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Notes

Race, Power, and Education in Early America

John Frederick Bell

Craig Steven Wilder. *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities*. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013. 423 pp. \$30.00

The relationship between higher education, race, and slavery has become a burgeoning field of inquiry. In recent years, historians and archaeologists have unearthed a wealth of information on the complicity of American colleges and universities in chattel slavery, scientific racism, colonization schemes, and the dispossession of Native Americans. Taking their cue from path-breaking historical commissions at Yale and Brown in the early 2000s, several prominent institutions including Emory, Harvard, the University of Maryland, the University of Virginia, and the College of William and Mary have sponsored long overdue initiatives aimed at recovering these unsavory chapters from their pasts. Craig Steven Wilder's *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities* represents a synthesis of these early findings, along with many of the author's own conclusions. Given its important subject matter, it is a

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book historians of education and their students should know well.

As the first comprehensive monograph on the linkages between race, slavery, and higher education, *Ebony and Ivy* offers scholars valuable lessons for conducting further research in this subfield.¹ Readers will naturally draw different conclusions from this extensive book, whose footnotes alone total 115 pages. This review focuses on Wilder's main theme, the historical relationship between education and power, and considers its implications for our understanding of early American colleges.

* * *

Ebony and Ivy makes two overarching claims (Parts I and II of the book, respectively): early American colleges were active beneficiaries of the slave economy, and they furthered these systems of inequality through their exercise of intellectual authority and their production of knowledge. For Wilder, there was nothing subtle about the association of power and education in this era. "The American college trained the personnel and cultivated the ideas that accelerated and legitimated the dispossession of Native Americans and the enslavement of Africans," he writes. "Modern slavery required the acquiescence of scholars and the cooperation of academic institutions."² Wilder portrays power and higher education's relationship as symbiotic. Colleges needed the support of merchants, planters, and empires in order to survive, and these authorities depended on the academy to provide "intellectual cover for the social and political subjugation of non-white peoples."³ Were universities the sine qua non of white supremacy? No, but Wilder ranks them as "the third pillar of a civilization built on bondage" along with the church and the state.⁴

Wilder does not mince words in his characterizations. Early in Part I, he twice likens colleges to forts as he assesses their utility as tools of conquest for the French, Spanish, and British empires. At first, the claim feels exaggerated. How can he compare higher

¹ For prior studies of individual institutions, see **Suggestions for Further Reading** below.

² Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities* (New York: Bloomsbury Press), 10.

³ Ibid, 3.

⁴ Ibid, 11.

education to an armory or a garrison in its ability to suppress and subdue? Wilder best illustrates his point by describing occasions when, in fact, colleges operated much like these other instruments of empire. In 1711, for instance, the governor of Virginia ordered twenty Tuscarora hostages be sent to the College of William and Mary. The college was simultaneously receiving per capita donations from an English trust for Indians' missionary training, so it may have actually profited from the arrival of these twenty prisoners. Devil's bargains like these typified Indian education in its colonial heyday. Along with William and Mary, institutions like Harvard, Dartmouth, and the College of Philadelphia (the University of Pennsylvania) doubly cheated indigenous students, first by stripping them of their culture and then by using them as emissaries to ensure tribal obedience. Scholars might disagree with Wilder's choice to forgo the trickier questions of hybridity and agency that often accompany discussion of colonial missions.⁵ Emphasizing colleges' strategic value leaves less room for examining cultural exchanges between Europeans and indigenous people. As important as these considerations are, Wilder argues that at the end of the day, Indian education programs existed to reinforce white interests. Perhaps his strongest evidence comes from the simple fact that American colleges discontinued these programs when Native resistance waned.

Power abundantly reciprocated the support it received from education. Wilder follows the money to exhaustively detail how the African slave trade financed higher education in British America. In the mid-eighteenth century, merchant elites replaced religious organizations as the primary source of philanthropy for colonial colleges. Institutions cultivated West Indian slave traders as donors; immense Caribbean fortunes endowed scholarships and professorships and bankrolled building campaigns. Officials nurtured these sorts of relationships by inviting merchants to become trustees and recruiting their sons as students. Wilder further reveals the importance of alumni networks in connecting northern colleges to the wealth of the South and the Caribbean. Harvard

⁵ See, for instance, Emma Anderson, *The Betrayal of Faith: The Tragic Journey of a Colonial Native Convert* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Linford Fisher, *The Indian Great Awakening: Religion and the Shaping of Native Cultures in Early America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Margaret Connell Szasz, *Indian Education in the American Colonies, 1607-1783* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988).

and the College of New Jersey (Princeton) sent numerous graduates southward as tutors and clergy, developing interregional allegiances that would persist through the Civil War. By highlighting these connections, *Ebony and Ivy* complements other recent scholarship showing the importance of social capital to the development of early American education.⁶ If actions speak louder than words, understanding how schools maintained external support can go a long way toward illuminating their institutional character.

⁶ Nancy Beadie, *Education and the Creation of Capital in the Early American Republic* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Margaret Sumner, *Collegiate Republic: Cultivating an Ideal Society in Early America* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014).

⁷ Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities*, 109.

Wilder argues that college life contributed to students' "moral comfort with bondage."⁷ In the eighteenth century, faculty, trustees, and presidents frequently owned African slaves, who performed any number of chores and errands around American campuses, North and South. Unfree labor built not only the Universities of North Carolina and Virginia but also helped construct portions of Dartmouth and the College of Rhode Island (Brown). The regular presence of enslaved people acquainted uninitiated students with slavery and its methods. Yet some northern graduates maintained reservations about the peculiar institution, especially when confronted with its grosser manifestations on visits to the plantation South. "Such moments of moral reckoning were rare," Wilder clarifies, but by interspersing a few in his narrative, he hints that whites should have known better because some, in fact, did.⁸ To make this critique explicit would be to risk anachronism. After all, colonial academics would probably be as repulsed by the values of today's universities as we are by theirs. Moreover, magnifying white ambivalence would undercut his larger argument that "human slavery was the precondition for the rise of higher education in the Americas."⁹ By concentrating instead on the overwhelming and appalling evidence of colleges' complicity in bondage, Wilder lets the details do the damning.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 114.

Part II of *Ebony and Ivy* examines how the academy helped validate expansionism and white supremacy in the mid to late nineteenth century republic through its promotion of scientific racism and colonization. According to Wilder, it wasn't coincidental that

¹⁰ Ibid., 198.

¹¹ Joyce Chaplin, *Subject Matter Technology, the Body, and Science on the Anglo-American Frontier, 1500-1676* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Rebecca Goetz, *The Baptism of Early Virginia: How Christianity Created Race* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012); Colin Kidd, *The Forging of the Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹² Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities*, 238.

¹³ See Christoph Irmscher, *Louis Agassiz: Creator of American Science* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2013); Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Macmillan, 2002), 97-116.

the “genesis of American medical science corresponded to...the ascent of race.”¹⁰ In the early national period, anatomy was as much a hegemonic practice as biological one. Scholars turned to dissection to substantiate their theories of human difference, and medical schools weren’t above defiling the graves of the under classes (blacks, American Indians, and Irish) for bodies with which to conduct their experiments. This “research” made academics prominent voices in contemporary debates over human origins. Recent works in Atlantic history have drawn on these exchanges to illustrate the influence of theology and colonialism on the evolution of race.¹¹ Wilder contributes to this discussion by underscoring the role of American universities in reconciling competing scriptural and scientific arguments about human origins.

Academics endorsed monogenesis while stressing the influence of geography in determining the “natural” characteristics of the races. The implications of this environmentalist argument would seem to contradict notions of inherent difference, and Wilder shows that for a time, antislavery views gained traction on college campuses across America. In the wake of Nat Turner’s rebellion in 1831, however, white power intervened in the South to redirect education toward its ends. Beholden to their slaveholding supporters, the southern academy began asserting its unique authority in studies of race “as bondage became peculiar to their region.”¹² How northern and European scientists responded to these claims goes unaddressed, and Wilder misses an opportunity to discuss the vital contributions of Harvard’s infamous polygenist Louis Agassiz to southern science.¹³ Instead, he focuses on how college officials in the newly free states vigorously opposed the prospect of a multiracial society. After northern emancipation, academics became some of the region’s most vocal advocates of resettling free blacks in Africa, their “natural” environment.

Wilder painstakingly inventories the participation of college presidents, trustees, and faculty in the American Colonization Society, but his analysis of campus debates over immediate emancipation abolition is arguably more significant, albeit more subtle. The

formation of student abolition societies troubled administrators in the 1830s, but not simply because these officials were colonizationists. Through the mid-nineteenth century, the civic function of higher education was to reaffirm, rather than realign, the social order. By opening the American promise to black Americans in even a limited way, abolitionism threatened the white establishment. Thus, administrators objected to students' views on both political and educational grounds. In the end, colonization mostly carried the day, but the underlying tension between social conservatism and social reform dogged higher education for more than a century after slavery's abolition.

Ebony and Ivy stand out from previous scholarship in both its range and its daring. Prior studies of race and slavery in American higher education have examined particular institutions, though a few have considered regional trends. By widening the scope of inquiry to consider multiple schools, North and South, as well as multiple races (white, black, and American Indian), Wilder demonstrates the pervasiveness of white supremacy in early college culture. A comparative approach positions him to evaluate the financial, social, and intellectual networks that institutionalized racism within the academy. Wilder recognizes that as systems, education, imperialism, racism, and slavery require systemic analysis. Future historians of these subjects should heed his example. *Ebony and Ivy* inspires a wealth of avenues for new scholarship, from historical investigations of slavery and higher education in the Old Southwest and border states to transatlantic histories of scientific racism to studies of slavery's influence on other emergent professional disciplines such as law. Whatever direction they choose, scholars should be sure to attend to the larger economies and ideologies of power that underlay their actors' motives and mindsets.

Slavery and racism were omnipresent in early America. From the colonial period well into the twentieth century, white American society staked its fortunes on the exploitation of nonwhite people. If education is the process of cultural transmission, we should not be at all surprised that the first institutions of higher learning furthered the

perverse value systems of their era. Yet *Ebony and Ivy* remains a profoundly unsettling read. Wilder alerts American academics that our professional world was built on a foundation of bigotry and violence. Historians of education have a critical role to play in recovering and elucidating this troubling past. *Ebony and Ivy* shows us how challenging and how necessary that work truly is.

Suggestions for Further Reading

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(Fall 1996): 467-485.



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