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**Racial Disparities in the United States Healthcare  
System**

**(From The 19th Century till the Present Time)**

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation to my beloved parents who gave me unconditional love, always supported and encouraged me to realize my dreams, and who provided me with everything I needed.

I dedicate it as well to my little brothers, to my cousins Imene, Feriel, and Aicha who inspired me to deal with this subject, and to the whole Nait Family. It is also offered to my best friends Lilya, Karima and Yasmine.

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## **Abstract**

The study aims at unveiling the racial obstacles that the African Americans were faced with throughout history; starting by how Blacks were oppressed under the slavery system to the different laws that segregated the African Americans and limited their freedom. This dissertation will focus on one of the least known and noticed racial disparities, which is still struggling with the legacies of segregation and racial bias; it is the United States Healthcare System. Throughout this research the dark history of American medical experimentation on black people and medical racism become more apparent and cannot be denied. It is also to unveil the modern health care disparities that continue to exist until today.

### ***Keywords:***

- Slavery            - Healthcare Disparities            - Medical Experiments
- Segregation    - The U.S. Healthcare System        - Modern Healthcare Disparities

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## General Introduction

### General Introduction

The healthcare disparities are the differences in health and healthcare that a minority group receives in comparison with another group from the same society, and in which the first group is more likely and more vulnerable to preventable diseases and tends to have a low life expectancy. In the United States, racial and ethnic minorities tend to receive an inequitable and a low quality healthcare compared to other communities, and among the groups who are mostly and deeply affected by the healthcare disparities throughout history are the African Americans.

During the slavery era, one of the darkest chapters in American history, the colored were owned by white masters; they were oppressed; they had no rights nor could they ever express and voice their thoughts; they were also considered as a valuable property. Indeed, the abolition of slavery in the United States came through the Emancipation Proclamation issued by the president of the United States Abraham Lincoln, and it was supposed to grant Black slaves their freedom and equal opportunities to those of the whites. However, it was never fully established; African Americans were again controlled and tied, but this time legally through the Jim Crow Laws.

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, white physicians played a leading role in subjugating colored people and never failed in oppressing them through medicine. Fast forward to the 21<sup>th</sup> century many aspects of racial disparities in healthcare are still alive and enacted; from helpless slaves, freedmen, sharecroppers to the poor ghetto inhabitants, African Americans are still faced with racism, prejudice, discrimination and neglection. All the aforementioned events will be fully examined to find out how African Americans fell victims of racial segregation, were treated as guinea pigs, and underwent both horrible and abusive medical experiments. Another purpose is to investigate the fact that African Americans are still dying at higher rates

## General Introduction

more than any other ethnic or racial group in the United States. For this, two research questions were developed: how has the United States' medical research mistreated and abused the people of color? And how is the United States' medical system still hunted by the legacies of slavery?

To answer these questions, two hypotheses are suggested. Firstly, as white people were seen as scientifically superior to the people of color, African Americans were regarded by researchers and physicians as the most fit for medical research and utilized their bodies for brutal experiments; secondly, it might be through the structural racism that is rooted in the United States and the inequitable healthcare system that the practices and events that occurred during the slavery and segregation era were made more vivid.

To investigate and find answers to these questions, this research paper is divided into three chapters. The first chapter will tackle the different events and historical landmarks from the moment that Black people became slaves to the point that their freedom was legally limited; it will also investigate the different segregation laws and specifically the ones related to African Americans' access to healthcare. The second chapter gives an overview on how white physicians took advantage of the Black enslaved bodies and their contribution in the 19<sup>th</sup> century medical exploitations in the United States. More stories of experiments will be exposed in the third chapter. The content of the third chapter will as well discuss modern day disparities in the American healthcare system towards black people.

# **Chapter One**

**Black Americans: from a Human  
Resource into a Nuisance**

# **Introduction**

The content of this chapter aims to review the period of slavery that the Black Americans went through from the moment they set foot in the New World in 1619 to the segregation laws and the injustice that separated them from the American society.

## **1. Historical Background**

Since the 1500s and due to slave trade captive men were kidnapped from their home land Africa, mostly from the western coast and inland Africa. They were chained and shipped to the New World such as the Caribbean or Brazil, where they were sold at auctions or slave markets.

### **1.1 Definition of Slavery**

Before defining what is slavery it is important to go back in history to know how slavery actually started. The European exploration of Sub-Saharan Africa began in the fifteenth century, during the age of discovery, while they were trying to find a short trade route to India. When they reached the western coast of the continent, their main concern was to do business with the Africans. They started with establishing trading posts on the coast.

Trading in Africa was developing gradually. Europeans used to bring clothes, guns and other products in order to exchange them with the Africans who in return provided them with ivory, gold, oil and finally slaves in the seventeenth century.

The development of the network for shipping slaves from Africa to the New World began in 1441 with the arrival of fourteen African slaves in Lisbon, Portugal. The slaves brought as a gift to Prince Henry the navigator (1349-1460) the son of the king of Portugal. The Africans had been captured in a raid on one of the many voyages Portuguese explorers had made along Africa's Atlantic coast. (Sylvester 112)

At that time the American colonies were looking for free laborers to work in the plantation fields; as a result, the Africans were kidnapped sold and transferred to the New World.

Most of the slaves taken to the Americas came from West Africa. Europeans built forts and trading posts along a 3.000 mile stretch of Africa's Atlantic coast, from Senegal in

the North to Angola in the South. About 70 percent of the slaves taken from West Africa came from the North of the Congo River and South of the Sahara Desert. The Coastal countries now known as Benin, Ghana, and Nigeria supplied a large share of captives. (Sylvester 109)

Africans traded other Africans mainly for gun acquisition, and used those weapons to capture and kidnap more. As a result other Africans who did not have guns were forced into the business of slave trading to possess guns to defend themselves from being taken as captives. Africans were obliged into slavery and slave trade. (Sylvester 110)

By the end of the 1600s, Africans were commonly kidnapped by roving gangs of both White and Black slavers. Whole villages sometimes fell victims to these kidnappers, but it was mostly women and children who were stolen in this fashion. Faced with occasional famine, and frequent warfare and violence, poor African families were sometimes forced to sell themselves or their children into slavery. (Sylvester 111)

For thousands of years slavery has existed as an institution in many civilizations all over the world. It can be defined as involuntary servitude in which individuals were constantly threatened, dehumanized and treated with cruelty and barbarically.

Slavery started in 1619 and ended till 1863. In the United States, it led to Civil War and was more based in the south, than it was in the North. Slavery was a legal system rather than a cultural one only.

Slavery was justified with the Greeks and Romans' slavery systems as an example as well as examples from the Bible. Some whites argued that even the slaves themselves profited from the slavery system, as their masters provided them with food, clothes and shelter. Whilst others argued that black people were naturally inferior to whites and not keeping them under the slavery system would destabilize the order of life. (Green 04:00)

The Black enslaved people in America were all doomed to involuntary labor and almost always without any pay; slaves were not treated as human beings and used to work from sunrise to sunset under different tasks and conditions. "In order for slavery to function slaves had to be dehumanized" (Green 07:41). The masters used to whip their slaves to keep them working; eventually both the slave holders and the slaves will be dehumanized, both of them would lose the sanctity and the dignity of human life.

## 1.2 Slavery as an Economic System

During the 1500s European countries such as Spain, France, England and Denmark who had colonies in the New World wanted to expand their investment on plantations. Eventually, the demand for more labor grew, and Africans were the perfect match for their demands. Thinking about the advantages that could be extracted by developing the agricultural goods of cotton, tobacco, coffee and sugar is what fueled human slavery. Actually, none of these goods were necessary for survival, but the fact that mattered was that Europeans could make tremendous amounts of money from slave trade. (Sylvester 108)

The cradle of slavery in the United States was the Southern region, as they had a slave based economy. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century cotton was considered as the 20<sup>th</sup> century oil. Cotton was used everywhere: in hospitals, soap and clothes. And as slave camps spread in the south, production increased and flourished. By 1831,  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the world's cotton came from the American Southern states. Southern whites became rich as did their fellow northerners also, because the cotton that the southern states produced made a huge contribution in the industrialization of the northern states. (Desmond; Green 01:00)

Cotton planters and consumers were making a new system of economy, a capitalist economy, fed by slavery. Slavery was the engine of phenomenal wealth in America, when planters and slave owners understood that tremendous profits could be made from the system they pushed and obliged their slaves to work more. This was confirmed by Matthew Desmond from the New York Times Magazine, who wrote: "What made the cotton economy boom in the United states,... was our nation's unflinching willingness to use violence on non-white people and to exert its will on seemingly endless supplies of land and labor."

Productivity of a slave was important to a slave holder. Therefore, when a slave fell sick or became old it was considered as a loss to the slave holders, it meant a serious financial loss because slaves were expensive. The owners needed the slaves in a good shape in order to produce more and eventually extract more money.

They picked in long rows, bent bodies shuffling through cotton fields white in bloom. Men, women and children picked, using both hands to hurry the work. Some picked in Negro cloth, their raw product returning to them by way of New England mills. Some picked completely naked. Young children ran water across the humped

rows; white overseers peered down from horses. Enslaved workers placed each cotton bowl into a sack slung around their necks. Their haul would be weighted the sunlight stalked away from the fields and, as the freedman Charles Ball recalled, you couldn't "distinguish the weeds from the cotton plants." If the haul came up light, enslaved workers were often whipped. "A short day's work was always punished," Ball wrote. (Desmond)

White doctors relayed on slave owners for financial stability, they used to accompany slave owners to slave auctions to verify the health of slaves, as they were called also to treat ill slaves. Sometimes slaves were sold or borrowed to physicians, whether they were healthy or sick, to be used in their medical experiments especially if they became too old to work or to breed more slaves.

### **1.3 Abolition of the Importation of Slaves**

After the American War of Independence, the Northern states passed legislations to abolish slavery in America, as their economy was not based on slave labor. The thing that created tension between the Northern and Southern states, as they had a slave based economy.

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> march, 1807 the American congress passed a law to "prohibit the importation of slaves into any port or place within the jurisdiction of the United States...from any foreign kingdom, place or country" (qtd. in "Congress Abolishes"). However, the new law was not applied until 1808.

In 1807, some southern congressmen along with more than 4 million slaves living in the South joined the Northerners and voted for the abolition of slave trade. Yet, the slave trade that was common within the United States was not prohibited, what was actually banned was the transportation of African slaves to America.

### **1.4 The End of Slavery**

Since the colonial days in America slavery had been practiced and was legal. At that time an enslaved African was treated as a property, and a slave holder had the right to purchase, sell or give away a slave.

Slavery was more based in the South than it was in the North, and most of the northern states citizens wanted to abolish slavery and give men human rights. In contrast, the Southerners were pro-slavery and needed slaves to work on their plantations (tobacco, sugar, cotton). Ultimately, a clash grew between the upper and southern states, which eventually led to a civil war, especially, with the election of Abraham Lincoln, the south felt that they were losing representation as they believed that Lincoln was anti-slavery and in favor of the northern interests. The 16<sup>th</sup> president of the United States of America, Abraham Lincoln was concerned about the issue of slavery; he called it “the disease of the entire nation” (qtd. in Ford 15).

In 1862, Abraham Lincoln drafted the Emancipation Proclamation, according to him it was “military necessary” (qtd. in Ford 21) and “an act of justice” (qtd. in 26). Abraham Lincoln thought that granting the slaves their freedom would create more tension on the Confederation and weaken it. He used the Emancipation Proclamation as a tool to end slavery.

Emancipation signifies liberty, and proclamation means a public notification. It stated that all the slaves living in the South, in the rebelling states, against the union were free, and it allowed also Blacks to join the US navy and army. However, the Emancipation Proclamation will take place and slavery will be ended only in the case that the Union won the war against the Confederation. The Emancipation Proclamation made it clear that the Civil War was taking place because of the issue of slavery (Ford 24, 29, 31). On January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1863 all slaves in the confederate states were declared free. Accordingly, the document stated that “all persons hold as slaves within any state designated part of a state, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free.” (Emancipating Proclamation, National Park Services. US Department of the Interior). It gave hope to 4 million African Americans living in the south at that time.

Finally, in the aftermath of the Civil War (1861-1865), which lasted four years, three amendments were introduced to the US constitution. The thirteenth amendment of the US constitution was ratified, the amendment states that “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for a crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist in the United States.” (US constitution. Amend. XIII, sec 1). Hence, the part “except as a punishment for a crime” mentioned in the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment meant that slavery was not abolished but rather moved from plantation to prison. In other terms slavery

was not fully abolished but rather reformed. Thus, it gave another way for southern legislators to pass new codes meant to limit the freedom of the newly freed Blacks and control them. The African Americans began a new journey and struggle fighting for their civil rights and to be recognized as citizens of the United States.

## **2 The Change of Attitude towards Blacks**

After the abolition of slavery in 1863 through the Emancipation Proclamation, Black people were no longer regarded as a valuable property but rather as a source of trouble and nuisance. They had to bear and endure racist laws enacted specifically against them.

### **2.1 Definition of Racism**

Racism is prejudice, discrimination or hatred towards a minority group. It can be defined as the belief that a certain race is inferior or better than another because they have a different skin color, speak a different language, religion, beliefs, origin, traditions, and costumes. Through this belief many wars were declared, slavery was established as an institution. Throughout the course of history many people sacrificed their lives and fought for the rights of the biased minority. Yet, racism is still prevalent and widely speared whether it is implicitly or explicitly until today across the world.

### **2.2 An Introduction into Racial Segregation**

According to Encyclopedia Britannica, racial segregation is to separate people from institutions and facilities such as swimming pools, hospitals, schools, restrooms, buses and separate services like education and housing services for people of color (*Racial Segregation*). Segregation was used in many countries in which the Black and White races coexisted. However, this type of discrimination was made legal in the southern states of America during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Even though they were freed by the Emancipation Proclamation, America's Blacks were still struggling for equality. Blacks were separated from the Whites in all aspects of life.

After the Civil War of 1865, and during the Reconstruction Era, the Southern states were militarily occupied. African Americans were able to vote and were even elected to high

office due to the military occupation of the south. However, after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln in 1865, his successor Andrew Johnson, a former slave holder and a southerner, did not support the coexistence and equality between the Blacks and Whites so, things changed. The 1877 elections represented a turning point, a deal was made between the Southern Democrats to give their voices to the Republicans in order to end the military occupation in the southern states. The south was able to form their governments again; it was the end of the Reconstruction Period and the beginning of segregation and the Jim Crow Laws.

The period of black liberation known as Reconstruction then came to an end. In the South, the former slaveholding aristocracy renewed African Americans' subjugation. Supported by a campaign of violence against the newly emancipated slaves, southern states adopted segregation statutes—Jim Crow laws. Denied the right to vote, segregated in public transportation, schools, and private accommodations, and victimized by lynching and other forms of brutality, African Americans in the South were reduced again to a lower-caste status. (Rothstein 53)

## 2.3 Jim Crow Laws

The Jim Crow Laws are a system of racial oppression and a series of laws which operated between 1877 and 1954, which marked the end of the Reconstruction period, till the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s. Right after the abolition of slavery, segregating the ex-slaves appeared; it took place in the southern states and was known as Black codes.

Black codes were strict local and state laws that detailed when, where and how formerly enslaved people could work, and for how much compensation. The codes appeared throughout the South as a legal way to put black citizens into indentured servitude, to take voting rights away, to control where they lived and how they traveled and to seize children for labor purposes. (History, "Jim Crow Laws")

The origin of the word Jim Crow is the name of a dance routine originated in 1828, Jump Jim Crow, written by a white comedian Thomas Dartmouth, known as "Daddy" Rice. He used to perform the song in black face and using a black dialect. (Urofsky)

After the Civil War in 1865, southern white democratic legislators passed the Jim Crow Laws that limited the rights of these new freedmen, and considered them as second class citizens. Since the white Americans believed that they were naturally superior to the colored people. As they believed also in the divine mission and that they were the chosen people, they marginalized the Black people, tore them out of even their dignity, tied them, and made them outlawed through the Jim Crow Laws.

### **3 Forms of Segregation**

After the Reconstruction Era and restricted their rights and liberties legally, they were prevented from using the same commodities as white people, prevented from going to the same schools as whites and from entering hospitals. Yet, there are Black Americans who refused to stay silent and decided to take action.

#### **3.1 Dred Scott Case**

In 1857, Dred Scott was a slave living in the free state of Illinois and Wisconsin territory then sold and was moved to the slave state of Missouri. Dred Scott sought his freedom through the United States legal system. The Dred Scott V. Stanford case was one of the very first and most famous legal battles in the history of the United States.

The chief justice Roger Taney, who was against granting slaves their freedom, led the Supreme Court which ruled that Dred Scott could not sue in the first place in the Supreme Court because he was not considered as a citizen of the United States of America. To back up his decision the chief justice used the Declaration of Independence, and went to justify that the phrase “all men are equal” mentioned in the Declaration of Independence was only meant for white people and citizens of the United States, as the enslaved Blacks did not participate in the drafting of the Declaration of Independence. He used also the US Constitution; the chief justice argued that the US Constitution, which starts with “we the people”, speaks generally about the people of the United States. However, two clauses included in the constitution show that the enslaved Africans were not regarded as members of the American society. Therefore, Dred Scott had no right to sue in the Supreme Court nor was he granted his freedom in the southern state of Missouri.

## **3.2 Separate but Equal**

More than 3 decades after the Emancipation Proclamation, and during the period of segregation and the Jim Crow Laws, the southern states fashioned a new concept of “Separate but Equal” in order to keep the White and Black races separated.

When the new Louisiana law provided equal but separate accommodations for the colored and white races in 1890, six years later in 1896, Plessy, an octoroon, challenged the state’s law and sat in the white people’s carriage and refused to move to the colored people’s carriage. As a result, he was arrested and the court decided that he was guilty of violating the state law. Plessy appealed against the decision of the court and argued that the “Separate Car Act” violated the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> amendments and therefore was unconstitutional. The court on the other hand responded that the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment was not violated because it did not reestablish involuntary servitude; as well as the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment, which was only meant to secure the legal equality of African Americans and White people and not the social one. The court pointed that Plessy was receiving equal services as the white passengers but in separate environments.

## **3.3 Segregation in Schools**

The Jim Crow Laws segregated the African Americans in most public venues. Their rights and liberties were denied. The Jim Crow Laws were more reinforced and supported after the Plessey v. Ferguson Supreme Court’s decision in 1896, which argued that as long as an equal quality of facilities was provided to both colored and white people the doctrine “Separate but Equal” was constitutional. It wasn’t until 1954, that the Plessey v. Ferguson’s decision was reversed. When the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional in the case of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, it concluded that the separate facilities meant that they were unequal. Accordingly, it stated that “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.”

The Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka was exceptionally important. It was the turning point which represented a change in the history of the Civil Rights Movement<sup>1</sup>. It all

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<sup>1</sup> The Civil Rights Movement: was an American movement during the 1950s till the 1960s; it is the struggle of African Americans to secure equal rights and fight against racial segregation and discrimination.

started when an African American named Oliver Brown tried to enroll his daughter at the closest school to his house, instead of having to take the bus everyday to go to a black elementary school. However the public school, situated in Topeka, Kansas, refused to register Linda Brown. As a result, 13 black families, including the Brown family, decided to file a suit against the Topeka Board of Education in 1951 arguing that it was unconstitutional.

After the U.S. District Court for the District of Kansas denied the unconstitutionality of the segregation policy of the Topeka Board of Education, the Browns appealed in the Supreme Court. This time accompanied by Thurgood Marshal a lawyer for the NAACP<sup>2</sup>, Thurgood Marshal led the charge in arguing that the segregation of schools violated the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment of the U.S. Constitution in 1953, even though the Topeka both Black and White schools were equally well equipped. Since the Supreme Court's justices were divided the case was put on hold in hopes of having new arguments, meanwhile during this time the chief justice in charge passed away and was replaced by Earl Warren, who thought of segregation as unconstitutional. The new chief justice Warren understood that most southerners were pro-segregation, thus he organized a unanimous decision. Finally, the court ruled that the plaintiffs were deprived of the Equal Protection law guaranteed by the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Since the Emancipation Proclamation, the Supreme Court's decision in the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, concerning segregation in schools, was the greatest victory for African Americans.

### **3.4 Healthcare Segregation**

Ever since the Brown v. Board of Education, which was a key milestone in the Civil Rights movement, the issue of racial segregation in public schools hasn't changed much; districts and schools did little to bring any changes. During the Civil Rights Movement, activists such as Martin Luther King Jr., especially in his speech "I have a dream", denounced realities of discrimination towards Black people, and how African Americans were marginalized, stigmatized, cut off and considered as socially inferior to whites. Martin Luther King highlighted one of the most little noticed forms of segregation, healthcare segregation, he described it as "the most shocking and most inhumane" at the end of the Selma, Montgomery march in 1965. (Washington 06)

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<sup>2</sup> NAACP: National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

African Americans were deeply affected by this type of racial segregation, healthcare segregation. It was not only horrible, but it also led to death in some cases. The "Medical Apartheid", inspired by Harriet Washington's book of that same name, was dangerous and represented a violation of human rights and the equality of American citizens which was guaranteed by the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

Segregation in America was due to the racist Black Codes and Jim Crow Laws. Many hospitals, clinics, doctor's offices and medical staffs were separated according to their race; this meant that whenever Blacks received treatments they will always be inferior to Whites. Many deaths among the Black community resulted due to the mistreatment, neglect and the refusal to be taken care of by doctors in hospitals and clinics as it was against the law to treat a colored man. (Newkirk)

As a result of segregation in healthcare, Black communities that lived in much disadvantaged communities than those of the Whites were doomed to unhealthy lives and lived in dangerous environments due to the fact that they were neglected by the United States healthcare system.

## **Conclusion**

To sum up, the African Americans were oppressed and mistreated under the slavery system. After the abolition of slavery little was changed for Black people's lives. They were segregated and prevented, once again, legally from their basic civil rights. In the second chapter more information about healthcare segregation and how white physicians took advantage of slaves, and African Americans in general, and conducted medical experiments on them.

# **Chapter two**

**Science without Consciousness**

## Chapter two: Science without Consciousness

### Introduction

It was only a few decades ago that people started investigating the nature of medical experimentation that were conducted on African Americans, and started denouncing them. In this chapter more details will be given on healthcare disparities across time in the United States. Also, more light will be shed on the nature of medical experiments conducted in the US. This specific chapter attempts to voice the stories of African Americans who underwent medical experiments and whose voices were silenced.

#### 1. Medical Research Fed by the Slavery System

Physicians' memoirs, medical journals, and planters' records all reveal that enslaved Black Americans bore the worst abuses of these crudely empirical practices, which countenanced a hazardous degree of ad hoc experimentation in medications, dosages and even spontaneous surgical experiments in the daily practice among slaves (Washington 15)

Black people have been utilized by American physicians to conduct their medical experiments. Whites were seen as scientifically superior to Blacks, and that Blacks were the fittest subjects for medical research.

##### 1.1. The 1800s Doctors Reliance on Slave Owners

Since early 1800s white physicians and slave owners shared the same interest, slave holders were concerned with the health of their slaves; as being healthy meant being more productive, and the death of slaves represented a loss of money. Therefore, in order to preserve their money planters had to save their slaves. Also, the healthier a slave was the more money he brought to his master when being sold at slave markets. The physicians, on the other hand, were concerned and wanted to establish their financial stability. Thus, doctors relied on slave owners and the slavery system for economic reasons; they reinforced their medical researches by using the slaves as research subjects. Harriet A. Washington wrote:

More than scientific racism, more than heroic purges, bleedings, and cathartics, and more than the punitive use of therapeutics involving medical experimentation was

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the scientific personification of enslavement, violence, pain, and shame joined as physicians forced the enslaved body into medical service, not to cure, but for profit. Medical experimentation was profitable in terms of recovered health and life of whites, who benefited once the medical process had been perfected. It was also a profitable source of fame, and sometimes fortune for physicians. (24)

Physicians traditionally accompanied slave owners to slave markets or slave auctions in order to examine the health and well being of the slave. This was mentioned in the travel memoirs of Frederick Gardiner, and he mentioned the state of slave markets in Washington, D.C during the 19<sup>th</sup> century:

There are a great number of Negroes, nearly all whom are slaves. And on different streets are large halls occupied as Marts or stores, for the sale or purchase of slaves.... While I have been looking at one of these places on Gravier Street, two gentlemen have arrived, one of whom I have seen in the Saloon, he is a young planter and come to purchase a girl to take care of his children, or whatever duties he may think proper to impose upon her. The other person is a doctor whom he has brought with him for the purpose of examining her. They pass along the front of the row in company with the agent or salesman. As they move forward, one is called upon to stand up, and then another while a passive examination is made. Then finally he discovers a bright mulatto, who appears about 16 years of age and is quite good looking. She is ushered into a private room where she is stripped to a nude condition and a careful examination is made of all parts of the body by the Dr. and is pronounced by him to be sound. The money is then paid and she is transferred to her new owner.... (qtd. in Washington 14)

The southern states of America were the cradle of medical experiments on slaves. There were more physicians in the South than there was in the Northern States, as working in the slave holding jurisdictions was becoming more and more profitable during the period of Civil War. Richard D. Arnold, a leading physician of Savannah reported in his journals: "The true reason why physicians get into practice more readily in the south than at the North and that here he stands some chance of making his bread while he has teeth to chew it" (qtd. in Fisher 38), Dr. Arnolds statement in regard to the white physicians' exodus to the south confirms the fact that they were only after financial wealth and fame, they did not care about the slaves' state nor interested in treating them.

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While doctors became more and more relying on slave holders, an important part of their income came from treating ill slaves on plantation fields. Some doctors signed contracts to treat the slaves on one plantation for a whole year and thus received an annual payment and others were paid each time a slave fell sick. The medical societies established "fee bills" or "tariff fees" in the south. The tariff fee of handling and treating a slave differed from one case to another; for instance, an office visit would cost \$1.00 only, however, being called to a house would increase the price; travelling from six to eight miles cost up to \$2.50; staying up with a slave to treat him was charged \$10.00 till \$20.00; assisting a normal birth was set back to \$20.00 also, and a complicated one is estimated to be between \$30.00 to \$100.00. The fee of treating a slave took into consideration also the period in which the physician was called, for example when different illnesses, infectious diseases or epidemics broke out. Yet, sometimes the tariff fee depended on the result of the case, on whether the slave was cured or not. (Halperin 13)

Historian Walter Fisher explained how much the vaccination of the slaves was charged in his publication *Journal of the History of Medicine*: "In 1851 the medical profession Richmond, Virginia, established a table of rates in which... the vaccination of a single slave was set at two dollars; each additional vaccination on the same plantation, or farm or in the same family, cost one dollar" (38).

Doctors were one of the crew members of the slave ship during the time of the transatlantic slave trade during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The doctors' mission during these voyages was to make sure that the slaves they were bringing with them were healthy and well enough to work in the plantation fields, and it was also to be able to sell them at a high price. These physicians were triggered into slave trade for economical gains: "The more you preserve of them for plantations the more profit you will have, and also the greater reputation and wages another voyage" (Halperin 15)

### 1.2. Slaves and Medical Care

When a slave on the plantation fields fell sick, he was first treated by his other fellow slaves with traditional remedies, which involved spiritual and physiological methods. They treated diseases using herbs and natural medicaments; these treatments were considered by the enslaved to be effective and less painful compared to the ones used by western white physicians, or it was the master or the overseers who attempted to treat him (Halperin 14;

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Washington 21). This contact between the slave and the doctors introduced the white American physicians to the germ world and the “The Germ Theory”; especially with the subtropical climate of the American South which makes it perfect for the spread of the infectious diseases such as Malaria, Yellow Fever, or Tuberculosis. And the absence of the simplest health measures such as clean water and hand-washing, specifically with the slave’s living and working conditions worsened the cases. The sanitary conditions made it easier for the spread of these diseases in the Antebellum South (Washington 14).

At that time there were no effective cures such as antibiotics; there were only temporary cures and the ones that existed were often risky. Their outcome could whether cure or cause death to the patient. The cures that existed were very weakening to the patient and unpleasant. They involved purges; caused vomiting, diarrhea and sweats as well as bleeding via cupping<sup>3</sup> by using potions containing toxic materials such as mercury, chlorine and opium, the use of such cures had other side effects like nervous system disorders, cancer, heart diseases, teeth and hair loss and respiratory diseases:

Through the eighteenth century, western medicine was not only misinformed but dangerously so. Caustic medicines of the period often contained metabolic poisons such as arsenic, or calomel, a compound of mercury and chlorine that was used as purgative. Many other remedies contained highly toxic substances such as mercury and addictive schedule II narcotics, including the opiates laudanum, opium, and morphine, as well as cocaine derivatives. These medicines addicted, sickened, or killed outright; they also could trigger chemical pneumonitis, or progressive lung injury, if inhaled during a bout of *iatrogenic*, or physician-triggered, vomiting. No studies seem to have been done on this point, but such lung injuries may have helped to account for slaves’ higher death rate from respiratory disease. (Washington 15)

During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries the southern physicians were harsh on slaves, they saw them as the perfect subjects and the most fit for their medical experiments. Medical experiments have often been relied on, and have often been conducted on the minorities, the most marginalized, stigmatized and disadvantaged group of people such as: children, women, mentally ill people, and during slavery the southern medicine has focused its radars and targeted the enslaved people, like Dr. Thomas Hamilton, a physician and a plantation owner

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<sup>3</sup> Cupping: It is the process of putting heated cups made of glass to create suction on the skin and drive the blood to the surface of the skin and held inside the glass cup.

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who used to conduct experiments on slaves between the period of the 1820s and 1830s. He once borrowed a slave while he was trying to find a cure for sun-stroke. Dr. Hamilton subjected Fed, the borrowed slave, to this experiment, as well as many others. He basically made the slaves fall ill, wrote notes constantly on their state and then tried the remedy that he came up with on the person he experimented on.

Most of the medical experiments that were conducted in the American South on the most vulnerable people, who went through abuse, racism and fear, were tackled in the same way: “Physicians were active participants in the exploitation of African bodies. The record reveals that slaves were both medically neglected and abused because they were powerless and legally invisible” (Washington 15).

### 1.3. Thomas Jefferson, “the Scientist”

Thomas Jefferson was not only a politician and a famous member of the Founding Fathers, and the one who wrote the first draft of the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America; he was also a slave holder and a scientist who experimented on his own slaves, as well as his family’s slaves.

At that time, the 18<sup>th</sup> century, smallpox was one of the most dangerous diseases and had killed millions of people throughout the world. The only way to treat it is through inoculation, described by Harriet Washington as follows: “consisted of inserting or injecting infected material from a sick person directly into a good one to induce immunity” (25). However, inoculation was not effective it had its own risks. In 1796, when an English doctor named Edward Jenner discovered a certain similarity between a virus which circulated between cows, cowpox, and the smallpox, he introduced a vaccine for smallpox which consisted of injecting cowpox to supply immunity to smallpox. Thomas Jefferson knew about this vaccination through a Harvard professor named Benjamin Waterhouse, who had previously used cowpox on his own family, however, it has proved to be ineffective. But still Thomas Jefferson proceeded with this medical experiment, he conducted it on some of the slaves he owned himself, some of his sons’ as well as his neighbors’ slaves. This brings it to a total of a hundred slaves. The slaves who were vaccinated were not contaminated by smallpox, but those who were not, got sick. Thomas Jefferson even vaccinated a slave against smallpox and then exposed him to smallpox only to prove the theory and the efficiency of the vaccine. (25)

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According to Washington, it wasn't only after seeing the positive results of the vaccine that Thomas Jefferson, the American politician and the scientist, decided to inject his "white" family members and his neighbors with the same vaccine. (25)

### **1.4. The Father of Gynecology**

James Marion Sims is a doctor and surgeon who performed shocking experiments on enslaved women on the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He developed surgical techniques and new tools. In the middle of the nineteenth century Dr. James M. Sims opened the first women's hospital in the United States in New York City. After almost a decade of Doctor Sims passing away, in 1894 a 14 foot marble statue was conducted in his honor for his contributions as a physician in the field of gynecology. The monument used to lay in New York City, Central Park just across from the NY Academy of Medicine in East Harlem before it was removed in 2018. The sculpture of the so called "Father of Gynecology" was extracted from Central Park after an anonymous voting was done by the New York City Public Design Commission. The statue was then placed in Green-Wood Cemetery, near Doctor Sims tomb. (Reverby)

Doctor James Marion Sims is considered by some as "The Father of Gynecology", a scientist who dedicated most of his life on experimentation and medicine in general. Whilst, for many, Sims is a cruel human being and a torturer who used to experiment on enslaved blacks whom he used to buy specifically for this purpose, without using anesthesia nor their consent.

Doctor Sims conducted many horrific and horrible experiments by the late 1830s. He used the slaves that he constantly bought for his experiments, as he used some of them as assistants in his laboratory. One of them was a 19 years old young man who underwent a surgery which led to his death. In order to stop an infection from spreading to the whole body; Dr. Sims removed bone segments without using anesthesia; the thing that led to his death. (Washington 27)

In one of the nightmarish and harshest experiments ever conducted by Sims was that of the Black babies who were born with a Hypocalcemic Tetany <sup>4</sup>. He took them from their mothers and performed on them his experimental surgery which consisted of making an incision in the babies' scalp and tried to change its position or modify it. However, this very

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<sup>4</sup> Hypocalcemic tetany: a condition caused by low calcium levels can cause muscle cramps and spasms for example.

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common neuromuscular disease among Black children was misunderstood and had nothing to do with the child's scalp, but rather it was due to malnutrition and a lack in calcium, magnesium as well as vitamin D. Ultimately, the child was doomed to death; Sims blamed the women who were nursing the babies and the mothers for their death. (Washington 26)

In 1845, a female slave on the Westcott plantation, named Anarcha and aged 17 years old, was pregnant with her first baby. But what happened to Anarcha during and after her delivery is unimaginably cruel and explains the horror of these experiments. After three days of intense pain of contractions; since the girl was young, she had an underdeveloped pelvis, and this made the giving birth process very difficult for her. When Doctor Sims was called in, he brought with him the obstetrical forceps<sup>5</sup>. Anarcha's baby died during the delivery; and the 17 years old black slave was faced with complications, consisting of an abnormal communication between three organs: vagina, bladder and rectum as well as a destruction of the vaginal wall. The opening between the vagina and the bladder is called the viscovaginal fistula. Anarcha was neither the first nor the last female who suffered from the viscovaginal fistula; it was very common among many black women. (Washington 27)

In an attempt to treat or find a cure for the visco-vaginal fistula, James Marion Sims experimented on eleven slave women with the visco-vaginal condition, as they were the most vulnerable, the easiest to acquire and because they were voiceless, and could not refuse. For four years, Sims conducted his experiments over and over again without using anesthesia even though it existed at that time and had already been in use since the early 1840s. Sims believed in the myth that black persons did not acquire pain the same as white persons; or furthermore, they did not feel pain at all. He also went to justify his act by stating that the process or the surgery was not "that" painful and the use of ether as anesthesia, at that time, was not very needed. So, Sims used the female slaves' genital area as a field for his experiments. Every time he tempted to close or treat an open wound, it got infected. He would then reopen, try treating and suturing it again; all this without using anesthesia. For the first time a women's doctor, as he was called during that period, was able to see and discover the female genitals, using a speculum he designed himself, and it was done through a female slave.

Southern doctors performed surgeries with filthy hands in unsuitable environments and with their everyday clothes on, as they had no idea about what causes the infections in the

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<sup>5</sup> The obstetrical forceps: a tool used when giving birth, for grabbing the baby and making the delivery process easier.

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human body (Washington 15). However, Doctor James Marion Sims represented the opposite of most southern doctors. What really caused the infection among these slaves was not the doctor's untidiness; it was actually the organic sutures, as they represented a field for pathogens. Thus, Sims replaced these organic sutures with silver sutures, the thing that resulted in stopping the infections for the female slaves. James Marion Sims viscovaginal fistula surgery represented a revolution in the field of gynecology. It was published in a medical paper in 1852, which gained him a fortune: a reputation and this is how he became known as "The Father of Gynecology" (27). However, the real heroes and the subjects who made this revolutionary surgery possible are rarely mentioned in history and scientific books.

### **2. Racism's Effects on Experimental Practice**

Due to racism, prejudice and the laws that were enacted against the African Americans and restricted their freedom and self-control, these people were often seen and considered as the weakest and the fittest subjects for non-therapeutic scientific research as regarded by physicians. African Americans were treated as guinea pigs by the American medicine through abusive and unethical medical experiments.

#### **2.1. The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment (1932-1972)**

The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment is a 40 year unethical study, as it is considered to be also the longest non-therapeutic experiment ever conducted on human beings in the whole history of medical research. The study was conducted between 1932 and 1972 in Macon County, Alabama in which the United States Public Health Service deliberately denied treatment for Syphilis in order to document the natural history of this disease for African Americans. At first, when these Black men were recruited, they were told that they will be receiving free healthcare from the Federal government of the United States; but they did know little about being subjected to a medical experiment.

The U.S public Health Service theorized that the path that this disease, syphilis, took in a Black man's body was different from the one that it took in white male's body. They believed also that African Americans made it more possible for the spread of venereal diseases (Washington 62). In the study 600 men were recruited, more than half of these men (399) had already been diagnosed with syphilis and 201 did not carry the disease (Nix;

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“Tuskegee Timeline”). Also the study which was supposed to last from 6 to 9 months ended up becoming a 40 year clinical study.

These ill men were never treated from syphilis, even though the treatment existed in the late 1940s. The antibiotic Penicillin was being used as a remedy for syphilis, yet the researchers in charge of the Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male never used it.

Syphilis is a contagious and a sexually transmitted disease by sexual contact or from a pregnant woman to the fetus. What causes the disease is a bacterium called Treponema Pallidum. The bacteria penetrate into the body through cuts on the skin for instance. If not treated, syphilis can lead to brain damage, blindness, paralysis, other long-term complications and even death (Washington 61-62).

Public Health Service blamed the African Americans for having syphilis and blamed it on their irresponsible sexual activity; even when there were many publications proving the inverse in Macon County, Alabama, where the study was conducted. According to Washington: “Despite the PHS physicians’ cracker-barrel wisdom, family histories and clinical assessments revealed that 61 percent of the true syphilis cases in Macon County were not contracted through sexual activity” (62)

It all started when the Public Health Service offered a day of free health tests. Black men from all across Macon County lined up in front of the clinic to get these tests. “Most of them had never seen a doctor before” (Washington 62). Throughout that day doctors tested these Negro men telling them that they were being tested for “Bad Blood”<sup>6</sup>. After the examination, the chosen participants were told that they will be getting a free and special treatment. The Public Health Service convinced the few local black physicians in Macon County not to treat the participants of the research.

Later the 399 men who were previously diagnosed with syphilis were put under examination; they were given inappropriate medication or treatment on purpose such as: mercury, vitamins and aspirin. When the men were dispensed the medicines, they believed that they represented their treatment. Actually, the Public Health Service needed these ill Negroes dead more than they needed them alive. The physicians were more interested in the exploitation of their bodies for anatomical examination and for performing spinal taps<sup>7</sup>. Throughout the research study, the

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<sup>6</sup> Bad Blood: also known as “Nebulous Disorder” used to describe a group of illnesses like fatigue, anemia and other illnesses.

<sup>7</sup> Spinal Taps: or Lumbar puncture a procedures done to diagnose an infection for instance, it involves inserting a needle between two vertebrae in order to take a sample from the cerebrospinal fluid.

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participants experienced serious health problems like blindness, insanity and many others as they were never given proper or effective treatment in the 40 year course of the experiment to be able to follow the full progression of the syphilis.

Ever since 1965 voices started to rise to denounce the Tuskegee Syphilis Study as more people were hearing about it. The researchers and the study as a whole were being pointed to as an act of racism. However, those voices were always buried and dismissed. During that same year, a young venereal disease interviewer named Peter Buxton found out about it; he complained and tried stopping it without any result. Seven years later in 1972, Buxton leaked the story of the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment to a reporter friend, Jean Heller of the associated press. Heller blew up the story by writing an article about it. The outraged and angry public demanded an explanation from the government; the government on the other hand promised to investigate the matter (Washington 64-65; Nix).

At last, it resulted in more than 100 participants who died directly from syphilis or from complications related to the disease, 40 people infected their wives or more in some cases and 19 newborns with congenital syphilis. In 1997, the president of the United States Bill Clinton gave a formal apology for the Tuskegee syphilis study to the participants, the survivors and their families.

The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment is considered as a horrible and a highly racist study. Physicians at the Tuskegee institute not only did they mistreat them, but they also actively worked on keeping them from getting the treatment.

## Conclusion

African Americans went through institutional racism in medicine. Black people went through appalling and dreadful experimentations to the point that they lost faith in the American healthcare system and developed what is called as “Iatrophobia” or fear of the healer. After all these years, however, African Americans are still struggling with scientific racism. In the third chapter, more cases and examples of racism and discrimination will be presented.

# **Chapter Three**

**Between Yesterday and Today:  
Healthcare Racial Disparities**

## Introduction

Black people's voices were silenced, their rights stolen, and they also had their minds manipulated and brainwashed by the American medicine and the American Healthcare system. This chapter will discuss genocide, how African Americans were prevented from their natural and basic right of parenthood, and how African American women were stolen their experience and journey of motherhood through racist programs. The chapter will also unveil the fact that the American Healthcare System is still marginalizing and neglecting African Americans.

### 1. Controlling the Black Population

Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, whites were trying to lay hand on controlling how black people breed and their reproductivity by manipulating them through special programs.

#### 1.1. Birth Control

Many scientists and researchers, across time, have always been after proving the idea that black people were physiologically inferior to the white race. Eugenics, also called the science of purifying the human gene pool, a term introduced in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has classified the Black people as "eugenic misfits" who were doomed to give birth to unfit children (Washington 72). They even went to justify it as something hereditary. Eugenists wanted to lower the birth rate of what they called unfit; they believed that there is a group of people whom they labeled as unfit (blacks, mentally ill, poor, uneducated convicts), and that there is another group who is genetically superior.

Activists such as Margret Sanger, a eugenist and founder of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, believed that a way of dealing with poverty in the southern states was through dismissing and trying to reduce this unfit population's community; given the black community for instance, it was common for them to have a lot of children, therefore they were never able to raise their children properly. She rooted for a society that limited birth to only those she saw as "'unfit'" to have children. W.E.B Du Bois even wrote: "The mass of ignorant Negros still breed carelessly and disastrously, so that the increase among Negroes, even more than the increase among whites, is from that portion of the population least intelligent and fit, and least able to rear their children properly" (qtd. in Washington 74).

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During the 1930s Sanger popularized the term “Birth Control”; she established a three year project (1939-1942) called the “Negro Project” which was said to be “established for the benefit of the colored people” (qtd. in Washington 74), however, this project proved to be totally the contrary as it was indifferent to the African American community. This program actively worked on limiting black births and slowing the growth of Black population.

Margret Sanger’s movement came during a period where contraception and birth control were illegal. She claimed that her intentions were to help poor blacks, immigrants, and those women of low income, and those who were determined to find a birth control pill. In 1957 along with scientists and physicians, she introduced the oral contraceptive or birth pill. (Little)

Margret Sanger wanted to spread the idea of birth control and contraception, as an idea that will improve their way of life, and that breeding a lot of children was the source of misery. Throughout this project, Sanger tried to provide an education on the Birth Control Program to Black Americans. She wrote: “The most successful educational approach to the Negro is through a religious appeal... We do not want the word to get out that we want to exterminate the Negro population, and the minister is the man who can straighten out that idea if it occurs to any of their more rebellious members” (qtd. in Washington 74). To put the Negro Project in the hands of black women and to advertize her ideas, Sanger used the church, black doctors, black social workers and even civil rights movement activists to chase and dust away any suspicion. But, since African Americans have always been treated as guinea pigs, they did not trust this move and thought that these people were going to experiment on them.

Black women approved of the idea that breeding children without being able to raise them was no good for them and that it needed planning; however, they were still afraid to end up as a subject in some medical experiment or being sterilized without their knowledge. As they expressed these fears, they were accused of “paranoia”. During the 1970s, black women were more integrated into the American society, and more real labor was available for them outside the house. They preferred not to give birth recklessly, but rather to think about their careers and then have children when it is time. “In 1970, social activist Donald Bogue found that 80 percent of black women he surveyed in Chicago approved of birth control and 75 percent were using it” (Washington 75).

The methods and programs that were used to lower the birth rate of African Americans would today scream “Racism”, and eugenics was used to justify racist acts.

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Sanger wanted a world with people of good quality not just a lot of people. Behind her fight to legalize birth control and contraception, racism laid. Harriet Washington, a medical ethicist and writer, wrote about it:

The proliferation of birth-control clinics that were clearly aimed at an African American population falls neatly within the U.N. definitions—they were intended to selectively reduce births within the group. Also, these clinics were numerous and well funded at a time when health advocates failed to address more pressing African American health issues, such as abysmal nutrition, poor control of infectious disease, high infant mortality, low life expectancy, poor quality health care, scarce mental health care, and even a lack of access to hospitals and physicians. This medical myopia cripples any argument that birth-control clinics were erected with the health of African Americans in mind. (76)

Sanger's eugenics and strategies are still being carried on today through the Planned Parenthood Federation. Studies showed that 80 percent of Planned Parenthood clinics are situated within disadvantaged communities. ("Does Planned Parenthood Target Minorities" 00:30)

### **1.2. Stolen Fertility**

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century a lot of people thought that mental health problems, disability and criminality were hereditary. For eugenists, these people were unfit to breed. The United States used compulsory sterilization through legal laws to prevent the "unfit" groups from having children. As early as 1907, the State of Indiana passed a law sterilizing the "mentally unfit"; in the few years that followed, many states passed similar laws to the Indiana law. The right to have children and motherhood became inaccessible for many poor, black, unwed, disabled, and mentally ill women.

Like always, the ones who were harmed and injured from these laws and abused through forced sterilization were the African American women. Statistics done during the 1970s showed that the sterilization of African American women was the double of the white women's.

Most sterilization was done illegally, by providing misleading information, when unconscious, when having a child delivery, or by taking off their uterus without their consent and knowledge while having any type of abdominal surgery; some doctors even threatened

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women with their jobs, housing... if they did not sign their consent. And some sterilization was performed in hospitals as a mere practice for residents to learn from. In 1961, Fannie Lou Hammer, an African American Civil Rights Movement leader from Mississippi went to the hospital for a minor surgery, but while she was unconscious, she was sterilized by giving her a Hysterectomy, a very famous and common procedure which was also known as "Mississippi Appendectomy" (qtd. in Washington 77) . Mrs. Hammer was not told about her sterilization directly from her doctor until she heard rumors about her never having her own children.

One of the most famous cases of sterilization abuse in America is the Relf sisters' case, the case which unmasked the reality of the U.S. government funded sterilization abuse. The two sisters were mentally disabled, and in 1973 Minnie Lee (14) and her younger sister Mary Alice (12) living in Montgomery, Alabama were sterilized by a federal funded family planning clinic. After having their illiterate mother sign her consent, the girls who were supposed to have simple contraceptive shots, known also as depo- provera, ended up having a surgical sterilization without neither their consent nor their parents' knowledge. A nurse even went to the girls rooms and made Minnie Lee, the eldest of the two sisters, sign a false document indicating that she was 20 years old when Minnie Lee was only 14 at that time. Since two years earlier, Minnie Lee and Mary Alice took part in an experimental trial and received birth control injections, and this one was also without them having any idea. It was only after the experiment ended that the clinic decided to permanently sterilize the Relf sisters, because for them the two mentally disabled, black and poor girls who benefited from public housing and whose parents were unable to work were not "fit" to the society standards and did not deserve to have and raise children of their own. When the girls' parents found out and realized what had happened to their daughters, they sought legal help from the Southern Poverty Law Center. With their assistance the Relfs' directly filed a suit against the clinic and the ones who provided the clinic with federal funding. It was the Office of Economic Opportunity as well as the surgeons and all those who were involved in performing the surgery. The lawsuit that was filled by the Relf family demanded the ban of the use of federal funds for sterilization purposes. Thus, the district court led by Judge Gehard Gessel discovered that approximately 100,000 to 150,000 poor women, out of whom almost a half were black women, underwent sterilization abuse without their consent annually under federally funded programs. (Washington 77; Jones; "Relf Sisters")

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The Relf sisters' case disclosed the truth that lay behind the sterilization and the stolen fertility of poor women who were labeled as unfit and specifically to control and lower the rate of the black population and race. This case drew national attention in the U.S., as it was an eye opener to many people over the operations that were going on behind the curtains.

### 2. Modern Healthcare Disparities

Until today many black people are still dealing with racial disparities in the American society. African Americans are still being neglected by the American Healthcare system, and the difference between the medical care that the white people and the black people receive is just blatant. Until today physicians believe in myths such as: blacks have a thicker skin than whites, their pain level is not taken seriously, and they are less likely to receive pain killers in the E.R.

#### 2.1. Maternal Mortality

Maternity death rates in the United States are considered as pretty high for a country such as America. Between 1987 and 2014 the maternal mortality rate increased by 250 percent, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and women of color represent a considerable part in these rates due to the racially biased healthcare system. African American women are more likely to die during delivery or due to pregnancy-related deaths than white women. According to the New York Times:

The C.D.C examined pregnancy related deaths in the United States from 2011 to 2015 and also reviewed more detailed data from 2013 to 2017 provided by material mortality review committees in 13 states. The agency found that Black women were 3.3 times more likely than white women to suffer from pregnancy-related deaths. (Rabin)

Many statistics showed that black women are often paid less than white women, and many of them worked part-time and low-wage jobs with very few benefits. As a result, these women are obliged to choose between housing, food and healthcare, and for most of the times healthcare comes last. African American women are often faced with discrimination and inequality in terms of obtaining a good healthcare. Actually, a significant number of African Americans do not have insurance, thus they have limited access to healthcare.

African American women are more exposed and are more likely to have chronic and preventable diseases due to the stress they suffer from caused by their lives' instability as well

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as their socioeconomic problems, and it is known that such stress has a physical effect on the human body. It goes like this, colored women feeling that they are treated differently, not being listened to by their doctors, worrying about housing, and discrimination in their everyday life and in their work place; all this results in black women's body aging prematurely from the inside. The most common diseases that African American women suffer from are for instance, the cardiovascular diseases, hypertension, and diabetes. Thus, when they get pregnant, their pregnancy journey as well as their babies' health is often exposed to many risks. Preeclampsia<sup>8</sup>, sever bleedings; cardiovascular diseases and even obesity during the deliveries are the most widespread life-threatening complications and death causes that Black women encounter.

In April 2018, the National Partnership for Women and Families wrote in the subject of Black women's maternal health, it said that African American women were more endangered of developing fibroids during their early stages of life and show symptoms of high blood pressure earlier than white women in their pregnancies. (02)

A lot of maternity deaths occur during the delivery. Yet, more than half of the mortality rates are composed of the deaths that actually happened after the delivery during the puerperium by a day or even a year after giving birth. Usually, African American women give birth in hospitals which serve mostly minority communities and in which they receive less quality maternity care. The National Partnership for Women and Families explained that: "only 87 percent of Black women of reproductive age have health insurance, and many more experience gaps in coverage during their lives" (03). Thus, many were covered by Medicaid<sup>9</sup>, and most loose that coverage after 42 days of the delivery.

To improve Black women's maternal health, they need to receive the maternal healthcare before pregnancy, better quality and access to healthcare and an ongoing postpartum care. The New York Times wrote that 60 percent of pregnancy-related deaths could be prevented if the U.S. Healthcare System provided a better health care. (Rabin)

A 2018 study showed that more than 700 women die each year by causes related to pregnancy. In December 2018, President Donald Trump signed a historical bill and allocated 50 million dollars in funding to decrease maternal mortality over the following five years ("Fight to End" 00:09).

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<sup>8</sup> Preeclampsia: it involves high blood pressure during pregnancy.

<sup>9</sup> Medicaid: it is a program to help cover medical expenses for families of low income and others who meet specific criteria.

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The reason for the blatant difference of maternity healthcare between the white and African American women is until now unclear, but it has often been related to racism and prejudice with regard to the low access to healthcare systems and the quality of the care that they receive during pregnancy and childbirth, even when many blame the black women.

### 2.2. Infant Mortality

Infant mortality, in the United States, counts as one of the most important and serious issues. Statistics done by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention showed that the overall mortality rate for babies before their first birthday had reached in 2017, 5.8 deaths per 1,000 live births. The C.D.C wrote in a report that: “the infant mortality is an important marker of the overall health of a society” (“Infant Mortality”). The African American infant mortality rate counts as the highest among all races and ethnic groups in the United States. In 2016 it reached 10.97 per 1,000 live births. Whilst, the white infant mortality rate was at 4.67, which means that the Black babies mortality rate is more than twice the rate of white babies.

Such disparity is still unknown, but most of the deaths were caused or related to the mothers’ health, as 24 percent live at or under the poverty line (“Infant Mortality” 00:51); as a result, they are often stressed about their socioeconomic status, have a lack of access to quality health care, parental care programs and preventive care, as well as the factors of malnutrition, smoking and drinking alcohol. All these aforementioned factors can result in birth defects; preterm births and birth weight related deaths. A data published by the Office of Minority Health on the issue of infant mortality and African Americans said that: “African American infants are 3.8 times as likely to die from complications related to low birth weight as compared to non-Hispanic white infants” (“Infant Mortality”). In 2017, the preterm deaths of African American infants reached 41 percent, according to the C.D.C. in their report (Ely and Driscoll 05). The C.D.C also showed that women who have their babies before the age of 20 or earlier in their 20s are at a higher risk of encountering their infants’ death compared to women in their thirties (03).

On the other hand, studies showed that racial bias plays a role as well. The United States healthcare system is known for being unfair; thus, if a woman of color has a low income and doesn’t have insurance is more likely to receive a low and different level of care. So, being a member of a particular minority group in America might affect your pregnancy due to the unequal treatment and to structural racism in the American healthcare system.

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The Centers for Diseases Control and Prevention confirmed that they are willing to improve the healthcare quality for African American mothers before, during and after their pregnancy and to reduce the rates of infant mortality, by making health care providers, communities, and other partners work with public health care organizations to handle and find a solution to all the different factors that take part in the rise of infant mortality rates.

### **2.3. Black Disparity in Deaths Amid Covid-19 Crisis**

Covid-19 or the Corona virus is an infectious and contagious disease, first appeared in China in the city of Wuhan by late 2019. Early 2020 the epidemic disease spread and broke out in many countries across the globe. In March, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that the Corona virus is no longer an epidemic but rather a pandemic. The virus is known for having more severe effects on old people, cancer patients and those with chronic diseases like hypertension, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases as well as chronic respiratory disease.

On April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020, the United States' Corona virus numbers of confirmed cases were over one million cases and deaths were more than one hundred thousand. The newly discovered virus is killing more people among African Americans than it does to any racial and ethnic group in the United States. According to the C.D.C almost one third of the infections in America affected Black Americans. For example, in the capital city of Washington, D.C whose African American population is nearly 47 percent, they make up 46 percent of District Columbia's Coronavirus cases, the percentage of deaths of African Americans are of 76 percent according to Time (Dozier). Most African Americans live under poor conditions, with constant stress and have all kinds of conditions from high blood pressure, diabetes to obesity and asthma, which makes the virus have a more aggressive reaction. As doctor Celia J. Maxwell stated for National Geographic:

“With persons of color, and African Americans specifically, there are so many issues they are dealing with—health, socio-economic, poverty, education and systematic racism, with all those things together it doesn’t surprise me that these patients would be more vulnerable to something like COVID-19. It is the healthcare disparity that is driving the epidemic” (qtd. in Brooks).

This vulnerable community of African Americans has a poor access to healthcare, and cannot afford to invest in their health like they should be doing, which is inequitable

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structurally and influenced by huge racial disparity and discrimination and the fact that Black Americans are having a low access to the tests and are less likely to get proper treatment for the Corona virus disease. As Senator Elizabeth Warren expressed on this matter, “Because of government-sponsored discrimination and systemic racism, communities of color are on the front line of this pandemic” (qtd. in Laughland and Zanolli).

Adding to that, most African Americans hold essential jobs in which they are obliged to interact with other members of the society who might be infected by the disease. Thus, Black Americans do not have the advantage to protect themselves.

Another factor for the disproportionate death rates by Covid-19 among African Americans is the environment in which they live, in ghetto area, poor and disadvantaged communities which are often overcrowded. On May 20<sup>th</sup>, Ed Pilkington wrote for the Guardian:

When New York City produced its first racial breakdown of Covid-19 deaths in April, it showed that Latino and black New Yorkers, especially in the outer boroughs including Queens and the Bronx, were experiencing death rates that were at least twice of whites and Asians. (“Black Americans”)

### Conclusion

The African American population has been controlled through Birth Control Programs. Through sterilization abuse, African American women were prevented from their right of becoming mothers and breeding children. Until today Black Americans are dealing with structural racism and too many disparities in healthcare.

## General Conclusion

### General Conclusion

Since the moment that Black people were brought to the New World as slaves their misery and dark history started. The chain of abuses, the different kinds of racism, injustice, and inequality that they had to endure were portrayed throughout this extended essay. However, they still managed to prove themselves as real individuals who contributed and are still contributing to the change of the American society. Black Americans were never treated as human beings, and were always inferior to white people and always at their mercy. They were forced into labor on plantation fields, taken advantage of from plantation fields' owners and white who subjugated the slaves' bodies, whether they were dead or alive, and used them to reinforce their medical research through harsh, inhumane and involuntary experiments.

Throughout the years and by using different discriminatory laws African Americans were denied healthcare and even prevented from entering hospitals to get treated. As mentioned throughout this dissertation, the medical experiments were conducted on the helpless enslaved men and women, poor African Americans and disabled people.

The fact that the U.S. healthcare system is still biased, whether consciously or unconsciously, towards black people when they receive healthcare; and the fact that prejudice, discrimination, neglection and such disparities are still prevalent within the American healthcare system are what made the core of this research. Indeed, through the examination of the different aspects that may have caused such healthcare disparities, it is evident that many things have changed concerning the medical care of Black people and the American healthcare system along with different organizations working on improving the flaws.

Through the examination of different data, one can conclude that regardless of medicine in the United States being extremely developed and despite all the efforts made by the U.S. Healthcare System, healthcare disparities still exist and are due to the accumulation of many factors: insurance, access to a good healthcare, health education, poor quality care... adding to that the systemic and scientific racism and prejudice. Thus, the American healthcare system and the different disparities are still a matter of debate and still need a lot of revision and reforms.

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