Interview with Jill Strauss and Dionne Ford, Slavery's Descendants and Coming to the Table

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David Paterson of H-Slavery is delighted to offer the following interview with Jill Strauss and Dionne Ford, who recently co-edited Slavery's Descendants: Shared Legacies of Race and Reconciliation (Rutgers University Press, 2019). Slavery's Descendants examines the personal stories of individuals confronting the legacy of racial slavery through the organization Coming to the Table.

David Paterson: Page 1 of Slavery's Descendants tells us that the volume "addresses the legacy of racism and slavery in the United States." Could you describe what motivated you to pursue the book and what you hope to inspire in readers?

Jill Strauss: I was motivated by the potential I saw in narratives that tell diverse stories of the legacies of racism in the past and until today. It is something that Coming to the Table members could do that other groups with different missions cannot. I wanted to help tell these stories!

Dionne Ford: I was relieved to find Coming to the Table while researching my family's history, in particular, my great, great grandparents who were an enslaved woman and the man who enslaved her. Recovering the stories of enslaved people can be difficult and emotionally taxing. It still stings to think of the will where my great-great-grandmother was bequeathed along with cattle and farm equipment. So, it was a gift to find a group of people dedicated to uncovering this history and an honor to help capture some of their experiences in a book that might educate people about how much slavery is intertwined with the creation of this country and how its legacy continues to impact us all.

David Paterson: Slavery's Descendants has twenty-four essays (besides the foreword, introduction, afterword, and postscript), written by highly diverse authors who include artists, journalists, genealogists, writers, poets, teachers, historians, a nurse and former nun, an author of Buddhist philosophy, an MBA, an environmentalist, a national park ranger, and a TV host, to list a few of their avocations. What common imperatives inspire these multi-talented folks to come to the table?

Jill Strauss: All the contributors care deeply about racial injustice and recognize its
relationship to slavery in the US. They all wanted to tell their individual stories because they recognize that together their stories tell our national story. In particular, descendants of slave holders in the volume believe that part of making things right includes naming. Whenever they could they included the names of the enslaved identified in wills, letters, and other documents to make those who had been invisible, visible.

Dionne Ford: I think the common imperative for each of the contributors to this collection is the first practice in Coming to the Table's approach to healing the historic harms of slavery: uncovering history. The contributors are each committed to undoing racism, and that starts with telling the broader, truer story of the United States’ history of slavery. All of them confront that broader story in their essays.

David Paterson: As a public historian, I relate to CTTT's goal of uncovering the histories of race and “working toward the transformation of our nation” (p. 4). Noted historian Nell Irvin Painter urges that “One of the things that’s so important to American history . . . is to get beyond thinking of people merely as units of race, or units of race and class . . . and to see them as individuals who grew up in particular families, with particular family relations.”[1] Many of your authors describe the importance of their genealogical research, and Dionne commented on this earlier—can you reflect on how family and personal histories might transform the national narrative?

Jill Strauss: I think it’s the power of the written word. Getting the stories out into the world means that (hopefully) people are reading and discussing them. Hopefully readers are inspired to then do their own family research, or inquire about the seemingly abandoned cemetery in town, or investigate something else. The most important thing is that people are asking questions and this is what can transform the national narrative.

Dionne Ford: I bet every person reading this can think of a book, whether it was non-fiction or a novel, that changed them in some way. Narratives have that power. And slave narratives had that power. These personal accounts of the lives of enslaved people helped the abolitionist movement and changed how some northerners felt about slavery. Where they might have seen it as this benign institution that wasn’t so bad, the narratives brought to life the physical and sexual horrors and the psychological despair of families being torn apart. Our personal stories are how we most deeply connect to each other. So my hope is that these stories resonate with readers and encourage them to think about their family’s place in this country’s narrative as well as their fellow Americans’.
David Paterson: In her essay, "Both Innocent and Accountable: A Moral Reckoning," Debian Marty reminds us that, for pre-1865 US citizens, whether to embrace slave-owning or to reject slavery was a choice—especially a choice for people born to inherit mastery in America’s slaveholding republic. Marty explores the very different choices made by two of her Quaker ancestors. (Many historians will remember the elite-born Grimke sisters from South Carolina as similar examples of Americans who flatly rejected slavery.) Can you discuss this idea of choice as it relates to America's slaveholding past and whether it connects to the choices we necessarily make as Americans today?

Jill Strauss: I think it is about those of us who recognize that there is something wrong but, in our comfort and complacency, opt to look away. Whether it was slavery in the past or human trafficking today, racism, domestic violence, homelessness, immigration, or other kinds of injustice, some of us stand up and speak out and act and others of us want things to change but don’t know what to do or have the courage to initiate change.

Dionne Ford: It’s so important to remember that to enslave people was a choice, not an inevitability. Even during a time when slavery was common and widely accepted, George Washington called it “the only unavoidable subject of regret.” I think when something is common or widespread like slavery was, it’s easy to be complacent and think our personal choice or feeling doesn’t matter or change anything, but our choices do matter and effect change. Most recently, we can point to how young people frustrated with police violence toward black and brown people started a movement by amplifying that black lives matter.

David Paterson: Page 2 suggests working toward “racial healing”—which echoes Debian Marty’s cry (p. 124): “I want to be cured” of the “hidden wound” inflicted by white peoples’ racism. Sara Jenkins acknowledges that whiteness “is a construct, a phantasm” that “seems real, a given, until we examine how it is maintained,” and urgently seeks “to heal . . . the wounds born of the illusion of race” (p. 165-6). Karen Branan calls America’s racial caste system “this crazy thing we’ve been taught” (p. 96). Yet five of the essayists in Slavery's Descendants explicitly chose and claim white identity, while Fabrice Guerrier tells us in his essay: “It wasn't until I moved to the United states [from Haiti] that I realized what it meant to be black” (p. 104). From your perspectives, given the history of how and why America’s “white race” was invented, what is the path forward?

Jill Strauss: The only way forward is together. I think different people will use different approaches and that is fine but it has to be collaborative and inclusive.
Dionne Ford: A collective reckoning with how and why whiteness was made and all the efforts to maintain it—whether in the form of scholarship like Nell Irvin Painter's *The History of White People*, through institutes like poet Claudia Rankine's *The Racial Imaginary*, or through personal stories like the ones told in our anthology—is an important step on that path forward.