

“BLACK REPARATIONS: THE CASE OF BROWN UNIVERSITY”

Part I of a Two-Part Series

The national debate over African American reparations for the crimes of both slavery and racial segregation initiated by Randall Robinson’s brilliant manifesto, The Debt, back in 2000 has been supplanted by concerns over global terrorism and U.S. war in Iraq. Yet the black reparations demand, and the need to atone for history’s crimes, won’t go away. Recent revelations about the slavery connections with one prestigious, “Ivy League institution”, Brown University, provide a striking illustration.

The story begins in 1765, when Nicholas Brown, Sr., a wealthy Rhode Island merchant, commissioned the ship “Sally” to trade cargoes of rum and other manufactured goods to the west coast of Africa for the purchase of enslaved Africans. The captain of the slave vessel was under orders to carry Sally’s human cargo to Barbados, where the bulk of Africans were to be sold. Four Africans, each approximately fifteen years old, were to be transported back to Rhode Island, where they were to become the personal household slaves of the Brown family.

The initial phase of Sally’s voyage to West Africa went according to plan, but things quickly fell apart when the ship started to cross the Atlantic. Individual Africans who had been brought on deck hurled themselves into the ocean, deliberately choosing death rather than descending back below deck. Scores of slaves began dying from fever,

lack of food and unsanitary conditions. One determined African woman managed to hang herself below deck to protest her captivity.

When one party of slaves was brought up on deck, they attempted to physically overpower the white crewmen: eight slaves were shot and killed. By the time Sally had reached the West Indies, over one hundred of the original one hundred sixty-seven enslaved Africans had died.

There is no historical marker for the victims of Sally's journey, either in some remote island in the South Atlantic, or in Rhode Island. But a memorial to honor Brown and his even more successful son, Nicholas Brown, Jr., a prominent banker and merchant, was subsequently constructed. Nicholas Brown, Sr.'s brother, Moses Brown, continued to purchase and transport hundreds of slaves into the Caribbean and the United States during and after the American Revolution. There is some evidence that unpaid black labor was used by the Brown family at its ironworks factory in Massachusetts, and in its candle factory located in Providence. The Browns were devoted to the cause of American independence, and volunteered their ships to transport crucial supplies to General George Washington's beleaguered troops. But these same ships were also used to bring African slaves to the United States against their will. None of these ironies of history troubled the founding fathers of what was originally named Rhode Island College, who in 1804 renamed their academic institution Brown University, to honor their chief benefactors.

When Brown University President Ruth J. Simmons, the first African-American president of an Ivy League institution, announced in March, 2004, the establishment of a “Committee on Slavery and Justice” to engage in a two-year investigation of the university’s ties to black servitude, conservative critics wasted little time in denouncing her bold initiative.

Economist Thomas Sowell ruminated in the conservative periodical Human Events: “This is to be no academic exercise of scholarly research. There is obviously supposed to be a pot of gold at the end of this rainbow.” For Sowell, Simmons was duplicitously engaging in the sordid business of “race hustling. It is being coy about race hustling. At least Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson are up front.”

What perturbed Sowell and other conservative ideologues was that despite largely winning the legal battle to dismantle affirmative action, they were in danger of losing the larger moral war for reinterpreting America’s divided racial past. Any serious, historically-grounded excavation of the histories of most major U.S. institutions established prior to the Civil War could potentially reveal a virtual nightmare of racist atrocities and exploitation, suggesting not merely apologies, but the large-scale transferal of wealth to the descendants of slaves, the African-American population, as compensation.

Sowell's worst fears may have been realized when a University of Alabama law professor, Alfred L. Brophy, urged his university to "apologize for owning slaves before the Civil War and consider granting reparations to their descendants," in March, 2004. Brophy's research had uncovered that African-American slaves had routinely labored at the early campus from 1831 up to 1865. Two of the University of Alabama's earliest presidents also owned slaves.

The battle over affirmative action may be almost over, but the war to achieve racial justice has barely begun. Conservatives are scared because they know that history is on our side.

Dr. Manning Marable is Professor of Public Affairs, History and African-American Studies at Columbia University in New York City. "Along The Color Line" is distributed free of charge to over 400 publications internationally through www.manningmarable.net