to be taken of enslaved people at a plantation in South Carolina for Agassiz to use in his research.[2] The images sought to dehumanize the enslaved people, framing them as foreign species and objects of study rather than as humans. He sent the daguerreotypes, which are believed to be the oldest images of enslaved people in the United States, back to Harvard. Harvard was then sued over its ownership of these images.[3] The daguerreotypes were transferred to the International African American Museum in South Carolina in 2025.”[4]

Some students shifted in their seats, clearly discomfited by what they were learning.

Glancing at the clock, Professor Smith rushed to finish. “To wrap up, it’s crucial to make clear that Agassiz’s theories about Black difference permeated the field of natural history for nearly a century, in part because of his standing at Harvard. These theories were used to justify further research and action in eugenics and racial science for decades[5]—which is a topic we’ll take up next week! Have a good weekend, everyone, and don’t forget to check the course website for announcements.”

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[1] For more on Agassiz’s life and work, see: Irmscher, C. (2013. Louis Agassiz: Creator of American science. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. (A review of Irmscher’s book is here: https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/03/books/review/louis-agassiz-by-christoph-irmscher.html. For more on Agassiz’s racial beliefs, see: Advisory Committee on Renaming Jordan Hall and Removing the Statue of Louis Agassiz (2020. Final committee report, 2, 37-40, https://web.archive.org/web/20201014132725/https://campusnames.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2020/10/Jordan-report.pdf; Miller, L. (2020. Why fish don’t exist: A story of loss, love, and the hidden order of life. Simon & Schuster, 19-28; White, R. (2022. Who killed Jane Stanford? A Gilded Age tale of murder, deceit, spirits and the birth of a university. W.W. Norton & Company, 56.

[2] https://legacyofslaveryreport.harvard.edu/report/intellectual-leadership-harvard-slavery-and-its-legacies-before-and-after-the-civil-war#race-scientists-louis-agassiz-john-collins-warren-and-jeffries-wyman.

[3] To read more about the daguerreotypes and the particular details in this case, see: Rogers, M. (2020. Chapter 1. In Barbash, I., Rogers, M., & Willis, D. (Eds.. To make their own way in the world: The enduring legacy of the Zealy daguerreotypes. Peabody Museum Press; Aperture (pp.66-68, p.69, footnote 15. Rogers footnotes a letter that Gibbes wrote about the purpose of the Agassiz study to Samuel Morton in Philadelphia on March 31, 1850. The letter referenced in the footnote is in the Morton papers at The Library Company of Philadelphia. For a review of To make their own way in the world, see: Sehgal, P. (2020, September 29). The first photos of enslaved people raise many questions about the ethics of viewing. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/29/books/to-make-their-own-way-in-world-zealy-daguerreotypes.html.

[4] See more here about the settlement of the case in May 2025: https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/28/us/harvardslavery-daguerreotypes-lawsuit.html.

[5] Gould, S. J. (1996). The mismeasure of man (Rev. and expanded). Norton, 52,74-83, 144; King, C. (2019). Gods of the upper air: How a circle of tenegade anthropologists reinvented race, sex, and gender in the twentieth century. Random House, 62, 83-85, 88; Menand, L. (2001). The Metaphysical club. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 97-116.

An awkward silence had filled the space moments earlier, but chatter and laughter quickly resumed. James Williams, a second-year student at Harvard's public health school, stood up dazedly.

"It's almost as if we didn't just learn about our university's complicity in racial science!" James thought to himself. He grabbed his bag and turned to his friend Hank: "Want to grab lunch?"

On their way out, James and Hank bumped into Courtney and Nisha, and the four of them found a long table in the corner of the Courtyard Café. James, still bothered by the lecture, wondered what his friends were thinking. "I hate to be the one who wants to talk about the lecture during our short lunch break, but I'm reeling from today's class."

"Really? What bothered you?" Nisha asked.

"I feel naïve. I didn't know that Harvard had such an odious history. I can't believe we weren't taught this in one of the required public health courses. If we weren't taking History of Science, would we just never learn about this?"

James looked at the others. Courtney averted her eyes to focus on her sandwich.

Hank responded, shrugging, "Well, I knew some of this stuff from undergrad here because Mather House, where I lived, is named after a person with a pretty sketchy history.[6] I've always assumed that Harvard played some role in eugenics, but I never looked it up. How could it not, though? This doesn't seem that surprising to me."

"Well, for international students like me, it's not obvious," Nisha interjected. "I don't know much about US history. That's why I'm taking this course, to learn more. But I wouldn't expect the school of public health to teach me all of this. I came to earn my MPH so I could advance public health in Delhi. Agassiz isn't really relevant to that."

"But we're here at Harvard," James countered, looking concerned. "Shouldn't we know that Harvard produced 'knowledge' supporting slavery and eugenics?"

"I agree it's unsettling," Hank nodded. "Mather House is named after an orthodox Puritan

[6] Mather House is named after Increase Mather. In 2020, students and other Harvard stakeholders petitioned to rename the residential house because Mather was an enslaver. As of the writing of this case in 2026, Mather House has retained its name. To learn more about the petition, see: Cobb, S. M. (2020, June 16). Harvard affiliates petition to rename Mather House due to slaveholding namesake. *The Harvard Crimson*. https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2020/6/16/mather-name-change-petition/.

slaveholder, and Agassiz was busy 'proving' my ancestors were subhuman. I don't know that I'd want it necessarily taught in class, though. It's tough hearing this information and then looking around and being reminded you're one of like seven students of color in a huge lecture."

"Yeah, that's lousy," Nisha affirmed. "I can't say I've had that exact same experience, Hank, but I definitely agree it feels awkward to be the only student of color in a room. But James, there are so many historical issues that are also relevant to public health—how could we learn them all, even if it was required?"

"Yeah totally, Nisha," Courtney nodded vigorously. "I feel like the professor needs to keep moving. I do sometimes wish we heard more about international examples or about how these theories impacted colonized peoples at the time."[7]

Nisha was about to respond when Portia, a Harvard senior who was working in a lab at the medical school, joined the group.

"Glad I ran into you! Our prison divestment meeting ran over, and the bus here takes forever!" Portia greeted the group and grabbed a seat. "Oh sorry, I completely just interrupted. What were you all talking about?"

"We came from a lecture on the history of race science," Hank explained. "There was some pretty egregious stuff about Harvard, and James was saying he couldn't believe this was the first he's heard of it. He thinks Harvard should teach a mandatory class on it or something like that."[8]

"Well, it seems like I joined the right conversation!" Portia enthused. "So are you going to petition the dean?"

Nisha looked startled. **"**Well, I was just saying that I appreciated learning about it, but as an international student, I just don't see how they can justify spending more class time on it. I am paying an obscene amount for an education here and want to get as much *relevant* stuff out of it as I can."

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[7] It has been well documented that American eugenic thought influenced Hitler and the Nazi regime, such as providing a supposed justification for the conquest of Eastern Europe and changes to citizenship law that discriminated against Jewish people for supposedly having "foreign blood." See: Whitman, J. Q. (2017). Hitler's American model: The United States and the making of Nazi race law. Princeton University Press, 19-20, 65. Further, the Eugenics Records Office, co-founded by Havard alumnist Charles Davenport, had outreach programs in Germany between the world wars. See: https://legacyofslaveryreport.harvard.edu/report/charles-b-davenport-william-e-castle-and-the-international-eugenics-movement.

[8] Advocates at several universities, such as the University of Pittsburgh, Western Washington University, and schools in the Cal State system, have successfully petitioned for classes related to ethnic studies, racism, and anti-racism to be graduation requirements. Similar measures at many other schools have been unsuccessful. See: Stellino, M. (2020, September 11). College students push for race and ethnic studies classes to be required. *The Hechinger Report*. https://hechingerreport.org/college-students-push-for-race-and-ethnic-studies-classes-to-be-required-but-some-campuses-resist/.

"Yeah, and it's not just international students," Courtney added. "We already have such a full course load; I just don't see how studying the school's history will help me in the future as a county epidemiologist."

"Exactly!" Nisha pointed at Courtney to emphasize her agreement. "Even if history got us to where we are now, it won't benefit my work in India unless, what, they compared this with caste or something?"[9]

"Definitely, the University has so much to do in terms of decolonizing," Portia exclaimed. "The syllabi, the requirements—there's a lot of unpacking. We need to take so many more perspectives into account.[10] But at the same time, it's got to be mandatory. Who's going to take these classes of their own volition? The people who already care!"

As Nisha and Courtney exchanged furtive glances, Portia pressed on, enjoying having a captive audience since her advocacy efforts often fell on indifferent ears.

"We need general education requirements that represent all students. Also, the legacy of slavery has present implications on medical care and access. Public health students—all students, really—should know that. More than that, we need the University to put its money where its mouth is and divest from prisons. Prison labor is just a re-enslavement of people of color."

"I think we agree on some points, Portia," said Nisha, offering an olive branch. "I think if coursework focused on those present implications, it could be useful. I just don't know that a mandatory course would be in all students' best interests. What about students who don't plan to be in the US after graduation?"

Courtney shifted uncomfortably, "I'm not sure about a mandatory class either. I'd like to learn more about the topic, sure, but I don't really feel comfortable discussing it in group settings."

"Don't we need to be made a little uncomfortable, though?" James inquired. "It's not easy for any of us."

"Yeah," Courtney paused, "but you all know my politics. We have civil conversations as friends, but I feel like conservative voices tend to get vilified here. I'd really rather avoid being targeted by cancel culture, especially for a discussion rehashing the past. I'm here to learn about what we can do now."

[9] Isabel Wilkerson makes associations between the Indian caste system and American eugenics and racism. See: Wilkerson, I. (2020). Caste: The origins of our discontents. Random House, 48, 79-80, 273-277, 280.
[10] Sharon Stein provides strategies for collaborative ways to make universities more inclusive in Stein, S. (2022). Unsettling the university: Confronting the colonial foundations of US higher education. Johns Hopkins University Press. https://doi.org/10.56021/9781421445052.

"I don't buy your cancel culture concerns, Courtney," Hank responded, "but I think you and Nisha are right about a mandatory class or discussion not being the best forum for this. I felt eyes on me in a 120-person lecture today, and the same happens in discussion sections. Even if they don't say it directly, people expect me to represent the 'Black perspective.' It's a burden I don't really want to take on."

James weighed his friends' comments. Although he felt strongly that he should learn more about the topic, he hadn't thought about the impact that diving deeper might have on students from different backgrounds or about why people might not want to engage in a conversation.

"I'm embarrassed about how much I'm learning today," he confessed. "But that's what still confuses me. If we shouldn't all learn this stuff together in the classroom, shouldn't the University take some responsibility for providing resources for people who want them? What other options are there?"

"Hmm," Nisha pondered. "I can see how a resource list could potentially be useful.[11] They just shouldn't mandate that people use them."

"Or maybe a plaque or space of some sort that everyone might see?" Hank added. "Some way of remembering the harm the University has caused Black people? As an alumnus of the College, I'd love to see that."

"Or, what about exhibits in the Harvard museums?" Courtney offered. "People could visit on their own time, and it would be a permanent fixture of campus that way."

"Yeah, and as a resident advisor to the undergraduates, I think I could work these opportunities into some of my house discussions," Hank chimed in. "It's not a wide audience, but at least the space would be there for people who want it."

Portia crossed her arms and spoke sharply, "Great! More resources that the University develops without any enforcement that they're used. Harvard can congratulate itself on being progressive without changing at all, and everyone will just keep moving on. You know some of those plaques already exist, right?"

[11] Several resources and ideas for how universities have reckoned with their pasts, especially their entanglements with transatlantic enslavement, can be found on these sites: https://slavery.virginia.edu/universities-studying-slavery/, https://cic.edu/newsletter/new-resources-for-legacies-of-slavery/, https://digital-exhibits.libraries.mit.edu/s/mit-and-slavery/page/universities-and-slavery.

“Portia, you’re not wrong,” Hank responded slowly. “I’m just not convinced the University can put something together that meets everyone’s needs without hurting anyone in the process.”

James felt torn. “I like your idea of hosting a discussion series, Hank. That said, I hate the idea that this would be left to small, informal, sometimes haphazard, group events like this rather than something formalized and owned by the University.”

“That’s why it needs to be in orientation or a mandatory class!” Portia exclaimed, her frustration mounting. “Everybody at Harvard should have a shared understanding of how the institution has harmed Black and Indigenous communities. Understanding this institution and its history is too important to let students who don’t care dictate how it’s presented. They need to hear it.”

“I hear what you’re saying, Portia,” Courtney sighed. “I just don’t think we should ask students to do this as a part of their required curriculum. Why should I be paying Harvard tuition so the University can teach me about its embarrassing history instead of helping me develop the skills I came here to learn?”

Nisha glanced at her watch and realized she was late for her next class, “Wow, it’s the end of lunch, and I don’t know if we’ve gotten any closer to a resolution. Is there *anything* we can agree on about Harvard’s responsibilities, or our own?”

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