

REVIEW OF CRAIG STEVEN WILDER'S *EBONY AND IVY: RACE, SLAVERY, AND THE TROUBLED HISTORY OF AMERICA'S UNIVERSITIES*

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Historian Ira Berlin wrote that the difference between a "slave society" and a "society with slaves" was that in a slave society the entire community benefitted and suffered from the presence of slaves.¹ In his construction, a slave society's economy, laws, and customs supported the presence of slaves or the slave trade.² For too long, in the popular imagination and sometimes in classrooms, northern states during the era before the United States Civil War have occupied a position distinct from southern states as areas increasingly detached from slavery and enlightened in race relations. Craig Steven Wilder's *Ebony and Ivy* disabuses the reader of such notions by enumerating the fact that many academic leaders at northern colleges and universities were slaveholders or slave sympathizers.³ Further, he specifies that America's first and most revered colleges and universities were complicit in the growth and development of American slavery, noting that "[t]he academy never stood apart from American slavery—in fact, it stood beside church and state as the third pillar of a civilization built on bondage."⁴ Over the succeeding centuries, college and university administrators and officials have attempted to sanitize their institution's links to slavery, but Wilder ably proves that the development of the American academy owed much to the donations and benefactions offered by those who profited from the slave trade.⁵ Often begun as educational efforts to "civilize" Native Americans, the institutions served as agents of subjugation.

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1. IRA BERLIN, *MANY THOUSANDS GONE: THE FIRST TWO CENTURIES OF SLAVERY IN NORTH AMERICA* (1998).

2. *Id.*

3. CRAIG STEVEN WILDER, *EBONY AND IVY: RACE SLAVERY, AND THE TROUBLED HISTORY OF AMERICA'S UNIVERSITIES* 11 (2003).

4. *Id.*

5. *See, e.g., id.* at 29, 117 (discussing Harvard University); *id.* at 42, 117–18, 136 (discussing the College of William and Mary); *id.* at 113 (discussing Dartmouth College); *id.* at 114, 123 (discussing Rutgers University); *id.* at 118 (discussing Yale University); *id.* at 118–19 (discussing Princeton University); *id.* at 127 (discussing King's College—now, Columbia University).

tion for both Native Americans and Africans.⁶ Certainly, other institutions were similarly embedded with slave sympathizers, but American colleges and universities were distinct because of their ability to influence those that became the nation's political, civic, and commercial leaders.⁷

Recent efforts have been made to cast light on the historical realities of physical and financial support from slaveholding interests that modern colleges and universities once enjoyed. Over the past dozen years or so, as part of a movement that was sparked by former president of Brown University, Ruth Simmons, some of America's most revered institutions have undertaken the painful chore of examining their relationship with slavery and the slave economy. The Brown committee, for example, published its findings in the report *Slavery and Justice*, which concluded that enslaved people had helped build the campus, prominent slave traders had helped direct the early history of the university in the colonial period, and that some of the university's first officers were slave owners.⁸ Brown's history was not different from that of its peers. Between 1746 and 1769, the number of colleges and universities in Britain's mainland colonies multiplied from three to nine.⁹ Not coincidentally, Wilder argues, the African slave trade reached its peak during that period. The great merchant families, like the Livingstons, Browns, and Crugers, filled the boards of new mid-Atlantic and New England colleges and universities, such as the following: Princeton University (originally the College of New Jersey, 1746), the University of Pennsylvania (1751), Columbia University (originally King's College, 1754), Brown University (originally the College of Rhode Island, 1764), Rutgers University (originally Queen's College, 1766), and Dartmouth College (1769).¹⁰ The scions of those families were educated at the very same institutions their forebears directed, sometimes with their own slaves in tow.¹¹ Wilder links the rise of the American mercantile class with the rise of American institutions of higher learning. He painstakingly demonstrates that college and university officials sought the merchants' benevolence and used the proffered gifts to establish professorships.¹² Such gifts helped develop and sustain those institutions in their infancy and influenced their development.

In the decades before the American Revolution, merchants and planters became not just the benefactors of colonial society but

6. See, e.g., *id.* at 21–28, 33–44.

7. See *id.* at 82–90.

8. BROWN UNIV. STEERING COMM. ON SLAVERY AND JUSTICE, *SLAVERY AND JUSTICE* (2006).

9. WILDER, *supra* note 3, at 49.

10. *Id.* at 47–50.

11. *Id.* at 75–77.

12. *Id.*

its new masters. Slaveholders became college presidents. The wealth of the traders determined the locations and decided the fates of colonial schools. . . . And the politics of the campus conformed to the presence and demands of slaveholding students.¹³

The enslaved individuals who found themselves on college and university campuses executed chores as far ranging as working in construction, cleaning student rooms, preparing meals, and performing for the students' amusement.¹⁴ At Williams College, the students paid a black man to see him repeatedly smash his head with wooden boards and barrels.¹⁵ In April 1772, at King's College (Columbia University), Beverly Robinson, an upperclassman, attacked one of the servants in the university's chapel.¹⁶ "Robinson spit in the Cook's Face [sic], kicked, & otherwise abused him," reads the record.¹⁷ Despite his temper and his assault, Robinson was allowed to graduate in 1773.¹⁸ He later became a trustee of the university.¹⁹ At Dartmouth, the number of slaves arguably equaled the number of white students at the fledgling college.²⁰ The sons of elite families were accustomed to the comforts that their servants provided and frequently chose to take a servant with them while they studied in residence.²¹

Given the presence and acceptance of so many slaves on America's campuses, one is left to question to what effect was their presence. Here, Wilder confronts the historical reality of the changed nature of college and university campuses during his research time period. American colleges and universities often had an undeniable link to Christian origins. The first five colleges and universities in the British American colonies—Harvard University (1636), the College of William and Mary (1693), Yale University (1701), Codrington College (1745) in Barbados, and the College of New Jersey (1746)—"were instruments of Christian expansionism and weapons for the conquest of indigenous peoples."²² Most of the early colleges and universities also established Indian colleges to convert Native Americans to Christianity and to send them out as missionaries. Their efforts included capturing and kidnapping young Native American boys in order to educate them properly in the Christian faith.²³

13. *Id.* at 77.

14. *Id.* at 134–43.

15. *Id.* at 142.

16. *Id.*

17. *Id.*

18. *Id.*

19. *Id.*

20. *Id.* at 113–14.

21. *See id.* at 77.

22. *Id.* at 17.

23. *Id.* at 44.

But colleges and universities were not static institutions, and over time, science came to challenge theology for hegemony. As science became the *sine qua non* of academic study, race became the area where it established resonance. Academics defended the inferior position of Africans in American society due to an innate “[b]odily and [m]ental [i]nferiority of the Negro.”²⁴ There was considerable debate within academic circles about the truth of this claim.²⁵ Benjamin Rush—an opponent of slavery, founder of Dickinson College, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, and intellectual sparring partner with Thomas Jefferson—was one noted critic.²⁶ Even within the southern state colleges and universities, there was dissent over the peculiar institution of slavery. In 1828, The University of Georgia’s Phi Kappa Literary Society decided that slavery was unjust and eventually reached an abolitionist conclusion.²⁷ However, students there and elsewhere in the South saw their positions against abolition harden as regional tensions rose. Meanwhile, politicians, editors, and academics in the South began to expand an educational infrastructure that defended slavery more ably in the face of a changed intellectual environment where slavery was more contested.

Here, Wilder is on less sure ground. He concludes that American scholars tried to reconcile the national debate by constructing two paths: “positive defenses of slavery grounded in history, theology, and economics; and scientific attacks upon the humanity of the colored races that denied black people the moral status of person and forced them into the moral sphere of brutes.”²⁸ However, in constructing such a conclusion, Wilder fails to effectively address the presence of the many academics who reached differing conclusions about the status of Africans. If colleges and universities were under heavy influence by slaveholders, both in support and operation, then how did those very same places sponsor debates on the propriety of slavery? The colleges and universities were part of a broader social, political, and economic environment and were, therefore, subject to the same dialectics that tormented the students and faculty living within their borders. A larger comparative study of the pressures external to college or university borders is largely absent from the monograph, perhaps by design, as his intent is to show how slave sympathizers were well entrenched in the halls of the academy. Nonetheless, a more substantial comparative study of the pressures external to the college or university borders is lacking.

American leaders and intellectuals in the 19th century confronted an en-

24. *Id.* at 227. This phrase is drawn from the title of an undergraduate research paper presented at Columbia by John Francis. *Id.*

25. *See id.* at 231–39.

26. *Id.*

27. *Id.* at 234–35.

28. *Id.* at 239.

vironment rife with racist theories emanating from Europe, an indigenous population that stood at its ever-expanding border, and a swelling, free black population that demanded the full citizenship that the nation's founding documents promised. Wilder focuses upon the academic community as contributors to the ongoing discussion of race in America. Too often academics acted out of fear of an increasing nonwhite population that was seemingly impervious to Christianity's transformative abilities. Academics constructed the argument that there were fixed racial categories with biologically determined fates. In the face of such determinism, the safest course was to remove—or colonize—the nonwhite people to locations outside of the country's borders.²⁹ The individuals who reached these conclusions had often built their fortunes, if not their legacies, on their families' involvement with a slave past.³⁰

Craig Steven Wilder undertook an immense project by attempting to document not merely the presence of Africans on America's early campuses, but also to understand the effect of a mindset that allowed and relied on an enslaved community's subjugation. While one may have wished for a more comparative analysis or a work that incorporated a more statistical basis, one must also recognize the significance of Wilder's accomplishment. *Ebony and Ivy*, in less able hands, would have stopped at detailing the presence of Africans on campuses and let a 21st century morality indict slave sympathizers. Rather, Wilder demonstrates how fervently academics and administrators held to racist theories constructed in their labs or those of their colleagues. Their work provided intellectual justification to slaveholders and to those who practiced the racial exclusion and removal campaigns that reigned for over a century. The academy was the "third pillar" because it informed the church and state; a triangular trade of its own.

29. *Id.* at 265–73.

30. *Id.* at 280–84.

