

N'COBRA NORTHEAST REGION
PROPOSED STRATEGY TO ENGAGE BROWN UNIVERSITY
ON ITS INVOLVEMENT IN ENSLAVEMENT IN AMERICA

ARI S. MERRETAZON, M.S.CED, REGIONAL REPRESENTATIVE

CONTRIBUTORS

WOULLARD LETT, MEMBER

AJAMU SANKOFA, LIFE -TIME MEMBER

I. SUMMARY

This proposal is based on an analysis and comments by N'COBRA members Woullard Lett, Manchester, New Hampshire, Ari Merretazon, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Ajamu Sankofa, New York, New York, on the report recently released by Brown University entitled, *Slavery and Justice: Report of the Brown University Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice* (hereinafter referred to as The Report). The analysis and comments were done after a full reading of The Report and conversations via conference calls. *Enslavement and Injustice* would be a more truthful name of what is described in The Report.

It was agreed that a proposed course of strategic engagement be drafted for input, approval, and mobilization by the N'COBRA membership, led by the Northeast Region. The purpose of this proposal is to set the basis and framework to engage Brown University on the content and recommendations of The Report, and Brown's role in the enslavement of Africans on the Continent, in the Americas and the Caribbean.

This proposal seeks approval from N'COBRA's governing body to enable N'COBRA Northeast Region and N'COBRA LDREF, as a collaborative, to develop, draft, publicize, and implement a plan of action for engaging Brown University and other Colleges and Universities in the Northeast Region. The approval being sought by this proposal will serve as a template for engaging other institutions of higher learning, and as a springboard for membership and chapter development regionally and nationally.

With the collaborative agency grant, the N'COBRA membership will be informed of the relevant issues and strategic approaches at the June 2007 18th Annual N'COBRA Conference in Philadelphia to bring Brown University to the reparations negotiating table. In the interim, this proposal, when approved, will seek to gain qualitative input, feed-back, and participation in the division of labor from our members to achieve successful reparations outcomes that will "improve the lives of African descendents in the United States for future generations to come; foster economic, social and political parity and allow for full rights of self-determination." (<http://www.ncobra.org/about.us.htm>)

In thrift, based on the recommendations in The Report, this proposal outlines proposed points of engagement for N'COBRA. It focuses on key recommendations made in The Report by quoting each, and list N'COBRA demands, as well as suggestions for N'COBRA, proposed by Lett, Merretazon & Sankofa.

Moreover, this proposal is submitted to enlist information input, relevant critical analysis, demands, and proposed direct actions by N'COBRA to reinforce its final demands for reparations from Brown University.

The Report can be found at http://www.brown.edu/Research/Slavery_Justice/documents/SlaveryAndJustice.pdf.

II. Catalog of Brown's Recommendations

a. Acknowledgement

"While members of the steering committee have different opinions about the propriety and value of an institutional apology, we believe that it is incumbent on the University, at a minimum, to acknowledge formally and publicly the participation of many of Brown's founders and benefactors in the institution of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade, as well as the benefits that the University derived from them.

N'COBRA Demands:

- **As The Report identifies the African trans-Atlantic slave trade as "a crime against humanity," an apology must be offered for Brown's complicity in this morally repugnant and universally condemned offense. (80)**

b. Tell truth in all its complexity

Every confrontation with historical injustice begins with establishing and upholding the truth, against the inevitable tendencies to deny, extenuate, and forget. The appointment of the steering committee and the various public programs it sponsored have already done a great deal to create awareness of

a history that had been largely erased from the collective memory of our University and state. Yet there is more to be done. We recommend that the University

- *release this report publicly, in both print and electronic versions, and circulate it widely among students, academic and non-academic staff, and alumni, as well as among other interested parties in Rhode Island and throughout the United States;*
- *sponsor public forums, on campus and off, to allow anyone with an interest in the steering committee's work to respond to, reflect upon, and criticize the report;*
- *include discussion of the University's historical relationship to slavery as a normal part of freshmen orientation; commission a new history of the University to replace the currently available text, which makes virtually no reference to slavery or the slave trade, or to the role that they played in Brown's early history;*

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- *lend its support and assistance to other institutions that might be considering undertaking similar investigations of their own histories.*

N'COBRA Demands:

- **Hold public forums with N'COBRA, on campus and off to respond to, discuss and criticize The Report.**
- **Allow N'COBRA representative(s) to discuss the Brown University's historical relationship to enslavement as a normal part of freshmen orientation.**
- **Re-write a new history of Brown University to include its role in enslavement of Africans in America and how it benefited and profited.**

c. Memorialization

Few if any institutions in our society are as quick to erect memorials as universities. The Brown campus contains literally hundreds of statues, stones, portraits, plaques, and other markers, each placed by one generation to inform and edify generations to come. Yet there are no memorials acknowledging the University's entanglement with the trans-Atlantic slave trade. To the best of our knowledge, there is only one such marker in the vicinity of the campus, a small brass plaque near the entrance of the John Brown House, which mentions slave trading in a list of its one-time owner's activities. Installed by the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society and the Rhode Island Historical Society after a long and public debate, the plaque was almost immediately defaced by vandals.

As this example suggests – and as programs sponsored by the steering committee on the politics of slavery and Holocaust memorials confirmed – memorializing traumatic histories can be difficult and awkward. The challenge, easier to articulate than to accomplish, is to create a living site of memory, inviting reflection and fresh discovery without provoking paralysis or shame. We believe that Brown can and should answer this challenge. We recommend that the University

- *undertake to create a slave trade memorial to recognize its relationship to the transatlantic trade and the importance of this traffic in the history of Rhode Island;*

sponsor a public competition to design such a memorial, keeping in mind that debate and controversy over an appropriate design are integral parts of the process of coming to terms with the past;

- *designate an annual day of remembrance on the academic calendar, to be marked by a visit to the memorial by University representatives, an endowed lecture, and other activities designed to encourage continued reflection on this aspect our history.*

N'COBRA DEMANDS:

- **The creation of multi-media depictions of the history of Black people of African descent and development of historical monuments and museums; The memorial should be consistent with this requirement rather than a lone statute.**

- **Artists and contractors of African descent as providers of the memorial design and construction must be prioritized.**

d. Create a center for continuing research on slavery and justice

Universities express their priorities first and fore-most in their selection of fields of study. We believe that Brown, by virtue of its history, has a special opportunity and obligation to foster research and teaching on the issues broached in this report, including slavery and other forms of historic and contemporary injustice, movements to promote human rights, and struggles over the meaning of individual and institutional responsibility. We recommend the establishment of a scholarly center dedicated to these questions. The center should include

- *a full-time director;*
- *a newly-created endowed professorship, lodged jointly in the center and an appropriate academic department, to be held by a distinguished scholar whose research engages broad questions of justice and injustice;*
- *fellowships for postgraduate and senior scholars;*
- *abundant research opportunities for Brown students, both undergraduates and graduates;*
- *internships and service-learning opportunities for undergraduates interested in working with anti-slavery organizations and other institutions dedicated to the promotion of human rights;*
- *public programming aimed at both the University and the wider community;*
- *a significant educational outreach component, including workshops and curriculum development, to help teachers integrate topics related to slavery and justice into their classrooms;*
- *administrative and staff support, to ensure sustainability and effective collaboration with existing departments and centers at Brown, including the Swearer Center for Public Service, the Watson Institute for International Studies, the Cogut Humanities Center, the John Nicholas Brown Center for the Public Humanities, and the Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity.*

N'COBRA Demand(s):

- **There must be a firm commitment to involve people of African descent with a resume showing support and advocacy for reparations for people of African descent for every staff position of the Center for research on Slavery and Justice**

e. Maintain high ethical standards in regard to investments and gifts

With institutions as with individuals, taking responsibility for an offense entails more than expressing remorse for past conduct; it also requires a commitment to doing better in the future. As we have seen, Brown's early endowment benefited from contributions made by slave owners and slave traders. Although slavery is no longer legal, it persists in many parts of the world, alongside a variety of other forms of gross injustice. Given its history, the University has a special obligation to ensure that it does not profit from such practices.

Brown has already taken important steps in this regard. The University recently introduced a new procedure for the ethical review of major gifts that is, at least on paper, one of the most rigorous in the nation. It has also expanded the purview (though not the resources) of the Advisory Committee on Corporate Responsibility in Investment, which makes recommendations to the Brown Corporation on proxy resolutions, as well as on ethical concerns raised by members of the Brown community. The value of this process can be seen in the University's recent decision to divest itself of all direct holdings in companies doing business in Darfur, the scene of an ongoing genocide. Yet there is also some cause for concern. Like most of its peer institutions, Brown in recent years has invested an increasing portion of its endowment in "hedge" funds, commingled vehicles that afford the University no influence over

the companies in which it is invested, and provide no clear knowledge of what investments it holds at any given moment. While the committee has no reason to believe that Brown is involved in any unethical practices, we find this lack of transparency troubling.

Recognizing the importance of growing the endowment, yet mindful also of Brown's distinctive history, we recommend that the University

- *uphold a strict procedure for the ethical review of gifts;*
- *strengthen its commitment to socially-responsible investment by expanding its holdings in socially-responsible funds and offering facilities to donors who wish to ensure that their gifts are invested in such funds;*
- *provide the Advisory Committee on Corporate Responsibility in Investment with the logistical and staff support that it needs to do its work effectively;*
- *review its investment strategies with a goal of increasing transparency and ensuring accountability.*

N'COBRA Demand(s):

- **Create an Advisory Committee on Investment with participation by members of N'COBRA and others selected and/or approved by N'COBRA.**
- **Make investments in Black communities with a fair share of ownership and/or control by qualified and/or certified Black people.**

f. Expand opportunities at Brown for those disadvantaged by the legacies of slavery and the slave trade

Over the last few years, hundreds of people have written to the steering committee offering suggestions about what Brown might do to make amends for its history. The single most common suggestion was creating special scholarships for African American students. Given Brown's failure to admit more than a handful of black students during its first two hundred years, it is a logical suggestion, and one whose spirit we endorse. But it is not a recommendation that we can make.

Brown is a need-blind/need-based institution. This means that the University, like most of its peer schools, admits students without regard to their ability to pay, committing itself to providing whatever financial aid an individual might require through a combination of grants, work-study employment, and loans. The obverse of this commitment is that Brown, like its peers, does not offer financial assistance on any basis other than financial need. We believe that this policy, which ensures that every qualified student can attend

Brown, regardless of his or her financial circumstances, is just and equitable.

This is not to say that there is nothing the University can do. The commitment to need-blind/ need-based admissions does not preclude actively recruiting students from disadvantaged back-grounds, or tailoring the financial aid packages of the neediest students to increase the proportion of grants versus loans. Indeed, the University has recently done precisely this through the creation of the Sidney Frank Scholars program, which frees Brown's most economically-disadvantaged students of any future loan obligations. Nor does the current system preclude increasing financial aid to international students, who are currently excluded from the need-blind system.

Mindful of these constraints, but mindful also of Brown's history of racial exclusion, we recommend that the University

- *maintain a vigorous commitment to recruiting and retaining a diverse student body, focusing in particular on increasing the representation of African American students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels;*

- *strengthen such initiatives as the Sidney Frank Scholars program and Talent Quest, a joint program of the Brown Admission Office and the Brown Alumni Schools Committee, to ensure that students from even the most economically disadvantaged backgrounds have every opportunity to study and prosper at Brown;*
- *increase the amount of financial aid available to needy students from outside the United States, with a long-term goal of making Brown a need-blind institution for international students;*
- *dedicate particular attention to the recruitment of students from Africa and the West Indies, the historic points of origin and destination for most of the people carried on Rhode Island slave ships;*
- *maintain a vigorous commitment to recruiting and retaining a diverse faculty and nonacademic staff.*

NCOBRA Demand(s)

• **Brown must create a special program to specifically provide scholarships to poor Blacks, who are otherwise qualified, in the most economically depressed counties of the United States, namely, the Lower Mississippi Delta Region, in recognition of the prominence, prevalence and disproportionate burden and impact of enslavement on African people in this region of the United States.**

g. Use the resources of the University to help ensure a quality education for the children of Rhode Island

If a single theme runs through this report, it is education. This focus reflects not only Brown's nature as an educational institution but also the nature of slavery: In large parts of our country, it was once a crime to teach a black person to read. During the age of abolition, many Americans, black as well as white, recognized education as essential to repairing the legacy of slavery and equipping the formerly enslaved for the full enjoyment of their rights as free people. The original Rhode Island Gradual Abolition Act, for example, required towns to provide the children of slaves with publicly-funded instruction in "reading, writing, and Arithmetic," a provision that clearly reflected the influence of Moses Brown. But the towns resented the expense and the state legislature removed the requirement. A similar process of advance and retreat occurred in the South, where the promise of an equal education for the newly free was swept away by the collapse of Reconstruction and the onset of Jim Crow, with its specious doctrine of separate but equal. Rather than promoting equality and common citizenship, public schools became vehicles for perpetuating inequality and segregation.

*Racial segregation in public education was finally declared unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in its 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, yet today, more than half a century later, American public schools continue to be characterized by de facto racial segregation, as well as by profound disparities in school quality and student achievement. To appreciate the dimensions of the crisis, one need look no further than Providence, where forty-eight of the city's forty-nine public schools currently fail to meet federally-prescribed minimum standards for academic achievement. This situation represents a direct challenge to Brown University. One of the most obvious and meaningful ways for Brown to take responsibility for its past is by dedicating its resources to improving the quality of education available to the children of our city and state.*

The resources that the University brings to the task are formidable. Brown is home to an array of institutions and programs with interests in public education, including the Education Department (which provides teacher training for both graduate and undergraduate students), the Swearer Center for Public

Service, the Educational Alliance, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, the Choices Program of the Watson Institute for Inter-national Studies, Brown Summer High School, and the newly created Urban Education Policy Program. Even more importantly, it is blessed with extraordinarily energetic students, literally hundreds of whom work in local schools as individual tutors and mentors, as well as in such programs as the Rhode Island Urban Debate League and the Arts/Literacy Project.

As the sheer variety of programs and initiatives suggests, Brown's efforts have been highly decentralized. They have also been ill-coordinated and chronically under funded, creating problems of sustainability and limiting their systemic impact. The recent appointment of a director of educational outreach and the funding of a University liaison position in the office of the superintendent of Providence schools hold the promise of better coordination, but they are only the beginning. If Brown is to make a meaningful impact in local schools, it will require a sustained, substantial commitment of energy and resources over many years. We recommend that the University

- create professional development opportunities for Rhode Island public school teachers, including the opportunity to enroll in one Brown class per semester, without charge;*
- expand the number of course offerings and available scholarships in Brown Summer High School, which has a long record of success in preparing local students for the challenges of college-level work;*
- increase funding to Brown's Masters of Arts in Teaching Program, including full tuition waivers for students who commit themselves to working for at least three years in local public schools;*
- create opportunities and incentives for Brown faculty to offer enrichment courses in local schools and to use their expertise to help develop new programs and curricular materials;*
- invest substantial resources, including dedicated faculty positions, in the new Urban Education Policy Program, with an eye to establishing Brown as a national leader in this vital field;*
- expand internship and service-learning opportunities for undergraduate students with interests in public education;*
- coordinate its efforts with those of Rhode Island College, the Rhode Island School of Design, and Johnson and Wales University, each of which currently administers educational outreach programs in Providence public schools;*
- provide administrative and staff support, through agencies such as the Swearer Center and the Office of Educational Outreach, to ensure effective collaboration and the sustainability of its educational initiatives.*

N'COBRA Demand(s)

- Resources of Brown University must be accessible and available to all students, who are otherwise eligible, no matter what state they live in.*

h. Appoint a committee to monitor implementation of these recommendations.

NCOBRA Demand(s)

Brown must include members of N'COBRA on any committee to monitor implementation of final recommendations resulting from The Report.

III. Next Step Suggestions for N'COBRA (no particular order)

- Create an effective process for an informed dialog among the N'COBRA membership on recommendations of how N'COBRA should engage Brown and**

other institutions of higher learning whether public or private.

- Be prepared to engage Brown as an organization soon after the June 2007. This should not preclude effective engagement prior to June 2007; but ensure that all engagement respects a meaningful democratic process and the policies/procedures and by-laws of N'COBRA.

- Avoid demands of Brown that have a no rationale basis within the four corners of the Brown report or upon which N'COBRA is not prepared to mount a powerful direct action campaign. However, offer full technical and political support to the most progressive African descendent students at Brown that are in sync with N'COBRA's broader mission. Allow them to lead.

- Develop allegiances, as practical and possible, with the most progressive faculty, administrators, and students at Brown.

- Do not let Brown dictate how we approach Brown.

- Measure the time on this work against the time needed to do mass base organizing of our people in general; this Brown report *work* and related issues are very important and must be done but it is not the highest priority of our reparations work. N'COBRA's time and attention to this work should be dispensed accordingly. However, N'COBRA would be making a profound error not to respond effectively to the Brown report.

- Hold a press conference as soon as possible to give initial response to The Report.

- Organize community teach-ins in New England on this and related issues where we make our case; selected progressive Brown folks should be invited to participate; but their involvement must be calculated as a vehicle that can help further N'COBRA's agenda.

- Work very hard to ensure that the membership meeting at the June 2007 conference is not a ritualized rubber stamping of a prior decision but a membership meeting that really engages the membership in a dynamic, informed, and principled discussion/debate on which way forward on this and other important reparations issues.

- Call for reparation resources to tell the story from the African descendants' perspective.

- Call for full scholarships for Blacks in poverty who are otherwise qualified, and/or will craft a remedial plan that comprehensively addresses the present day effects of vestiges of chattel slavery, Jim Crow, and systemic racism/white in the area of education; and based on that plan, N'COBRA will articulate a powerful demand of Brown to do explicit tasks that help to implement those elements of the plan relevant to Brown's complicity in this historic injury.

- Plan a strategic direct action campaign powerful and consistent enough to mobilize broad-base support for N'COBRA over a long-term engagement with Brown. This strategy should include roles for allied students and faculty, community and religious organizations, professional associations and unions, et. al.

