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### Scientific Racism: The Exploitation of African Americans

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# SCIENTIFIC RACISM:

AQILAH ELSHABAZZ-PALMER

# THE EXPLOITATION OF AFRICAN AMERICANS

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**D**uring the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, experimentation on human subjects was widespread. Minorities were more frequently used for experimentation than others. The treatment of African Americans, in particular, was deplorable. Not only were they used for experimentation, but they suffered from the segregation of schools, restaurants, and other public facilities. There are several examples in American history that exemplify the exploitation of minority subjects in scientific experimental research, including the Tuskegee Syphilis Study and the conditions and experiments conducted at the Hospital for the Negro Insane. In such cases, African Americans were exploited for the “progression

of science,” which consequently jeopardized their health and safety. The subjugation of one race using scientific explanation or the exploitation of a race for scientific means constitutes scientific racism. I wonder why these topics are not better known. Why is it so difficult to find information on hospitals like Crownsville? And lastly, why was this type of mistreatment so widespread?

It was not until my third year in college that I learned about scientific racism in biomedical research after reading Rebecca Skloot’s *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. It took me until the age of twenty to learn about this disturbing and lesser-known practice in our history. In her book, Skloot discusses the life of Henrietta Lacks, whose cells helped initiate many scientific advancements, ranging from the polio vaccine to observing how human cells react to conditions in space. Although these are positive advancements, the scientists at the hospital stole and used Lacks’ cells for research without her consent. And this is, amazingly, a milder example of exploitation discussed in Skloot’s book. Later, Skloot briefly mentions the Tuskegee Syphilis Study and the conditions at Crownsville State Hospital, which intensified my curiosity.

At Crownsville State Hospital, formerly known as the Hospital for the Negro Insane, many experiments were conducted on African-American patients—or “inmates” as they were sometimes referred. In Tom Marquardt’s “Tragic Chapter of Crownsville State Hospital’s Legacy,” he writes that an estimated 100 epileptic patients received “insulin shock treatments.” During treatment, patients were administered large doses of insulin to reduce their blood sugar, causing them to

fall into a coma. The patient would then be injected intravenously with glucose, or have a warm salt solution distributed into their system through a tube connecting to their stomach, which often resulted in memory loss (“Shock Therapy”). Scientists also performed lobotomies on “feeble minded” patients, in which parts of lobes in the brain were removed, or hydrotherapy, in which patients were submerged in hot and then cold water repeatedly (Marquardt).

In addition to the aforementioned treatments, another common documented procedure at Crownsville State Hospital was pneumoencephalography. This procedure required scientists to drill holes into the skulls of patients, causing the fluid surrounding the brain to drain out of the skull. Scientists would then puff air or helium into the empty spaces surrounding the brain to take an x-ray. This was due to a belief that, without that protective fluid, scientists could receive better images from the x-rays. Unfortunately, allowing the fluid to drain led to several side effects ranging from nausea and dizziness to seizures (Skloot 276).

Syphilitic patients were also among those who underwent procedures at Crownsville State Hospital. In order to rid these patients of syphilis, doctors injected them with the malaria virus, leading patients to become unmanageable, resulting in their having to be forcefully restrained during the procedure. Doctors would attempt to counteract the malaria by injecting the restrained patient with the substance bismuth (Goering et al.). Although it is one of the less toxic metals, high dosages of bismuth can lead to kidney failure, anemia, or depression (Lenn Tech BV). However, these procedures were not successful, and patients’ original symp-

toms returned after 48 hours (Goering et al.).

According to Marquardt, African-American patients were subjected to inhumane living conditions at Crownsville State Hospital. He highlights a photograph of a malnourished girl with her arms tied down to a chair, an occurrence not uncommon at Crownsville. The hospital was severely overcrowded, which often led to patients being abandoned without adequate treatment. By 1957, Crownsville had reached over 250% of its capacity, which in turn created more issues (Stern). The hospital became extremely understaffed with a 208:1 patient to doctor ratio, and for every 230 patients at Crownsville, there were just seventy attendants (Coole). Due to this imbalance, patients were not getting the rehabilitation and attention they needed to improve.

Many of the patients came into Crownsville

inducted into the Hospital for the Negro Insane was because of their race, not their mental state (Marquardt).

Though information about patient treatment and experimentation at Crownsville exists, it is quite difficult to find. Some groups have tried contacting influential individuals in the state of Maryland for more information on the history of Crownsville State Hospital. Three different organizations—the NAACP, the ACLU of Maryland, and the Maryland Disability Law Center (MDLC)—came together and wrote a letter to Martin O'Malley, the former governor of Maryland. In their letter, they wrote about the experimentations and terrible conditions at Crownsville State Hospital. One of the main issues that these three groups wanted rectified was the unorganized and incomplete

### **...the reason people were inducted into the Hospital for the Negro Insane was because of their race, not their mental state.**

with minor difficulties such as nervousness or lack of self-confidence, but due to the isolation in windowless rooms and limited outside contact, their mild ailments developed into serious mental illnesses. Those who did come into Crownsville as chronic cases only became worse. Even the doctors working at the hospital knew the effects such conditions had on patients.

Dr. Ward, one of the medical professionals at Crownsville argues that isolating patients is one of the worst things you can do at a mental health facility (Stern). George Phelps, one of the county's first Black deputy sheriffs, noted that the reason people were

compilation of death records.

Crownsville also donated bodies to colleges and universities for research purposes without the consent of the family of the deceased; the bodies were used as cadavers and unceremoniously incinerated. Many of the bodies were also buried without burial markers. An approximate 1,800 graves are unmarked at Crownsville State Hospital—more than any other psychiatric hospital. The patients subjected to experimentation have never been acknowledged, and neither have the individual bodies used for research. These three groups concluded that, after appropriate research, the state of Maryland

should create a museum honoring their contributions to science.

In their letter, they mention that Janice Hayes-Williams and Paul Lurz's research could be the foundation for the museum (Goering et al.). Born in Annapolis, Maryland, approximately eight miles from Crownsville State Hospital, Hayes-Williams has been committed to preserving Black history. She determined that the death certificates appeared intentionally vague, in order to hide the actual causes of death (Marquardt). The contributions she makes come from her work of identifying over 1,500 patient bodies buried on a former tobacco farm near the hospital. Lurz, a local historian, went to Crownsville in the mid-1960s as a student social worker and stayed there for 40 years before he retired. He located a collection of records and gave them to the Maryland State Archives (Marquardt).

Crownsville's treatments and experiments would be abominable today, but during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, medical theories existed to justify the mistreatment of African Americans; there were also different types of scientific thought justifying racial segregation. Such understandings boil down to "scientific racism," a view that leads to the promotion of European superiority and ethnic inferiority. This concept is one of the main contributors to the normalization of mistreating African Americans for biomedical research.

In "A Genealogy of Modern Racism," Cornel West elaborates on the workings of scientific racism. Specifically, he discusses Dutch anatomist Pieter Camper, who used his measurements and studies of the human cranium to justify the segregation of races

(104). As West notes, Camper based his studies on different races in comparison to the Greeks, whom he viewed as the highest level of beauty. He measured the angle of the top of the head to the nose in order to compare Europeans, Blacks, and orangutans to Greek statues. He noted that Europeans had an angle closer to that of the Greek statues, while Blacks had facial angles more similar to the orangutans. Thus, Camper concluded that Blacks were lower on the social hierarchy. This study is a clear indication of the interplay between ideas of Eurocentrism and science.

Another influential philosopher, Christoph Meiners, also supported racial hierarchy and classified Eurocentric beauty based on what he perceived to be "good looking" and "ugly" races. He referenced head shape when establishing his racial hierarchy, but not with angles like Camper; instead, he used the size of the jaw. He explained that Blacks had more savage and primitive traits, such as a large and strong jaw, in comparison to Europeans. He compared Blacks to "wild beasts" and stated they were less sensitive than other races because they had thicker nerves, thus they could feel less pain or no pain at all (Jahoda 67). These medical ideologies validated the preexisting idea that African Americans were inferior to white Americans and it was believed that they could tolerate pain better than their white counterparts.

These examples only scratch the surface of biomedical research conducted on African Americans during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. During this time, African Americans were exploited for the progression of science without recognition. Fortunately, individuals such as Paul Lurz and Janice Hayes-Williams, as well as groups

like the NAACP, ACLU, and MDLC, have made valiant efforts to uncover more about Crownsville's history. Their collective efforts have led to the retrieval of records, the identification of over 1,000 bodies, and the support of former Maryland Governor Martin O'Malley to hire researchers to investigate Crownsville's history in 2013 (Wood).

It is important to pay tribute to those who were used in the different research studies and shed light on the issue of scientific racism and the exploitation of African Americans throughout history. Despite the disturbing details of these experiments, they need to be acknowledged and discussed. This part of history cannot simply disappear. If we keep searching for answers, as Paul Lurz states in Marquardt's article, who knows what we will find out?



"Crownsville mental hospital" by Flickr user alliecat1881, CC by 2.0: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/alliecat1881/27509094232>.

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