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A Tale of Two Universities: Harvard and Georgetown Accept Their Ties to Slavery

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Abstract

The Washington Ideas Forum, a Washington D.C. hot-ticket event, reconvened for its eighth year on September 28th and 29th, 2016. Leaders in politics, policy, race and justice, education, science and technology, and even food met to share ideas and have meaningful conversations at the event hosted by *The Atlantic* and the Aspen Institute. From Speaker of the House Paul Ryan and Secretary of State John Kerry to author Chimamanda Adichie and chef and founder of Momofuku, David Chang, the best and the brightest were all in attendance.

[*excerpt*]

Keywords

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Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

A Tale of Two Universities: Harvard and Georgetown Accept Their Ties to Slavery

By *Alex Andrioli '18*

The Washington Ideas Forum, a Washington D.C. hot-ticket event, reconvened for its eighth year on September 28th and 29th, 2016. Leaders in politics, policy, race and justice, education, science and technology, and even food met to share ideas and have meaningful conversations at the event hosted by *The Atlantic* and the Aspen Institute. From Speaker of the House Paul Ryan and Secretary of State John Kerry to author Chimamanda Adichie and chef and founder of Momofuku, David Chang, the best and the brightest were all in attendance.

On the second day of the forum, the national correspondent of *The Atlantic*, Ta-Nehisi Coates, conversed with the presidents of two elite universities: John J. DeGioia of Georgetown University and Drew Gilpin Faust of Harvard University. The three talked about the roles of the universities in acknowledging and reconciling with their histories of slavery and discrimination.



The Washington Ideas Forum, Washington D.C. Photo taken by the author, September 29, 2016.

“We had a tragic moment in the early years of our history that we’ve been trying to come to terms with,” DeGioia began. “In 1838, Jesuit priests on plantations in Maryland had enslaved

children, women, and men and in 1838, arranged a transaction to sell 272—virtually all of them—to a land owner in Louisiana.” Some of the proceeds, about \$17,000 (that would equate to \$500,000 today), from this sale went to Georgetown University. DeGioia explained that the work in discovering this specific information only began two years ago. Georgetown was inspired to do this by a campus building named after the individual responsible for the transaction in 1838. The university was aware of its history and had taught it at Georgetown for years, “but we knew we had a new moment [addressing the name of the building] to be able to engage our community in a very different way.” Georgetown began to remove names on buildings associated with its dark past and replace them with names of people like Isaac Hawkins, the first name that appears on the manifest of individuals sold in the 1838 transaction.

Within the past few years, Georgetown has launched working groups on slavery, memory, and reconciliation to acknowledge “that moment of our history,” DeGioia said. A second working group was launched to address racial justice to help Georgetown “come to terms with the new ways in which we as a university community can engage these questions.” Recently, Georgetown announced that it would give admissions preference to the descendants of the 272 slaves in the transaction that benefitted the university.

Harvard University’s acceptance of its connection to slavery and discrimination is slightly different. “There are interesting contrasts between our two institutions,” Faust explained. “We’re both venerable, we’ve been around for a long time . . . but, Harvard, being in New England, was often part of a New England consciousness that after the Civil War said, ‘Oh, we didn’t have anything to do with slavery.’” However, recent scholarship has made more historians aware of how New England and Harvard had benefitted from the peculiar institution. Slavery was legal in Massachusetts until 1783, and though it did not exist in Civil War era New England, many people in Harvard were connected to slavery, and thus the “economic engine” of slavery supported Harvard in various ways.

Harvard is making an effort to understand how slavery helped to build the university and how enslaved individuals contributed to it. Through research conducted by Harvard students, the names of four African Americans that worked in the households of Harvard presidents in the 18th century were able to be identified. To commemorate these individuals that contributed to Harvard, a plaque was placed on a building as a “first step in enshrining the history of slavery . . . in Harvard’s understanding of itself.” Also, a committee of faculty historians has been assembled to look into further research in slavery at Harvard, and a conference in March 2017 is scheduled to discuss slavery and universities.

The theme of the conversation, as Coates admitted, was the responsibility that universities owe to “the populations they abused, to the communities in which they operate, [and] to the peer institutions they influence.” However, DeGioia exposed an unsettling event that occurred on his campus. When Georgetown announced that working groups were to be created in relation to

slavery and injustice, people were surprised. Despite the fact that Georgetown's history was so well known, people were still very surprised that the university was going to do something like that. That is why it is beyond important to keep the history and memories of slavery's role alive in America's prestigious universities and elsewhere.

Faust ultimately provided the goal of higher education: to form "young people within [our] sets of commitments to justice, to truth—values that matter to us as a society. . . We don't just want to train them like automatons, we want to educate them within the larger context of whatever [they're pursuing]." History is a tool for people to use in order to grasp at the "possibilities of evil and injustice—that we can learn through seeing how our ancestors made choices of the kind they did."

Check out the full video of this interview session

at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oPDWcfZTRPc&list=PLGwx9pYP7sAINOUpfFGGK2YJT8YJ7HnUL&index=6>.

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