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The Mothers of Gynecology

The rise of American Gynecology is one of the largest encroachments Black women had to endure. The experiences of Black women being experimented on, signify the informal practices of early American medicine. Treated like cattle, products, and science experiments, doctors experimented on enslaved women. Enslaved women did not have a say if medical procedures can be performed on them because they were property. In the book *Patient*, written by Bettina Judd, the second part of the book, "Use", discusses the history of gynecology and Black bodies. The developments of medical treatments and methods were produced from the bodies of Black women and this part of history is often swiped under the rug.

Born in Baltimore, Maryland, phenomenal scholar, interdisciplinary writer, artist, and author of *Patient*, Bettina Judd writes about the experience of enslaved women as gynecological subjects in her collection of poems. Researcher and teacher in Women's and Gender and African American studies at the University of Washington, Judd imagines the pain, suffering, trauma, and survival Black women underwent as experiments in her book. To introduce the stories of the enslaved women who played an involuntary role in this part of history, Judd writes, "The Researcher Discovers Anarcha, Betsy, Lucy", "[...]/Anarcha Westcott, Betsy Harris, and Lucy Zimmerman are taken into the care of a reluctant country surgeon in Montgomery, Alabama" (5). Broken up into four sections, which are "Pathology", "Use", "Treason of the Body is...", and "Parity", Judd tells the stories of historical figures, Anarcha Westcott, Betsy Harris, and Lucy

Zimmerman, and other Black women who are known as the “patients” or subjects of James Marion Sims.

Considered to be the father of modern gynecology, American physician, James Marion Sims, has performed experimental works on enslaved Black women. Known for perfecting a technique to repair vesicovaginal fistula which is when an additional hole develops between the vagina and the bladder or rectum during childbirth, the physician practiced on many enslaved women. The additional hole often led to incontinence of urine and feces, which is when someone loses control over their bladder and this enables them to urinate uncontrollably. Sometimes, the pain from this illness was so unbearable that it often led to death.

In Judd’s poem, “You Could Smell It From The Field”, she writes about vesicovaginal fistula: “A yellow-brown of/open insiders in heat/Mister Wescott keep away/everyone do” (25) This part of the poem describes the effects vaginal fistula had on Anarcha. A painful condition caused by prolonged childbirth, injuries, surgical procedures, and pressure on the vaginal walls, enslaved women were aware of the embarrassment this condition brought to them. An example of Judd conveying the pain and suffering another enslaved woman experienced during their operations with Sims, is in her poem, “The Inauguration of Experiments”: “Lucy didn’t scream like most. [...] Doctor spent a lot of time with Lucy. He would stand at the foot of her bed looking. Not mad just like he had a whole lot of questions and wanted answers from her” (19). Positioned on her hands and knees for over an hour, Lucy nearly died from blood poisoning during one of her examinations with Sims because he recklessly inserted a sponge into her vagina that was used to drain urine from her bladder. Thus, giving her an infection. Even after this incident, Sims continued his experiments using the speculum.

During some of Sims's experiments, he propped the vaginal walls open by using a metal spoon with a bent handle, in order to have a wide view of the vagina. In the poem, "The Researcher Discovers Anarcha, Betsy, Lucy", Judd envisions the moment when Sims created or inserted the tool into one of his patients, "Sims shapes his speculum, invents his silver sutures, perfects protocol for proper handling of the female pelvis/[...]/*we wake/Unanesthetized or addicted to opium, children born, children disappeared. /Helpless help.*" (5). This poem highlights the dark history of Gynecology and the intent behind Sim's examinations.

During Sims's surgeries, he did not administer pain meds or use anesthesia for his Black patients. However, he did offer them to his white patients. Professor in the History of Medicine and Director of the Humanities in Medicine Program at the University of Nebraska, Deirdre Cooper Owens, states in her article "The Birth of American Gynecology", the lack of use of anesthesia from medical doctors during the 19th century:

Medical doctors did not typically use anesthesia because of their well-founded fears that surgical patients could bleed to death in the time between unconsciousness and surgery. Dexterity and speed were much more highly valued than making a patient unconscious. For instance, in the case of James Marion Sims's experimental surgeries on slaves, Sims discussed in his memoir how he relied on speed in the surgical area to save his patients' lives. (24)

As mentioned in this article, pain and discomfort were the last things these physicians were cornered about because their fears overpowered their mortality. In other words, their suspicions were reflected in their goals and their experiments and they did not surface around the result of the patient's overall well-being, physically, emotionally, and mentally. Their decisions were more personal rather than ethical. Speed and skill were something that they valued more than life,

especially when it came to Black women. It is clear that the goal of their experiments was more so for personal gain rather than principles. Therefore, their lack of humanity is showcased in their experiments.

On January 1st, 1808, Congress made a federal law where it was illegal to import enslaved people into the United States. It is argued by scholars that the abolition of the slave trade did not have a tremendous impact on slavery due to the enslaved still being exported within the states and reproducing. Therefore, even after the end of the Atlantic slave trade, the slave population grew for another 57 years. As a result of the end of the Atlantic Slave Trade to the U.S, enslaved women were treated as breeders. The Black women's reproductive system played a role in the political and economic system of the country; "The growing body of literature on U.S. slavery and, more specifically, scholarship on the medical lives of enslaved people describe in great detail how valuable black women's reproductive labor was to both institutions." (Owens 43). Enslave women were forced and expected to produce children so that slaveholders can sell more slaves for profit.

Pregnancy did not disregard the labor the enslaved had to execute. Despite the discomfort, Black women endured in the operating room, there were still incidents when enslaved women were still whipped, beaten, and even killed when they could not work:

Slave narratives [...] recalled how expectant mothers protected the children in their wombs while receiving the lash. [...] Arkansan Marie Hervey, who lived on the Hess plantation in Tennessee, remembered how parturient women on the plantation were punished physically. She stated, "They used to take pregnant women and dig a hole in the ground and jut their stomachs in it and whip them. (43 Owens)

Consequently, indicating that the measure of the value of Black women was production and reproduction. In other words, their value was reflected in the field and the number of children and work they could produce.

The vaginal speculum is a medical device that is used for pelvic exams. In “Etymology of Anarcha 1”, Judd recalls the pain an Anarcha experienced during her examinations with Sims, “When the tearing came there was/no baby in the canal but a new route:/fisitual/[...] Becoming an unfuckable woman, freedom/the black hole of my sex, fare/[...]/but I will be finally (24). Other than the expression of pain, it is apparent that Anarach was satisfied with something. At this moment she was content with her situation because she was no longer perceived as something to be used. As for Betsy, which is another enslaved woman Sims experimented on as mentioned before, she recalls her examination with another southern physician, who goes by the name of Dr. Harris in Judd’s poem, “What We Are Made Of”: “Doctor Harris would put things in my hand for cleaning looked like they were for opening things made to stay shut/ Metal, strange-shaped, sometimes familiar like a knife or a spoon [...] Everything looked the same sliver and white, then brown” (21). This is an example of the speculum being utilized during operations and the colors Betsy was noticing can be interpreted as the color of her skin (Brown), Dr. Harris who is white, and sliver, which symbolize the tools that were being used, like the speculum. Judd then goes on to provide readers with a poem that imagines Betsy’s perspective of the examination. In “Betsey’s Head Resting on Palms”, Judd writes: “Spirt flees the body and it treacherous tearing [...] When I bring them down it is to him and the spoon. Tounge flicking, mothing gaping/I feel myself opening and/can no longer see” (20). This part of the poem provides readers with a descriptive analysis of what Betsy must have been feeling. Another form of this writing is critical fabulation. It is far too often that Black women’s thoughts, feelings, and

dialogue are not effectively reflected in writing, especially under the lens of white writers, but Judd provides a raw perspective of what Betsy experienced during that very moment.

Usually made of metal or plastic, the speculum is duck-bill shaped and it is designed to be inserted and open in the vagina during exams. The speculum is also used to discover if there are any underlining issues occurring in the vagina. In *Patient*, Judd wrote a poem about the tool being used on Betsy Harris, an enslaved woman who also suffered at the hands of Dr. Sims. In the poem, "Betsy Invents the Speculum", Judd writes, "I have bent in other ways/to open the body to make space/More pliable than pewter, my skin may be less giving/ Great discoveries are made/on cushioned lessons and hard falls/ Sims invents the speculum/I invent the wincing/the if you must of it/the looking away/the here of discovery" (32). As italicized in the poem, Sims described the speculum to be shaped like a spoon. So, you can only imagine how medieval this contraption was. Sims recalled in his autobiography his thoughts about having access to the female reproductive system, "Introducing the bent handle of the spoon I saw everything, as no man had ever seen before" (32), as mentioned in Owens essay. This statement from Sims showcases a perverted perspective he had about female anatomy, thus leading to the questioning of the pervasiveness of the medical field. The viewing of the female reproductive system by male doctors was frowned upon for white women but not inherently for Black women. There were also debates about the process of speculum examination in a sexual aspect. People were frightened about having women exposed, and being corrupted by the intrusive of the device thus leading to sexual desire. However, even though the Alabama doctor is considered to be the father of gynecology, he did not invent the speculum.

French midwife, Marie Anne Boivin, invented the vaginal speculum which evolved into our modern bivalve speculum. For close examination of the cervix, the instrument was designed

to be screwed into place to dilate the vagina. Boivin is known for making an impact in the medical field in numerous ways. Even though she was denied access to medical school because she is a woman, in 1825, she discovered the causes of different types of bleedings within the uterus, such as miscarriages along with diseases.

Before the French midwife, there have been several versions of the speculum. Gynecological artifacts of the speculum date back to 97 A.D, in Pompeii which is were created by French gynecologist Joseph Recamier. Then by 1821, Italian surgeon, Giuseppe Cannella created another version of the speculum which is described to be a combination of a knife and the speculum. By amputation of the cervix, this tool was used to examine cases of cancer within the vagina or uterine prolapse.

It is interesting that white men are considered to be the successor of the female anatomy and not a woman. You would think that a woman who has familiarity and experience with her body would take the place of Sims and other physicians like him, however, Gynecology, is a male-led profession like education during that time. Thus giving men the power to determine what biological functions needed fixing such as libido, menstruation, and even childbirth. A cause of this issue is that education was not permitted for women at a certain time. Men dominated the education system even outside the United States. Therefore, during the 1800s, most doctors were men. This was an issue because men were given access to the female body and had the freedom to explore the private areas of the reproductive anatomy. In a way, this further crosses boundaries. However, the concerns of men having this type of access to the female body did not apply to all women. This issue was not extended toward Black women or even “proper women” like sex workers during the 19th century in Paris.

As Sims used enslaved women during his experiments, he violated them even further by inviting other physicians to observe the examinations at his private hospital. Also, even after the death of enslaved women, their bodies were cut open, dissected, and preserved for examinations:

Preserving diseased and damaged reproductive parts, performing experimental surgeries, [...] helped southern doctors, medical colleges and museums, and their faculty and students advance their medical knowledge quite literally on the broken bodies of black slaves. (Owens 47)

Thus, showing that the Black body was used as a product and furthermore disrespected and degraded in inhumane ways.

For hours and during several experiments, the enslaved women were provided with no anesthetics. There is a misconception that Black people have a high pain tolerance. As mentioned in Owens essay, in a slave narrative written by Harriet E. Jacobs, titled, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs recalls a time when her slaveowner wanted to test out his suspicion about Black women's pain tolerance: "Former slave Harriet Jacobs shared in her memoir how her owner forced an enslaved woman to eat food that had killed his pet dog. The master did so because he believed that "the woman's stomach was stronger than the dog's" (44). The idea that Black people do not feel pain, is just racist behavior. It just gives racist white people, especially during the 19th century, the excuse to be brutal, abusive, and harmful towards Black people.

In a 2011 research conducted by Jason Bryan Silverstein, Co-Director, Master of Science in Media, Medicine, and Health and Lecturer on Global Health and Social Medicine at Harvard University, Silverstein studied the reaction people have when white people are in pain in comparison to how they act when Black people endure the same pain. In a conversation he had with Michel Martin, host of NPR's "Tell Me More" program, Silverstein said that in an

experimental video, Black and white participants were stuck with a needle, and when viewers saw white people in pain, their reactions were more dramatic compared to when they viewed Black people who experienced the same stimuli. Silverstein then named the outcomes of this experiment and theory the “racial empathy gap”. However, Silverstein also mentioned that Black people reacted the same way. Thus, assuming that racial prejudice and animosity are not the overall roots of this misconception. Author of “Black Women’s Experience in Slavery and Medicine”, Deirdre Cooper Owens writes:

Like other branches of science, American reproductive medicine was influenced greatly by biologically rooted racism [...] Enslaved women were perfect medical subjects for gynecological experimentation because doctors deemed them biologically inferior to white women based on their research findings, yet black women supposedly had a high tolerance for pain. (23)

As Silverstein mentioned in his discussion, there is also this idea that past trauma can adhere to the misconception of Black pain. There is this idea that due to trauma, adversity, and hardships, Black people can endure intense pain however, this is not just a conscious idea, this is idea has been embedded into society for centuries.

As discussed in NPR’s episode with Camila Domonoske, “‘Father Of Gynecology,’ Who Experimented On Slaves, No Longer On Pedestal In NYC”, Sims wrote in his autobiography his negotiation with the slaveholders who had ownership over Anarcha and Betsy. During their discussion, Sims agreed to not perform operations that can endanger their health if he can still experiment on them. As a result of this arrangement, Sims continued to conduct painful operations on the women for years and they could not reject them. Lucy, Anarcha, and Betsy, could not consent to these procedures. They had no say in what was going to happen to their

bodies and Sims took advantage of this. For instance, Sims operated on Anarcha over 30 times. Even during his experiments with Anarcha, he referred to her as a “stupid thing”. Thus, showing that he did not perceive enslaved women as humans. It is interesting that even though Sims was portrayed as an influential person in the medical field, his autobiography, as mentioned by researchers, shows proof of how brutal, cold, and twisted he was.

In Sims’s autobiography, he claimed that the enslaved women were eager for treatment and to be cured however, his autobiography only provides us his word from that event. In the poem, “Anarcha to the Slow Born Child”, Judd writes about the loss of a child: “Little girl, what I do/looks like madness/But if I stay there would be/another kind of sloughing/[...]/Exhaustion holds the heart/from screaming/tearing this way,/is soundless/Fold into me tight/forgive the soft parts. of your mother (22). It is interesting that Anarcha apologizes for her condition. As if she is the root or cause of her body’s weakness. In her eyes, the world she was living in was not something to gift a child. Therefore, death was the most suitable way out. In this poem, Judd provides readers with an outlook view of how numb Anarcha became, mentally. In a way, she could not compare if the pain she was feeling from her surgeries overpowered the pain of losing a child. Due to her being aware of her position as an enslaved woman she could not bear the idea of letting another life suffer from that vicious and cruel system.

In “Suicide of 100,000 its”, Judd highlights what Sims saw in the medical room. “It had been in spasm for two days and nights and looked as if it were dying. [...] It could not swallow, could take no nourishment, and it impossible for it to suck [...] as a matter of course, the child died [...] The next day we held a post-mortem examination” (11). This poem mentions a reflection in Sims’s autobiography about an infant suffering from lockjaw, which is when a bacterial disease affects the nervous system, and this bacteria can come from cuts or wounds

made by knives. It is clear that Sims is the cause of this death. As mentioned in his other experiments, he is not only impetuous but reckless and this can be seen in this poem and his autobiography. This memory shows how not only disposable Black women were, but so were newborns. Also, this not only demonstrates how the enslaved were treated and disregarded but the objective and mindset Sims had. His operations were purely experimental, and this can be seen in the language within his autobiography. His curiosity overshadowed his humanity. Especially, when he referred to the infant as “it”. In other words, a thing, or something not human. It is interesting that it was not until the death of the child, Sims saw its humanity. As if is the only explanation that can determine value and humanity is death. In Sims’s autobiography, as mentioned by Owens, enslaved women were represented as one-dimensional. In Sims’s writing, they were nothing more than silent bodies on operating tables. In a position to save lives, doctors during the 19th century and even now, can at times be the gateway to death.

Racial bias is still prevalent in the medical field. The linkage between medicine and Black trauma is still prevalent in modern society. For instance, Bettina Judd has mentioned in her book that doctors often dismissed her pain, even though she was suffering from ovarian torsion, which is when the ovaries and the fallopian tube twist, causing discomfort and cutting off blood supply to the ovaries. Statistics have shown that Black women are more likely to die during pregnancy and childbirth in the hospital compared to white women and it is recorded that Black patients receive less pain medicine in comparison to their white counterparts.

19th-century medical practices are still reflected and prevalent in contemporary medicine. Black women have far too long suffered in the medical field. American gynecology was built off the backs of Black women and this is something that is still unacknowledged to this day. For decades, Black women have endured pain and suffering. Their stories are often overlooked and

shadowed by white men. The stories of Lucy, Betsy, Anarchra, and other enslaved women that suffered at the hands of early American medicine, had their stories told in Judd's book. In the autobiographies of 19th-century doctors, the dynamic relationship between the physicians and the slaveholders was complex. Men like Sims and slaveowners shared a common practice of ownership over enslaved women. Also, the risk of killing enslaved women in order to discover ways to heal them played a role in the production of slavery. The cycle of trauma is not only reflected in Black women's bodies but in their minds as well. The dark history behind some of these renowned doctors causes people to overlook and not question these practices. This part of history has been glossed over because it was of course accepted at a time. Black women are the blueprint of American Gynecology.

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