

Defining Medicine:

The erosion of African American Slave Medicine in the age of Modern Medicine

History 140A: World History of Science
Zora Williams

Medicinal science holds a prestigious reputation in academia because of the groundbreaking innovations from researchers in the field ranging from the chicken pox vaccine to the safe storage of blood. It also holds prestige because of the institutionalization of the discipline. In order to earn a medical degree, aspiring students must earn a bachelor's degree, attend medical school and be placed in a residency. This entire process has influenced who defines medicine and what it looks like to practice it. Consequently, the modern notions of medicine have been defined to include certain cultures and practices but to also systematically exclude others. Tracing back to the dawn of the Scientific Revolution in Europe there are certain ideas of medicine that are prioritized over others and contribute to the erasure of other medicinal practices. One such medicinal tradition eroded by the Scientific Revolution is African American Slave Medicine. This tradition follows the practice and practitioners during the Antebellum Slave period in the United States that worked parallel to and sometimes in tandem with the predominantly white health care system. The Scientific Revolution especially impacted African American Slave medicine due to America's strict adherence to racial hierarchies, the medical discipline's implied stigmatization of magic and the compulsory institutionalization of medical knowledge. This paper investigates each of these aspects had how they were either exacerbated or promulgated directly by events of the Scientific Revolution.

Overview of African American Slave Medicine

Before detailing the gradual erosion of African American Slave Medicine, it is important to first understand the domain as a whole. African American Slave Medicine encompasses the medical therapy administered to slaves and the practitioners who developed those remedies. Most of the accounts of African American Slave Medicine were oral, therefore most of the discipline's content is substantiated only by interviews from ex-slaves. Many of the medicinal

practices harken back to the West African origins of the slaves and include the combination of a variety of herbs. Remedies relied heavily on herbs and roots including Apple, Butterfly Root, Castor Beans and Peppermint. Enslaved communities would use these and other herbs such as Asa foetida to ward off fever and worms by wearing them around their neck. In the case of Asa foetida, there are specific accounts of its implementation. An ex-slave Lizzie Norfleet from Mississippi recounts, “Every child wore an asafetida bad round the neck to keep from ketching diseases¹.” Another ex-slave woman named Hannah Jones from Alabama said that “Some of the women would tie assfedity ‘roun’ de chilluns necks to keep de sickness away².” Moreover, the uses of other herbs including Blamony, have been documented in interviews of ex-slaves which herbalists today use to treat liver disorders and worm infestations. Another ex-slave, Mollie Dawson from Texas recounted that “we always used de Barmonia weed ter make a tea and drink dat fer chills, and fever and it sho was good fer it.”³ Within African American Slave Medicine, it was common to ingest medicinal herbs by making a tea out of their roots: “they used all kinds of herbs and roots out of the woods, such as cami weed roots and red oak bark to make tea out of for chills and fever,⁴” remarked Eli Davison, a slave from West Virginia. There are a host of other roots and herbs used for colic, fever, malaria, cramps and virtually every ailment. However, not all remedies in African American Slave Medicine were herbal, some non-herbal remedies included:

“ Rheumatism: take an empty whiskey bottle, fill half-full with vinegar; put a handful of large red ants into this and shake well before applying internally and externally.

¹ Cited in Herbert Covey, *African American Slave Medicine*. (Lanham: Lexington, 2007), 81. But also found in Works Progress Administration interviews (funded the Federal Writers Project to interview slaves in south.

² A Federal Writers' Project. *Slave narratives: a folk history of slavery in the United States from interviews with former slaves*. Washington, 1941. Web. <https://lccn.loc.gov/41021619>; Covey, *African American Slave Medicine*, 81.

³ Federal Writers' Project. *Slave narratives*; Covey, *African American Slave Medicine*, 82.

⁴ Federal Writers' Project. *Slave narratives*; Covey, *African American Slave Medicine*, 87.

Nosebleed – tie a woolen thread around the big toe. Mash a lead bullet around a string; tie this around the neck; this will stop nosebleed every time.⁵”

Majority of the accounts about medicinal uses of herbs in slave medicine have been by women and this trend holds true for the formal practitioners of Slave herb medicine. Grannies and older women were considered the primary medical care providers. Often these women were too old to do manual labor in the fields and as such were enlisted to care for children and able-bodied adults when they fell ill. They were regarded as both doctors and midwives:

“Old negro mammy was one of the best doctors in the world with her herb teas.” – ex slave John Mosley⁶

“When de chilluns was born, Marse seed to id date de mammy was rightly took care of. He kept a old granny womn wid dem till dey got up and well.” – ex slave George Flemming, South Carolina⁷

There were also others who were formally called Slave Herb Doctors and served as an equally vital component to a plantation community – serving both Blacks and Whites. One woman remembers: “[Father] spent quite a bit of his time,...compounding herbs into medicine. Both white and black came to him for his medicines.⁸” Given that the vast majority of African American slaves were illiterate, many had to learn medicinal crafts through word of mouth. Sometimes the practices were remembered from Africa or learned from Native Americans in the same region. An ex-slave Harriet Collins discusses how her grandmother learned herb medicine, “My mammy larned me a lot of doctoring what she larnt from old folks from Africy, and some de Indians larnt her,⁹” Other times, there would be a family member who taught the children while the able bodied adults worked in the fields, an ex-slave woman Melinda recalls, “I

⁵ Covey, *African American Slave Medicine*: Chapter 6: Enslaved African American Non-Herbal Treatments and Materia Medica, 128. Also see: Sharla M. Fett. *Working Cures : Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantation*. (Chapel Hill,2000).

⁶ Covey, *African American Slave Medicine*, 1.

⁷ Federal Writers' Project. *Slave narratives*.; Covey, *African American Slave Medicine*, 51.

⁸ Covey, *African American Slave Medicine*,75.

⁹ Federal Writers' Project. *Slave narratives*.; Covey, *African American Slave Medicine*, 76.

remained with my grandma from sunrise to sunset...she knew the value of herbs and how to prepare remedies for almost every evil.¹⁰”

Following the notion of curing evil or warding against evil, medical treatment in slave communities relied heavily on ritualistic processes. “Much of the herb doctors’ success was due to the rituals involved with providing care, which undoubtedly had a touch of mystery and ceremony for the patient¹¹,” which helped the patient believe that treatment would be successful. There were also references to the use of incantations in healing practices. An ex-slave, Lizzie Norfleet mentions magical aspects of healing in her interview, “For in them days they did not know nothing ‘bout no charms or nothin’ of the kind. The asafetida bag was the only dependence.¹²” Conjure and hoodoo were strongly held beliefs in slave communities that also influenced their medicine. Conjure was “the belief that the behavior of others can be controlled through ritual and manipulation of natural objects,¹³” and was both feared and sought after amongst enslaved communities. This element of African American slave medicine will be explored further in a later section.

Overall, African American Slave Medicine was a practice sustained by enslaved populations on plantations for enslaved people. The exclusion and distrust of “white medicine spurred the necessity of a self-sufficient medical system amongst blacks. “Plantation medicine forced the survival of African American folk medicine,¹⁴” which allowed enslaved Blacks to take control of their own survival amidst the horrors of slave life. Consequently, a unified Black community and identity were solidified through community specific medical practices.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Covey, *African American Slave Medicine*, 75-76.

¹² Federal Writers' Project. *Slave narratives.*; Covey, *African American Slave Medicine*. 81.

¹³ Covey, *African American Slave Medicine*, 56. (Also found in C.E. Semmes. *Toward a Theory of Popular Health Practices in the Black Community*, *The Western Journal of Black Studies*. 1983, 208.)

¹⁴ Covey, *African American Slave Medicine*, 4.

Adherence to Racial Hierarchies and Elitism:

With a solid understanding of the nature of African American Slave Medicine, there are some obvious contentions that arise with the dawn Scientific Revolution. Though the Scientific Revolution officially spans from mid 1500's to the 20th Century, this analysis will be limited to the 18th century forward. The Scientific Revolution has its origins in Western Europe and many of the discoveries were made in the heart of elite, selective and predominantly white institutions. Leading scientific institutions at the time included the Royal Society of London and The French Academy of Sciences who housed scholars including Sir Issac Newton. Madame Marie Curie's rejection from The French Academy of Sciences, despite having two Nobel prizes, exemplifies the harsh exclusivity and prejudice of scientific institutions at the time. Curie was not rejected for lacking merit but because she was a woman. In the United States, the same prejudiced admission pattern reigned. Most universities were all male but were also only reserved for males who identified as white¹⁵. From this fact, an obvious rigid racial hierarchy emerges in the United States even before the height of the slave trade. In Colonial Virginia , the racial hierarchy starts being constructed with the passing of several laws. The government begins distinguishing between whites and Blacks following Nathaniel Bacon's Rebellion against the governor of Virginia. Bacon's rebellion was considered a turning point in colonial history because it demonstrated the potential for blacks and whites to unite forces against the establishment.

Michelle Alexander, author of the *New Jim Crow* explains:

“The events in Jamestown were alarming to the planter elite, who were deeply fearful of the multiracial alliance of [indentured servants] and slaves. Word of Bacon's Rebellion spread far and wide, and several more uprisings of a similar type followed. In an effort to protect their superior status and economic position, the planters shifted their strategy for

¹⁵ Flexner, Abraham. *Medical Education in America: Rethinking the training of American doctors*. June 1910. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1910/06/medical-education-in-america/306088/>. Accessed March 21, 2019.

maintaining dominance. They abandoned their heavy reliance on indentured servants in favor of the importation of more black slaves.”¹⁶

Subsequently, the commonwealth of Virginia passed laws to make legal distinctions between whites and blacks. In 1705 a law decreed that livestock of African American bond laborers would be confiscated and given to poor white freemen¹⁷. This along with other laws contributed to the construction of whiteness in America’s colonies and the reliance on imported African slave labor. Thus, the association of blackness to permanent bondage begins. Alexander von Humboldt, famous German naturalist during the late 1700’s noted on his travels that “in America the greater or lesser degree of whiteness of skin decides the rank which a man occupies in society,”¹⁸. Sentiments of white racial superiority were obviously dominant during the height of slavery and subsequently stymied the recognition and legitimization of slave innovations in medical practice. Once slavery becomes fully fledged in the United States, African Americans integrated themselves into the health care system so much so that colonial lawmakers passed “ laws in 1748 to curb the growth of slaves claiming to be doctors and administering medical treatments.¹⁹” Such laws required slaves to obtain permission from plantation owners before dispensing medication. Powerful whites acted as gatekeepers for which medicines and practices would be admissible thereby discouraging certain practices over others.

The continual erosion of slave medicine persisted even after the end of slavery. Many black communities condemned medical rituals from the days of slavery in order to more easily assimilate and integrate with the mainstream white population. Conjuring and slave medicine “has long filtered through the lens of Christianized Anglo-American society as the rank

¹⁶ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, rev. ed. (New York: The New Press, 2013), 24.

¹⁷ Allen, T. W. *The Invention of the White Race*, Vol. Two: The Origin of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America (London: Verso,1997); (Consulted also: Judy, Helfand. *Constructing Whiteness*. <https://racism.org/index.php/en/articles/race/66-defining-racial-groups/white-european-american/378-white1a2>)

¹⁸ Alexander von Humboldt, *Political Essays on the Kingdom of New Spain*, 2 vols.,trans. John Black (New York, 1811),1:185.

¹⁹ Covey, *African American Slave Medicine*, 5.; Schiebinger, Londa. *Secret Cures of Slaves: People, Plants, and Medicine in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World*. Stanford University Press, 2017, p. 256.

superstition of primitive black people,”²⁰ and found itself at odds with Black Christianity customs. Though Black Americans still engaged with Conjure and slave medicine simultaneously following slavery, the racial order of the United States demanded that the Black community present itself in a manner that was digestible to the white public. During the Civil Rights movement especially, white validation of the plight of Blacks was vital for the necessary systemic changes for progress²¹. Part of redefining the Black community meant relinquishing ties to its the non-western/non-white elements including slave medicine and conjuring. Consequently, the practice of slave medicine was diminished by Blacks themselves for self-preservation purposes. Overall, the perceived higher value of white culture substantiated by the existing racial hierarchy spurred this shift from cultural medical practices within the Black community.

Compulsory Institutionalization of Medical Knowledge

Racial stigma in the United States also directly affected medical institutions established to serve non-white male populations. Given that slave medicine existed as an oral tradition, African American communities worked to legitimize their cultural knowledge by opening schools for Black students to study during the Reconstruction Era and thereafter. These schools included The Louisville National Medical College, Knoxville Medical College, the Leonard Medical College in North Carolina and the Howard University College of Medicine²². In 1919 the Flexner Report on medical education in the United States and Canada was issued by the Carnegie Foundation to raise the standards of medical education in the country and to rid it of “medical commercialism.” The primary requirement for medical schools that resulted from the

²⁰David H. Brown. *Conjure/Doctors: An Exploration of a Black Discourse in America, Antebellum to 1940*. *Folklore Forum*. 23:1/2 (1990). 3 <https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/2022/2091/23%281.2%29%203-46.pdf?sequence=1>.

²¹ Cynthia Stokes Brown. *Refusing Racism: White allies and the struggle for civil rights*. Teachers College Press (New York, 2002).

²² G. A., Johnston. *The Flexner Report and black medical schools*. *Journal of the National Medical Association*, 76, 3 (1984), 223-5. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2561635/?page=1>

report were to maintain high functioning research facilities and laboratories – an obligation that would prove nearly impossible for the smaller scale Black medical schools. Chapter 14 of the Flexner Report, “The Medical Education of the Negro”, spanning only one page and half, was the only discussion of Black medical schools in the entire 700 page document. This chapter put forth the idea that Howard University and Meharry Medical College should act as the sole provider of medical education to the black community. The report states “the upbuilding of [these universities] will profit the nation much more than the adequate maintenance of a large number of schools,” which essentially burdened the other universities enrollment capacity. Although the Howard and Meharry are still thriving institutions today, the subsequent closing of the other five Black Medical (See Appendix 1) schools took away the opportunity for many aspiring Black students to practice medicine. By extension, the knowledge and culture of African American Slave medicine from potential Black medical students is missing from the medical discipline. Again, this contributes to the gradual erosion of slave medicine as it lost the opportunity to be fully institutionalized.

Stigmatization of Magic

Furthermore, certain aspects of African American Slave medicine conflicted with the definition of medicine of the time. In the aforementioned section on the overview of African American Slave medicine, conjuring and hoodoo were mentioned as elements of the independently functioning slave health care system. Conjure is a belief system used by enslaved and contemporary Black communities, “to explain unknown or mysterious occurrences in life, including illness and accidents,”²³. Many seeking medical treatment would go directly to

²³ Covey, *African American Slave Medicine*, 59.

conjurer doctors rather than the mammies and herb doctors. One woman, Patsy Moses, born a slave in 1863 recalls the remedies of a conjurer doctor during the time:

“Ter beak de conjur spells, he gives dem broth ter drink. He takes his kettle an’ puts in splinters ob pine or hickory jes’ so dey has bark on dem ter make de steam...and dis was a sure cure fer de conjur spells case on de patient.²⁴”

References to spells, incantations, and potions tie Conjure medicine of slaves back to the tradition of alchemy and hermetic practices in Medieval Europe²⁵. Magic and invisible forces were the foundations of many medical practices that went against the popular ideas of the church during the Medieval time period. Similarly, this element of slave medicine was at odds with the dominant Anglo-Christian culture. During the Scientific Revolution, science was redefined to mean discoveries gleaned from the scientific method. Sir Francis Bacon is credited for developing the Scientific method in his work *Cogitata en Visa*²⁶ also known under the title “induction”. Higher institutions of education validated his approach and even set the scientific method as a gold standard for scientific research.

Notably, the Royal Society of London’s motto, “Nullius en Verba” which means nothing in words, exemplifies both the approval and adoption of the scientific method as well as the stigmatization of other forms of science including those that use magical techniques. The motto essentially declares that words have no bearing in academic exploration, and that it is only by doing or experimenting that knowledge can be created. Hermetic practices, alchemy and African American Slave medicine rely on the combination of words and action in their practice. As a result, these traditions were excluded from the formal institutionalization of scientific knowledge. Labels such as ‘primitive’ and ‘evil’ have been used to describe African American

²⁴ Federal Writers' Project. *Slave narratives.*; Covey, *African American Slave Medicine*, 65.

²⁵ See Writings of Paracelsus: Paracelsus The Great. *The Hermetic and Alchemical Writings*. (London, 1894).

²⁶ Jürgen, Klein, "Francis Bacon", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/francis-bacon/>.

slave medicine in particular. Stigma from these perceptions probably discouraged Black medical schools to incorporate slave medicine in curriculums and further contributed to its erasure from mainstream medicine.

Conclusion

African American Slave medicine faced many hurdles over history to survive. In the United States, the rigid racial hierarchy placed all aspects of Black culture and black people in the lowest ranks. Even after the abolition of slavery in the 19th and 20th centuries, Black communities themselves separated from slave medicine to construct a more Christian image that would be accepted by the white public. Allyship with whites was crucial for the Civil Rights Movement's success and thus those aspects of Black culture that were too incongruent with mainstream white America were disregarded. The marginalization of Blackness extended to institutions as the Flexner Report led to the closure of most of the Black medical schools in the United States. Any knowledge of the slave medicine lost the chance of being formally institutionalized by Black communities. The Scientific Revolution's general stigma against magic and any science that did not follow the scientific method also contributed to the suppression of African American slave medicine in the United States. Newly freed slaves would not have their practices regarded as legitimate even if they wanted to formally train as doctors. All of these factors contributed to the erosion of African American Slave medicine. Though it is still practiced in small pockets of the Black American community, it has almost been erased from the American scientific conscious. The current medical education system is neglecting a swath of knowledge that could prove useful for developing treatments and therapies for America's ailing Black population. Medical institutions must reevaluate their definition of science and medicine

to recognize the value of African American Slave medicine in addressing contemporary health care challenges. It will all begin by expanding the bounds of admissible scientific knowledge.

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Appendix 1

TABLE 1. PAST AND PRESENT MEDICAL SCHOOLS

Name	Location	Status
Meharry Medical College	Nashville	4-yr functional
Howard University	Washington, DC	4-yr functional
Morehouse School of Medicine	Atlanta	2-yr functional
Flint Medical College	New Orleans	Closed after Flexner Report
Knoxville Medical College	Knoxville	Closed after Flexner Report
Louisville National Medical College	Louisville	Closed after Flexner Report
West Tennessee Medical College	Memphis	Closed after Flexner Report
Leonard Medical College	Raleigh	Closed after Flexner Report
Chattanooga National Medical College	Chattanooga	Closed before Flexner Report

²⁷ G. A., Johnston. *The Flexner Report and black medical schools*. Journal of the National Medical Association, 76, 3 (1984), 223-5.
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