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Yale Grapples With Ties to Slavery in Debate Over a College's Name

By NOAH REMNICK SEPT. 11, 2015

NEW HAVEN — When Maya Jenkins was accepted to Yale, her family erupted in joy. Still, her mother confessed a concern: that her daughter might be assigned to Calhoun College, one of the 12 residential colleges at the heart of the university's undergraduate life. It is named for John C. Calhoun, a Yale valedictorian-turned-politician from South Carolina and one of the 19th century's foremost white supremacists, who promoted slavery as "a positive good."

Ms. Jenkins, a black sophomore from Indianapolis, brushed aside her mother's apprehensions, but a few months later, she was indeed placed in Calhoun, where depictions of its namesake abound. As she eats lunch in the dining hall or studies in the common room, the historical association feels inescapable.

"I'm constantly thinking about Calhoun the slave owner staring me down," Ms. Jenkins, 19, said. "It's supposed to be my home, but I feel like I can't be my full self here."

She belongs to a growing chorus of students, alumni and faculty members calling on Yale to rename the college. The idea has circulated around campus for decades, to minimal effect. But this academic year, galvanized by the massacre in Charleston and the removal of the Confederate battle flag outside the South Carolina State House, Yale finds itself in a renewed debate over its historical ties

to slavery and the symbols of that affiliation.

In addition to the debate over Calhoun, which was named in 1933, some at Yale have suggested an end to calling the heads of the colleges “masters,” a traditional title at the university without roots in slavery. In a letter to his students last month, Stephen Davis, the head of Pierson College, asked that his title be dropped, saying no African-American “should be asked to call anyone ‘master.’ ”

This summer, law school students circulated an online petition equating the Calhoun College name with the Confederate flag. They have collected around 1,500 signatures demanding its removal. In a recent editorial, The Yale Daily News supported the renaming “not to obliterate history but to inscribe different values into Yale’s present.”

Yale’s president, Peter Salovey, concentrated his address to the incoming freshman class on the Calhoun controversy. “The time has come for us to have a thoughtful and public discussion of what we ought to do,” he said.

Debates over similarly charged relics have long roiled campuses. Brown announced in 2003 that it would investigate its ties to slavery and the slave trade, setting off similar initiatives at other academic institutions, including Harvard, William & Mary, Princeton and Columbia.

But Yale and other universities are increasingly contemplating another step: whether to expunge public displays of these legacies.

Vanderbilt University tried to change the name of its Confederate Memorial Hall, but the United Daughters of the Confederacy, which paid to erect the building in 1933, successfully sued to stop the action. Duke and East Carolina University took the name Aycock off buildings because the man they were named for, former Gov. Charles B. Aycock of North Carolina, was a noted white supremacist. Washington and Lee University in Virginia removed Confederate battle flags from the chapel where the Confederate general Robert E. Lee is buried.

Some Yale students and professors question whether focusing on such symbols diverts attention from more substantive campus problems with race, including what they see as a weak commitment to faculty diversity.

Yale reports that in its Faculty of Arts and Sciences, less than 3 percent of members — 32 out of 1,145 — are black. Among the roughly 5,400 undergraduates, 11 percent identify themselves as black or African-American.

Jonathan Holloway, the dean of Yale College and the first African-American in that post, earlier served as master of Calhoun, which he said he considered "deliciously ironic." Dr. Holloway, who has filled his office with books on African-American history and artwork depicting black life in America, said he was torn over how the issue should be addressed.

"I worry about historical amnesia," he said. "But in the wake of the Charleston shooting, I found myself disillusioned."

Dr. Holloway and others are questioning how broadly the effort to rescind honors should extend. Calhoun's statue is among those of eight "worthy" graduates, including Nathan Hale and Eli Whitney, whose likenesses adorn Harkness Tower.

Should the statue come down? Calhoun served as a senator, vice president and secretary of war, and, according to some historians, that influence allowed him to become the singular voice for secession and slavery. But other residential colleges are also named for slave owners, including George Berkeley, Timothy Dwight and Ezra Stiles. Should those colleges be renamed as well?

The debate has gone so far that Dr. Holloway and Dr. Salovey felt compelled to assert that Yale itself would never shed its name, despite ties between the East Indian slave trade and the university's namesake, Elihu Yale.

"History is filled with ugliness, and we can't absolve ourselves of it by taking down something that offends us," Dr. Holloway said.

The Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. said he and other black members of the Calhoun class of 1973 focused their activism elsewhere. Still, they referred to the college with a wink as "Calhoun Plantation."

"We were there to prove Calhoun wrong," he said. "We wanted to make the rest of society believe we belonged at places like Yale."

The list of other notable black members of Calhoun includes the actress Angela Bassett, and this year, Dante de Blasio, the son of New York City's mayor,

Bill de Blasio.

Students and faculty members have been startled over the years to discover artifacts at Yale that commemorate slavery without censure. When Chris Rabb, a professor at Temple University, arrived on campus from Chicago in 1988, he said he was stunned to find a stained glass panel in Calhoun College depicting Calhoun with a shackled slave kneeling at his side.

“This is literally a form of institutional racism,” he recalled telling the college master.

He successfully lobbied for the offending portion to be removed, but back home, his family chided him for allowing Yale to sanitize its history.

For colleges and universities established in the 18th and 19th centuries, a deep association with slavery was nearly inescapable. In the South, institutions were often built and tended by slaves. While Yale University apparently owned no slaves, some of its presidents did. Slave owners gave early financial support, and slave-owning benefactors and alumni have been celebrated.

For some time, satirical references to slavery punctuated life at Yale. Pierson College had a courtyard called the “slave quarters” into the 1980s, and its newspaper was called The Slave, until black students demanded an end to both.

While at a meeting in Woodbridge Hall during her early years as a tenured professor, Elizabeth Alexander, the poet and former chairwoman of Yale’s African-American studies department, found herself overcome by a portrait of Elihu Yale. At his elbow beckons a young black slave, a metal collar locked around his neck.

“I kept thinking, ‘Wow, this is the place where the most important business of the university gets done and here hangs this painting,’ ” said Dr. Alexander, who graduated from Yale in 1984 and recently left its faculty for Columbia. “But ultimately it’s the place itself that can teach you how to critique the place.”

The portrait was quietly replaced eight years ago with one of Yale standing alone.

Dr. Holloway said he expected the Yale Corporation, the university’s governing body, to decide about the renaming by the end of the academic year.

The administration kicked off its sanctioned conversation over Calhoun with an online forum and has a series of events planned for the fall.

At one such gathering on Wednesday in the Calhoun master's house, the civil war historian and professor David Blight echoed Dr. Holloway's caution of historical erasure, saying, "Memorialization, representing the past, needs to cause pain."

But Isaiah Genece, a junior in Calhoun from Westbury, N.Y., offered the event's most poignant moment. "As much as I've come to feel a part of the Calhoun community, as much as I will proudly use that name, these are the things that remind me," he said, gesturing toward a portrait of Calhoun hanging at the head of the room. "These are the things I find disturbing and fearsome."

Though Mr. Genece's emotional testimony resonated with the crowd, many students — black students especially — hope to move beyond such symbolism.

"There's a way in which these conversations sometimes get used as an excuse for not talking about more pressing issues," said Lex Barlowe, a junior from New York and the president of the Black Student Alliance at Yale, citing the dearth of black faculty members.

Glenda Gilmore, a professor of American history at Yale who hails from North Carolina, agreed with Ms. Barlowe, and said that while symbols mattered, issues like faculty diversity must move to the fore. "If the administration is really prepared to listen, they should listen hard," she said. "This is a situation where wrongs can be righted."

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