



VERITAS: Reflections on Harvard's Legacy of Slavery and the New Black Female President's Challenges to Reparations, Diversity, and Equity

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Founder of Polyglots in Action for Diversity, Inc. (PAD) & Associate Professor of Philosophy, Morgan State University and author of the award-winning book, *Obamanomics and Franciscanomics: A Call for Poverty Alleviation, Fairness, and Welfare* (Europe Book London, 2022).

THE LATIN TERM VERITAS IS HARVARD UNIVERSITY'S MOTTO. IT MEANS 'TRUTH.' Academic freedom-based truth is what academic institutions should be all about. Regrettably, this has not always been the case because of many reasons, including but not limited to financial reasons and the politicization of the academic affairs. In this short essay, I intend to reflect on the importance of the April 26, 2022, Report of the Committee on "Harvard & the Legacy of Slavery." It takes a great deal of moral compass, honesty, intellectual humility, a Socratic passion for the truth, leadership, and commitment to transformative change to do what Harvard's President Lawrence S. Bacow did. Not only did he have the audacity to appoint a committee of faculty members to investigate the Ivy League institution's controversial connection with slavery a.k.a. "America's original sin," but also accepted and was committed to taking reparative actions on the committee's seven recommendations. Before delivering my reflections, it is necessary to summarize the report key findings.

First, slavery was an integral part of daily life in Massachusetts and other states during the colonial era and Harvard was no exception. Second, four university presidents as well as faculty and staff "enslaved more than 70 individuals" (Report Summary, p. 2). between the University's founding in 1636 and the end of slavery in the Commonwealth in 1783. Third, the University benefited from the plantation system and their owners. This was apparent in its financial ties to donors who accumulated their wealth through slave trading, cotton and sugar plantations. They relied on slaves in the Caribbean islands and American South. As a token of appreciation, "The University today memorializes benefactors with ties to slavery across campus through statues, buildings, professorships, student houses, and the like" (Report summary, p. 2). Fourth, integration was accepted slowly and with some resistance. Fifth, "faculty members spread bogus science" [1]. Indeed, "several prominent professors,

including Louis Agassiz, promoted "race science" and eugenics and conducted abusive "research," [...]. Sixth, "Legacies of slavery [...], including racial segregation, exclusion, and discrimination, were part of campus life well into the 20th century" (p. 12).

The committee made seven recommendations to the President and fellows of Harvard College. For example, "Engage and Support Descendant Communities by leveraging Harvard's Excellence in Education (Rec. #1). Honor Enslaved People through Memorialization, Research, Curricula, and Knowledge Dissemination (#2). Establish an Endowed Legacy of Slavery Fund to Support the University's Reparative Efforts (#6). Ensure Institutional Accountability" (#7. See pp. 57-60 for details).

HARVARD & THE LEGACY OF SLAVERY is a wonderful truth-telling report [2]. It is consistent with the University's motto, "Veritas" (Truth). This is the liberating truth that progressive countries and institutions have the audacity to tell when they are committed to accountability in an effort to transform the world. The report is reminiscent of South Africa's 1998 Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Report [3]. TRC Report "documents a past marked by conflict, injustice, oppression, and exploitation. [...]. While seeking to establish responsibility for many of the wrongs recorded, the Report aims [...] to reconcile victims and perpetrators in a process leading to the establishment of a just society" (Janice E. Kuta). Harvard's Report is also reminiscent of Germany's "Rosenburg Files." In this document, Germany's Federal Ministry of Justice critically examines the country's Nazi past in an effort to move from "Drawing a line under the past" toward "dealing with the past" [4].

Harvard's Report is an academic institution's critical examination of its ties to slavery. The announcement of an unprecedented commitment of \$100 million to fund the committee's recommendations has four meanings. The first meaning is a mea culpa and a promise to redress past wrongs through reparation. The second meaning is that it is never too late to acknowledge and deal with past racial injustices. The funding of the recommendations implementation is "necessary to support research efforts to understand the magnitude of racism and develop specific tools to tackle it" (M. Bachelet). The third meaning

is Harvard's willingness to participate in what the former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet calls, "difficult discussions on the legacy of enslavement, the Transatlantic trade in enslaved people and colonialism." Bachelet's words were part of her July 22, 2021, statement on the Midterm review of the International Decade for People of African Descent (2015-2024). She reported that in some cases, these discussions have been accompanied with "local, national or regional initiatives towards truth-seeking and some forms of reparations." Harvard's Report is a good answer to Bachelet's call to "Stop denying racism, start dismantling it" [5]. The fourth meaning of the Report is the rejection of the ongoing anti-intellectualism in the US. This has been apparent in the conservative and MAGA Republicans' assault on Critical Race Theory (CRT) and "The 1619 Project." Last but not least, *Harvard & the Legacy of Slavery* is consistent with this University's motto, VERITAS. Truth is the *raison d'être* of any institution of learning. Regretably, Harvard's 2022 Report was followed by the U.S. Supreme Court's move to strike down Affirmative Action. When combined with 'legacy admissions' at Ivy League institutions, the worrisome developments are detrimental to diversity and social mobility through 'quality education' which is sometimes equated with 'Ivy League education.' Ironically, these new critical issues coincide with the history-making presidency of Dr. Claudine Gay, the 30th and first black female President of Harvard. She has to deal with the implementation of reparative actions, while dealing with the Supreme Court's diversity-challenging decisions. Fortunately, the new black president is aware of the challenges and understands that the commitment to diversity "remains steadfast." She is not alone in this struggle for racial justice.

The NAACP has joined Lawyers for Civil Rights, a Boston-based nonprofit that filed a complaint against legacy admissions, in decrying the discriminatory nature of this practice.

Congratulations and best wishes to Harvard's new and first black president!

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