SNATCHING BODIES, MAKING DOCTORS

Stealing black corpses for medical education in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American South

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“Students working in the second dissecting hall around 1900. Located near the present site of Venable Hall, this building was abandoned after Caldwell Hall was occupied in 1912.” – Medical Education in Chapel Hill: The First One Hundred Years, W. Reece Berryhill, 1979
Thesis

- On one hand a horrifying desecration of the deceased, on the other a lucrative business practice supplying a scientific necessity, body snatching as a means of supplying cadavers to Southern medical schools was a practice that thrived in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. What is more, those corpses most likely to end up on the dissecting table came from the most marginalized groups of Southern society; namely, the poor, and the African-American community.
Dissection, a necessary science

- History as far back as Ancient Greece, 3rd century B.C.
  - “Extensive anatomical and physiological discoveries”
- Artistic purposes in the 15th century
  - Michelangelo, Da Vinci
- Dissection for medical purposes in the 18th century
  - “Experience in dissecting was conventional practice”
- Dissection in the United States, 19th century
  - Thomas Eakins, *The Gross Clinic* (1875)
Dissection, a necessary science

• Dissection in the United States, 19th century

*The Agnew Clinic*, Thomas Eakins (1889)
Dissection, a necessary science

• Not always positive, dissection as punishment
  • 16th century British law – public dissection
  • In 1792 Albany, NY man was sentenced “to be hanged by the neck until [he was] dead, and [his] body delivered to the surgeon for dissection.”

• Dissection as a crime
  • Jack the Ripper murders, London, 1888
  • “Desecration of the corpse”

• Moral shortcomings outweighed by educational value
The Medical School

• First medical school in British America: University of Pennsylvania, 1765

• Lack of bodies
  • “A single body was made to do duty for a whole course of lectures”
  • Fewer physicians than society required

• Physicians lacked basic skills
  • “The dearth of anatomical training was evident in the poor treatment given to patients by physicians…if [medical students] were to become more than haphazard and butchers, they needed the intimate knowledge of the human anatomy provided by direct dissection.” – Historians Robert L. Blakely & Judith M. Harrington
The Medical School

- Shift to the “Paris method”
  - Hands-on learning
  - Requires more cadavers for dissection

- Legal acquisition not enough
  - UNC President Edwin Alderman in 1899 warned that “without dissecting material, it will be necessary to close the [medical] school.”
Body snatching: the history

• Defining body snatching
  • Physical removal of bodies from their graves for the purpose of medical dissection
  • Grave robbing

• As early as 1763 in British America
  • A “Body has since been taken up, and likely to become a Raw Head and Bloody Bones, by our Tribe of Dissectors, for the better instruction of our young Practitioners.” – *New York Gazette*, Nov. 28 1763

• Riots in 1788
  • In Philadelphia, Baltimore, and New York City
Body snatching: the history

• More medical schools in 19th century, more snatching
• Vast regional networks
• Booming business
  • An abundant supply of cadavers, “extreme inconvenience” for John Staige Davis, professor, UVA medical school, 1858
• Halt during Civil War
• Snatching resumed following War, continued into 20th century
Body snatching: the act

- A painting on the wall of a public house in Penicuik, Scotland
Body snatching: the act

- Transporting bodies
  - Wagons, then barrels, whiskey casks, boxes via railroad
- Prices $12-$30 per adult body in 1850
- Children not immune
  - $4 per child “infant to 8 years”
  - “A newborn child found dead at a door in Norfolk, would have been ideal ‘for exhibiting foetal circulation.’” – physician in 1850
- Seasonal practice, November to February
  - Body snatcher in Virginia, 1849: “unavoidable delay” in the acquisition of bodies, so warm that “the subjects are all in incipient putrefaction when buried.”
The Snatchers

- Critical role of the medical school
- Middle men
  - “He was employed by the medical department of the University of Tennessee to which place, if they had been successful, the body would have been taken.” – *Louisville Courier Journal*, 1879
- “Resurrectionists”, “Sac-um-up-men”, and “Night Doctors”
- Cunning and clever
  - William Cunningham, 1860s, Cincinnati, Ohio
  - Maude Pratt, 1860s, Washington, D.C.
- Doctors and students snatching themselves
- “Diligent use of the shovel and the scalpel” – Edward Dixon, Rutgers, early 1830s
- Paying for tuition
The Snatched

- “There was a hierarchy for the eighteenth-century dead as surely there was one for the living” – historian Steven Wilf
- Varying security of dead based on social status
  - Church, hired watchman, “mort safes,” iron coffins
  - Layering straw, family members stand guard
- Morgues and hospitals
- Docks, train stations, almshouses, asylum burial grounds
- Guards bribed
  - “Had been in the habit of purchasing stiff s [(bodies)] from the sexton of the cemetery at $3 apiece.” Nashville, 1879

Cage-like “mort safes”
The Snatched

- Rarely, the wealthy
  - Congressman John Scott Harrison, son of William Henry Harrison and father of Benjamin Harrison, Ohio Medical College, 1879
- The white poor
- Mostly the black community
Black bodies: the vulnerable

• “In Baltimore the bodies of coloured people exclusively are taken for dissection, because the whites do not like it, and the coloured people cannot resist.” – English sociologist Harriet Martineau, 1835

• “Dissecting a white was risky business. Dissecting a black was largely a matter of finding a body.” – historian D.C. Humphrey

• Snatching in black cemeteries
  • As early as 1788 in New York City
  • In Philadelphia in 1883, as if the ground “had been subjected to an aerial bombardment”
Black bodies: the vulnerable

• Medicine dominated by whites
  • First black medical school in 1868, Howard University in Washington D.C.
  • Black doctors worked in a “Negro medical ghetto” – African-American historian and anatomist W. Montague Cobb
Snatching in the South

- Blacks the primary subjects of dissection
- Medical College of Georgia discovery in 1989
  - 79% African American, 21% Euro-American
  - 42% of population African American in Augusta, GA
- Advertising:
  - “No place in the United States offers as great opportunities for the acquisition of anatomical knowledge. Subjects being obtained for the coloured population in sufficient numbers for every purpose and proper dissection carried out without offending any individuals in the community!” – Charleston Mercury, for the Medical College of South Carolina, 1831
Snatching in the South

- Shipping to and from the North
  - Between 1880-1900, medical college in New England received “twelve bodies of southern Negroes” twice each academic session
  - In article “More Pork for the South”: “two dead negroes” transported from New York City to Charleston, S.C. – New York newspaper, 1830s

- The black body alive
  - Soliciting African-Americans from slaveholders
  - “To planters and others – wanted 50 Negroes. Any person having sick Negroes, considered incurable by their respective physicians, and wishing to deposite of them, Dr. S. will pay cash for Negroes affected with scrofula, or king’s evil, confirmed hypocondriasm, apoplexy, diseases of the liver, kidneys, spleen, stomach and intestines, bladder and its appendages, diarrhea, dysentery, &c. The highest cash price will be paid on application as above.”- Dr. T. Stillman, Medical College of South Carolina, Charleston Mercury, Oct. 12, 1838
Snatching in the South

- Medical studies with slave participants
  - 4 of 8 articles in 1836 Southern Medical and Surgical Journal include slaves as patients
  - In 1838, slaves served as subjects of 80% of eye operations by one Georgia doctor
A range of reaction

- “Resolved, that we most solemnly believe that those who have no regard for the dead, can have but little respect for the living, and those who respect neither dead or living, should never receive the confidence of the public.” – Painesville, Ohio, 1845

- riots
  - “Doctor’s Mob Riot” of 1788, New York City
  - 18th c. riots in Conn., Mass., Vermont, Illinois, Missouri
  - U of Maryland, “maze-like corridors to thwart potential mobs”
A range of reaction

• Post-Civil War change in attitude
  • “Many diplomaed practitioners were exposed as incompetent, unable to perform amputations, set fractures, remove bullets, or do other basic surgeries.” – historian Michael Sappol
  • Understanding the importance of dissection

• Popular literature
  • *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876)– snatching of “old Hoss Williams” on behalf of “Sawbones,” the “young Dr. Robinson”
  • *Tale of Two Cities* (1859)– Jerry Cruncher, ordinary by day, snatcher by night
A range of reaction

- Government intervention: Anatomy Acts
  - Began in 1831
  - Authorized local officials to deliver the bodies of those that would otherwise be buried at the public’s expense to medical schools
  - Body snatching was therefore illegal, but not well enforced
- Key racial difference in the South
  - Proposed bill, Kentucky House of Rep., 1833: “award only the corpses of negroes” to medical schools for dissection
  - Anatomy Act in North Carolina, “no white cadaver would ever be delivered to a black medical college for dissection.”
- Disregard for Acts
  - Report following the arrest of snatcher Richard Jordan: “Jordan, after securing the [punitive] fine, stated publicly that he would resume operation as soon as the excitement blew over.” – *Louisville Courier Journal*, 1879
Racialized responses

- White communities
  - Ignored snatching, “repaying a debt to society”

- Black communities
  - “Usually knew full well how the bodies of their friends and relatives were being used, and they were both offended and frightened.” – historian Todd L. Savitt
  - “Please Gawd, when I dead, I hope I wi’ dead in de summah time” – elderly black woman exclaimed to her friend as they passed by a medical school, 1856

- “Night doctors” as propaganda during Civil War
Racialized responses

• “The Dissecting Hall” (1951)
  Yuh see dat house? Dat great brick house?
  Way yonder down de street?
  Dey used to take dead folks een dar
  Wrapped een a long white sheet.

  An’ sometimes we’en a nigger’d stop,
  A-wondering who was dead,
  Dem stujent men would take a club,
  An’ bat ‘im on de head.

  An ‘drag dat poor dead nigger chile
  Right een dat ‘sectin hall
  To vestigate ‘is liver – lights –
  His gizzard an’ ‘is gall.

  Tek off dat nigger’s han’s an’ feet –
  His eyes, his head, an’ all,
  An’ w’en dem stujent finish
  Dey was nothin’ left at all.
Racialized responses

• Some African-Americans complicit in snatching
  • “Negro body-snatchers” in Nashville (1879)
  • Black superintendent of a Philadelphia cemetery (1883)

• Grandison Harris
  • Slave purchased by the Medical College of Georgia in 1852 to snatch black bodies from a local cemetery
  • Became very knowledgeable about anatomy, well respected
  • Yet, likely loathed by the local black community
  • Historian Tanya Telfair Sharpe: Harris’ presence in black neighborhoods like a drug dealer in contemporary society, fear and jealousy
The big picture

• Placed in a larger context, body snatching and the subsequent dissection of cadavers was only one way in which the black body served to advance medical education in the American South in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

• Use of black body without snatching or dissection

So why is it important?

• The very act of resurrecting the dead black body bestows an importance on it that never existed while the body was alive.
  
  • “…our [white] colleagues recognized in the Negro [on the dissecting table] a perfection in human structure which they were unwilling to concede when that structure was animated by the vital spark.” – black historian and anatomist W. Montague Cobb.
The big picture

- Equality amongst inequality
- Medical students “cannot say that coloured people have not nerves that quiver under moral injury, nor a brain that is on fire with insult, nor pulses that throb under oppression.” – Harriet Martineau, 1838
- Differences only skin deep
Decline and Legacy

- Snatching continues into the 20th century
  - still operations in Tennessee in 1920s
- 1968 – Uniform Anatomy Gift Act
  - ensured the right of a donor to bequeath his or her own body to medical science and education
- Race in medicine elsewhere
- Tuskegee syphilis experiment
  - 1932-1972, 600 rural black men participated, 128 died
- Henrietta Lacks
  - 1951, without consent from the patient or her family, cancer cells biopsied and replicated, mass-produced even today, “He-La cells”
Decline and Legacy

  • In Marion, AL, population 3,600, 20 people have been diagnosed with TB since 2014, 3 have died
  • People hesitant to report symptoms to providers, to get tested
  • “There is a mistrust of government medicine, in the African-American community especially, because of Tuskegee. It dates back to that. We haven’t dealt with the damage of Tuskegee in this state at any meaningful level.” – Dr. R. Allen Perkins, former president of the Alabama Rural Health Association
Conclusion

• Stories like these, in addition to instances of forced sterilization, radiation experimentation, and “corrective” surgeries particular to blacks suggest that any strained relationship between the medical and African-American communities that exists today is one that began developing years ago. While it is impossible to pinpoint just when such an uneasy coexistence -- one characterized by suspicion, exploitation, and fear – truly began, there is no doubt that body snatching during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had a significant impact. When historian Harriet A. Washington asserted that today’s “much bewailed racial health gap is not a gap, but a chasm wider and deeper than a mass grave,” she was halfway there. Such a chasm did not appear on its own. It was body snatchers that helped to dig it.