Scholars of Slavery Force a Public Reckoning

Historians ask fresh questions as America confronts its past
# Scholars of Slavery

## Force a Public Reckoning

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Marc Parry is a senior reporter who writes about scholars and the work that they do. He covers people and debates shaping the world of ideas, with a focus on humanities and social science research. He co-wrote a report about the Gates Foundation’s influence on higher education, which earned an investigative reporting prize from the Education Writers Association.

Parry joined The Chronicle in 2009. He studied literature at the University of Michigan and journalism at Columbia. He lives in Washington, D.C. Email him at marc.parry@chronicle.com.

Cover photo of author Ta-Nehisi Coates (right) and Drew Faust, president of Harvard U., by Stephanie Mitchell, Harvard U.
Stained by Slavery

How Craig Steven Wilder exposed higher education’s past

By MARC PARRY

In the fall of 2006, Brown University published a landmark report detailing the historical complicity of its founders and benefactors in slavery. Craig Steven Wilder, a historian then at Dartmouth College who had spent years researching related themes, thought he knew what would happen next. Brown’s peers would borrow the report’s template to examine their histories of bondage. And Wilder, his own project put out of business by the new research, would move on to studying something else.

But to his shock, Brown’s sister Ivies responded mostly with silence. Asked for comment, Richard C. Levin, Yale’s president at the time, told the campus newspaper that Yale’s slavery links were “simply a fact of history.” Student journalists looking into the University of Pennsylvania’s ties reported that their campus was “all clear.” Harvard’s president, Drew Gilpin Faust, a Civil War historian who wrote a book about how society reckons with trauma, informed The Harvard Crimson that she would not start an institutional investigation.

“The institutions themselves did really virtually nothing, officially,” says Wilder, 51, now a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. “That’s what kept me going … this sense that there was a story to be told that we weren’t telling.”

The result, published in 2013, was *Ebony & Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America’s Universities* (Bloomsbury). Wilder’s book broadened Brown’s work to show that all of the country’s oldest seats of higher learning had been entangled with slavery. It traced how Ivy League institutions deployed slave labor to build campuses, depended on slave traders and owners for money and students, and developed the intellectual arguments that nourished slavery.

But the book’s release didn’t end Wilder’s efforts to expose the slave roots of academe. It deepened them.

More than a decade after the Brown report, universities are now obsessed with the legacy they once avoided. Georgetown. Rutgers. Columbia. Hardly a month passes without fresh headlines about another institution confronting its most sordid heritage. Scholars at the vanguard of this movement are scheduled to convene at Harvard on March 3 for a conference on slavery and universities. Faust is to share a stage with one of America’s most prominent writers on race, Ta-Nehisi Coates. Even the event’s overflow venues were booked weeks before.

“The more that have done it, the more the center of gravity has shifted,” says James T. Campbell, a historian at Stanford University who chaired the committee that produced Brown’s slavery report. “Now, the question you’d be asked would be, Why wouldn’t you? Every other university has done this work.”

If there’s one scholar most responsible for shifting the conversation about universities and slavery — the guiding hand behind the headlines — it’s Wilder. How did he become the guru of a new movement?

To understand that story, it helps to watch Wilder in action recently at Yale. It was there, in 2001, that the first stirrings of academe’s modern slavery reckoning began. The issue came up as Yale celebrated its tercentennial, a moment the university chose to highlight its historical contributions to abolitionism. In response, three graduate students challenged that narrative with a paper and website
Craig Steven Wilder at Yale’s Calhoun College. Like all of America’s oldest universities, he says, Yale “was born and nurtured in the slave economies of the Atlantic world.”
that presented Yale’s much longer embrace of slavery. Among their findings: Eight of the university’s 12 residential colleges had been named for slaveholders.

Fast forward to 2015. Students nationwide rose up to protest racism on campus and beyond. In New Haven, minority activists demanded the renaming of Calhoun College, a residential community that honored a Yale graduate, South Carolina senator, and leading 19th-century champion of slavery: John C. Calhoun. What followed was more than a year of debate, protests, vandalism, petition-writing, committee-forming, and report-drafting, as Yale initially pledged to keep Calhoun’s name before reversing course and scrapping it.

And so, just over a week after the university announced that decision, Wilder arrives in New Haven to help the campus think through how it got to this point and where to go now.

Over two days of public lectures and panel discussions in late February, Wilder offers some 200 students and professors a kind of People’s History of the Ivy League. The settings for his various events capture the dissonance of this reckoning with slavery. Surrounded by gilded crests, soaring red-draped windows, and busts of mustachioed eminences, Wilder explains that Yale, like every college that survived the colonial cut was dying. But the state’s connections to the small slave plantation whose rents funded its first buildings like Calhoun College. That story relegated the Civil War to the past in favor of interregional unity. It cast Reconstruction as an unfortunate episode that had been corrected by Jim Crow. It viewed Calhoun as a unifying figure whose architectural presence might help to diversify the Yale student body by attracting students from the South.

Wilder conveys his material in a studiously dispassionate monotone. But when he invites comments from the audience at the end of his lecture, a young man steps up to the microphone to ask a personal question that makes Wilder’s eyebrow lift and his lips purse.

“As black professionals,” the man asks, “what is our relationship to these institutions as we become more and more aware that our ancestors’ blood is stained in the very walls and the very spaces that we work and study in today? And what is the institutions’ responsibility to bear witness to these experiences and atrocities?”

Wilder answers by sharing his own experience of being a first-generation college student. Raised by a single mother in pregentrification Bedford-Stuyvesant, in Brooklyn, he earned degrees at Fordham and Columbia. He felt gratitude for access to those institutions. But researching his book changed that. His main concern now, he says, is that all students — be they first generation, immigrants, or undocumented — feel the same sense of ownership over universities. That means colleges can’t hide behind history.

“Campuses,” he says, “are not museums for the emotional and psychological bigotries of the alumni.”

As the auditorium erupts in applause, Wilder issues a further challenge. A primary ingredient of social justice, he says, is truth. “Yale has to take responsibility for investigating and making public its history with slavery and the slave trade,” he says. “Because it’s a measure of our integrity that we do that. We can’t claim to be what we claim to be — institutions that produce knowledge and pursue truths — if we’re afraid to pursue truths about ourselves.”

Wilder stumbled into his current role as a one-man truth-and-reconciliation commission for universities and slavery. His first two books were about the history of race in New York City. He began what would become Eb-
ony & Ivy in the early 2000s as a result of his long professional residency in New England, first at Williams College, then at Dartmouth and MIT.

What interested him initially was a group of small secondary schools in the region, where black abolitionists, who were largely excluded from colleges and universities, got their educations. But driving around from town to town, Wilder began to discover a more complicated racial legacy. The exclusionary policies had been selective. The first American Indian student had graduated college in the second half of the 17th century. The first black student graduated more than 150 years later.

Wilder found himself pursuing a broader set of questions. What role had colleges played in deciding who was educable, and who wasn’t? How did their ties to slavery shape their relationships with different populations of nonwhite people? How did they contribute to colonization and conquest?

It was the Brown report that eventually helped Wilder define the shape of his book. Brown’s project had begun in 2003, during a period when the reparations movement was polarizing the nation and elite universities were threatened with lawsuits. Ruth J. Simmons, president of Brown and the first African-American to lead an Ivy League institution, appointed a Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice to examine both Brown’s historical ties to slavery and reflect on the present-day meaning of that history. The effort yielded a 107-page report, a community-outreach campaign to manage the political and public consequences of opening such a charged topic, and a series of policy recommendations on matters ranging from memorializing slavery to recruiting African-American students.

Wilder felt the project had one flaw. It made Brown seem unusual. “It focused the attention on Brown,” he says “in ways that provided a bit of shelter for some of the other institutions.”

Nailing down that larger story would not be easy. Ivy League colleges had mythologized themselves with carefully pruned histories, Wilder says. This meant, for example, that published works would euphemize slave traders as “Atlantic merchants.”

“He can’t go to the institutional histories of Princeton or Columbia or Yale and find in secondary sources good references to how slavery might have impacted those institutions,” says Martha A. Sandweiss, a Princeton historian who is leading a project on her university’s ties to slavery. “He had to go to the archives, and he had to ask new questions of familiar documents.”

Over time, though, other sleuths joined him in those archives. In the absence of institutional commitments like Brown’s, a grass-roots movement sprang up. Sandweiss at Princeton, Sven Beckert at Harvard, Karl Jacoby at Columbia — and other professors started classes about their universities’ ties to slavery. Undergraduate and graduate students did much of the research. Librarians and archivists mounted exhibits.

In weaving together those individual stories, one turning point came when Wilder realized that the number of colleges in British America had more than tripled in the quarter century between 1745 and 1769. The new academies included Codrington College (in Barbados), the College of New Jersey (Princeton), the College of Philadelphia (Penn), King’s College (Columbia), the College of Rhode Island (Brown), Queen’s College (Rutgers), and Dartmouth College. What struck Wilder was the timing of this boom. It came just as the slave trade peaked.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, slavery was the linchpin of an economic network that linked Europe to Africa and the Americas. Familial slave-trading firms in New England and the Mid-Atlantic shipped African captives to slave plantations in the Caribbean and the South. Merchants moved slave-produced products like sugar and tobacco to the mainland colonies and European markets. Northern producers provisioned the Southern and West Indian plantations with food and supplies. In the Mid-Atlantic and New England, slave labor powered the expansion of European settlements.

All of the new colleges were established with direct connections to that coercive economy. When the Rev. Eleazar Wheelock set out to found Dartmouth, he arrived with his family, some students, and eight slaves. Soon after Penn was set up, it started running fund-raising missions to wealthy planters in the West Indies. Founding trustees of Columbia, like Philip Livingston, a future signer of the Declaration of Independence, invested in slave-trading ventures. In the colonial and early national period, Wilder says, about 80 percent of newly established academies failed. Those that

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survived did so by attaching themselves to the slave economy.

Within the history profession, Wilder’s book is part of a renewed emphasis on slavery’s significance to life in the Northern colonies and states. Academic reviewers have greeted it warmly. Their quibbles focus on his habit of clobbering readers with page after page of evidence — family trees, businesses, and so on. Some also push back, gently, on his thrashing of their own institutions’ contemporary behavior. At one of Wilder’s Yale talks, David W. Blight felt compelled to point out that his university has operated a center for the study of slavery and abolition for 18 years — “the first of its kind in the world” — which had been “part and parcel of at least the attempts Yale has made at times to face this past.” (It’s the Gilder Lehrman center, which Blight runs.)

For scholars steeped in the history of slavery, it’s not shocking that colonial colleges were linked to bondage. As James Campbell, of the Brown committee, puts it: “Why would we be surprised that institutions of this vintage were entangled with an industry that was, at the time, the most important and profitable global industry? Would we be shocked if in 300 years people came back and looked at the endowment portfolios and donors of American universities today and found people who were involved in banks or finance?”

But Wilder’s book does shock students, whose activism helps explain why it has attracted such sustained interest. Take Yamiesha Bell. The 2015 Rutgers graduate says that, like many millennials, she got to college having been taught to see slavery as distant history. As for universities, she considered them engines of equality. It was in an Africana-studies class that she first encountered Wilder’s book. “It was devastating,” she says, “to have so much love for an institution but also recognize how ugly of a past it had.” The work helped her see continuities between past and present racial injustices on campus. In 2014, Bell co-founded a campus chapter of Black Lives Matter. Like her peers elsewhere, she put the university’s racial history on public trial. She recruited student protesters by sharing Wilder’s research on Rutgers. She also used Ebony & Ivy to pressure the university’s chancellor, Richard L. Edwards, emailing him about its findings and following up in person. When Edwards appointed a committee to study the university’s history of slavery and Indian land dispossession, Wilder advised its members on issues both methodological and moral.

“It’s not just about the history,” says Marisa J. Fuentes, a Rutgers historian who led research for the university’s slavery report. “It’s about how students and faculty of color are feeling about their position and their standing in the university. So getting the chancellor and the university to articulate a moral vision — of a commitment to diversity, a commitment to retention — was something that he actually made clear we should be talking about with these administrators.”

The Rutgers episode is one story from dozens of campuses that Wilder has visited, often giving specialized talks with titles like “Slavery and the Little Ivies” (at Bates) or “Catholic Colleges and Slavery” (at Boston College). Despite the attention to his work, Wilder doesn’t think colleges are doing nearly enough. Many slavery-history projects exist, yes. But you can count on one or two hands the number of slavery-linked universities that have taken institutional responsibility for researching and publishing those connections, he says. Most have not.

 Elite universities, he adds, are comfortable dealing with minorities when those institutions get to appear benevolent. They resist any narrative that puts minorities in the position of making demands, he says, often patting themselves on the back for making decisions that others forced upon them.

Back at Yale, sitting shoulder to shoulder with students and researchers involved with the Calhoun College controversy, Wilder makes a demand of his own. Whenever a university changes a name, he says, they should not erase how and why that decision came about. They should memorialize it — right where it happened.

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Shackles and Dollars

Historians and economists clash over slavery

By MARC PARRY

For Edward E. Baptist, the scandal was a gift. It had taken the Cornell University historian over a dozen years to produce a study tracing the creation of American capitalism to the expansion of slavery. It took less than one day for a short book review to turn his 400-page narrative into a cause célèbre.

The inciting review appeared in The Economist magazine. It faulted Baptist’s study, The Half Has Never Been Told (Basic Books, 2014), for exaggerating the brutality of bondage based on the questionable testimony of “a few slaves.” Baptist fired back in Politico and The Guardian. The magazine’s critique, he wrote, “revealed just how many white people remain reluctant to believe black people about the experience of being black.” The Economist, widely denounced online, published an apology.

The controversy stimulated both public discussion of slavery and sales of Baptist’s book. Within academe, though, some think it had another effect: to squelch debate over The Half Has Never Been Told. Skeptical scholars may have been wary of criticizing its arguments for fear of being perceived as apologists for slavery.

That silence is breaking. In a series of recent papers and scholarly talks, economists, along with some historians, have begun to raise serious questions about Baptist’s scholarship. Their critiques echo parts of the Economist review, only this time backed up by reams of economic research. The attack is notable because it has expanded beyond The Half Has Never Been Told to assail the wider movement to which that book belongs.

Over the past several years, a series of books has reshaped how historians view the connection between slavery and capitalism. These works show the role that coercion played in bringing about a modern market system that is more typically identified with freedom. At a moment of rising frustration with racial and economic inequality, they have won a level of attention and acclaim that academics dream about but almost never get.

Some think the books’ forensic accounting of how slave labor was stolen may buttress the case for reparations.

What the economists are now assembling amounts to a battering ram aimed at the empirical foundations of these studies, which include Walter Johnson’s River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom (Harvard University Press) and Sven Beckert’s Empire of Cotton: A Global History (Knopf). The critics, whose own scholarship stakes out similar turf, say the new histories are riddled with errors, make overblown claims, or distort evidence to suit their story lines.

“The shocking thing is how far they have deviated from the traditional strengths of history, in terms of using evidence and evaluating arguments,” says Paul W. Rhode, who chairs the economics department at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor and until recently served as co-editor of The Journal of Economic History.

The clash is a reckoning for two disciplines that have long developed in isolation. Some researchers believe that economic history would gain strength if historians and economists worked together. By September, though, the sniping over slavery had gotten so nasty that one scholar trying to build bridges between the camps, Caitlin Rosenthal, de-
Historians “carry along certain ideological positions which they hold fervently and are not willing to test.”
he says, “it looks more like the sciences than it does the humanities.”

On a Thursday night in October, two economists who have pummeled Baptist’s work in print, Alan L. Olmstead and Trevon D. Logan, engage historians in a public debate over slavery’s role in the coming of American capitalism. The setting is a dimly lit basement auditorium at Dartmouth College, where 100 or so students and professors have gathered to hear them go at it. This is the event Berkeley’s Rosenthal worried would devolve into a fight.

It mostly doesn’t — until, about an hour into the discussion, Olmstead steps up to the lectern. “I came here to hammer Baptist,” he says. Olmstead, a tall, white-haired economic historian from the University of California at Davis, fills the screen behind him with a slide about Baptist’s torture thesis. He clutches a stack of rolled-up papers in his left fist. “It’s hard to find anything in history that’s more ludicrous than this, in recent years at least.”

To appreciate Olmstead’s exasperation, it helps to know a bit about the quest that has consumed much of his career. His research on the slave economy is animated by some of the same questions that concern Baptist. How did slaves in the antebellum South come to pick so much more cotton? What resulted from that growth? Olmstead and his longtime collaborator, Michigan’s Rhode, sought answers by scouring the South for plantation records. They accumulated a data set with more than 600,000 entries showing the daily amount of cotton that individual slaves picked between 1800 and 1861.

Baptist drew on that data to claim that calibrated torture was behind the productivity spike. Only, to hear Olmstead and Rhode tell it, he left out the section of it that clashed with his story. In The Half Has Never Been Told, he reproduced one of their charts, showing a fourfold increase in picking rates for one type of cotton, called Upland, grown away from coastal areas. He failed to include a separate chart that had run below it in their original paper. That one showed almost no increase in picking rates for another cotton crop, called Sea Island, cultivated mostly along the coasts and on the offshore islands of Georgia, Florida, and South Carolina.

To economists, that comparison makes all the difference, because it enables a kind of natural experiment. As Olmstead writes in a review of The Half Has Never Been Told, “If Baptist’s ‘whipping machine’ drove the huge increase in Upland cotton picking output, he needs to explain why the nabobs producing other crops did not apply more (or new forms of) torture to increase their output.” The increase in one kind of cotton but not the other suggested a different explanation. Olmstead and Rhode concluded that biological innovation — improved varieties of seeds that yielded more pickable cotton — propelled the Upland jump.

Then there’s the question of how important cotton really was to the American economy in the decades leading up to the Civil War. Baptist’s book walks readers through a series of calculations to arrive at the striking conclusion that more than $600 million, or almost half of economic activity in 1836, derived directly or indirectly from slave-produced cotton. But the notion that cotton was the prime driver of antebellum economic growth has been repeatedly tested and rejected by economic historians, as Olmstead and Rhode detail in a 34-page draft paper attacking Baptist, Beckert, and Johnson.

Even worse, economists accuse Baptist of manipulating statistics to pump up cotton’s importance. They say he tramples widely accepted methods for calculating a country’s gross domestic product. For example, his $600 million includes pork, corn, and axes bought by slave plantations. But those are production inputs, says Eric Hilt, an economic historian at Wellesley College who has his own forthcoming critique of Baptist et al. Including them and the cotton output is one of numerous examples of Baptist’s double-counting. You could similarly claim almost any commodity was crucial. Hay, say.

It’s “hocus-pocus,” Olmstead says at Dartmouth, a number pulled from thin air. He drives home the point by spinning around while waving a pretend magic wand above his head.

Economists are “so obsessed with detail that they don’t really confront the broader dynamics of the interpretations.”

These themes — innumeracy, overstatement, and ignorance of economics research — pop up again and again in economists’ critiques of the new histories of slavery and capitalism. But here’s the broader point. Most economic historians have argued that “cotton textiles were not essen-
tial to the Industrial Revolution,” and that cotton production did not necessarily depend on slavery, according to Douglas A. Irwin, an economist who held and moderated the Dartmouth debate. Summarizing economists’ thinking for the debate audience, Irwin points out that cotton was grown elsewhere in the world without slaves. Cotton production continued to rise in the United States even after slavery was abolished. “In this view, the economic rise of the West was not dependent on slavery,” Irwin says, “but came about as a result of an economic process described by Adam Smith in his book *The Wealth of Nations* — a process that depended on free enterprise, exchange, and the division of labor.”

Much criticism of Baptist and others originates within the subfield of economic history. These are scholars, trained mostly in economics, who bring a social-science perspective to studying historical economic behavior. That means testing hypotheses against data. It means quantitative analysis. And it means counterfactual thinking. When historians claim slavery was essential to the Industrial Revolution, as Beckert and Baptist both do, to economists that implies it would not have happened in slavery’s absence. If scholars feel uncomfortable making that statement, “than they should think harder about the initial claim,” Hilt says. Economic historians have thought very hard about the slave economy for decades. They believe slavery was profitable. But they also believe the institutions created to sustain it harmed the South’s long-term development.

As they see it, the problem with the new slavery books stems in part from how the discipline of history has developed. In the ‘60s and ‘70s, historians and economists battled over economic history. But as historians turned toward culture, and economists became more quantitative, economic history increasingly became just a subfield of economics. For a variety of reasons, including the 2008 crisis, historians are turning their attention back to financial matters. But they “did not build up their tools in order to understand the material world,” says Rhode. “And they carry along certain ideological positions which they hold fervently and are not willing to test.” Historians, he says, “can’t be making stuff up.”

Not surprisingly, Rhode’s targets see things differently. Start with Baptist. He ended up pulling out of the Dartmouth debate, blaming scheduling problems, so he was not on stage to rebut Olmstead’s wand-waving. Reached by phone, however, he does so aggressively. Baptist sees a basic flaw in Olmstead and Rhode’s research — a problem that points to the methodological gulf dividing historians and economists.

It comes down to seeds. Olmstead and Rhode say that cotton picking got more efficient because of improved varieties of Upland cotton. They reach that conclusion in part by comparing the growth in Upland cotton to the lack of growth in Sea Island cotton. The problem, Baptist says, is that comparison assumes there was no real difference in the labor systems used to produce those crops. But there was. As Baptist writes in a blog post responding to Olmstead and Rhode, historians have shown that Sea Island planters assigned slaves a “task,” or a specific amount of work they had to get done each day. Task accomplished, they could go home. The quantity of work demanded under the task system did not change much prior to emancipation, he says, partly because those slave communities resisted increased labor demands.

To Baptist, the root problem with Olmstead and Rhode’s work is reductionism. The economists are bent on stripping causality down to one variable (seeds), assuming away things they have no business discarding (different systems of labor). They also falsely suppose that economic actors will always look at a situation and identify the most efficient way of achieving their goals. So, by this logic, planters in 1800 understood everything about extracting labor that they understood in 1860. But that’s antithetical to how many historians think, Baptist says. Historians believe causality is complex and cultural frameworks are in constant flux. By 1860, planters may have formed different ideas about what they should be trying to get out of laborers.

Baptist calls Olmstead and Rhode “profoundly naïve” about the plantation records that anchor their research. “These are not documents that were generated to test seeds,” he says. “They are documents that were generated to measure labor. And to measure labor that was being extracted by force. And to measure labor that we know, from dozens and dozens of different testimonies by people who survived it, was generated by the threat of being whipped for not picking enough cotton.”
When economists gripe about historians retreating from economics, historians offer a counternarrative: “The problem is the economists left history for statistical model building,” says Eric Foner, a historian of 19th-century America at Columbia University. “History for them is just a source of numbers, a source of data to throw into their equations.” Foner considers counterfactuals absurd. A historian’s job is not to speculate about alternative universes, he says. It’s to figure out what happened and why. And, in the history that actually took place, cotton was extremely important in the Industrial Revolution.

Some economists who attack the new slavery studies are “champion nitpickers,” adds Foner, who has praised Baptist’s book in The New York Times and who taught Beckert at Columbia. “They’re barking up the wrong tree. They’re so obsessed with detail that they don’t really confront the broader dynamics of the interpretations. Yes, I’m sure there are good, legitimate criticisms of the handling of economic data. But in some ways I think it’s almost irrelevant to the fundamental thrust of these works.”

Part of what those works are trying to do, he says, is to counter the idea that capitalism is a natural system. They want to put that system back into history by showing the contingencies that shaped its rise.

Historians also want to come up with a new way of writing about economic change, Berkeley’s Rosenthal says, one that brings politics and power back into the mix. Beckert, for example, coined the phrase “war capitalism” to describe the violent phase of development that laid the foundation for the more familiar industrial capitalism that began in Britain in the late 18th century. War capitalism was based on “slavery, the expropriation of indigenous peoples, imperial expansion, armed trade, and the assertion of sovereignty over people and land by entrepreneurs,” he writes in Empire of Cotton.

For all the mudslinging, the slavery fight does not break cleanly along disciplinary lines. Historians under attack find support for their ideas in the writing of some economists, like Ronald Findlay and Kevin H. O’Rourke. Some historians think Olmstead and Rhode have the better side of the facts in their battle with Baptist. Historians and economists criticize the new slavery scholarship on grounds that go beyond economics.

One economist, Trevon Logan of Ohio State University, sounds much like a historian in what may be the most personal of all challenges to the new scholarship. Logan, who is African-American, cuts down Baptist for misusing slave testimony in a misguided effort at racial amelioration. Baptist has suggested that his book could help liberate African-Americans from the shame of being the descendents of slaves. This feels oddly familiar to Logan. In the ’70s, he writes, the same impulse led Fogel and Engerman to highlight “black achievement under adversity” and argue that slave laborers were far more productive than their Northern counterparts. “I was not freed from shame from having read Baptist’s book,” he writes. “… American slavery will never be a source of pride for anyone. It is time to accept that fact.”

The greatest breakthroughs in historical scholarship on slavery, Logan writes, concerned the slaves themselves. Think of Genovese’s work on Southern culture, or Herbert Gutman’s on family structure, or John W. Blassingame’s on psychological development. But in Baptist’s analysis, slaves are not the real subject, Logan says. The meat of Baptist’s book, as Logan reads it, concerns “the people who bought and sold other individuals for profit, the way that they organized the people they bought and sold, and how they fostered relationships with those that did not own people to further their cause.” Like many others, Baptist “continues to see the enslaved as a vehicle for his own need to tell us something new, even when it is not,” Logan writes. “That, I believe, is the true shame about the historiography of slavery.”

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Buried History

How far should a university go to face its slave past?

BY MARC PARRY

Fred O. Smith Sr. stands near the site where the U. of Georgia discovered remains, presumably of slaves, during a campus construction project. Smith, a Georgia alumnus and leader in Athens’s black community, criticizes how the university handled those remains.
American universities have publicly wrestled with their historical ties to slavery for the better part of two decades. In all those years, there may never have been a moment quite like what took place at a cemetery near the University of Georgia’s Athens campus on March 7. That afternoon, Fred O. Smith Sr. — Georgia alumnus, slave descendant, leader in Athens’s black community — found his alma mater secretly reburying the remains of people who could have been his ancestors.

The remains had obsessed the 63-year-old retiree since they surfaced in late 2015 during a campus construction project. At the time, the university explained that it had found several graves from a 19th-century burial ground, Old Athens Cemetery, while expanding Baldwin Hall, an academic building next to the cemetery. It described the bones as belonging to people of European heritage. But the story had changed by March 1 of this year, when Georgia issued another statement, confirming what Smith and others had long suspected. Most of the remains whose DNA was successfully analyzed — fewer than one-third of the people from what by then amounted to 105 rediscovered grave sites — were of African descent. That meant, in all likelihood, they had been slaves.

Immediately, local black leaders began to complain publicly. They held a press conference. They attacked the university’s lack of transparency. They noted that some current residents of Athens probably were descended from the individuals whose remains were found. They criticized the site where the university intended to rebury those remains — the plan was to move them to a cemetery called Oconee Hill, with a memorial ceremony slated for March 20 — and recommended a historically black burial ground instead. They implored the university to slow down.

Then Smith got a call. They have dug the hole, and they may be burying them at any moment, said his tipster, whom Smith declines to identify. Which is how, around noon on March 7, he found himself outside the gate of Oconee Hill, a sprawling cemetery located across the railroad tracks from Georgia’s football stadium.

The gate was locked. The reburial would not take place during the March 20 ceremony, as some had assumed from the university’s press release. It was happening now — unannounced — during Spring Break.

Smith drove to another gate. It was also locked, but there he had a clear view of the reburial. No minister anywhere. No hearses, just U-Haul-like moving trucks. Workers lowering boxes, not coffins, into what seemed like a mass grave. When one person saw Smith taking pictures, he says, the man pulled a large truck in front of the gate to block his view.

Smith emailed a description of the scene to hundreds of contacts. The same day, he met with Valerie Babb, an English professor who directs the University of Georgia’s Institute for African American Studies, and told her what had happened at the cemetery. “My reaction,” Babb says, “was horror that remains were treated that disrespectfully.”

What happened next would only deepen professors’ concerns. To some faculty members and students, the emergence of these remains presented an opportunity for Georgia to do what many other universities have done lately: fully investigate and deal with its history of slavery. But the coming weeks would show how much of a struggle it still can be for a major institution to face its complicity in America’s original sin, particularly a public university in the Deep South. Georgia, some professors feared, was literally and figuratively trying to bury its slave history.

The past is unavoidable the moment you arrive at the University of Georgia, which was chartered in 1785 and promotes itself as the “birthplace of public higher education.” If the Georgia story has a symbolic center, it’s a black iron arch, thought to have been built around 1857, that stands close to some of the campus’s most historic buildings. A commemorative marker nearby explains how the university shut down during the Civil War — “the War for Southern Independence,” as the sign calls it — when most of its students entered the Confederate Army.

That same arch stood during the struggles of desegregation a century later. It was there, in 1961, that demonstrators hanged a blackface effigy and chanted “Two, four, six, eight, we don’t want to integrate.” Today a marker celebrates the courage of
the first two African-American students to enroll at the university, Hamilton Holmes and Charlayne Hunter (now Hunter-Gault). The white-columned building where those pioneers registered for classes is now named after them.

The story of slavery at the university, however, is nearly invisible. In recent years, some faculty members and students have been trying to change that. They've combed archives to uncover the facts about the university's history of bondage, presenting that story in a website and a library exhibit. They've studied and helped preserve the history of various cemeteries where enslaved and later free African-Americans were buried. "Slavery was a vital part of the history of the University of Georgia," says Scott Nesbit, a 19th-century historian specializing in digital humanities who has studied and taught the university's slave heritage. "What we find also is that University of Georgia was vital to the history of slavery."

In 1860, the 11,000 or so residents of Clarke County, which included the university, were about equally split between white people and enslaved African-Americans. Slaves did much of the labor on the campus: chopping wood, carrying water, maintaining buildings. (That famous arch? Slaves may have built it.) Some Athenian slaves led notable lives. Lucius Henry Holsey, who was owned by a literature professor, went on to found Paine College, a liberal-arts institution in Augusta, Ga. At the same time, thinkers associated with the university were publishing significant treatises defending slavery on moral, economic, and political grounds.

Some on the campus now call for the university to acknowledge and showcase that slave history. Doing so would create a more inclusive environment for African-American students, says Mansur A. Buffins, a rising senior who is president of the campus chapter of the NAACP. It would link them to African-Americans who contributed to the university long before Holmes and Hunter-Gault integrated it, in 1961. "If you're acknowledging the total black experience on this campus, I feel more of a connection to this campus as a physical thing is when I'm passing by the Hunter-Holmes Academic Building."

The University of Georgia's slave history is hardly unique, and neither are the recent calls to reckon with it. After the Revolutionary War, Americans secured the future of their democracy in part by building colleges. They established 17 from 1783 to 1800, among them the first truly public institutions, such as Georgia and the University of North Carolina. Slavery undergirded the entire enterprise, says Craig Steven Wilder, a historian at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and author of Ebony & Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities (Bloomsbury, 2013). These days, academe's early dependence on slavery has risen to the surface. Investigating and publicizing that past, once uncommon, has become a badge of seriousness. Brown University paved the way with a landmark report in 2006. The movement gained momentum with Wilder's book in 2013 and has spread to so many institutions that a consortium exists to facilitate their efforts.

The new self-studies can be as vast as the story of slavery itself. For example, researchers at the University of Virginia have found that 5,000 or more enslaved laborers worked there during the 45 years between its founding and emancipation. Slaves created the 900,000 bricks that made up the Rotunda of what is now a Unesco World Heritage site, according to Elizabeth R. Varon, a historian at UVa. The university has addressed that history through measures like a formal expression of regret from its governing board, extensive community meetings, naming a new dorm after a former slave couple, a memorial project, and a lecture course meant as a new way of initiating undergraduates into campus culture.

Probably no reckoning with academic slavery has captured the public imagination like the one at Georgetown University, where a penitent president has offered preferential admissions treatment to descendants of 272 slaves whose 1838 sale shored up the Jesuit institution's finances.

Georgia is a laggard by comparison. What's distinctive about its situation is the intimate presence of this history. Its South Campus is built on land

"Other places, where the student body is from all over the world, to talk about slavery is not necessarily to implicate you directly. But here ... there’s a more direct family connection."
that used to be a slave plantation. Many state residents trace their roots to slaves and slaveholders. “Other places, where the student body is from all over the world, to talk about slavery is not necessarily to implicate you directly,” says Scott Reynolds Nelson, a historian at Georgia. “But here, particularly for the student body, and then for many of the higher administrators, there’s a more direct family connection. You don’t have to press too hard to get 150 years back.”

“This is the cemetery,” says Fred Smith. “We’re riding on it.”

It’s a Saturday morning in late March, and Smith parks his SUV behind Baldwin Hall. What he sees as a cemetery looks like a standard red-brick academic building. The more visible burial ground is the sloping, magnolia-shaded area behind a fence next door. That place, called Old Athens Cemetery, contains monuments to the kinds of people whose lives tend to leave records for historians: a railroad magnate, a veteran of the Revolution, a professor of belles lettres and moral philosophy.

But the cemetery’s modern borders mask a hidden backstory. The burial ground, presumably segregated, once encompassed more land, according to Scott Nesbit, the historian. It fell out of use after Oconee Hill Cemetery opened in 1856, he says, and it was closed to black burials in 1858. By the 1930s, when the university used money from the New Deal to build three new academic buildings in the area, Old Athens Cemetery had lapsed into disrepair. According to Nesbit, one of those new facilities, Baldwin Hall, was built on its slave section.

The evidence: a 1938 letter, sent by a public-relations firm to the university librarian, explaining the methods used to exhume skeletons of slaves for the Baldwin Hall construction. It reads, “The white inmates at the northern end of the cemetery turned over in their graves when they heard picks and shovels digging foundations for a large brick University building in 1938. They rested more easily when it was revealed that the digging was being confined to the southern end where the colored folks of Athens used to be interred; numerous tibias, vertebrae and grinning skulls of colored brothers were unearthed and thrown ‘over the dump,’ while surviving relatives and friends of silent sleepers in this city of the dead shuddered to think of what an extension of building construction would mean.”

What happened to the remains exhumed during that construction? Nesbit doesn’t know. “I believe that they were thrown — that they were thrown away,” he says. “The remains were simply thrown away.”

Fast-forward to 2015. The shudder-inducing prospect foreshadowed in that 1938 letter came to pass. This time workers found remains amid a
project that involved replacing a parking lot outside Baldwin with a building extension. The university halted construction and brought in a consultant, Southeastern Archaeological Services, to exhume and rebury the remains. Based on Southeastern’s visual inspection, Georgia announced, those remains appeared to be European.

That puzzled some faculty members. It shocked Smith, who is known around Athens for founding an academic “quiz bowl” competition focused on local and national African-American history. Like Nesbit, Smith had seen documentation about the removal of slaves’ graves when Baldwin was built. He immediately emailed university officials to share that history and pose a question: “Could the remains be slave remains?”

It would take more than a year for an answer to emerge. In January 2016, one month after Smith sent his email, Georgia announced a research project to learn more about the individuals’ ancestry and living conditions. Carrying out the study: Laurie Reitsema, a biological anthropologist at the university who specializes in researching past human lives by studying skeletons. The subjects she had to work with in this case were fragmented. Only 63 of the 105 grave sites possessed any visible human remains. Also, because the campus lacked a lab suitable for the challenging task of analyzing archaeological DNA, a facility in Texas had to process the samples.

Ultimately, 42 of the individuals appeared to have enough organic material to enable ancient-DNA analysis, Reitsema says. The analysis succeeded in most, though not all, of those cases, and most of the people who could be studied were found to have African ancestry. “Given the period of use of the cemetery, and the geographic region, it’s highly likely that they were enslaved,” Reitsema says.

What Reitsema and Nesbit discuss with the precision of scholarship hits Smith with the force of kinship. When he learned of the remains’ African ancestry, he grieved. He wanted time to process the news. He hoped to see the remains lowered into the ground. Instead, the university reburied them within a week of announcing their ancestry. And Smith was locked out. University administrators “had no emotional inclination about this,” he says. “I guess they thought that we would take that as some prehistoric bones that they found, and that we wouldn’t identify that those might have been our relatives, our ancestors.”

At least one administrator, though, does see the bones that way. Michelle Cook is Georgia’s chief diversity officer and associate provost for institutional diversity. She is also an African-American with Athens-area roots going back to the 19th century. The Baldwin remains, she says, “could be my own relatives.” She advised the administration on how to memorialize them, and, since that process came under attack, she has served as a public face of the university’s response.

Cook says university planners never expected to find bones on the site, because oral histories and local historians indicated that all remains had been removed decades ago. Once remains did turn up, she says, Georgia reburied them based on guidance from the Office of the State Archaeologist. That meant finding a new grave site close to the original one (Oconee Hill is minutes from Baldwin). It meant reinterring remains individually in wooden funeral boxes whose size was appropriate to their contents. It meant burying them as closely as possible to their original configuration, so as not to separate family members or other pairings.

The university decided to honor those people with a service of remembrance on March 20, Cook says. It anticipated that many community members would attend. It was necessary to reinter the remains at an earlier time, she says, with good weather. Locking the gate — normal at Oconee, she says, for burials that take place separately from funeral services — was appropriate to prevent a media or public spectacle. And, contrary to Smith’s claim about the large truck, the consultants who handled the reburial say they did not deliberately block anyone’s view, according to Greg Trevor, the university’s chief spokesman.

Georgia consulted members of the black community about the memorialization process, Cook says, naming a judge, Steve C. Jones; a music professor, Gregory S. Broughton; and a pastor, Winfred M. Hope, all of whom participated in the March 20 ceremony. The university’s handling of

“The past never cooperates by staying in the past. Eventually it always reaches out to us and asks, What have you learned?”
the reburial has earned the praise of another local black pastor, Charlie Maddox, who wrote an op-ed in the *Athens Banner-Herald* attacking critics “inflamed and hyperbolic rhetoric.”

“The institution was trying to do this in the most dignified way,” Cook says. “Not in the sense that there was a rush, but out of a true genuine concern” to respectfully rebury the bones as soon as possible.

But the university’s response doesn’t much impress Craig Steven Wilder, the MIT historian. The idea, he says, “that state institutions can unilaterally make decisions about the reburial and the remains of enslaved people, without in fact a significant and extended period of public discussion, to me is outrageous.”

And the reburial itself is only the most high-profile controversy in a series of related moves that have troubled professors and students.

Start with the word “slavery.” The university has been inconsistent about referring to the Baldwin individuals’ probable enslaved status. When it announced their African descent, its news release made no mention of slavery. Speakers at the March 20 ceremony, including the university’s president, Jere W. Morehead, also skirted the subject. They stressed how much was unknown about the individuals.

This was striking given the vast amount that is known about 19th-century U.S. slavery, including archival research by Georgia’s own faculty that has deemed the practice essential to the university’s early history. It was only on the granite marker by their Oconee Hill graves, where the reinterred individuals were described as “presumably slaves or former slaves,” that the word was found.

Georgia also effaced enslaved people from the 1845 landscape painting that stretches across the website showcasing the university’s history. The bottom section of the original painting, “View of Athens from Carr’s Hill,” by George Cooke, depicts multiple figures that are almost certainly slaves, one of them running to a carriage and another working with cotton bales. Yet, as the campus newspaper reported in early 2016, those slaves are cropped out in the version that appears on the history site.

After the Baldwin Hall discovery, university officials pulled an article scheduled to run in the alumni magazine about efforts of Georgia historians, students, and community members to study and preserve Oconee Hill, successor to the Old Athens Cemetery next to Baldwin Hall. Officials shelved the story because “anything to do with the
old cemetery and its association with the Oconee Hill Cemetery is a very sensitive topic right now as far as the public is concerned,” says internal correspondence obtained by The Chronicle Review. Of particular concern: that the article “would not be well received by local and state officials who have close ties to the university.”

As for the Baldwin remains, it’s not just members of the Athens community who have felt excluded from decisions about what to do with them and how the University of Georgia should address its history. The same goes for faculty members from areas like history and African-American studies. Professors in these fields have studied and taught black history. They’ve built up community contacts. But many faculty members have learned about the university’s moves from press releases and newspaper articles.

“The history department, formally, was never contacted,” says Claudio Saunt, who heads it. “No one ever called the department chair and said, ‘We have this story. We’ve discovered these remains. We want to know more about the history at UGA. Can you help us?’”

A climate of paranoia envelops the subject. People interviewed for this article considered parts of the story too sensitive to discuss on the record. Employees whose jobs lack the protection of tenure have felt pressure not to pursue public-oriented work related to slavery and the university. “I feel very badly for people in the community who have been very hurt by this experience,” says Cindy Hahamovitch, a historian. “But at the same time, I’m also concerned for the university’s reputation. We run graduate programs. We try to attract faculty to come here. The last thing UGA needs is a reputation as a place that doesn’t handle this well — is trying to bury the past.”

Georgia is doing nothing of the sort, officials respond. Cropping out slaves from that painting: A web designer resized both the top and bottom sections of the image to make it fit the page, Trevor says. Pulling the magazine article: To run it would have been insensitive, he says, at a time when the Baldwin remains were still being exhumed. Sidelining faculty members: Cook names more than a dozen mostly black professors and administrators whom she personally contacted before March 1 to
discuss what the university had learned about the remains’ ancestry and how it was planning to re-bury them.

Nevertheless, some professors are taking matters into their own hands. A few hours after Smith drives his SUV to the Baldwin site, he joins hundreds of people in the Richard B. Russell library building for a faculty-organized event billed as “A Conversation about Slavery at UGA and the Baldwin Site Burials.” The meeting has a guerrilla feel. Its organizers tried but failed to get institutional sponsors. They almost failed to get the venue. Now, lined up behind a long beige table, a panel of professors and community members faces a packed auditorium. Several administrators are here, too, but they sit in the audience.

“Some have been afraid to engage in the type of conversation we are about to have today because the many issues surrounding it are difficult, and because some constituents might be offended,” says Valerie Babb, the English professor. “But the past never cooperates by staying in the past. Eventually it always reaches out to us and asks, What have you learned?”

What follows begins like an academic symposium — an opportunity for scholars like Nesbit and Reitsema to share the findings of their research — but soon becomes a drubbing. In front of local and national reporters, Smith seems to verge on tears as he recounts the university’s treatment of the Baldwin remains. A prominent local politician and historian, Michael L. Thurmond, scolds the university for failing to document the contributions of slaves, whom he compares to the black female NASA scientists celebrated in the movie Hidden Figures.

John H. Morrow Jr., a black historian who has served the university for nearly 30 years and held a number of leadership posts, indicts Georgia for consistently acting as if the surrounding black community does not exist. Morrow, who was one of the employees contacted by Michelle Cook, the chief diversity officer, scorns President Morehead’s response to the Baldwin Hall controversy. According to a news release that had gone out a few days before, this would involve meetings with university members, city officials, and other local leaders to discuss collaborating on issues like education and economic development.

“He’s going to talk to the community,” Morrow says. “I’m not interested in hearing what the white community has to say about this. We know damn well what the white community thinks, because we’re connected to it — coaches and everyone else. But there is still no communication with the African-American community about these issues.”

If your notion of how a university reckons with slavery comes from the positive coverage of recent developments at Georgetown, then Georgia’s case demonstrates a messier reality. Institutional fear of dealing with slavery is common. Even Georgetown was not immune. As Wilder points out, Jesuit historians had written for decades about their order’s slave plantations. Only in recent years has Georgetown taken what he calls “institutional accountability” for that history.

Whether Georgia will follow that example is an open question. Faculty members are pushing for a slavery initiative that aspires to match the ambition of projects like the ones at Georgetown and Virginia. So far, Georgia’s response has been lukewarm. Administrators are backing a more narrowly tailored research project to learn more about the lives of the 105 people whose graves were discovered at Baldwin Hall, including, as a news release puts it, “any ties to slavery.”

For Smith, even that is a positive step. On the day of the contentious “Conversation” set up by the faculty, he drives to Oconee Hill Cemetery to visit the freshly sodded graves of those 105 people. He examines the white lilies beside their granite marker. He stoops to read the Paul Laurence Dunbar poem excerpted on it. He seems, for a moment, satisfied. He has turned these slaves into front-page news. “Before that, they were forgotten, neglected, abused,” he says, nodding his head with each adjective. “They treated them as nothing. At least they’re getting a lot of attention, finally. Well-deserved attention.”

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In the aftermath of Charlottesville’s violent white-supremacist rally, Americans are waging a renewed culture war over Confederate monuments. But a more complicated question lurks beneath the upheaval over what to do with these statues, one that will linger once the TV cameras have moved on. After a community takes down Confederate relics, how should citizens and scholars remember and memorialize the slave system those rebels fought to preserve?

New Orleans exemplifies that dilemma. The city’s mayor, Mitch Landrieu, won national attention in May for a speech that dismantled the bogus Civil War history enshrined in Confederate monuments. But in defending his city’s removal of those statues, Landrieu also demanded that New Orleanians reckon with their city’s history of bondage. “New Orleans was one of America’s largest slave markets: a port where hundreds of thousands of souls were bought, sold, and shipped up the Mississippi River to lives of forced labor, of misery, of rape, and of torture,” he said. The lack of monuments to that past amounted to “historical malfeasance, a lie by omission.”

Landrieu’s remarks mirrored decades of research that has recast the former French and Spanish colony, once seen as a place apart in U.S. history, as the beating heart of the country’s 19th-century slave-powered expansion. The city has become a case study of what happens when slavery scholarship collides with public memory.

Perhaps the ultimate case study: It’s hard to think of an American metropolis that presents more challenges to reconciling those tensions than “the city that care forgot,” a tourism-dependent destination that traffics as much in historical fantasy as in history.

At least, that’s how it seemed one warm, cloudless Sunday morning not too long ago, as a Dartmouth College historian, Rashauna Johnson, guided me on a tour of her native city’s hidden slave landmarks. For Johnson, 34, Landrieu’s speech was “shocking,” partly because you don’t expect a mayor to “sound almost like a cutting-edge historian,” but also because he acknowledged that slavery happened in the city at all. That legacy never came up during her education at one of the city’s finest high schools, says Johnson, who went on to spend years researching the subject for a book she published in 2016, Slavery’s Metropolis: Unfree Labor in New Orleans During the Age of Revolutions (Cambridge University Press).

Her study sprang from a basic question: Where were the city’s enslaved people?

“If you just step back for a second, the whole city is a memorial to slavery.”

“I still marvel at this massive disconnect between how central it is — and how historians and certain people know how central and how important this institution was here — and how absent it is from the present landscape,” says Johnson, who is herself a descendant of slaves from rural Louisiana. “It speaks to just how much work has to go into completely erasing the history of something that was once common knowledge.”

The present landscape, on this particular morn-
Rashauna Johnson stands outside Lafitte's Blacksmith Shop, a bar symbolically connected to multiple histories of slavery.
ing, feels like an outdoor fraternity party set in a historical theme park. Our walk coincides with the final day of a 23-stage jazz-and-food showcase called the French Quarter Festival. The streets of the Vieux Carré, the oldest part of the city, smell of fried dough, spilled beer, and weed. Beads hang from trees. Vendors hawk jazz-themed paintings. Revelers carry green plastic cocktail cups shaped like grenades.

It’s a safe bet most of them are not here to meditate on human bondage. But Johnson leads me to the spot they would probably visit if they did want to learn about slavery in New Orleans. It’s a circular, stone-paved space tucked away in a corner of Louis Armstrong Park just beyond the French Quarter, with a scuffed, brown historical marker that draws a steady stream of pilgrims. This is the area today recognized as Congo Square. In the antebellum period, it was one of the only places in the country where slaves could drum and dance on Sundays. Scholars trace the roots of jazz to the pulsing circles of slave dancers that could comprise as many as 500 or 600 people.

Johnson speaks of Congo Square with a mix of respect and ruefulness. “At the risk of seeming flippanant,” she writes in Slavery’s Metropolis, “only in New Orleans could the paradigmatic site of slavery be a party.” Her point is that an exclusive focus on what enslaved people accomplished in their scant leisure moments presents a warped picture of how slavery functioned. “The way that the systematic exploitation of enslaved people and their labor was foundational to the creation and growth of the city — that story has to be told alongside the powerful story that’s being told at Congo Square.”

Though the streetscape hasn’t caught up, that story has come to occupy an increasingly prominent place in history books. Early New Orleans had long been known for its large community of free black people. But Johnson entered her profession as a series of major studies focused fresh attention on the history of slavery in the city and neighboring areas, connecting that story to national and trans-Atlantic processes of cultural, economic, and political development.

In Slave Country (Harvard University Press, 2005), Adam Rothman traced how decades of post-Revolutionary conquest, migration, and diplomacy transformed the areas that would become Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama into major suppliers of slave-grown sugar and cotton. In Soul By Soul (Harvard, 1999), Walter Johnson showed the centrality of the New Orleans slave market to U.S. economic and social life prior to the Civil War, a period when roughly one million slaves were forcibly transported from the upper South to the lower South. In Exchanging Our Country Marks (University of North Carolina Press, 1998), Michael A. Gomez charted the history of Southern slaves’ cultural transition from African to African-American.

Some of the most lauded history books in recent years have examined slavery’s role in the coming of capitalism. Pick up any of those works, and New Orleans emerges as an epicenter of slavery. Here’s how Walter Johnson, in River of Dark Dreams (Harvard, 2013), depicts it from the viewpoint of a Mississippi River traveler in 1850: “Downriver was the great city of New Orleans: the commercial emporium of the Midwest, the principal channel through which Southern cotton flowed to the global economy and foreign capital came into the United States, the largest slave market in North America, and the central artery of the continent’s white overseers’ flirtation with the perverse attractions of global racial domination.”

Rashauna Johnson’s work builds on this body of literature in a way that reveals just how difficult it could be for modern residents to fully absorb and commemorate their city’s complex slave history. To illustrate that complexity, she takes me to a bar.

When tourists look at the piano bar and lounge known as Lafitte’s Blacksmith Shop, they see a quaint Bourbon Street relic. The dilapidated brick building, said to be built in the early 18th century, advertises itself as perhaps “the oldest structure used as a bar in the United States.” Its sign notes that the brothers Lafitte, Jean and Pierre, allegedly used it as a smuggling base between 1772 and 1791. Today the bar is known for a bourbon-and-Everclear mixture called “purple voodoo.” You feel almost drunk just looking at its unevenly sloped roof, which seems on the verge of collapse.

When Johnson sits down at one of the inked-up wooden tables — “Kristina & Becky’s YOLO CRUISE,” reads one of its many inscriptions — what she sees is a place symbolically connected to multiple histories of slavery. One of those histories is about trading. The Lafittes were pirates who engaged in a variety of commerce, including the traffic in slaves, so slaves probably circulated in places like this as goods. The other history is about booz-

**“At the risk of seeming flippanant, only in New Orleans could the paradigmatic site of slavery be a party.”**
ing. Formal and informal drinking spots filled early New Orleans. Though it exposed them to danger, slaves managed to patronize these “places of riot and intoxication,” as Johnson shows in *Slavery’s Metropolis*.

The tavern story is one piece of Johnson’s broader effort to map an alternative geography of New Orleans. She developed her project in the shadow of Hurricane Katrina. What struck her then was the gap between the mythical image people had of New Orleans — fun, fluid, racially transgressive — and their sudden discovery of its abiding poverty. “I wanted to look deeper into the city’s history, and to think about the ways that that kind of pervasive material inequality ... was baked into and built into a society based on slavery,” Johnson says. “It would be impossible to understand what we saw in 2005 or what we see in the present without really thinking about this longer history.”

Slavery scholars often complain about the archives, in part because their subjects usually did not leave behind enough records to trace their lives. But when Johnson, who was a graduate student at New York University, began her research in 2006, she found thousands upon thousands of documents attesting to slavery’s importance in New Orleans. One of the first records she discovered, for example, detailed the minute tasks enslaved people performed on public chain gangs, like paving streets and cleaning up stalls in the market. Johnson’s growing awareness of slaves’ ubiquity provoked a new question: If enslaved laborers were circulating all over the city, how did the city’s elite maintain social control in a place that even then was known for disorder?

*Slavery’s Metropolis* argues that the emergence of New Orleans as a modern city hinged on this contested process of manipulating and harnessing slave labor. The book zooms in on a transformative period in the city’s ascent from colonial backwater to emerging powerhouse. These were the years between the start of the Haitian Revolution in 1791, whose aftermath drove thousands of free people of color and slaves to the city, and the close of the War of 1812, which climaxed in 1815 with Andrew Jackson’s defeat of the British in the Battle of New Orleans. Each chapter of her “spatial history” focuses on a place or on circuits of migration. In one, for example, she looks at the management of slaves in the jail. In another, she follows the trajectories that took people of African descent from Saint-Domingue (later Haiti) to Cuba to Louisiana, focusing on how people became enslaved in New Orleans.

Johnson’s larger aim is to expand our notion of how slavery worked. We are used to thinking about the system in terms of remote plantations that restricted mobility. That’s captured in the movie 12 Years a Slave, when Solomon Northup arrives at a plantation that feels like a hermetically sealed universe unto itself. But the New Orleans of *Slavery’s Metropolis* lacked such stark boundaries: slaves here, free people there. Slave circulation was not only permitted, it was required to build the city’s infrastructure. Slaves worked as couriers, peddlers, newspaper deliverers. And they had their own ideas about where they should be (sneaking into parties, say).

So how do you go about memorializing all of that?

“If you just step back for a second, the whole city is a memorial to slavery,” says Walter Johnson, a Harvard University historian. “The levee is a slave-built levee. The entire economic development of the city was premised upon slavery. All the buildings were built by enslaved people or free people of color.”

He adds, “You could memorialize the city of New Orleans with a million markers of which enslaved people lived there, which enslaved people worked there, which enslaved people built this.”

Something in that spirit does exist in Louisiana. In 2014 a retired New Orleans trial lawyer and real-estate magnate turned a former indigo and sugar plantation into what has been promoted as America’s first museum focused wholly on slavery. Across the South, historic plantation homes are major destinations for weddings and other tourism. But visitors to this museum, Whitney Plantation, experience the flip side of that sanitized charm: the plantation as slave labor camp. Exhibits include a granite memorial to 107,000 enslaved people listed in the “Louisiana Slave Database” built by the historian Gwendolyn Midlo Hall. Another memorial there honors what Adam Rothman, a historian at Georgetown University, labels “the largest slave rebellion in the history of the United States”: a brutally defeated 1811 uprising in the sugar areas above New Orleans. The memorial displays dozens of brown ceramic

“I still marvel at this massive disconnect between how central it is ... and how absent it is from the present landscape.”
heads mounted on steel stakes.

When I visited Whitney Plantation, a wall inside the museum was plastered with colorful notes left by visitors attesting to how the experience had affected them. A blue note read simply, “WOKE.”

But Whitney Plantation is in a rural area on the west bank of the Mississippi, an hour’s bus ride from New Orleans. The city itself lacks a permanent museum exhibit on the history of slavery. Back in the jazz-happy French Quarter, Rashanna Johnson could only imagine the impact of New Orleans opening a Whitney-like destination. “The rural plantation that’s somewhere else spatially and somewhere else temporally can be a little bit easier to digest,” she says. “Having it right here does a different thing in terms of forcing us to think about the ways that that institution could function at the heart of what feels like a deeply fluid, heterogeneous society.”

The city has made some progress. In 2015, after mostly avoiding the subject for decades, the Historic New Orleans Collection, a museum and research center, presented an exhibit called “Purchased Lives: New Orleans and the Domestic Slave Trade, 1808-1865.” The show spotlighted the stories of families and communities torn apart by one of history’s biggest forced migrations. It also looked at the many industries, including health care, insurance, and banking, “whose operations intersected with and were in large part supported by the trade,” according to Erin M. Greenwald, the exhibit’s curator.

Still, New Orleans lags behind other former centers of the domestic slave trade in commemorating that history, as Greenwald noted last year in a Times-Picayune op-ed co-written with Joshua D. Rothman, a historian at the University of Alabama. Natchez, Miss., has a memorial and signs dedicated to the trade. Richmond, Va., has a walking trail that explains the pre-eminent role the city played as an exporter of slaves to the Deep South. “It’s only since Katrina that the city and the tourism industry have begun to understand that the public is actually seeking a much more complicated narrative” than the celebratory ode to New Orleans’s uniqueness, Greenwald says. Plans are in the works to put up at least eight slave-trade markers by the end of 2018.

As Johnson and I wind down our walk, we discover one of the new signs. The placard sits beneath a canopy of leaves on Esplanade Avenue, near an elegant gray building with a wrought-iron balcony. It marks the former site of a slave pen where Solomon Northup, a free black man from upstate New York, was sold into slavery in 1841.

A tourist comes up behind us, hoping to have a look at the sign.

“Did you want to take a picture?” I say to the woman, offering to move out of the way.

“No,” the woman says. “I saw the movie.”

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An Antidote for American Amnesia

Tiya Miles maps forgotten corners of slave history

By MARC PARRY

Tiya Miles at Detroit’s Second Baptist Church, whose members and facilities played an important role in sheltering runaway slaves during the Underground Railroad.
This is where the facts of history meet the life of memory. Inside Second Baptist Church, home of Detroit's oldest black congregation, a polo-shirted tour guide leads a small group of visitors on a journey to the Underground Railroad. She sings a spiritual, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," as the tour descends into a cold basement lecture room decorated with historical maps. The story she shares there is as uplifting as the 2,800-pipe organ upstairs. It's the story of how a city's residents, some of them from this church, collaborated across the color line to shelter fugitive slaves and get them to freedom in Canada. Fugitives who had been enslaved someplace else.

And the story is true. But there's another story about slavery in Detroit. Chasing it has become a chief pursuit of one of the visitors touring Second Baptist this Wednesday morning. Tiya Miles is a University of Michigan historian with glasses, long locks, and a voice so quiet it sometimes verges on inaudible. Her demeanor can be misleading. The MacArthur "genius" grant winner and part-time novelist has made a career of doggedly challenging America's slavery amnesia. "A gentle hammer," one friend calls her.

In her best-known book, *Ties That Bind* (University of California Press, 2005), Miles followed the trajectory of one black and Indian family to examine the often tragic relationship between two groups whose land and labor built the United States. She told the story of how the Cherokee Indians came to possess 4,000 black slaves by the eve of the Civil War, a history that haunts contemporary struggles over the citizenship rights of those slaves' descendants in the Oklahoma tribal nation.

But six years ago, chasing at celebratory narratives like the one in this church, Miles decided to dig deeper into Detroit's past. She discovered that Detroiters held hundreds of people in bondage between the mid-1700s and the early 1800s. The city's slave system persisted under three colonial regimes, first the French, then the British, and then, thanks to legal loopholes, the American. It implicated storied families whose wealth financed the University of Michigan and whose names continue to grace the region's landscape.

That "alternative origin story," told in full for the first time in Miles's new book, *The Dawn of Detroit* (The New Press), will be news to many of the city's residents. "People aren't going to want to hear and think about the fact that we were a city built in part around slavery," says Roy E. Finkenbine, a historian at the University of Detroit Mercy.

If anyone can make them come to terms with that, it's Miles. At a time of polarized battles over who owns history, she may be one of her profession's most effective diplomats. Her career as a self-described "public historian" is a window onto the expanding reach of slavery scholarship. Her efforts to resurrect the voices of forgotten slaves have been felt far beyond academe, in locations as remote as the Klan-pocketed hills of northern Georgia. But before she began to help those communities face their myths, she first confronted the ones in her own family.

Nor too long ago, Miles, 47, sat down to tell that story over lunch in the bustling cafeteria of the National Museum of African American History and Culture. She'd come to the Smithsonian's newest museum to review it for an academic journal and to research a fledgling book project. Her mood was exuberant. Of all the highlights — Nat Turner's Bible, Harriet Tubman's shawl — what especially moved her was a little girl who shouted with joy upon seeing a photo of Sojourner Truth, an abolitionist and women's-rights activist. "We spend so much time worrying about, wondering about whether or not our work is relevant to people's lives today," Miles says. "This museum says yes. It wouldn't exist without that scholarship. Generations of that scholarship."

With all the recent discussion of slavery's legacy, from Georgetown University to Jack Daniel's whiskey, it's easy to forget how much academic spadework paved the way for this cultural moment. As late as the mid-1950s, mainstream historians portrayed black people as inferior and slavery as a benign institution needed to civilize them. Scholars saw slavery as an unprofitable social system that "might well have died out peacefully had the Civil War not intervened," as historian Eric Foner has described that earlier view.

The Civil Rights era propelled historians to re-examine the origins of America's racial problems. By the 1970s, a surge of revisionist slavery scholarship had pushed the old ideas aside and replaced them with a fresh sense of slaves as historical actors who shaped their fate and culture. According to another historian, Peter Kolchin, subsequent scholars broadened that story — geographically, chronologically, demographically.

That, says Miles, allowed it to reach people who had imagined that they were living in places disconnected from slavery. Places like Texas. Or the North. Or the Cherokee Nation. "It's created this map that doesn't end of where slavery was practiced and where it was experienced," she says.

Growing up in Cincinnati, Ohio, Miles had nothing like this museum from which to learn African-American history. What she had, at first, were the stories that her grandmother, Alice Banks, would tell her while working in her vegetable garden. She remembers feeling Banks's sadness as she described the moment her family lost their beloved land in Mississippi. As Banks told it, some white men got her father to sign a paper that stripped them of the property. Seeking a better life, Banks eventually brought her five kids north
during the Great Migration.

When Miles was in junior high, her mom saw an ad in the local newspaper for “A Better Chance,” an organization that helps place minority kids in elite schools. Miles applied, and it transformed her life. Instead of staying in Cincinnati and becoming a teacher there, like her father, she went to Middlesex, a private boarding school in Massachusetts, and then on to Harvard University. This was 1988, a time when Harvard’s department of Afro-American studies remained a tiny, struggling unit. Still, Miles loved it. After Middlesex, where black history had been limited to a brief slavery lesson, Harvard’s classes were “manna for the soul.”

What gripped Miles the most was reading narratives of former slaves, like Frederick Douglass. She found the stories so distressing that she would call up her grandmother in tears. How had their ancestors survived this? The stories that Banks shared in response to such questions would later fuel Miles’s fascination with the uses of history. Banks soothed her granddaughter by recalling her own father, who, she said, had been enslaved. She said he was half Indian. She spoke as if that ancestry gave him superpowers: fortitude, longevity, the eyesight of a hawk. Her message: We were strong. We survived. And (this was implicit) our Indian ancestry was partly why.

Those stories weren’t unique. Many African-Americans have viewed Indian descent as a point of pride and Indian lands as safe havens. That’s conveyed in tales of Native Americans sheltering runaway slaves. It’s evident in stories of freely chosen black and Native marriages. You hear it in the fiction of Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins, the blues of Bessie Smith, the essays of Ralph Ellison. And there is some truth to the stories of black and Indian alliance. But there’s also a much uglier reality, one that Miles discovered as a graduate student at the University of Minnesota.

By this time, Miles had become passionate about the struggles of contemporary Indians, not just the mythical-sounding ones who populated her grandmother’s stories. At Harvard, she had met the man who would become her husband, Joseph P. Gone, a citizen of the Gros Ventre tribal nation of Montana (and today a psychologist at the University of Michigan). She had volunteered for a women’s shelter at the Yankton Sioux reservation, in South Dakota. She had taught English at a college on the Fort Belknap reservation, in Montana.

Now, as a budding academic in Minnesota’s American-studies program, she wanted to study and write about the experiences of both black and Indian people. But she soon found out that Indians hadn’t just sheltered fugitive black slaves. They had also owned them. If her family really did have Indian ancestry, it was much more likely to have resulted from a master-slave relationship than a free one.

Miles first encountered that story of Indian slaveholding in James Merrell’s research on a Carolina tribe, the Catawbas, who had both intermarried with black people and also held black slaves. Her shock was compounded by something Merrell revealed in a visit to her Native history seminar. When Miles asked what modern Catawbas thought of his work, he said tribal council members had endorsed it but asked him to “leave out or scoot to the side the part about the black people,” Miles recalls. “First there’s slavery, and now there’s denial. I was really angry. I almost couldn’t believe it. It was nothing like my grandmother ever told me.”

Miles went on a hunt for other historical possibilities. When she came across a footnote alluding to what was allegedly the first Cherokee-black marriage, she was thrilled. This 19th-century union between Shoe Boots, a Cherokee war hero, and Doll, a black woman, seemed to have the makings of the positive story she hoped to tell. A story, perhaps, of two people who chose each other and fought together against slavery and colonialism.

She quickly hit a wall. In planning her first real research trip, to the Georgia state archives, she told an archivist that she was seeking links between black and Native people in the Southeast, particularly women. He laughed at her. “Black women weren’t important enough, and Native women weren’t important enough, to be written about alone,” he said. “Let alone you’re trying to put them together.”

Miles persisted, and soon unearthed a document that unlocked her project. The story that she ended up telling in her first book, Ties That Bind, was rooted in a period of epic change for the Cherokee people. After the Revolutionary War, Miles writes, the administration of President Washington aspired to “civilize” rather than destroy the Indians whose lands now fell within America’s

“People aren’t going to want to hear and think about the fact that we were a city built in part around slavery.”
borders. Native people were to coexist with whites by adopting their ideas about farming and private property. In that context, a segment of Cherokee society embraced chattel slavery, chiefly in northern Georgia and southern Tennessee. "The process of becoming more civilized in the eyes of white federal officials depended on Indians adopting practices of American barbarity, namely, slavery and racism," Miles writes.

Despite the Cherokees’ efforts to remake themselves — their constitution, their newspaper, their embrace of missionaries — the government eventually decided to evict them. That 1838–39 forced march to what is now Oklahoma, which left some 4,000 Cherokees dead, is famously known as the Trail of Tears. What’s less well known is that the expelled Natives took their black slaves with them.

That history is not unique to Cherokees. Each of what used to be called the “Five Civilized Tribes” — Creeks, Choctaws, Cherokees, Chickasaws, and Seminoles — adopted racial slavery. According to Claudio Saunt, a historian at the University of Georgia, some of their slaves “toiled on sprawling plantations while their masters relaxed on distant verandas.” But many others worked next to their masters. Slaves “inevitably became family, marrying Indians and fathering or bearing their children,” writes Saunt, author of a 2005 book about an Afro-Creek family, Black, White, and Indian (Oxford University Press). “Interrmarriage blurred racial boundaries and sometimes made it difficult to separate family slaves from family members.”

The story of Shoe Boots and Doll turned out to be a relationship along similar lines, as Miles learned when she found that crucial document: a petition from Shoe Boots for the freedom of his children. The petition made clear that his link to Doll was not the freely chosen, fight-the-power union that Miles had initially envisioned. She was his slave, and he referred to her disparagingly. But the document also revealed something else: a real family. Shoe Boots wanted the kids that Doll had borne him to become full Cherokee citizens.

The award-winning book that Miles wrote about their relationship, Ties That Bind, made two broad arguments. The first was to push back against the widely held notion that Cherokees had practiced a far more benevolent slavery than whites. Miles showed that Cherokee slavery had been a cruel system at the core of tribal wealth and governance. Her writing humanized the victims of that system, especially Doll.

This female slave led so marginalized a life that record keepers could scarcely bother to record it. But Miles tried to describe Doll’s interior world regardless, including details as intimate as how she might have felt about bearing children into slavery. She managed that by patching together sources like slave narratives left by other women, combined with fictional renderings of bondage, such as the portrayal of slave motherhood in Toni Morrison’s Beloved. “She delves into the emotional side of these people’s lives in a way the vast majority of historians wouldn’t dare,” says Saunt.

The second argument that Miles put forward was that, despite the cruelty of the Cherokees’ slave system, a more flexible situation existed on the ground. Ties of kinship could supersede categories of race. They could even be a loophole out of slavery.

The corollary was unspoken: Consider thinking that way now. Ties That Bind appeared amid a long-running conflict over the political status of descendants of the tribe’s former slaves, known as Cherokee freedmen. This fight would lead to a 2007 vote in which the Cherokee Nation approved a constitutional amendment limiting citizenship as Cherokee freedmen. This fight would lead to a 2007 vote in which the Cherokee Nation approved a constitutional amendment limiting citizenship to Indians “by blood,” blocking roughly 2,800 freedmen and freedwomen descendants of membership. Miles’s narrative heartened some slave descendants, who interpreted her research as a positive story about a Cherokee man who had a black wife and freed his kids.

Cherokee scholars and officials, meanwhile, criticized Miles’s findings as marginal to their history. They saw her as trying to steal the Cherokees’ spotlight by turning the Trail of Tears into a “black” story. One prominent Indian elder from a Great Plains tribe went further. After she heard Miles speak prior to the publication of Ties That Bind, she implored her, “Don’t write your book; it will destroy us.”

Attitudes to that past are changing, though, in part because of where Miles took her work next: the public realm of historical tourism destinations that shape how millions of Americans see their history.

In 2002 a pair of sociologists published an important study called Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums (Smithsonian Books). The authors, Jennifer
L. Eichstedt and Stephen A. Small, had investigated more than 100 public and private plantation museums across the South, taking tours and counting how many times the docents mentioned enslaved people. They found in many cases that tour guides would say little about slavery, if they mentioned it at all. The sociologists labeled that neglect “symbolic annihilation.”

Eichstedt and Small’s work would become a model for Miles as she wrestled with a similar case of slave erasure on a plantation in northwest Georgia. She discovered the site in the late 1990s while trying to locate Shoe Boots’s old farm. It turned out that place no longer existed. Nearby, though, Miles found an imposing, white-columned brick home connected to the broader story of Cherokee slavery. This was known as the Chief Vann House State Historic Site. In the early 19th century, the land had been a plantation, Diamond Hill, set up by a wealthy Cherokee entrepreneur and political leader, James Vann, whose family possessed 115 of the 583 slaves held by Cherokees at that time.

In this mostly white corner of Georgia, state officials and academics had come to showcase the site as a “grand estate in the antebellum Southern style,” as Miles puts it, with a bit of an “Indian twist.” What motivated her to develop a project about the plantation — which led to her second book, *The House on Diamond Hill* (University of North Carolina Press, 2010) — was a film she saw on one of her visits. The movie ended with a group of mostly black children, probably from Atlanta, running out of a school bus up to the steps of the house. A voice-over said, *If you don’t know your history, you don’t know where you’re going.* Miles was stunned. Here was a place telling black kids to learn their past. Yet officials had excised discussion of slaves who had enabled the luxury of the site.

Miles decided to tell that story herself. How she went about it may be instructive to scholars who hope to get their ideas heard across borders of race and class. She didn’t browbeat the Vann House staff about the lack of black narratives. Instead, the next time she visited, she took a careful look at how people communicated there. She noticed that they enjoyed telling stories through historical booklets available at the gift shop. And so Miles and her Michigan students delved into the archives to create their own booklet about black life at the plantation. She printed 200 copies and shipped them to the museum as a gift just before its most popular annual event, the “Christmas by Candlelight” celebration. Then she held her breath.

Within two weeks, the house’s director emailed Miles to say copies were running out and he wanted to print more. The booklet prompted Julia Autry, then the site’s interpretive ranger, to reread historical records for stories of slaves linked to the site. Autry was a Georgia native, one of whose own ancestors had held close to 80 slaves. But she had grown up not giving the matter much thought. Nudged by Miles, she began to see not just slaves, but people. Michael. Pleasant. Patience. She shared their stories in a new display that opened in a cabin on the property. “In some ways, I fought so hard to get the slave exhibit because that is the...
only reparation I can offer,” Autry says. “I don’t know who my family owned. I don’t know where their descendants are today. But it’s my way of saying I’m sorry.”

If this comes off like a fairy tale, there’s a darker aspect to the story. The Vann House sits on a hilltop in the isolated foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The Ku Klux Klan has been known to hold rallies in a town not too far away. As Miles’s Vann House ties deepened, she began to learn that staffers there had been shielding her from certain white people in the community, like a local college professor known for spouting his anti-black views. They also didn’t want her to travel by herself. And when the slavery exhibit first went up, they worried that someone might try to burn it down.

That didn’t happen. But the exhibit, like the ones at many other plantations, remains problematic. Driven by scholarship, by better-informed tourists, and by a National Park Service report that encouraged the telling of more complicated stories, historical sites around the country are paying more attention to slave history. But many sites segregate those exhibits in facilities beyond paying more attention to slave history. But many sites segregate those exhibits in facilities beyond the main houses, says Derek H. Alderman, a geographer of public memory at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. Another form of inequality is emotional. Many plantations tell stories that evoke a connection to the master class, Alderman says. They often fail to do so for the slaves, whose history gets relegated to dry facts.

The struggle over slavery’s memory has been almost as intense as the struggle over slavery itself.” That sentence appeared some two decades ago in the introduction to a collection of ex-slave interviews co-edited by Ira Berlin, a dean of American slavery scholarship. The struggle it describes, still so far from finished, is not limited to the South. That’s the basic lesson of Miles’s new book about Detroit.

The history Detroiters generally know is the narrative of the Underground Railroad during the decades immediately preceding the Civil War. As that story goes, slavery happened below the Mason-Dixon line. Detroiters were on the right side of history — the good guys whose city, code-named “Midnight,” had been the final stop before fugitive slaves crossed the Detroit River to freedom in Canada. The region celebrates that heritage today in a pair of bronze statues that occupy opposite banks of that river, one in Detroit’s Hart Plaza, the other in Windsor, Ontario.

The excitement it evokes is evident during Miles’s tour of Second Baptist, whose members and facilities played an important role in helping runaway slaves. A student from University of Detroit Mercy says she didn’t know the Underground Railroad was here until the Hart Plaza statue was installed to commemorate the city’s tricentennial, in 2001. “I was just like — great! — we got a part of the history in our city. And I got the opportunity to see it.”

What’s less well known is that the streets this student may have driven through to get here, even the garage she probably parked in, are named for people who committed, as Miles puts it, “crimes against humanity.” The slave-owning part of the city’s history doesn’t fit neatly on a plaque. Wrapping your head around it means going all the way back to 1701, when Antoine Laumet de La Mothe Cadillac, a French explorer, established the settlement originally known as Fort Pontchartrain du Detroit.

Cadillac aimed to encourage Indians to settle nearby as trading partners so France could strengthen its influence over the booming Great Lakes fur business. As Detroit expanded, Miles writes, it needed workers to do things like grow food, handle furs, and maintain homes, so that trade extended to slaves: captive Indians offered by other Indians in exchange for manufactured goods. After war with the British cost France its North American territory, slavery became an increasingly biracial system. Indians would go down to a place like Kentucky, capture black people, and bring them back to Detroit.

The Brits, too, soon lost Detroit, but slavery didn’t end then, either. For example, Detroit’s richest person in the late 1790s was a Scots-Irish merchant, William Macomb, who owned at least 26 black slaves. His wealth passed to his wife and sons, later among the University of Michigan’s first trustees, according to a recent opinion piece that Miles published in The New York Times. Only in 1835, with the adoption of Michigan’s first constitution, was slavery completely squelched.

When Miles began trying to untangle that story, she says, it was nothing more than a blip in the history books. Like her work on the Vann House, the project sprang from a sense that the community’s public narratives were incomplete. She felt the Underground Railroad fanfare did a disservice to the complicated story of what had actually happened. But her attitude shifted over time. Studying records, taking tours, meeting people, she rethought her views on the public’s attachment to the Underground Railroad. She began to appreciate how that story was a source of identity and community building. She didn’t want to take that away. Rather than framing her book in opposition, she came to see both stories as part of a larger whole.

And, slowly, those stories may be starting to merge. Back in the pews of Second Baptist, as the tour guide plunges into a thrilling 1830s tale of fugitive slaves who escaped to Canada, she suddenly pauses.

“Did you know that there were slaves here in Detroit at that time?”
The Scholars Behind the Quest for Reparations

By MARC PARRY

HILARY BECKLES wants his scholarship to sting. His audience: students and scholars who have assembled here at the University of the West Indies this morning to listen to the historian/administrator/diplomat lecture at a symposium on reparations for slavery. If his talk succeeds, they’ll leave this gilded ballroom outraged — and inspired to join his university’s fight.

Mr. Beckles has emerged as the chief spokesman of a global movement for racial justice. In 2013, heads of state from the 15-nation Caribbean Community, a regional group made up mostly of former British colonies, united to seek reparations for slavery and native genocide from Britain and other European powers. Their collective push — a mix of symbolic demands, like an apology, and financial ones, like debt forgiveness — placed the power of governments, not just the activism of individuals, behind the centuries-old struggle for reparations.

To head the commission carrying out that work,
the politicians appointed Mr. Beckles, a Barbados-born, British-educated historian of slavery who leads the University of the West Indies.

Mr. Beckles’s speech at the reparations symposium boils down to a basic argument: The British got rich by exploiting the Africans they imported to work as slaves on Caribbean sugar plantations. The descendants of those laborers are impoverished today because of structural inequalities inherited from slavery. And British politicians have consistently brushed aside calls to remedy this mess. Their anti-reparations policy began when the slaves were emancipated, in the 1830s, continued when the colonies emerged as independent nations, in the 1960s and ’70s, and endures to this day.

“The persistence of the arrogance and the hatred: And I want you to feel that those postures are embedded in an underlying philosophy that says, ‘Who are you? What are you? We do not apologize to lesser people,’” Mr. Beckles says.

By analogy, he says, think about when you want to cook some curry goat, and you ask a butcher to kill your animal. “You don’t apologize to the goat,” he says. “There is a perception, then, that we are the children of chattel. … We were property. We had no humanity. We were defined in the law for 400 years as real estate. So we are the descendants of property. You do not apologize to your property.”

Mr. Beckles’s response? Ratchet up the pressure.

Today’s symposium is part of a series of events held to mark a milestone in the movement: the establishment of an academic center, based at the University of the West Indies, devoted to reparations research. The center will supply arguments to politicians, narratives to the media, and a publishing platform to scholars. A think tank for the cause.

Whether or not that cause succeeds — and the obstacles are immense — this scene in Jamaica may be a harbinger of what’s to come in the United States, where the reparations movement is also newly energized. Slavery scholarship has already contributed to a national reckoning with America’s original sin on campuses, in cities, and at corporations.

What Mr. Beckles is doing represents the next step. It’s the marshaling of scholarship for a political aim: payback.

Slavery scholars, like the system they study, are a trans-Atlantic network. To see how new research is spurring the work of reparations advocates like Mr. Beckles, one of the best places to look is a campus 5,000 miles from here, University College London.

It was a researcher there, an investment banker turned historian named Nick Draper, who identified a slavery archive so significant that he and his colleagues have spent more than a decade picking it apart and sharing it with the world. Their goal is a form of narrative reparations: to repair British history by reinscribing the legacy of slavery into the consciousness of a country that prefers to remember its leading role in abolitionism.

The British got rich by exploiting the Africans they imported to work as slaves on Caribbean sugar plantations. The descendants of those laborers are impoverished today because of structural inequalities inherited from slavery.

When Americans think of slavery, they tend to picture cotton fields in antebellum Mississippi. But long before that time, European colonists had transformed Caribbean islands into capitalist machines producing slave-grown sugar for an international market. Between 1713 and 1822, the British West Indies carried on more British trade than all of North America, according to the historian David Brion Davis. The Caribbean, he writes, “became the true economic center of the New World.”

Britain abolished its slave trade in 1807. But it wasn’t until the 1830s that the 760,000 enslaved people in its colonies, most of them living in the Caribbean, were liberated. Emancipation happened through a deal negotiated among slave owners, abolitionists, and the British government. Under this 1833 settlement, the government agreed to pay 20 million pounds to about 45,000 slave owners around the world as compensation for the loss of their “property.” The deal also compelled the previously enslaved people to pay for their liberty with four to six years of additional free labor for their former masters. The ex-slaves themselves got nothing.
“It was beyond most people’s intellectual and moral compass to think about compensating the enslaved people,” Mr. Draper says.

Scholars debate how best to translate the payouts into modern terms. One way to think about it: The 20 million pounds amounted to about 6 percent of Britain’s gross national income in 1831, Mr. Draper says. The same percentage of Britain’s contemporary economy would equate to 76 billion pounds, or about $100 billion.

Here’s why this resonates so forcefully for reparations activists. To obtain their shares of the 20 million pounds, slave owners filed claim forms. The records of that compensation process, Mr. Draper discovered, were sitting in Britain’s National Archives. Thanks to a database built by Mr. Draper and his colleagues, the documents are now easily searchable online: who got paid, how much, where.

The records show, for example, that an ancestor of David Cameron, Britain’s former prime minister, received some of the money. So did the families of the authors Graham Greene and George Orwell.

Mr. Draper isn’t trying to make targets of contemporary descendants. He uses the records as a tool for investigating larger questions about how much of a role slave money played in the formation of modern Britain. He calculates that 15 to 20 percent of the richest Britains who died in the 19th century owed their wealth to slavery. He and his colleagues have compiled hundreds of case studies of what happened to that money — the paintings it bought, the buildings it built, the businesses it supported.

Mr. Draper, director of the Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slave-ownership, wants to make it difficult for people to write British history without taking that slave entanglement into account.

Mr. Beckles has a different agenda. He calls the 1830s abolition settlement, with its failure to compensate the former slaves, “the greatest crime of all committed by the British state against the African people.” And he wants the money back.

Earlier this year, Mr. Beckles sat down to discuss that reparations campaign in a conference room at Harvard University’s Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. He was in town to participate in a symposium on universities and slavery. As it happened, the speaker scheduled to keynote that event was the closest U.S. analogue to a Beckles-like figure: Ta-Nehisi Coates.

Mr. Coates, 42, emerged as one of America’s most famous writers on race after “The Case for Reparations,” his 16,000-word plea for “an airing of family secrets, a settling with old ghosts,” was published in The Atlantic three years ago. His essay reframed U.S. history as a centuries-long process of extracting wealth from black people to benefit others, a systemic plunder that persisted long after slavery ended. It took the reparations conversation into the mainstream of American life.

Mr. Beckles, 62, appraises the Coates phenomenon with a mixture of admiration and gentle condescension. The two have shared a stage; Mr. Beckles says he gave Mr. Coates a copy of his own book about reparations, Britain’s Black Debt (University of the West Indies Press, 2013). “I really felt that he was a young man who ought to be encouraged,” Mr. Beckles says. “I thought it would be very useful for him to understand how to do the historical research, and how to provide detailed scholarly analysis of this subject.”

Mr. Beckles’s own reparations campaign originated with a phone call. The United Nations was preparing to convene its first global conference on race and racism. The 2001 summit, in South Africa, would be an opportunity to reckon with slavery and colonialism on the world stage. Mia Mottley, education minister of Barbados at the time, was calling to ask if he would lead their country’s delegation.

Mr. Beckles headed to South Africa shaped by his personal experience with slavery’s legacy. Born in 1955, he was raised in a plantation village where residents labored for sugar planters “who owned everything of worth around us,” he has written. Today, Barbados promotes its golden-sand beaches as “paradise on earth.” Historically, though, this easternmost Caribbean country was the first New World society in which Africans became a majority of the population as the entire economy revolved around large-scale enslavement.

He descends from slaves who worked on a plantation owned by ancestors of Benedict Cumberbatch, the British actor who played a Louisiana planter in the movie 12 Years a Slave, according to a report in The Guardian. When Mr. Beckles was growing up, his great-grandmother spoke openly about their slave ancestry. “She would say that if her enslaved grandparents were to return, they would fit right in,” Mr. Beckles writes. “Little had changed in over 150 years.”

Mr. Beckles went to the U.N. summit to hold the New scholarship focuses on the role that slavery played in the development of American capitalism.
former colonial powers accountable for that past. What he saw at the meeting disgusted him. The United States objected to any talk of reparations, almost scuttling the conference. European diplomats, too, dodged responsibility. Yes, they maintained, colonial slavery should have been a crime. But it was legal at the time.

Mr. Beckles responded with an international campaign of lectures, and, eventually, a book, *Britain’s Black Debt*, which lays out the Caribbean case for reparations. It springs from the argument that the mass enslavement of Africans was criminal when it happened, and Britons knew it. They simply justified it in the interest of nation-building.

The book synthesizes generations of scholarship to sketch the nature of that crime: The role of the British state in nurturing, regulating, and profiting from the slave trade. The links between colonial sugar revenue and Britain’s ascent as the first industrialized nation. The ideological cover provided by the Church of England.

And, crucially, the 20-million-pound payout when it all came crashing down. That compensation for slave owners “should have been paid to the enslaved,” says Mr. Beckles, who credits Mr. Draper’s research with shaping much of his own book. “We have a right to that. We are going to demand it.”

His reasoning: Britain pulled out of the Caribbean without a plan to clean up the rubble left behind from centuries of slavery and colonialism. When Jamaica, for example, became independent, in 1962, 80 percent of its citizens were illiterate, Mr. Beckles says. Caribbean countries had to incur significant debts to modernize.

Forgiveness of those debts is key to a 10-point reparations platform that Caribbean leaders backed in 2014. The fact that politicians in the region now frame their economic agendas partly within the narrative of reparations owes much to the influence of Mr. Beckles.

“He has the ears of the grassroots people in the region,” says Verene A. Shepherd, a Jamaican historian and radio host who directs the Centre for Reparation Research at Mr. Beckles’s university. “People listen to him. They believe in him.”

People in the United States, too, are listening. When Mr. Beckles gave his “curry goat” speech at the recent reparations symposium in Jamaica, the audience included a contingent of visiting American-based historians, legal scholars, and political scientists. Their presence speaks to how the Caribbean momentum has galvanized the U.S. reparations movement — a cause that is also rooted in scholarship, and, increasingly, is taking aim at universities.

The U.S. discussion has a long lineage. How long it is hits home if you visit the National Museum of African American History and Culture, in Washington, where you can read the elaborately scripted case file of an ex-slave, Belinda Royall, who successfully petitioned the Massachusetts legislature for reparations — in 1783.

Most such appeals have not been victorious. “Blacks have never received any group compensation for the crime of slavery imposed upon them by the people and government of the United States,” according to Robert Westley, a legal scholar at Tulane University. The 1990s saw a flurry of failed efforts to change that. After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, which shifted public attention to national security, reparations talk faded.

It tends to resurface amid racial unrest. American race relations are “pretty bad right now,” Mr. Westley says in an interview at the Jamaica event, “and I think this is the reason why there’s a perception, at least, that the issue has come back to the forefront.”

More than a perception, if you listen to Ron Daniels, a political scientist at the City University of New York’s York College. Mr. Daniels, 75, is a civil-rights activist who has spent decades agitating for reparations. In a session after Mr. Westley’s, he rises to offer a rundown of how the American scene has evolved. His bottom line: Discussion of reparations in the United States “has never been hotter in my lifetime.”

The Caribbean push “sent a positive shock wave throughout the world, including the United States,” he says. It led Mr. Daniels and other U.S. activists, several of them scholars based at universities, to establish the National African American Reparations Commission in 2015, with its own 10-point program. Black Lives Matter and related groups have also grafted a reparations agenda onto their broader racial-justice platforms.

And, as Mr. Daniels notes, history departments at U.S. universities are brimming with new scholarship focused on the role that slavery played in the development of American capitalism. Works in this

“I don’t know how you conduct research that shows that your very existence is rooted in a great crime … and you walk away.”
genre have parallels to the new British research that helped Mr. Beckles make his reparations case. For example, Cornell University’s Edward E. Baptist, author of The Half Has Never Been Told (Basic Books, 2014), argues that the expansion of slavery in the 19th century transformed the United States from a “postcolonial disaster” to a “geopolitical and economic superpower.”

“To me, this whole debate is, on one level or another, about reparations,” Mr. Baptist, whose work has generated vocal pushback from some economists, says in an email to The Chronicle. “It is about who profited from slavery, and where white wealth comes from, and what that implies for the future of our society. The history matters to present-day discussions of inequality.”

Mr. Coates’s Atlantic essay introduced a new generation to that history. One contribution of his argument is that it did not hinge on slavery. It focused on housing discrimination: how, from the 1930s to the 1960s, “black people across the country were largely cut out of the legitimate home-mortgage market through means both legal and extralegal.” Similarly, another prominent public intellectual, the legal scholar Michelle Alexander, now demands reparations for the effects of the war on drugs.

William A. Darity Jr., an economist at Duke University, is co-writing a book that will move the discussion beyond why reparations and into the realm of how. His research has examined issues like the potential structure of a reparations program (for example, lump-sum payments to individual African-Americans) and who might be eligible for it (people who could demonstrate that they had at least one ancestor who was enslaved in the United States).

Mr. Darity’s work mirrors developments in Congress. Rep. John Conyers, a Michigan Democrat, has long promoted legislation that would establish a commission to study slavery, its legacy, and reparations. This year he introduced a revised version of that bill, which would both study reparations and propose plans to implement them.

American college leaders will very likely be forced to confront this growing activism and scholarship. The 10-point plan put forward by Mr. Daniels’s reparations commission pledges “to relentlessly pursue local and state governments and private institutions directly engaged with or complicit in these crimes.”

Lately, many universities have established commissions to investigate their historical connections to slavery. These have produced stacks of official reports. These have generally not yielded much beyond symbolic steps to make amends, like memorials, says the historian Ana Lucia Arau-

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B ut is all of this just talk? The Caribbean demands have generated few results to date. European governments have responded tepidly. In 2015, David Cameron traveled to Jamaica, the first British prime minister to make an official visit in 14 years. Addressing slavery in a speech to Jamaica’s Parliament, he told Jamaicans to “move on.”

Some Jamaicans, too, raise doubts about the reparations agenda. The Jamaica Observer, a newspaper in Kingston, the capital, greeted the opening of the research center at the University of the West Indies with a biting editorial that asked “whether all this is not just a grand waste of time and money that can scarcely be afforded by cash-strapped Caribbean countries.” A more practical approach, the newspaper suggested, would be to focus on strengthening existing international programs that the former slave-owning countries of Europe already use to channel aid to the Caribbean.

Even one scholar sympathetic to the Caribbean cause points to some holes in the reparations study at its heart. Britain’s Black Debt neglects important questions raised by skeptics, says a review of the book by Alfred L. Brophy, a law professor at the University of Alabama. These include “why the current generation should pay for the crimes of the past” and “how much current poverty in the Caribbean is related to the legacy of slavery and subsequent racial injustice.”

The new reparations-research center at the University of the West Indies will no doubt try to plug some of those gaps.

But, as a historian, Mr. Beckles also holds a long view. It took all of the 19th century to get rid of slavery, he notes. It took all of the 20th century to gain civil and human rights for the slaves’ descendants. And maybe it will take all of the 21st century to prevail in the final stage of that fight, winning reparations.

“The thing about historical struggles is that it always appears daunting,” he says. “And then, suddenly, everything changes.”
The Long Reach of David Brion Davis

The historian’s influence has been enormous, if not always obvious

By MARC PARRY
In the spring of 1955, a graduate student at Harvard met a visiting professor from Berkeley. Their encounter helped to change how history is written, and slavery’s place in that story.

The student was David Brion Davis, then 28, whose experiences in America’s segregated Army had sensitized him to the country’s racial problems. The professor was Kenneth M. Stampp, then 44, who was about to publish *The Peculiar Institution*, the first major challenge to the racist slavery scholarship that prevailed at the time.

Stampp’s example taught Davis the urgent need to re-examine the then-marginalized subject of slavery. That became his life’s work. It culminates this month when Knopf publishes *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation*, the final book in a trilogy that Davis, who is about to turn 87, began more than 50 years ago.

Davis’s slavery investigation grows from a question: Why, at a certain moment in time, did people begin to recognize a great moral evil to which they had been blind for millennia? To understand the antislavery story, Davis traces a confluence of forces: religious dissent, coming especially with the Quakers; a shift in economic relations, with the Industrial Revolution; political revolutions, which rearticulated the meaning of freedom. In a discipline often constrained by geography and epoch, Davis’s books cross both.

“He’s an undaunted historian,” says Sean Wilentz, a Davis protégé and professor of history at Princeton. Columbia’s Eric Foner says Davis “has probably had more influence than any other single scholar that I can think of on how we think about slavery and its central role in the history of the United States and the Western hemisphere and the whole Atlantic world.”

But as scholars toast his feat of intellectual tenacity—Davis’s book will be feted at events at Harvard and Yale—one of the most important aspects of his influence is the least obvious.

Just as Stampp changed Davis’s life, Davis, who taught at Yale from 1970 to 2001, has shaped the intellectual trajectories of generations of scholars. Very few of his 58 Ph.D. students worked on slavery. That became his life’s work. It culminates this month when Knopf publishes *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation*, the final book in a trilogy that Davis, who is about to turn 87, began more than 50 years ago.

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The mentor they encountered as students was an austere and intimidating figure with a flowing dark beard who looked like the philosopher William James. His praise felt like hitting a grand slam. His criticism could bring tears. His approach to history, rooted in high-stakes moral problems and the power of ideas, helped to inspire a flowering of cultural history and foreshadowed today’s border-spanning “transnational” scholarship. It now animates a younger generation, as Davis’s disciples train their own students in his mold.

“Knowing David Davis was the best thing that ever happened to me in the academy and in my professional career,” says Jackson Lears, a cultural and intellectual historian at Rutgers.

How did this shy man—who founded no school of scholarship, projected little personality in the classroom, and practiced the then-unfashionable craft of intellectual history—become such an academic guru?

The answer to that question begins in the 1960s, when a populist turn electrified history. Scholars democratized the field by reconstructing the lives of ordinary people who had been left out of the story. They called this movement “social history.” Its methods were often quantitative; its mantra, “History from the bottom up.” Intellectual history, once prestigious, got shunted aside as the out-of-touch domain of elites.

Davis helped a new group of scholars bring ideas and meaning back into the story. He did it by developing a more grounded way to write about ideas, the product of his unique biography.

Davis experienced the extremes of history firsthand in a way few present-day academics have. In the fall of 1945, on a troopship bound for Europe, he was handed a club and ordered to descend into the hold to stop the “jigaboos”—blacks—from gambling. “In this highly segregated army,” he writes in his new book, “I had never dreamed there were any blacks on the ship.” He found hundreds, squeezed together and almost naked. It felt like a slave ship.

Later, as an Army security policeman in postwar Germany, he was called out in battle gear to the scene of a bloody shootout—a dance club where black and white American soldiers had fought over blacks’ dating German girls. He saw concentration-camp survivors and rubbled cities that “smelled of death.” He arrested a Polish soldier for raping a 6-year-old German girl.

Writing home in 1946, in a letter Davis would later share with his graduate students, the 19-year-old informed his parents that he intended to pursue history because he hoped an understanding of the past might “make people stop and think before blindly following some bigoted group to make the world safe for Aryans, democrats or Mississippians.”

What Davis gave many of his students was more elusive than a research agenda. It was a quality of mind.

By the 1950s, though, Davis had become “increasingly dissatisfied” with his education, as the professor recalled years later in a lengthy talk at Yale about his career. As a graduate student in Harvard’s History of American Civilization Program, he encountered intellectual history that followed the flow of various “isms,” like Romanticism
and rationalism. What excited Davis was a more concrete method: studying specific moral problems to trace fundamental cultural and intellectual changes.

He started with killing. In 1957, Davis published Homicide in American Fiction: A Study in Social Values, 1798 to 1860. This mashup of canonical authors and forgotten pulp earned a deadly review from Jacques Barzun, who skewered the young scholar, as Davis remembered it years later, as a “key example of how our graduate schools were going to hell.”

Davis’s next crack at studying moral problems earned a Pulitzer Prize. By 1966, when he published The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture, the first book in his trilogy, the civil-rights movement had awakened a new consciousness of slavery. Davis’s study followed the story way back—to a time before slavery had become associated with black people—to explain the “profound transformation in moral perception” that led a growing number of Europeans and Americans to see the horror of the institution. He excavated the ideas used to justify slavery from Aristotle to Christianity to John Locke, who, according to Davis, was the last major philosopher who found a way to defend human bondage. And he traced the roots of antislavery sentiment in Enlightenment philosophy and evangelical faith.

With the trilogy’s second volume, The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823, published in 1975, Davis won more awards and the awe of the growing group of students waiting outside his office amid the Gothic arches and leaded glass of Yale’s Hall of Graduate Studies. “Every graduate student walked around like [the book] was the monolith from 2001,” recalls Edward L. Ayers, a 70s-era Davis student who is now president of the University of Richmond. “It was just like, Oh, Lord, look at this thing. It was this great imposing monument that seemed to loom over our daily experience.”

What captivated historians most about the book was a section “that sought an explanation for the rise of abolitionism in the realm of social relations, not simply ideas,” Eric Foner writes in a review of Davis’s new book that will appear in The Nation. Davis highlighted how British Quakers and other Dissenters were closely linked to both abolitionism and the early Industrial Revolution. He suggested that the denunciation of bondage legitimated wage labor at a time of what Foner describes as “deeply oppressive conditions in English factories.”

“This was not a conspiracy theory, as some interpreted it—a capitalist plot to use the slavery issue to deflect attention away from the situation of the working class—but an analysis of the social functions, sometimes unintended, of abolitionist ideology,” Foner writes. “The book stimulated a wide-ranging and fruitful debate about capitalism’s relationship to the emergence of modern moral sensibilities.”

Davis’s writing on those unintended functions of abolitionist ideology captures something of the sensibility that shapes his students. What he gave many of them was more elusive than a research agenda. It was a quality of mind.

Consider the career of Jackson Lears. As a graduate student at Yale in the 70s, Lears was fascinated by the tensions of American life at the close of the 19th century, a rapidly industrializing “age of confidence” that seemed pervaded by “undercurrents of doubt and even despair.” Lears’s book No Place of Grace (1981) focused on antimodern critics, like Henry Adams and Charles Eliot Norton, who worried that society had become overcivilized. Antimodernists turned to medieval and Oriental sources in search of intense physical and spiritual experiences and sought self-sufficiency in the Arts and Crafts movement.

Yet even as these affluent and educated Americans protested modernity, they were also its products and beneficiaries. Their agenda “melded with the corporate-sponsored consumer culture that was coming to characterize life in 20th-century America,” Lears writes in an email. The antimodern quest for intense experience, he concludes, “unwittingly served to strengthen the emerging regime of routine work punctuated by purchased leisure.”

“It was because of Davis’s influence that I became sensitized to the whole notion of ambivalence,” says Lears. “He showed a lot of us how to come to terms with the tensions and contradictions in the people we were studying.”

As Lears and others entered the history profession, dissatisfaction with social and intellectual history led scholars to explore a middle ground. From social history, says Lears, there was a turn toward consciousness and culture; from intellectual history, a turn toward society and everyday life. That middle ground is where cultural history was born.

Cultural history, which flowered in the 1980s and 90s, looked beyond just words and ideas. Scholars studied how people create meaning in technology, objects, commerce, and rituals. Davis helped inspire that turn, says Lears, who went on to write books about advertising and luck. Davis showed a way to study ideas without severing them from everyday life.

“In his view, people act because of the values that they hold, the ideals that they’re pursuing, the fantasies they cling to,” says Steven Mintz, a former Davis student, now at the University of Texas at Austin, who has written histories of childhood and family life. “You can’t distinguish behavior from ideas. What he’s trying to do is revitalize in-
intellectual and cultural history and show that it’s not irrelevant or elitist or confined to some group that social historians were not interested in. And it would really be his students” who “helped make this bridge from social history to American cultural history.”

The Davis stamp is invisible to most readers. His students, on the other hand, spot his themes and approaches throughout one another’s books. They see them in the intellectual history that Wilentz gave to the pre-Civil War working class (Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850). And in Christine Stansell’s history of antebellum working-class women (City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860). And, nowadays, in the younger generation of historians that they themselves have trained: scholars like Scott Sandage, at Carnegie Mellon, who wrote Born Losers, a history of failure in America, and Jonathan Levy, at Princeton, author of Freaks of Fortune, about the emergence of risk.

The fruits of this Davis diaspora occupy several shelves in the living room of the professor’s house, a short drive from Yale’s campus. On a recent afternoon, Davis swipes his cane at the books’ spines. “It’s really remarkable how diverse they are,” he says. And that’s pretty much all he’ll say on the subject.

Davis seems allergic to discussing his own influence. Asked about his approach to mentoring students, Davis says only that he would meet with them often and “read very carefully their chaps—and Eugene Genovese—Davis was different: shy, quiet, a bit ill at ease.

“He was always on task,” says Stansell. “He never got distracted with unnecessary bickering or points of conflict. He always wanted, you felt, to get to the truth. And that made him an immensely attractive teacher.”

Technically, Davis has been at the task of writing his latest work since the 70s. But he put the project aside, publishing some eight other books between the second and third volumes of his trilogy. He managed to complete the series despite four bad falls—drilling was required to drain blood from his head—and a recent diagnosis of multiple myeloma.

Because one of those intervening books was a big survey, Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World, Davis felt free to be more selective in the last volume of his trilogy. The result is a book that feels more personal and essayistic than its predecessors.

“I focused on some major subjects that have had far too little understanding and attention paid to them,” Davis tells me. Above all, the colonization movement: the consensus among so many whites in the United States that slaves could never be free unless black people were settled in Africa or elsewhere. Even major black leaders, down to Marcus Garvey in the 1920s, took up this theme.

The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation “reflects how scholarship on slavery has evolved, partly under the impact of the first two works in this trilogy,” Foner writes in his Nation review. Scholars, he continues, increasingly put black rather than white abolitionists at the heart of the story. And they now see slave resistance as critical to abolition: Davis, “following in the wake of recent scholarship, makes blacks’ role as historical actors and catalysts of emancipation far more central than in the previous volumes.”

So now that he’s finished, what does Davis hope that readers will take from his trilogy?

He picks up a copy of the new book from a box on the floor of his study and begins to read aloud from the epilogue in a scratchy voice, one vocal cord strained from a problem that may be related to his myeloma. Even now, after all these years, the story still seems to astound him.

Early in the American Revolution, in 1776, black slavery was legal, and in some ways thriving, throughout New England and even Canada—and all the way down to Argentina and Chile. In the 1780s, the first antislavery groups were founded in London, New York, Philadelphia, and Paris. In 1833, Britain freed nearly 800,000 colonial slaves. And in 1888, one century after those first antislavery groups emerged, Brazil became the last place in the New World to outlaw the practice.

“We need to keep this in mind as a way that we can make moral progress,” Davis says. “Evil things can be overcome.”

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