

## The Color of Ivy: Racism at Harvard by Chimaobi Amutah

Upon entering Harvard College's campus, a visitor might feel that Harvard is a prime example of a university in which underrepresented domestic racial groups play a significant role on campus. Perhaps they would have heard about Harvard's 35% Black, Latino, Asian, or Native American population – higher than that of rival Ivy League schools such as Princeton or Yale. Maybe they would look at the over 100 student groups at the college alone that are based on racial, national, or cultural grounds, from the Asian American Association to *Yo Creo En Venezuela*, or "I believe in Venezuela." In time they might be made aware of the fact that some of Harvard's top executive administrators – including the Senior Vice Provost of the University, the CFO of Harvard College, and last year's President of Harvard's Alumni Association – are all people of color. All of this, however, belies the reality that all who have spent significant amounts of time at Harvard, whether they are minority students, faculty, or staff – know and understand to this day: Harvard is still a place where racist ideas, actions, and practices continue. Although historical antecedents of the campus' current state stretch back hundreds of years, they remain one of Harvard's least talked about, though persistently reinforced, traditions.

"I experienced pity at the sight of this degraded and degenerate race, and their lot inspired compassion in me in thinking that they were really men." These were the words of Louis Agassiz, celebrated Harvard zoologist and well-known practicing racist, in reference to Americans of African descent in 1846 Philadelphia. Nineteenth century Harvard was the Harvard of old where White, wealthy males from New England made up almost the entire student body. Although slaves were no longer on campus with their young, studious masters—as had been the case in previous centuries—many students still had what were known as "scouts," or Black servants who took orders from well-off White students while they were on campus. The first non-White student admitted to the college was Beverly G. Williams in 1847, though he died only a few months before the beginning of his initial year of studies from tuberculosis.

The first non-White Harvard College graduate did not come until 23 years later in the form of Richard T. Greener, an accomplished writer and public speaker who became a philosophy professor, law school dean, and foreign diplomat after his historic graduation in 1870. The first non-White Ph.D. recipient from Harvard was the more well-known W.E.B. Du Bois, NAACP founder, prolific writer, and leading figure in the scholastic emergence of sociology. However, few know that when Du Bois was a student at Harvard in the late nineteenth century he was not allowed to live in campus dormitories and was subsequently forced to rent a home in the Black section of Cambridge now known as Riverside. Du Bois viewed Harvard as a "defender of wealth and capital" and was first introduced to Marx at Harvard. He would eventually expatriate to Ghana and renounce his U.S. citizenship after joining the Communist Party and becoming disillusioned with capitalism and racism as practiced in the U.S.

Harvard's history of racial exclusion and unfair treatment continued throughout the twentieth century and still exists today in numerous guises. Various incidents between

individuals have occurred on campus in the past year, and more will undoubtedly come. One such incident happened in October of 2005 when a Black student in Pforzheimer House (Pfoho) was forcefully removed from the building and arrested by four officers for trespassing in his very own dorm. The event prompted Black student leaders and Pfoho tutors and staff to hold numerous meetings in an effort to further understanding and mitigate hostility. This was followed by a second incident in November, when a White person chased down a Muslim student walking by Lamont Library, yelling at them that they were a “filthy Jew hater.” Campus response was one of surprise, though publicity about the incident was relegated almost exclusively to a sole Harvard Crimson article. A third such incident occurred in February of this year, when Dean Judith Kidd sent out an e-mail warning the editors of *The Harvard Salient*, who had recently published the highly controversial Danish cartoon depictions of the prophet Mohammad, to be careful in case the decision brought violence from the Muslim community on campus. Dean Kidd was soon forced to release a letter of apology after members of the Harvard Islamic Society and others on campus criticized her insinuation that Islamic students would resort to violence. These are just a few of the untold numbers of instances of racism happening on campus last year.

Collective or group racism has also been consistently displayed on campus. One such instance where this occurs is at the Fox Club’s annual “Boxer Rebellion Party.” The Asian American Women’s Association (AAWA) has vocally opposed the party, as it seemingly celebrates a highly violent massacre of both residents and foreigners in China during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The blatant celebration of the massacre of thousands of Chinese citizens was, and is still, deemed racist. Requests to have the name of the party changed have gone unheeded by the Fox. Additionally, racism has entered the electronic realm through the Facebook with groups such as “Harvard White Men’s Association”, a mockery of the many crucial race-based student groups on campus, and the “I should have gone to a Whiter school” Facebook group, which mocks the discomfort many students of color feel on our predominantly White campus. One other group incident on campus that stands out in particular involved a South Asian woman who was coming out of a party in Lowell and was grabbed by a White male after having racial slurs yelled at her by the all-White group that he was with. One of the comments that were purportedly said was that someone in the group wanted to “slaughter your people.” This type of inter-group terrorism still happens on campus, though the attention it garners is rarely one of substance for students, the administration, or the media.

Harvard’s admissions process is another realm where racist practices exist as a framework for operation. Through the Undergraduate Minority Recruitment Program (UMRP) and the Harvard Financial Aid Initiative (HFAI) Harvard is able to publicize its perceived commitment to a diverse student body along the lines of race and class. For Black students at least, Harvard is one of the few places where the predominant national congruencies between race and class do not exist, as Black students at Harvard are overwhelmingly middle-class and wealthier. UMRP has students return back to the cities and towns that they come from to recruit other minority students to Harvard, but this neglects the fact that most minority students at Harvard went to high schools where they were also in the minority. For most minority students at Harvard, a return to their high

school would mean a return to their boarding school, exam school, or suburban high school – places where the few minority students that attend would probably already be familiar with Harvard. Harvard is still inaccessible to many individuals of the rapidly increasing minority sectors of the population. Very, very few Black and Latino high school students apply to Harvard, though they make up over one-quarter of the high school population in the U.S.

There are many areas where Harvard College can improve its race relations and work harder to end racism throughout campus. The Harvard Foundation for Intercultural and Race Relations functions as an awareness device for the University and, through its sponsorship and leadership of many student events on campus that serve its mission, works to bring about inter-racial and cross-cultural understanding. Much headway still needs to be made in this area, as the people who attend The Foundation's events are most often minority students and their diversity-embracing friends, hardly the majority of the college.

In terms of faculty appointments, the fact that most of Harvard's faculty members of color teach only about race and culture highlights the dearth of such professors in the departments relating to the arts and hard sciences. The core curriculum needs to be drastically re-worked to include courses related to the billions of people of Latin America, Southern Asia, and Africa (there are more Foreign Cultures courses offered on France alone than on the entire continent of Africa). Without measures to facilitate cross-community understanding, a faculty more demographically reflective of the student body, and more courses on areas of the world which many still harbor unsubstantiated or outdated images about, racism at Harvard will persist for countless commencements and convocations to come.