

In These Times, Season 2 | Repair, Part 1

Alex Schein:

Last fall, we launched our podcast In These Times, with an examination of COVID-19 and its far-reaching impacts. This season, we're focusing on black lives and exploring the nation's complex history with race. We'll consider some challenging questions. Who controls the narrative about the US? How far have we moved beyond our history of enslavement and Jim Crow? Are we at a moment of reckoning? In these times, knowledge is more important than ever.

This season we've spoken to experts about how institutions have perpetuated racial hierarchies. Higher education is no exception. In our final two episodes, we're talking to students and faculty about the work that comes next. Welcome to episode six, Repair, part one.

The Penn and Slavery Project is a student-led organization that investigates the university's connection to slavery. Their mission statement makes it very clear. In US history, no colony, state, or well-funded university was buffered from slavery's reach. Carson Eckhard, a graduating senior and Dean's Scholar, is part of the Penn and Slavery Project. Kathleen Brown, David Boies Professor of History, is faculty advisor, but students lead the research.

Carson Eckhard:

I became interested in the Penn and Slavery Project sort of by accident. The Penn and Slavery Project began in the fall of 2017 when I was a freshman. And at the same time I was taking a course called the History of the American South, taught by Judy Giesberg at Villanova, and for the class, we had to write a paper on any aspect of the course that we wanted to.

I wrote a research paper on Southern universities and slavery, and my TA Gabriel Raeburn, who's a PhD student in history, introduced me to Professor Brown, who runs the project and said that it might be a good connection. And so I started working on the Penn and Slavery Project in the spring of that year after Professor Brown read my paper. And at that point I was hooked on doing historical research. And so I started looking into the history of the medical school. Penn's medical school is the oldest in the country, was founded in 1765. So I was curious about potential connections between medical education and the creation of race. And so that's where I began.

Alex Schein:

Penn holds a collection of skulls from Samuel Morton, a Philadelphia based physician and anatomy lecturer who built his collection in the 1830s and 1840s. Morton used the skulls to promote pseudo-science and white supremacy.

Carson Eckhard:

So I learned a lot of things over the course of now almost four years. Probably the most well-known aspect of this work has been focused on Samuel Morton, who accumulated the Morton cranial collection, which includes the remains of about 60 enslaved people. I began looking into in conjunction with Paul Wolf Mitchell, who's a graduate student in anthropology, who studies the collection and was especially interested in trying to identify at least two enslaved Americans who were in the collection.

There's a woman from North Carolina and a man from Delaware. And so I was really interested in trying to figure out who exactly they were and what their lives might have looked like.

Alex Schein:

Over the past year, many museums have re-evaluated their collections and made efforts to repatriate human remains, art and artifacts to communities of origin. Penn recently announced that it will work with local communities to return remains from the Morton collection and the 1985 MOVE bombing.

Carson Eckhard:

I've also done a lot of work looking at Penn alumni, specifically people like Josiah Nott and their contributions to writing racist rhetoric and that production of knowledge. Thinking about what Penn's connections to slavery are, thinking about the university's place as an institution that produces knowledge is really, really important.

Alex Schein:

Josiah Nott was an 1827 graduate of Penn's medical school. He became known for publications on racial difference and scientific racism, including a book called types of mankind. Eckhard says the book became one of the defining texts for polygenesis, a now rejected theory that claimed human races had different origins. The theory was used to promote white supremacy. Nott was influenced by Morton and served as a Confederate surgeon during the civil war.

Carson Eckhard:

So another large part of my research has been looking at the medical school's efforts to recruit students in conjunction with Alexis Broderick Neumann, who was the post-doctoral fellow on the Penn and Slavery Project. One thing that we were really interested in was thinking about the university's very concentrated efforts to recruit wealthy white men to the medical school.

And so I found advertisements in the Penn archives spanning really the entire South and really, really heavy concentration of advertising happening there. There was almost as much advertising happening in the South than as in local newspapers. And in some years, upwards of half of the medical school's graduating class came from the American South. And so it was very clear that the university was being strategic in where they were trying to recruit potential medical students from.

And then secondarily, I was curious about whether or not the curriculum maybe to some extent reflected the political leanings of wealthy Southern men during this time. And that is maybe a little bit harder say for certain, but it is a very clear that people like Morton were giving lectures around Philadelphia to medical students about things like racial difference, so it's likely that these medical students, especially a large contingent of whom were from the South, were learning a lot about this sort of junk race science, in part through their Penn medical education, or at least through people that they met through their medical education.

Alex Schein:

Eckhard's work compliments other student research on early university trustees and slavery and fits into larger conversations about Philadelphia and the racist medical practices. These are big topics and the work is not done. Along with classmates Natalia Rommen and Sarah Simon, Eckhard received a President's Engagement Prize for Project Hope. The project will address the lack of legal and re-entry support to incarcerated Philadelphians by serving as the core of an expansive advocacy network.

Reflecting on the award, she says that Penn has pushed her to think about how classroom learning can make the world a better place. The Penn and Slavery Project has done a lot of research and Eckhard says there have been real world changes.

Carson Eckhard:

I think one thing that's so important about this work is that it's never going to be finished. There's no point at which this research is ever going to be complete. And so my hope is certainly that the project continues and continues to grow. I've been so inspired by some of the work that's been happening in the past year or so on the project. And I think maybe even more so than the project continuing is the continued response of the university to the project.

I personally have been really, really relieved that the Penn Museum and the university has finally committed to dismantling the Morton collection and to repatriating those crania and finding descendant communities where possible. That work came about in part because of activist-oriented research like that at the Penn and Slavery Project, and also because of the work of West Philadelphia activists.

And I think that watching that process happen was really exciting, and also to some extent hopeful for me, as far as what activist-oriented research can do. So I'm hopeful that the university will continue to respond to the project and to take the findings of the Penn and Slavery Project into consideration in thinking about how the university can make reparations happen and take reparative action.

Alex Schein:

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted healthcare disparities and shown that race and medicine are present day concerns, not historical curiosities. Ian Peebles is a doctoral candidate in the philosophy department and a Dean's Scholar, whose areas of specialization are moral philosophy, bioethics, and philosophy of race. He's also had a chance to study social cognitive and affective neuroscience in the Penn Center for Neuroscience and Society.

Ian Peebles:

I would say that my work, it focuses on two things. The first thing is looking at the ethics of neuroenhancements, and you can understand neuroenhancements as being medical interventions to alter human cognition. And the second part looks at ethical issues at the intersection of race and medicine. More specifically, I'm interested in the sort of constructs that medical professionals use to track health disparities between racial groups.

Now, as it relates to how I got here, honestly, it was me trying to piece together seemingly disparate topics that I liked. I knew that I wanted my work in philosophy to have some practical import. I wanted it to be something that I could, for example, share with my family. And that thought was well, everyone has to deal with health, life and death, so let's take a look at bioethics and see what's of interest there. And that's really how I latched onto that. And then as far as the philosophy of race, I've been thinking about race since I was a little kid. I think I was doing philosophy of race before I knew that's what it was called.

Alex Schein:

Peebles says that epidemiologists and social scientists can tell us a lot about the healthcare disparities we have seen play out over the course of the pandemic. He sees his job as a philosopher as clarifying and refining constructs related to race, so that discussions are accurate and ethical.

Ian Peebles:

So for example, in the philosophy of race, there's a live debate about how we should conceptualize racism. Is it an ideology? Is it primarily about motivations, our behavior, our thoughts? And depending on how you conceptualize racism will depend on what you take to be racist. And because there isn't really consensus on this, I think that sometimes it's difficult to have unity in the social scientific literature. And in addition to there not being unity because of these competing conceptions, I also think that sometimes some of the conceptions that are used may not sufficiently capture the entirety of the phenomenon that we're trying to get, which is racism in US health care.

And so I take it that my job is to help with these sorts of problems. Like these are the problems that I'm deeply invested in. How should we understand racism? How should we understand race when we're talking about it in healthcare? And as it relates to COVID, my work doesn't directly address COVID, but I definitely think that there are parts to it that are intimately related to the pandemic.

Alex Schein:

Peebles recalls a television commentator stating that black and brown people are disproportionately impacted by COVID because of alcohol, tobacco and drug consumption.

Ian Peebles:

You know, I just felt like that was a perfect example of confirmation bias. If you want to talk about those things, that's fine, let's talk about them, but they failed to consider, for example, that housing discrimination has put many of these people in areas where they're exposed to toxic materials, right? So we're thinking about pollution, or pests, and how those things are associated with the comorbidities that make COVID-19 so deadly.

And so one of the things that I touch on in my research is how to understand social determinants, but also how to prioritize them, how much concern and care should we give to them? How much should we be intervening in social environmental influences? And I really think that before we talk about biological differences, or before we try to blame cultural differences, we need to take seriously some of these social environmental influences.

Alex Schein:

Peebles is a teacher of philosophy, as well as a scholar. Before the pandemic, he was part of the Philosophy for the Young Project headed by Karen Detlefsen, Professor of Philosophy and Vice Provost for Education. The group went to Benjamin B. Comegys School in Philadelphia, where they would discuss philosophy with students from ages 10 to 14. Peebles says children are natural philosophers, capable for much more than people give them credit for. This fall, he'll be back in the classroom at Penn.

Ian Peebles:

In fall of 2021, I will teach racial justice and for the class, I've decided to focus on racial justice as it relates to US health care. So an obvious reason for that is because that's what I specialize in, but also I think that racial justice itself is a large topic. So you can talk about housing discrimination, you can talk about education, wealth, disparities, occupation, the prison system. There's just so much wrapped up in that single topic. And I think that in order for the students to get the most from the class it's best if I narrow the focus to racial justice in a certain context. And so we'll definitely spend some time discussing social determinants of health.

And one of the ways that I see my philosophical background helping in this, and one of the things I hope to do with the students is to get into some of the philosophy of science literature, as it relates to adjudicating between competing explanations or theories when it seems like both theories are empirically equivalent, so how do we figure out which explanation is the best one? But I also want to talk about reparations in the context of healthcare. And I want to look at the ethical, social and legal implications of various solutions that have been offered to remedy the current health disparities in America.

Speaker 4:

For the first time, a House panel has voted to advance a bill related to potential slavery reparations. What's known as HR 40 would establish a commission to examine slavery as well as discrimination in the US from 1619 to the present.

Alex Schein:

In April of this year, the House Judiciary Committee approved the Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African-Americans Act. The bill was first introduced in 1989, but has never made it to a full house vote. The past year has shone a spotlight on the health effects of racism. So Peebles wonders, what can reparations do for healthcare?

Ian Peebles:

One of the things that got me interested in this question is the story of Victoria Gray.

Speaker 5:

From a child, Victoria Gray has been plagued by sickle cell disease, a rare disorder that has ravaged her body with pain and fatigue.

Victoria Gray:

A good day could easily turn into a terrible day where I would be in pain. And I would have to go to the emergency room.

Speaker 5:

Two years ago, Victoria learned about a revolutionary new sickle cell treatment that had the potential to change her life, only it had never been performed on anyone else.

Speaker 7:

We told her she would be the first person in the world to get it. It has never been tried in humans. She was adamant to say, sign me up. I am ready to do this.

Speaker 5:

So Victoria became the first sickle cell patient to be treated with a gene editing tool called CRISPR.

Ian Peebles:

It looks like so far, it's gone well for her. She's doing much better. But there's a question of, in some way could this be a part of some sort of reparations package? And I think an even more important question,

should it be? Victoria Gray is like the positive note for me. This is what happens when medical professionals consider diseases that disproportionately affect, for example, the black community.

But I think one way that this might go wrong is if the medical reparations further entrenched us in false beliefs about biological differences between races. So there has been some talk amongst people about possibly using neuroenhancements to close the education gap. But I think that this solution is both unnecessary and dangerous to me and can possibly further entrench us in these ideas that there are significant cognitive differences between racial groups.

And so in thinking about reparations, I really want to challenge the students to think about what forms of reparation would be permissible and beneficial and actually serve as some form of corrective justice, and what forms of reparations would actually be detrimental to the communities that they're trying to serve.

Alex Schein:

This wraps up episode six, Repair part one. Join us in two weeks for our seventh and final episode, Repair part two, where we'll hear from a graduate student in history whose work on the Penn and Slavery Project intersects with her family history, a philosophy professor who tells us more about reparations, and a political scientist leading an interdisciplinary, international project that puts restorative justice at the center.

In These Times is a production of Penn Arts and Sciences. Special thanks to Carson Eckhard and Ian Peebles. I'm Alex Schein. Thanks for listening.

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