HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

A Forced Reckoning: *Reader's Theater*

Script adapted from A Forced Reckoning case study by Orelia Jonathan, Caroline Tucker Mehta, and Meira Levinson

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www.legacyofslavery.harvard.edu/normative-case-studies and www.justiceinschools.org

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.

CHARACTERS:

Narrator, Professor Smith, James, Hank, Nisha, Courtney, Portia

NARRATOR:

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

PROFESSOR SMITH:

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.

NARRATOR:

The lecture began with a broad overview of race science and its connection to the discipline of public health. The professor then turned to describe Harvard's direct production of race science research.

PROFESSOR SMITH:

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.

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. 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. The daguerreotypes were transferred to the International African American Museum in South Carolina in 2025.

NARRATOR:

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

PROFESSOR SMITH:

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—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.

NARRATOR:

Chatter and laughter filled the room as students gathered their belongings. James Williams, a second-year student at Harvard's public health school, stood up dazedly.

JAMES:

(speaking to himself) It's almost as if we didn't just learn about our university's complicity in racial science!

(raising his voice) Oh! Hank! Want to grab lunch?

HANK:

Sure!

NARRATOR:

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:

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.

NISHA:

Really? What bothered you?

JAMES:

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?

HANK:

Well, I knew some of this stuff from undergrad here because Mather House, where I lived, has a pretty sketchy history. 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 surprising to me.

NISHA:

For international students like me, it's not obvious. 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.

JAMES:

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

HANK:

I agree it's unsettling. Mather House is named after an orthodox Puritan 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.

NISHA:

(somberly) Yeah, that's lousy. I can't say I've had that exact same experience, 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?

COURTNEY:

(nodding vigorously) Yeah totally, Nisha. 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.

NARRATOR:

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

PORTIA:

Glad I ran into you! Our prison divestment meeting ran over, and the bus here takes forever! *(pause)* Oh sorry, I completely just interrupted. What were you all talking about?

HANK:

We came from a lecture on the history of race science. 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.

PORTIA:

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

NISHA:

(*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.

COURTNEY:

Yeah, and it's not just international students. 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.

NISHA:

Exactly! 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?

PORTIA:

Definitely, the University has so much to do in terms of decolonizing. The syllabi, the requirements—there's a lot of unpacking. We need to take so many more perspectives into account. *(speaking with increasing passion and urgency)* 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!

NARRATOR:

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

PORTIA:

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.

NISHA:

I think we agree on some points, Portia. 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:

(hesitantly) 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.

JAMES:

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

COURTNEY:

Yeah, 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.

HANK:

I don't buy your cancel culture concerns, Courtney, 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:

Wow, I never thought before 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. 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?

NISHA:

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

HANK:

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

COURTNEY:

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

HANK:

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

PORTIA:

(crossing her arms and speaking 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?

HANK:

(*slowly)* Portia, you're not wrong. I'm just not convinced the University can put something together that meets everyone's needs without hurting anyone in the process.

JAMES:

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.

PORTIA:

(frustrated) That's why it needs to be in orientation or a mandatory class! Everybody in this community 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.

COURTNEY:

I hear what you're saying, Portia. 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:

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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