Black Femininity through the White Speculum:
The Implications of Medicosocialism and the Disproportionate Regulation of Black Women’s Reproductive Autonomy
By Imari Zhané Smith
A thesis submitted to the Department of Women’s Studies for Graduation with Distinction
Duke University
Durham, North Carolina
2016
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*Through my tears
I found god in myself
and I loved her fiercely
-Ntozake Shange*
Abstract:

At the crux of health disparities for women of color lies a history of maltreatment based on racial difference from their white counterparts. It is their non-whiteness that limits their access to the ideologies of “woman” and “femininity” within dominant culture. As the result of this difference, the impact of the birth control movement varied among women based on race. This project explores how the ideology attributed to the black female body limited black women’s access to “womanhood” within dominant culture, and analyzes the manners in which their reproductive autonomy was compromised as the result of changes to that ideology through time. This project operates under the hypothesis that black women’s access to certain aspects of femininity such as domesticity and motherhood reflected their roles in slave society, that black women’s reproductive value was based on the value of black children within slave culture, and that both of these factors dictated the manner in which their reproductive autonomy was managed by health professionals. Black people’s worth as a free labor force within dominant culture diminished when the Reconstruction Amendments were added to the constitution and slavery was deemed unconstitutional—resulting in the paradigmatic shift from the promotion of black fertility to its recession. America’s transition to the medicosocial regulation of black fertility through Eugenics, the role of the black elite in the movement, and the negative impact of this agenda on the reproductive autonomy of black women from low socioeconomic backgrounds are enlisted as support. The paper goes on to draw connections between post-slavery ideology of black femininity and modern-day medicosocial occurrences within clinical settings in order to advocate for increased bias training for medical professionals as a means of combating current health disparities. It concludes with the possibility that this improvement in medical training could persuade people of color to seek out medical intervention at earlier stages of illness and obtain regular check-ups by actively countering physicians’ past transgressions against them.
This project is dedicated to:


“somebody/ anybody
sing a black girl’s song
bring her out
to know herself
to know you
but sing her rhythms
carin/ struggle/ hard times
sing her song of life
she’s been dead so long
closed in silence so long
she doesn’t know the sound
of her own voice
her infinite beauty
she’s half-notes scattered
without rhythm/ no tune
sing her sighs
sing the song of her possibilities
sing a righteous gospel
let her be born
let her be born
& handled warmly.”

― Ntozake Shange

“somet…”

Introduction: #SayHerName

“Black women are killed by the police too. Say their names. Remember their faces.”

There are video cameras on every corner in each major city across the United States, and the majority of inhabitants of own cellular devices with cameras embedded into their frames. Privacy is no longer a matter of whether someone is able to witness an occurrence of events, but whether or not it was able to be recorded--making it nearly impossible to keep “isolated incidents” of systemic oppression for marginalized people a secret. With every flash of a camera, memories that could once only be shared between those involved and accounted for with words, are now available for the world to bask.

Cameras commoditize experiences for those who would have never encountered such in life--allowing them to witness discriminatory actions, hear the language employed for the belittlement of marginalized people, and gain insight to the mythical claim of “the system.” The light from the flash of the video camera illuminates what was once dark matter and with each use of the lens, the exposure allows the images to appear clearer. The stories of pawns within the system have become commoditized so that all may witness the injustices that were once declared “alleged” and secret.

As the result of being able to view everyday life through others’ perspectives, there has been a heightened level at which these segments are accessed and information is shared. Social media outlets such as YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook allow for global access to atrocities as well as proof of phenomena experienced on individual levels as the result of their

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1 Crenshaw, Ritchie, and Gilmer, “Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality against Black Women.”
2 Pew Research Center, “Mobile Technology Fact Sheet.”

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marginalization within dominant culture. Pictures and videos can be posted, shared, and reposted to various groups outside of the primary audience within seconds of the original upload. When Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager, was killed on August 9, 2014 by white police officer Darren Wilson of Ferguson, Missouri, news was immediately shared with his community via a witness’s Twitter account.³ Upon being asked why the young man was shot, the owner of the account, with screen name “@TheePharoah,” wrote “no reason! He was running,” followed by “I saw it happen man….” He continued to post tweets as a means of updating his “twitter followers”, those able to see his posts directly--sharing his location and uploading pictures of the scene to validate his story. Each of his tweets received between 47 and 4700 retweets which meant that his account was viewed by many people outside of his own followers. One-hundred and fifty-three minutes after the first post, @TheePharoah tweeted, “Homie still on the ground tho,” showing the lack of respect that law officials in charge of handling this incident had for Michael Brown’s life through the treatment of his body, both before and after the last breath was expelled from his lungs. As Ranjana Khanna notes, the dead body lends itself as a testament to the lived life⁴; his body was put on display like a modern day execution by hanging. It was kept in the August sun on display for Brown’s community to see and social media allowed for the world to see it too.

@TheePharoah’s account was all too familiar, and as the media began to circulate the story, communities across the country were able to see similarities between this “isolated incident” and “isolated incidents” of their own. Widespread consciousness of the disregard for black lives in institutions and spaces that were not constructed to protect them led to the national recognition of the #BlackLivesMatter movement against police brutality faced by black people at

³ @TheePharoah, “Witness to Brown Killing from Tim Dickinson on Twitter.”
⁴ Khanna, “Speculation.”
the hand of white officers. The hashtag originated after the acquittal of George Zimmerman, a Florida white-passing neighborhood watch coordinator, in the case of Trayvon Martin, “an unarmed black teenager” who was killed by the aforementioned on February 26, 2012.

Although the campaign is spearheaded by Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi, and Alicia Garza, all queer black women, the focus of the movement has been centered on the black man. Reminiscent of the book titled All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, but Some of Us are Brave, it is inoffensive to say that #BlackLivesMatter became a fight for the lives of black men as if they were the true representation of blackness. This has also happened (and continues to occur) within various moments of feminism--the fight for “women” has generally been the fight for “white women,” but “white” would go unsaid for the sake of homogeneity and the assumption that white women’s issues were the universal issues that all women should work towards ending. The women’s suffrage movement, which lays claim to a victorious outcome in 1920 regarding “women’s” ability to vote, could be considered one of the most blatantly exclusionary women’s movements; voting for people of color had not been actualized until the 1859 Reconstruction Amendments had been effectively enforced in 1964.

Movements, both social and political, adopt representative identifiers who are most associated with the entity in which they are moving against. Most systems were created to protect what is considered normal, which means “those groups that require no name in casual conversation.” Considering most systems of oppression, the normative group is defined as white, male, cis-gendered, wealthy, heterosexual, and Christian. In lieu of the tendency to choose representative figures most similar to the normative group, the “white woman” became the

5 Bell Scott, Hull, and Smith, All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies.
signifier\textsuperscript{6} for “\textit{all women}” and the “black man” became the signifier of “black lives” because of shared race and gender, respectively, with the group at large. Collier Meyerson, columnist for fusion.net, notes:

Though Black Lives Matter founders were explicit in their demands—justice for all black people, including trans and black women—the movement had been largely centered around the deaths of black men, about calling attention to their vulnerability. The names of black men shot and killed by police became synonymous with the slogan “black lives matter.”\textsuperscript{7}

We know the names of people considered to be the important figures of each movement, the ones who inspired people to mobilize and change to happen. First wave feminism’s Lucretia Coffin, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Alice Paul are well known, but I pose the question of where the name of Ida B. Wells, founder of the first black women’s suffrage organization, the Alpha Suffrage Club of Chicago,\textsuperscript{8} falls on the list along with the mention of Delta Sigma Theta, a National Panhellenic Council sorority that notes participation in suffrage parades within its own history. Are they not women and suffragettes? From media depictions of Black Lives Matter, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and Amadou Diallo have become heavily associated with the movement, but there is also Mya Hall, Alexia Christian, Eleanor Bumpers, Alberta Spruill, Rekia Boyd, Shantel Davis, Shelly Frey, Miriam Carey, Michelle Cusseaux, Tanisha Anderson, Megan Hockaday, Natasha Mckenna, Aiyana Stanley Jones, Sandra Bland.


\textsuperscript{7} Meyerson, “How Michael Brown Changed Our Perceptions of America.”

\textsuperscript{8} Williams, “The Alpha Suffrage Club.”
The difference between the former and the latter examples of ascription was the level of consciousness in the interpellation\(^9\) of each group’s representative trope. Unlike white suffragettes’ effort to dissociate themselves from blackness and black women during the first wave of feminism, the creators of #BlackLivesMatter intended for an all-inclusive representation of black lives that would encompass the entire identity spectrum that accompanies the definition of “black”: “Black” as in “black” regardless of religion, as in “black” regardless of sexual orientation, as in “black” regardless of one’s position on the gender spectrum. White suffragettes consciously sought to define all women as white women only while black lives came to symbolize black men because of the attention gained following cases of racial injustices concerning black men.

Historically, black women have been neglected in the definitions of “woman” and “black” although they reside at the intersection of both identities. According to Kimberlé Crenshaw, director of Columbia Law School’s Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies, “women of color are situated within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas. The need to split one’s political energies between two sometimes opposing groups is a dimension of intersectional disempowerment that men of color and white women seldom confront.”\(^{10}\) As the result of being a subset of the groups signified by movements that seek to empower women and black people, black women’s stories often go unnoticed, names often go unsaid, presence not committed to memory. It is imperative that we offer them the same attention, the same remembrance, granted to members of groups with less tangled layers of identity-based oppression. From this sentiment came the #SayHerName

\(^9\) Nguyen, “Interpellation | The Chicago School of Media Theory.”

\(^{10}\) Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” 1252.
Campaign in which black women’s lives and deaths serve as the focus. In the African American Policy Forum “#SayHerName Brief,” Crenshaw notes:

Although Black women are routinely killed, raped, and beaten by the police, their experiences are rarely foregrounded in popular understandings of police brutality... Yet, inclusion of Black women’s experiences in social movements, media narratives, and policy demands around policing and police brutality is critical to effectively combatting racialized state violence for Black communities and other communities of color.11

This is a time for recognizing the groups that forgo recognition because the ability to control what is considered “mainstream” media as well as “what is considered important” has shifted to the people and the masses that share in their stories.

This academic paper offers that same recognition to black women within the realm of reproductive health. As an aspiring obstetrician gynecologist and public health professional, politically and culturally defined as a black woman, I wanted to pursue a project that would allow me to examine blackness, womanhood, and socially ascribed femininity within the context of medicine. Because of my training in the humanities as a women’s studies major, I place a high emphasis on examining factors that influence the present as opposed to limiting the scope of my analysis to the present. In light of this, I will examine the origin of current notions of black femininity by historicizing such ascription given to black women during one of the first long-term interactions between them and white men—the transcontinental slave trade.

It was during this time that one of the first terms were ascribed to people of African descent within the scope of subordination to non-Africans. “Slaves” and “masters” became

11 Crenshaw, Ritchie, and Gilmer, “Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality against Black Women.”
synonyms for “Africans in America” and “Europeans in America”, respectively, and prescribed a new hierarchy within the young society. As the result, modern day white, heterosexual, Christian patriarchal men—the group from which all other groups in society deviate—became normalized (the group that needs not be described). This should be noted because “slavery,” the forced subordination of groups of people, was not invented through cross-continental colonization.

Slavery existed in Europe and Africa well before they came into contact with one another. I operate in the framework that there were always physical markers of difference between slaves and masters, however, colonization of more distant lands, made possible by varied technological advancements, allowed for this power dynamic to manifest between groups with greater physical difference than before. Transcontinental colonization introduced the intersection of stark racial difference and subordination. Groups that go unnamed and unmentioned in most conversation, both casual and formal, hold the highest position of power in a given society as well as the designation of normality. During transcontinental interaction, men of European descent became standardized as the normal group within colonized societies. The extreme difference in appearance of the colonized and the colonizer allowed for race to serve as a marker of status in slave culture.

Kimberle Crenshaw’s term “intersectionality” is integral for analyzing slave women’s identity formation within the antebellum south. Intersectionality is the manifestation of various levels of oppression based on multiple facets of an individual’s personhood. Years before the term was invented, Angela Yvonne Davis, in her book Race, Class, & Gender, explores life at the intersections of race-, gender-, and class-based oppressions. Through her analysis, Davis lays the groundwork for future black feminist scholars, like Crenshaw, to complicate the narrative of all women and homogeneity because of gender. She first recognizes gender- and class- based
oppression and goes on to expand her argument to confront how the narrative of slavery is used to show racial difference in the establishment of “female inferiority”:

“Woman” became synonymous in the prevailing propaganda with “mother” and “housewife,” and both “mother” and “housewife” bore the fatal mark of inferiority. But among Black female slaves, this vocabulary was nowhere to be found. The economic arrangements of slavery contradicted the hierarchical sexual roles incorporated in the new ideology. Male-female relations within the slave community could not therefore conform to the dominant ideological pattern.\textsuperscript{12}

In other words, there was no such possibility to fully perform gender as prescribed by one’s sex as a result of slave status. However, Davis also notes the juxtaposition of race and class as a source of “ungendering,” a term coined by Hortense Spillers in her famous essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.”\textsuperscript{13} Essentially, the inability to conform to dominant gender- and family-based ideology is equated with slavery’s ability to ungender slaves.

Positional designation of status on the spectrum from slave to master relied on the phenotypically ascribed race with which one presented, followed by class, then gender. This manner of categorization posed the questions: “Are you a slave?”; “Do you have enough capital to be a slave owner?”; “Are you a man or woman?”--in that order. And so the order of power boiled down to rich men of European descent, rich women of European descent, poor men of European descent, poor women of European descent, then, slave men and women. This hierarchy continues to plague American culture today. Through racial mixing among indigenous, immigrant, and slave peoples and incorporation of new groups into the country, the spectrum has widened, but the two extremes of whiteness and blackness have remained the same; all groups

\textsuperscript{12} Davis, \textit{Women, Race, & Class}. 12

are still separated based on how close they are to either of the two extremes and what they are thought to contribute to society.

Through this project, I explore the relationship between expectations of and desires for black women in white-dominated society and black women’s health disparities today such as transmission of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections. Because of limitations of time for my academic exploration, the scope will be narrowed specifically to the realm of reproductive autonomy for black women.

A Medicosocial Dilemma: Being Alive, Woman, and Colored

“Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives.”

-Audre Lorde, Uses of the Erotic

“And this old world is a new world and a bold world for me.”

-Nina Simone

In 2008, the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) “Gardasil” vaccine had been introduced into healthcare clinics across the nation. It was reported to protect vaccinated women from getting strains 6, 11, 16, and 18--16 and 18 being the cause of 70% of all cervical cancer cases. Currently, "Black and Hispanic women [have] higher rates of HPV-associated cervical cancer than white women”--this extends to vaginal cancer as well. At present, it is reported that black women “are 20% more likely to develop cervical cancer and twice as likely to die from the disease” than their white counterparts in spite of the vaccine because it does not treat the HPV strains that usually cause black women’s infections. As previously mentioned, the vaccine treats HPV 16 and 18, and black women’s cancers usually result from HPV 33 and 35. Adriana C. Vidal, PhD, associate professor of obstetrics and gynecology at Duke University School of Medicine in Durham, North Carolina, claims that this can be attributed to black women’s

14 Lorde, Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.
15 Simone, Nina, “Feelin’ Good”
16 Kim, “HPV Vaccines May Be Less Effective in African American Women,” 1
17 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), “HPV-Associated Cancers Rates by Race and Ethnicity.”
18 Kim, 1
19 ibid.
unwillingness to participate in “studies so that when policies, and vaccines in this case, are made they [can] represent all the populations.”

This exclusion from treatment is attributed to the lack of black women’s participation in earlier phases of vaccine development. Vidal states that "African American women should participate in [these kinds] of studies so that when policies, and vaccines in this case, are made,“ they will be included, and this is true. Black women should participate more in medical research so that they are accurately represented in medical advancements. However, this statement offers a solution for a problem that fails to acknowledge the root in its entirety. It ignores the trauma that had been bestowed upon the black female body for the sake of medical advances within obstetrics and gynecology. It disregards the vulnerability of black women in the creation of medical tools used everyday in the OB/GYN office. It forgets the historical understanding that black women did not have the option to participate in medical experimentation, it was expected of them because they had no rights to their own bodies.

The ability for one’s health to be protected has been racialized because black women refuse to volunteer as experiments--a choice that women before them had not possessed. This statement suggests that such “rebellion” or neglect for one’s responsibility to the future of medicine is unjustified. What is made even more evident by this statement is the lack of understanding for history and the attribution of black women’s ignored personhood within medicine as their own fault. It makes one contemplate how a field founded in the vaginas of black women has failed to protect them and synonymously forgotten said place of origin. Vidal’s sentiment reflects a sense of medical meritocracy. Black women are not healthy because black

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20 Kim, 1  
21 ibid.  
22 ibid.
women do not make efforts to improve their health. They do not participate in health research so they cannot complain if the research outcomes do not benefit them. Like explanations for other health disparities for marginalized communities, their unwillingness to participate is attributed to their socioeconomic status and perception of medical intervention held by previous generations. If greater involvement in medicine truly results in greater protection of health, then the state of black reproductive medicine should have been and continued to be above all other groups. The black vagina has served as ground zero for the field of obstetrics and gynecology, yet, made evident by modern day health disparities, it is the most unhealthy, least likely to be protected, unsafe, underexplored, threatening of all vaginas.

Health disparities for black women, especially regarding sexual and reproductive health, are reported to be the results of internalized historical betrayal of communities of color and lower socioeconomic status. As illustrated by various narratives in both Dorothy Robert’s *Killing the Black Body* and Harriet Washington’s *Medical Apartheid*, these two reasons are very well supported. However, it is important to explore the role of negative clinical experiences on the maintenance of stances against medical treatment. Health professionals should take responsibility for the lack of black women’s participation in studies and action against these disparities as opposed to blaming on the community as being responsible for their own misfortune.

At the crux of health disparities for women of color lies a history of maltreatment based on racial difference from their white counterparts. It is their non-whiteness that limits their access to the ideologies of “woman” and “femininity” within dominant culture. This project explores how the ideology attributed to the black feminine body limited black women’s access to “womanhood” within dominant culture, and analyzes the manners in which their reproductive
autonomy was compromised as the result of changes to that ideology through time. Black people’s worth as a free labor force within dominant culture diminished when the Reconstruction Amendments were added to the constitution and slavery was deemed unconstitutional—resulting in the paradigmatic shift from the promotion of black fertility to its recession.

The relationships among owner of vagina, speaker for vagina, and examiner of vagina and the power dynamics among woman, society, and physician are essential to the construction of my argument. They allow for the division of topics explored in this project and provide a common factor that unites them. I want to expand the term vagina to encompass both the vagina and uterus—acknowledging the vagina as a symbol of sexual objectivity and the uterus as reproductive ability as well as the interconnectedness between the two. I hypothesize that black women’s access to certain aspects of femininity, such as domesticity and motherhood, reflected their roles in slave society, that black women’s reproductive value was based on the value of black children within slave culture, and that both of these factors dictated the manner in which their reproductive autonomy was managed by health professionals over time. Additionally, I hypothesize that, as the result of the decrease in value of the black population after the end of slavery, black fertility was problematized, and solutions for the problem resulted in efforts to decrease black women’s ability to reproduce both voluntarily and involuntarily through increased access to contraceptives, sterilization, and eugenics.

From the past to the present, black women have continued to be scapegoated for the negative outcomes within the black communities and services have been offered to offset reproduction of black women as the result of this. I want to trace back to a time when black reproductive ability was viewed in a positive light, trace the moment in which it shifted, and
consider how it affected black women’s experiences with the medical field and medical professionals.
Section 1: Pro-Reproduction and Slavery
Part I: Defining Black Femininity in the Context of Slavery

“my spirit is too ancient to understand the separation of soul & gender”

—Ntozake Shange,
for colored girls
who have considered suicide
/when the rainbow is enuf

The title “Black woman” in my essay is referenced as a socially ascribed political identifier within white male-dominated society. Like that of Hortense Spillers’s “American Grammar Book,” I also value the language used to describe people and phenomena in society. I consider my own racial mix of South Asian, Irish, African, and Native American and wonder how I have come to be labeled as “African American” as though my African ancestry is the only one I am allowed to acknowledge in American society. It was not until I witnessed the support of #BlackLivesMatter by black people outside of America that I realized that the uniting factor for black people is the shared experience of blackness that results from possessing phenotypes that attest to a more direct connection with African populations. I am American. I am a black in America.

For the duration of the project, I will be using “Black” as opposed to “African American” because, although black people are of African descent, “Black” does not limit their variant ancestries to their African heritage and emphasizes the shared experience that results from pigmentation as well as origin. It provides a space that allows for blackness to be made up of more than African descent, while maintaining the common phenotype that results from said origin on a global scale. Removing the “America” from the title eliminates nationhood from an

23 Shange, For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/when the Rainbow Is Enuf.
identity that exists in many other countries and removing “African” allows for the transcendence of blackness despite one’s specific genetic makeup. The shared experience is treatment and social position based on blackness, and I choose to place more emphasis on racial phenotype than nationhood because of it.

“Femininity,” in this project, will mean the essence of performing gender expectations attributed to female bodies. One’s ability to perform gender varies with the intersecting identities within the society previously mentioned (race, class, etc). In this definition, I draw upon gender theory by both Judith Butler and Joan Riviere. According to Butler, to be woman is to perform as a woman—an act that was limited within the sphere of plantation life. Both authors proclaim “femininity” to be an expectation of and requirement for “proper” gender identification of female bodies. Although gender and sex are often linked, they are constructed differently from one another. The dissimilarity between their constructions is highlighted through the works of Joan Riviere’s “Womanliness as a Masquerade” and Judith Butler’s “Bodies that Matter.” Butler constitutes sex as proof of one’s gender, and gender as a performance of one’s sex while Riviere claims that gender is based on the “masks” people choose to portray. Ultimately, both gender and sex are constructed on the basis of presentation, however, gender depends on the quality of the character traits presented and sex depends on the genitalia that accompanies that performance. Femininity, for me, is the essence of the expected performance of “womanliness.”

Presentation is central to the interplay between sex and gender. In Riviere’s article, gender is merely an imitation of ideals for “man” and “woman” enforced by a heterosexual society. She asserts that men and women possess an inherent bisexuality because all individuals

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24 Riviere, “Womanliness as a Masquerade.”
26 Riviere, 303
carry out traits associated with males and females. Consequently, gender depends on the amount of masculine or feminine attributes an individual has; when feminine attributes outweigh masculine ones, the individual is considered a woman. Enslaved women were not able to perform gender in the same manner as free women. One text, *Ar’n’t I a Woman* by Deborah Gray White, stated that there was virtually no difference in slave life on the basis of gender until female slaves reached the age of childbearing. Slave children were given tasks such as “toting water to field hands,”

27 carrying out domestic work, and caring for younger slave children, regardless of their assumed gender (based on sex). It is assumed that there was also no differentiation of play based on gender

29 because of various accounts from slave men and women about games they would participate in as children. This even extends to the youth who were of working age and would be designated to work in the field and household alongside their parents.

  Enslaved women of working and childbearing age were expected to carry similar workloads to their male counterparts at all times in their lives, even during pregnancy.

30 They were even subjected to the same consequences. There is a record of a pregnant slave woman having to dig a hole in the ground just large enough for her stomach so that she could lie down to be whipped by a plantation overseer. Slave men and women were often subjected to similar abuses from masters and overseers, including that of a sexual nature. While Hortense Spillers argues, in her essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” that slavery marked the “ungendering” of black men and women, the body, for Spillers, is the canvas that prevents slave women from being considered the same as slave men on all levels. However, she does not reach the


28 White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, 92.

29 ibid.

30 Minges, 17
conclusion that the possession of a vagina or penis allowed for slaves to perform as their prescribed gender on plantations. Since slavery was not “at all gender-related,” there was no need for such differentiation. Only their contribution through slave labor was vital to the economy. Through the all-encompassing label of “slave,” the “female body and male body became a territory of cultural and political maneuver.” Their personhood was of no value.

Essentially, the would-be slave man or woman is an enslaved body with a penis or vagina, respectively. Conversely, Spillers notes that this “ungendering” along with the sexual trauma that happened to both male and female slave bodies became differentiated by the female slave’s ability to become pregnant, and expectancy that she was responsible for rearing and conditioning the next generation of slave children for slave life. Slave women’s contribution to the economy transcended her ability to perform slave labor because of her reproductive capacity. Initially, this was not important. Slave owners could purchase new slaves in order to maintain slave labor forces and wealth driven by their slaves until “congress outlawed the overseas trade in 1807.”

Considering the transatlantic slave trade ceased being a legal option well before slavery was abolished, reproduction amongst slave populations was integral to maintaining slave labor after that year. Out of necessity for the continuity of slave culture, “female slavery had much to do with work, but most of it was concerned with bearing, nourishing, and rearing children whom slaveholders needed for the continual replenishment of their labor force.” Thus this increased emphasis on sexual and reproductive ability allowed for a pseudo-gendering of slave women. It allowed for dominant slave culture to recognize slave women’s bodies as female and ascribe

32 ibid.
33 ibid., 69
them the ability to perform feminine tasks. Although black women were denied full access to the ideology of “womanhood,” they were deemed capable of performing as woman within the context of slavery.

In other words, slave women’s gender expectations were based on unmet needs on the plantation, recognition of their feminine genitalia by those in power, and assumptions of feminine abilities based on the presence of said genitalia. Their oppression was rooted by the expectation that they could perform as woman within the context of slavery and the lack of protection and access that would be afforded to females performing womanhood outside of slavery. In addition to domestic roles as caretaker, child-rearer, and assistant to the mistress of the household as “Mammies,” enslaved women faced sexual objectification as fancy girls, mistresses, and “Jezebels,” ascribed roles based on their fertility became the most important part of their identity in society. Black women’s femininity had always been defined by their value to society and the economy. They were needed to assist their masters’ wives in running the household by cooking and cleaning, to raise their masters’ children, in being objects of their masters’ sexual desires, and in bearing children to ensure that their masters would have another generation of workers to replace the current workforce when the time came.

As the result of these needs, black women became associated with their contributions to the slave economy and qualities related to these tasks were integrated into what it meant to be a black woman—no matter how contradictory those traits were. Black women were trusted as caregivers because this was the role they fulfilled within the master’s home. This trust, as caregivers, demonstrated the dominant culture’s faith in slave women’s abilities to reproduce culture for white children and maintain culture within white homes. In addition to the role of the

35 Ibid. 72
36 Ibid.
black woman in the master’s home, she was also used to fulfill a role in the master’s bed. Slave women’s bodies were commonly considered as sexual objects because of their possession of female reproductive organs. Most importantly, the role of the black woman as mistress did not reflect the master, but attributed lasciviousness to black women while evading masters’ roles in the sexual exploitation of slaves (made evident by the presence of mixed children). Masters needed them to be considered “Jezebels” in order to benefit from their children’s labor (regardless of paternity), and wives needed someone to blame for their husbands’ disavowal of promises made on their wedding day. Both the masters and their wives benefitted from this trope, financially and emotionally.

According to Spillers, “before the ‘body’ there is the ‘flesh,’ that zero degree of social conceptualization.”

The flesh is the initial marker of ethnic identification and difference between master and slave, while the body served as the place of recognition and similarity. It is the place by which sex manifests as “male” or “female”--the only evidence of a physical identity that induced a recognizable sameness between master and slave (by the master). The ability to identify the slave woman as female allowed for her to become an acceptable sexual object. There was no male equivalent of the mistress role. In all of my research, I had not come across mention of a “fancy boy,” “male lovers,” or a well-known unjustly romanticized affair like that of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. Considering the relationship between homophobia and mainstream society over time, the ability to identify the slave man as male prevented him from publicly being attributed the role of mistress.

Thus the expected performance of gender ascribed to black female bodies was malleable within society to naturalize the tasks they performed within slave culture. Black women’s

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37 Spillers, 61
38 ibid.
possession of female genitalia permitted them access to feminine roles of domestic work, childrearing, and (public) sexual objectivity for white men, but their race prevented them from accessing femininity in its entirety because, as slaves, they lacked the protection and rights necessary to be considered proper ladies.
Part II: Black Women as Living Cadavers

I remember visiting Monticello and deciding not to go on a tour because it began at the slave quarters. That day, I swore that would be my first and last visit to a plantation because I sensed that this was a place of great pain as opposed to something to be marveled. One memory in particular was a secret door in the Jefferson dining room that would allow domestic slaves to enter and exit the room discreetly. People awed at the technology, and I became even more disgusted.

In 1769, Thomas Jefferson became aware of a development in disease prevention known as inoculation. Fascinated by the potential of this discovery, Jefferson, like many before and after him, utilized the most expendable human subjects for medical advancements as a means of testing the safety of them. During the antebellum period, slaves not only served as a source of free labor for the American economy, but were also used as human guinea pigs for medical treatment before it was provided to the general white population. An example of the exploitation of slaves for medical experimentation and advancement comes from one of the largest plantations in Virginia, President Jefferson’s Monticello estate. At his plantation, depicted on the back of the nickel, Jefferson used his slaves to test the validity of the vaccinations. His scientific process is summarized in Harriet Washington’s *Medical Apartheid*:

Eager to make his mark, Jefferson embarked on enthusiastic adventures in vaccination by gambling with the lives of his slaves. Jefferson obtained some cowpox vaccine indirectly from Dr. Benjamin Waterhouse of Boston, but it was known to be of dubious potency: the vaccine had failed to protect the subjects of an earlier trial. Jefferson spent that summer vaccinating 200 of his family’s and
his neighbors’ slaves. Only after they escaped illness did Jefferson inject his white family at Monticello.\(^39\)

Jefferson and his neighbors were not sure of the validity of vaccinations, and refused to jeopardize their families, as well as themselves, for the sake of experimentation. Those interested in the legitimacy of such practice could not put non-expendable persons at risk, however, slaves were not included in this faction. As Washington claims, Jefferson “embarked on enthusiastic adventures in vaccination by gambling with the lives of his slaves.”\(^40\) Slave men and women in the antebellum south were akin to “model organisms,”\(^41\) such as the Drosophila melanogaster, fruit flies used in biology labs across the world—easily expendable and readily available for experimentation, observation, and data collection.

To be a black body at the mercy of a white physician during the antebellum period was extremely risky. Slave treatment proved to be both beneficial to the master and the physician, more to the latter than the former. During this time, there was not much medical exploration conducted on the human body. When slaves became sick, physicians offered their services to masters at little to no cost in order to expand their own repertoire and escalate their own careers to new heights without facing repercussions if procedures went awry. Due to a lack of formal medical training available during this time, “treatment” was reminiscent of “experimentation” rather than “improvement.” Physicians were able to use slaves as test groups to practice unproven procedures and establish credibility in the medical field upon mastery. Through acquiring slave subjects, there was no limit on inquiry. Slave specimens were essentially living cadavers. Slaves served as model organisms because they could be bought and replaced, could


\(^40\) Ibid.

\(^41\) Nature Education, “Model Organism / Model Genetic Organism.”
not deny treatment because their masters were responsible for granting consent to physicians, and lacked legal protection because they had not been designated as persons under the law until the 1859 Reconstruction Amendments (13th, 14th, and 15th amendments). Ultimately, experimentation on slaves was a way to perfect procedures at little cost before incorporating a practice into their medical interactions with white patients.

More specific to the black women and the context of reproductive health during slavery, James Marion Sims’s exploits allow for examination of the disconnection between those who served as “the sacrificed” and beneficiaries of said sacrifice and its relevance to current health disparities. Sims, a doctor from South Carolina, is often spoken of as “the father of gynecology.” However, at other times, his contribution to the field is considered "a prime example of progress in the medical profession made at the expense of a vulnerable population." Monuments dedicated to Sims’s career were erected at the South Carolina state house, his alma mater Jefferson Medical College, and the Alabama capitol grounds. The historical marker at his birthplace in South Carolina honors him for “his service to suffering women. Empress and slave alike.” One could assume this description to be representative of his contribution to women’s health regardless of class, however, that is not the case here. While acknowledging the existing connections between Sims, gynecology, and slavery, the words on this statue fail to even begin to acknowledge the trauma inflicted on the slave women who had been at Sims’ mercy. Much like the inscription on the statue, slave women’s sacrifice continues to go without proper recognition within the medical texts since there was no legitimate mention of their suffering as a “contribution.” The manner in which the story of gynecology is told implies consent and

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43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
successful, equal treatment of “empress and slave alike”—making a martyr of the slave women and immortalizing Sims by commemorating him for his dedication to women’s health as opposed to condemning him for his abuse of slave women for the sake of the empress.

Harriet Washington, in Medical Apartheid, describes the trauma that Sims forced his female slave subject to undergo in his quest to cure vaginal fistulas in the white female population. In the text, Washington notes that Sims acquired seventeen slave women, but only three of the slaves’ names, Anarcha, Lucy, and Betsey, had been uncovered during archival research. All of these women were subjected to experimental procedures that included “unanesthetized removal of bone segments” that paved the way for modern day gynecological exam tools and procedures. Through his abuse of enslaved black female bodies, he was able to develop a method by which to repair “vesicovaginal fistula, [which] afflicted many women, black and white, who survived difficult childbirth.” Vesicovaginal fistula is an abnormal tube-like connection between the bladder and vagina; it causes continuous involuntary discharge from the bladder through the vaginal tract. (Risk of fistula increased with the incorporation of forceps into childbirth procedures during this period.) Sims developed his technique by operating on female slaves, many of whom he purchased and kept on his property. Some of the seventeen women with fistulas underwent thirty operations, none with the benefit of anesthesia, which had been recently discovered. These operations clearly violated modern principles of ethical medical practice and the portrayal of his legacy 150 years later is a matter of controversy because of its...
unscrupulous basis. The bottom line is that Sims never served each group, “empress and slave,” in a similar manner.

Modern authors have pointed out the exaggerated nature of Sims’s descriptions of his own work. For example, Sims claims that all women were cured of vaginal fistula when writing about his procedures, but Washington illustrates the falsity of his claim by describing his assistant’s efforts to repair the slave women after Sims mutilated their bodies for his own gain. Sims was also found to have changed his patients’ racial descriptions to “white” in presentations on and illustrations of his work. Essentially, the way in which Sims presented his own work in the field was heavily biased towards his desire to be viewed as an innovator in women’s medicine. As demonstrated by the statue’s inscription, third party descriptions have also failed to provide accurate representations of Sims’s exploits.

The manner in which Sims’s experiences were historicized is not only problematic, but also serves as a tool to establish and reaffirm various stereotypes concerning black people. The clearest stereotypical confirmation provided by, both, his own accounts and narratives created by historians was the idea that black people experience lower levels of pain because of a higher tolerance than their white counterparts. Dr. Seale Harris, author of the 1950 book titled Woman’s Surgeon: The Life Story of J. Marion Sims, wrote, “Sims’s (sic) experiments brought them physical pain, it is true, but they bore it with amazing patience and fortitude – a grim stoicism which may have been part of their racial endowment.” His text demonstrates the impingement of racial ideology onto the objectivity of historical depictions. Logically speaking, pain warrants a reaction when it is felt. Stoicism to pain is inhuman. This description of Sims’s patients forgoes

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50 Spettel, Sara, and Mark Donald White. "The portrayal of J. Marion Sims’ controversial surgical legacy."
51 Washington, 66
52 Washington, 67
53 Harris, Woman’s Surgeon: The Life Story of J. Marion Sims, 5.
Lucy, Betsey, Anarcha, and the unnamed thirteen other women’s humanities for the sake of defending and justifying Sims’s actions. It inadvertently says “the black women felt pain, but their blackness bestows them with a higher pain tolerance that allows them to ignore the pain” caused by Sims’s experimentation. Essentially, “it wasn’t that bad because they were black.”

This notion of black bodies combined with gender ideology also establishes and reaffirms the “strong black woman” trope. At the intersection of blackness and femininity lies a negation of the ideological woman’s entitlement to emotion and sensation. Considering that the United States had still been under the ruse that “separate but equal” could proximate equity during the time in which Harris’s text was written, this method of self-preservation through “othering” evident in his narrative is expected.

Forty years later, historian Washington takes exception to this racist idea of the stoic slave who undergoes painful experiences without reaction. She discusses consent in noting that “slaves did not have to be recruited, persuaded and cajoled to endure pain and indignity; they could not refuse”—offering an alternative perspective to the one presented by Harris:

Each surgical scene was a violent struggle between the slaves and physicians and each woman’s body was a bloodied battleground. Each naked, unanesthetized slave woman had to be forcibly restrained by the other physicians through her shrieks of agony as Sims determinedly sliced, then sutured her genitalia.

This scene contains an element of realism and grants those seventeen women a sense of humanity through giving them the ability to feel pain and rejecting that such an experience

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54 Lorde, *A Burst of Light.*
55 Washington, 2
56 Harris, 5
would result in their being “confident that in time [Sims] would cure them.”

She also rejects Harris’s claim that they “contended with each other as to who should have the honor of being the subject of his next operation” in spite of “their repeated disappointments, despite all the futile operations they had been through.” Washington continues to dismantle his claim by providing a reason for the patients’ willingness to be subjected to more experimentation: Sims had “addicted the slave women to morphine” and would only administer the drug after surgery. When examined alongside one another, these perspectives on history serve as testaments to two different agendas. Harris’s historical narrative is written in the interest of producing a positive portrayal of Sims’s narrative and dehumanized slave women for this purpose. Washington’s historical narrative is used to establish slave women’s humanity within that same narrative and to complicate previous depictions like the one provided by Harris. These accounts are reflective of the historian and their reasons for compiling a particular historical narrative. Harris’s version of the story was meant to protect whiteness and apotheosize Sims, while minimizing the violence and trauma of slave women. Washington, however, had no interest in protecting whiteness and ultimately wanted to give a more accurate historical narrative for black bodies who rarely had the opportunity to document their own experiences.

The bottom-up model for retelling traditional historical narratives from other perspectives allows modern day historians the opportunity to bestow justice upon traditionally misrepresented groups by speaking to a variation of historical truths outside of the dominant narrative. It caused me to contemplate what tangible changes would need to take place in order to continue this restoration of dignity and humanity for black women. Collings, author of “The Way We Live

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57 ibid
58 ibid
59 ibid.
60 Washington, 66
Now: Stand Up Women,” stated in 2003 that she did not “want to topple Dr. Sims’s statue, but 
[wanted] to get Lucy and Anarcha up there with him, completing the picture.”61 Upon reading this statement, I agreed, but it caused me to wonder about what such a statue would look like. As previously mentioned, there were three statues erected in honor of Marion Sims’s contribution to women’s health depicting his likeness alone. Where do Lucy, Betsey, and Anarcha fit into the scene represented?

Currently, there is a tendency to narrate stories in a constant state of binary: good and evil, black and white, man and woman, adult and child. French sociologist Emile Durkheim describes the phenomenon of classification via dichotomy in his text, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* that is useful in. He claims that “since we picture a sort of logical chasm between the two [extremes], the mind irresistibly refuses the two corresponding things to be confounded, or even to be put in contact with each other.”62 They serve as antitheses to one another, further defining the other by representing what the it is not. Societies function on the existence of binaries, but, in practice, nothing is ever “either/or.” Since binaries have been so ingrained in society and incorporated into normalcy that citizens of said society struggle with acknowledging categories that reside in the “in-between”, people do not like to convolute them. Durkheim warns, “such a promiscuity, or even too direct a contiguity would contradict too violently the dissociation of these ideas in the mind.”63 This being said, people do not like to conflate *good* and *evil* when it comes to creating historical narratives. The two exist in a binary that should never be corrupted by the other.

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61 Collins, “The Way We Live Now: Stand Up Women,” 2426
62 Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life.*
63 Ibid 93
Binary is the reason conquest and war are taught without mention of enemy death tolls throughout the educational system; it is the reason we have the Jefferson estate on our currency without mention of it being one of the largest plantations of its time. Placing Anarcha, Betsey, and Lucy alongside Dr. Sims, for the purpose of accurately describing historical events, calls for the public acknowledgment of his crimes against him. Although, in theory, this sounds great--making public everyone who played a role in the creation of gynecology. However, in practice, it is not feasible to depict a hero next to the persons that would render him a villain, nor is it feasible to devalue the experience of the slave women by depicting them as women who sacrificed themselves for the advancement of women’s health. I envision the most accurate statue imaginable would be one depicting a content Sims alongside Lucy, Betsey, and Anarcha, with mouths open wide and tears streaming as if they were screaming out in agony. Nevertheless, because of the inability to combine good and evil, and a tendency to forgo evil qualities when historicizing heroes, the statue that would be erected would, instead, present the three women standing alongside Sims with lively eyes gazing out into the abyss to represent the importance of their sacrifice for all women. I appreciate Collings’s sentiment that Sims, Lucy, Betsey, Anarcha, and the 14 unnamed slave women were, all, important to gynecology and deserve acknowledgment. However, an inaccurate visual representation of their relationships to one another would underscore the ambiguity of Sims’s achievements as well as the experimental trauma to which the slave women were subjected.

The resistance against acknowledging the “in-between” extends to art created around the origin of gynecology. Marie Jenkins Schwartz ironically chooses this painting as the cover art for her book, *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South*:
This painting serves as the visual accompaniment of the history depicted by Harris’s narrative. There is a fully dressed slave woman on the table in a position that gives the illusion of trust in her physician. Other slave women gaze curiously around the curtain that grants the slave woman privacy during her appointment with the physician. Schwartz discredits the historical accuracy of this picture through her analysis of black women’s encounters with medical professionals during slavery.

Upon direct comparison of the picture with historical medical practice, it was customary for physicians to have to work around sheets covering the pelvic region as a means for the preservation of white women’s modesty. That protocol prevented doctors from obtaining the necessary visual perspective of the vagina and therefore from being able to effectively perceive and treat vaginal deformities that would arise during childbirth like vaginal fistula. Essentially, the lack of visual reference during procedures resulted in a lack of access to the area of surgical interest. The discourse of intersectionality in relationship to power dynamics is important to Schwartz’s analysis of this picture. Unbeknownst to someone who is unaware of the power dynamic in the picture, the woman on the table is at a disadvantage because she is a slave as indicated by her blackness and timeframe of the painting. As the result of her possession of a

64 Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South.*
black female body, she serves as a test subject on which to refine surgeries on women’s reproductive organs as opposed to a mere patient.

Ultimately, the picture is an invalid portrayal of the black woman’s clinical experience because of her status as a slave. Using slave women as subjects allowed doctors to lower the level of respectability politics within clinical settings. There was no social standard to protect the modesty of the slave woman, whose “flesh” served as an indication that she was an object to be acted upon. Black women could be less clothed for procedures because they were ultimately not “women” who happened to be slaves, but slaves who happened to share physical traits with “women”. Like Sara Baartman, also known as Hottentot Venus, these women’s bodies were put on display because their “flesh” excluded them from the same privilege, protection, and rights afforded to women whose “flesh” signified entitlement to social norms of the dominant culture.
Part III: Breeding a Black Labor Force

“What can the white man say to the black woman?

For four hundred years he ruled over the black woman’s womb
....for four hundred years he determined
which black woman’s children
would live or die.” 65

-Alice Walker, Right to Life

“So we roam
Through the unknown waters
In the sea of social constructs
Built around our pedigree” 66

-Englewood Spoken Word

As a result of the end of the transatlantic slave trade, slave masters encouraged black women’s pregnancies and childbirths in various ways. Since their wealth depended on current and future slave cohorts, they needed black women’s children to secure and maintain their own family fortunes. Thus, black fertility became synonymous with white wealth. Black women’s ascribed femininity was the result of their value within society as caregivers, sexual objects, and breeders. Their entitlement to traits associated with the ideology of “woman” was reflective of those roles. Black women were capable of domestic work such as maintaining the master’s home and raising his children, lascivious enough to seduce the master, and fertile enough to produce a

new generation of workers. They were allowed access to the aspects of femininity most associated with their positions in the slave economy.

Masters’ needs for more slaves led to a portrayal of motherhood as a status their female slaves should strive to attain. There were incentives for women to bear children, such as lighter workloads, resources that were contingent on the amount of children to which she had given birth, and consequences for those who failed to add slaves to their work forces. Some women were also punished if they were thought to have sabotaged their chances of pregnancy through secret methods of birth control. Some women refused to have children that they knew were truly not their own and used infanticide as a means by which they could save their children from life as a slave. These women were prosecuted because they had destroyed the property of the master. Slave women had no right to their children--and a limited allowance on motherhood.

Often times, slave women did not have a say in who fathered their children. The future of a master’s estate depended on the next generation of slaves, so slave owners were extremely invested in the process of breeding strong offspring for their current slaves. If a female slave were thought to have undergone puberty, she would immediately be paired with a male slave so that she could begin to have children. One freed woman recalls as conversation with her mistress in which the mistress explained to her, “[she] am de portly gal, and Rufus am de portly man. De massa wants [them]-uns for to bring forth portly chillun’.” There was such a high demand for strong slaves that in one instance a male slave was temporarily sold to surrounding farms and tasked with impregnating the women there because his strength and build were desired traits for

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67 Schwartz, 86
68 ibid.
69 Minges, *Far More Terrible for Women: Personal Accounts of Women in Slavery*, 14
the next generation of slaves.\textsuperscript{70} Slaves were allowed to court but only if they had been seen as a fit pairing by the masters. For example, if a couple were married on a plantation but had not produced any offspring after a certain amount of time, they would be forced to find other partners.\textsuperscript{71} Black children were a form of white capital—and the increasing slave population ultimately meant that there was an increase in the value of masters’ estates. Reminiscent of the cyclic relationship between women and children, since the children were valuable, black women’s reproductive abilities were also highly valued in society. Ultimately, enslaved black women were valued for their reproductive ability, their domestic roles in households, and their accessibility as sexual objects, and after blacks were emancipated from slavery, their value diminished drastically.

\textsuperscript{70} Minges, 40  
\textsuperscript{71} ibid., 13
Section Two: Emancipation and Anti-Reproduction
Part I: Freedom and the Depreciation of Black Reproduction

“They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? They say, I know an excellent colored man in my town...”

W.E.B. DuBois
The Souls of Black Folk

“How does it feel to be a problem?” In 1903, W.E.B. DuBois explained this question as one in which people hesitated to ask, but “heroes” like esteemed feminist Margaret Sanger dared to answer with resolve. Just 40 years after the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments were made to the Constitution, DuBois is able to pinpoint how unchained blackness was problematized. Through this description, he captures the discomfort surrounding equality and hesitance to accept black bodies, now legally able to stake claims to the rights of citizens, which limited their inclusion in and contribution to strides toward a “more perfect Union.”

DuBois, in The Souls of Black Folk, introduces the term “color line” as a means to describe the racial tension between whites and blacks in the United States. He attributes two figures to either side of said line: those who remember the “good old days” of enslavement, “who bowed to the evil of slavery because its abolition threatened untold ill to all”; and those who shared in that memory from an alternate perspective:

The other, a form hovering dark and mother-like, her awful face black with the mists of centuries, had aforetime quailed at that white master's command, had bent in love over the cradles of his sons and daughters, and closed in death the sunken eyes of his wife, -- aye, too, at his behest had laid herself low to his lust,

73 Ibid.
74 U.S. Constitution.
and borne a tawny man-child to the world, only to see her dark boy's limbs scattered to the winds by midnight marauders riding after "damned Niggers".\textsuperscript{75}

DuBois considered these conflicting perspectives as “figures on the present-past”. They show the relationship between the present and the history by which this racial opposition was formed. Similar to Hortense Spillers’s description of “the past” as “present and always tense”\textsuperscript{76}, the past shapes the current dynamic of these two groups, the descendants of benefactors and beneficiaries of slavery. DuBois wrote this section of \textit{The Souls of Black Folk} to confront the persistence of stereotypes and power dynamics that had been established during slavery and maintained after emancipation. For both DuBois and Spillers, the past could be used to explain the present and the present served as a testament to the past.

This excerpt addresses the memory of black women’s servitude, the means by which they had been commoditized as caretakers and sexual objects, their relationships to motherhood, and their children’s relationships to the world around them as damned. Black children became marked as damned after they could no longer be dragged onto the auction block. Dark. Damned. Problem. Contrary to what this book would lead one to assume, DuBois actually serves as a proponent of regulating black reproductive capacity by supporting and advocating for black people’s involvement in eugenics. DuBois, like many other eugenicists, saw this as a form of racial betterment and viewed this as a viable form of uplift for the black community out of damnation.

In 1906, just three years after \textit{The Souls of Black Folk} had been published, the American Breeders Association was created along with the Galton Society, The Race Betterment Foundation in 1911, and the American Eugenics Society in 1926. The organizations’ founders

\textsuperscript{75} DuBois, 21-22
\textsuperscript{76} Spillers,
and major contributors consisted of various elite white men--ranging from John Harvey Kellogg to John D. Rockefeller, and the Carnegie Institution. To be white and male and directly in charge of black women’s reproduction was normal, but the support from “women” and “blacks” in their efforts was the newest component of that regulation in the 20th century.

This movement towards setting limits on black women’s reproductive capacity holds great symbolism as a change in socially ascribed black femininity. During slavery, black women, through their domestic roles within white households such as cooking, cleaning, and rearing white children, demonstrated their capacity to reestablish culture within the next generation of white children. This role was often referred to by the term “Mammy.” She was the symbolic religious domestic slave.77 After emancipation, the ideology built around their roles within this institution shifted. Instead of being remembered for their ability to raise white children to be fully functional white adults during slavery, unchained black women were rendered incompetent and detrimental to the welfare of their own children; instead of being encouraged to exercise their reproductive ability to its maximum level, they were told to limit the number of children they had. Dorothy Roberts, author of Killing the Black Body, expresses her frustrations, in an interview with Moira Brennan of Ms. Magazine, with how some people do not understand that providing methods to limit specific women’s autonomy and “telling women, ‘This is what you should use,’ could be oppressive.”78 On the one hand, access to family planning is provided; however, since the medical intervention of that time period was heavily influenced by eugenics, recommendations for family planning were always based on either negative or positive notions of women’s maternal abilities which, as previously explained, were racialized post-emancipation.

77 White, 46
78 Roberts, Dorothy Roberts: What we talk about when we talk reproductive rights.
Black women were deemed “incapable” of producing “excellent colored” folk after slavery because dominant white society needed a tangible explanation for the state of black people post-slavery devoid of white culpability. Initially, the narrative surrounding black poverty exuded that their freedom was to blame. Tempie Herndon Durham notes in her slave narrative, “Freedom is all right, but de niggers was better off befo’ surrender, ‘cause den dey was looked after...Dey didn’t even have to think ‘bout clothes nor nothin’” in terms of basic needs. Durham suggests that black poverty was correlated to the newfound independence of black people. However, with the 20th century on the horizon, the narrative shifted towards one that correlated black poverty to the reproductive capacity of black women, as indicated by DuBois’s support of eugenics for the purpose of eradicating this issue.

In his book *American Dilemma*, Gunnar Myrdal states:

> If the Negroes could be eliminated from America or greatly decreased in numbers, this would meet the whites’ approval—provided that it could be accomplished by means which are also approved. Correspondingly, an increase of the proportion of Negroes in the American population is commonly looked upon as undesirable...The presence of Negroes in America today is usually considered as a “plight” of the nation and particularly of the south.

As a non-American outsider, he observes that although this “plight” was indeed seen as a nuisance, whites needed the black labor force. Myrdal postulates that Eugenics was the most succinct way to decrease the black population without ending the labor force they provided at that time. According to Gunnar, “If the Negro is to be eliminated, he must be eliminated slowly

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80 Myrdal, 167
so as to not hurt any living individual Negroes.\textsuperscript{81} Through eugenics, the black population would slowly be eliminated without disrupting society’s current economic state. It also allows for a sort of “adjustment period” for businesses so they could become accustomed to a smaller black labor force over a longer period of time than a blatant act of black genocide could provide.

Additionally, eugenics allowed for control of the population in a manner that separated the United States from the Adolf Hitler regime--they were not actively killing living black people, but preventing their numbers from increasing through decreased fertility.

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 168
Margaret Sanger’s initial attempt at obtaining willful black participation in Eugenics manifested as the 1929 Harlem Clinic. She founded the clinic in a majority black neighborhood and staffed with an all black personnel who we supposed to advocate for family planning. She obtained a staff of this demographic to ensure that the patients would submit to treatment because of a cis-race-based trust between black doctors and black patients.\textsuperscript{83} The clinic failed in 1935 because of the black staff felt neglected and reduced to child-like delegation, in addition to the Great Depression\textsuperscript{84} making it difficult to keep the center open under new management.

Although the Great Depression contributed to the failure of Sanger’s Harlem Clinic to fail, it was also the reason the 1939 Negro Project, Sanger’s second “experimental initiative to reduce birth rates among blacks,”\textsuperscript{85} was able to come into fruition. Roberts claims this recession “increased interest in sterilization as a means of preventing the birth of children who would need public assistance.”\textsuperscript{86} The Negro Project was integrated into society by the people who experienced the hardship of the Great Depression. The timing of Sanger’s efforts, especially The

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\item\textsuperscript{82} Davis, Women, Race, & Class.
\item\textsuperscript{83} Sanger to Gamble, “Letter from Margaret Sanger to Dr. C.J. Gamble.”
\item\textsuperscript{84} “Great Depression.” According to official records, the Great Depression had taken place between 1929 and 1939 after the stock market crashed. During this time, many Americans were subjected to immense economic loss resulting from record unemployment rates.
\item\textsuperscript{85} Washington, 191
\item\textsuperscript{86} Roberts, “Margaret Sanger and the Racist Origins of the Birth Control Movement,” 199
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Negro Project, could not have been any better than during (and after) the Great Depression. Sanger’s supporters were the people who had experienced this hardship and felt as though something had been taken from them. They were the workers, the elites, and the professionals who wanted someone to blame for their misfortune. Birth control was a successful means for regulating fertility for those affected because it played on their fear that another Great Depression could occur.

By declaring that certain groups--the poor who could not afford to eat and had been receiving government assistance, the blacks who would no longer serve as slaves and were now a burden to society--contributed to economic downfall more than others, Sanger provided both, the people and the government, an explanation for their hardships. This “out” averted the attention from greed and capitalism and towards the people disadvantaged by such systems. In Woman and the New Race, Sanger asserts birth control as a solution for economic turmoil, “Let us not wait for war famine, and plague to do it. Let us cease bringing unwanted children into the world to suffer a while, add to our burdens and die. Let us cease bringing others into the world to compete with us for a living.”

Although she mentioned this years before the recession, she introduces a connection between survival, competition, and “unwanted children” that would become especially relevant during the Depression. Prior to this statement, she connects all of those factors for survival to women’s abilities to reproduce. Sanger claims, in the aforementioned text, “the creators of over-population are the women, who, while wringing their hands over producing each fresh horror submit anew to their task of producing the multitudes who will bring about the next tragedy of civilization.”

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87 Sanger, Woman and the New Race.
88 Ibid.
Women’s inability to control their fertility was the cause of social issues and competition among individuals. Essentially, unregulated reproduction lead to unwanted children who caused unnecessary competition. Mothers were at fault for not being able to regulate their fertility. This responsibility results, at least in part, from the woman’s physical relationship to the child through gestation in conjunction with the likelihood that she will be the primary caretaker of the child. Maternal legitimacy is validated through her experience of pregnancy. The woman is responsible for incubating the next generation of people and, because of her major role in childrearing, seen as integral to the maintenance of culture by reproducing it in her offspring.

Consequently, the ability of the mother and the success of the people are subjected to a cyclic relationship. This is exhibited in the ability to attack the welfare of a people by criminalizing and discrediting the mothers of a certain group, and insult mothers by illuminating their children’s flaws. That cyclic relationship led to the regulation of who was able to reproduce as a means to better the next generation of a group within society, and served as the basis on which eugenicists like Sanger established regulatory initiatives such as the 1939 The Negro Project.

On the surface, one could conclude that Sanger advocated for birth control in order to help all women, however the more I encountered Sanger’s work, the more distinct her stances on contraceptives and sterilization delineated from each other. Ultimately, contraceptives and temporary forms of birth control were meant to be used by middle and upper class Americans. She wanted people who were able to properly provide for children to be able to reproduce, but at a rate in which each child could be nurtured into a proper citizen. She wanted culture to be reproduced, but only by those who could properly do so. Sanger wanted to exclude people who were unfit to raise their children to be proper citizens from having any part in reproduction and advocated for the condemnation of their reproductive autonomy through sterilization. In 1922,
Sanger notes that regarding “potential source[s] of an endless progeny of defect, [the policy] of immediate sterilization, of making sure that parenthood is absolutely prohibited” was preferred for the feeble-minded, only. About 30 years later, she expands her view of the “unfit” as “feeble-minded” only when she asserts “the sterilization program should not be confined to the physically or mentally inadequate. The program has wider implications and a broader application”\(^89\) including “tragedies of parents overburdened by larger numbers of children than they can rear in decency.”\(^90\)

Essentially, those incapable of creating an environment that would effectively facilitate the development of a young child were considered to be candidates for sterilization.\(^91\) For Sanger, in order to create such an environment, couples would need to be able to maintain a stable family structure, and have values similar to that of the normalized middle class white culture. Only couples capable of doing those things would be capable of bringing forth a new, degenerate-free, generation of Americans. Sanger argues in a letter to Dr. Clarence Gamble that sterilization had been negatively received by the American public because of the Nazis’ abuse of the practice in exterminating of groups of people. Reminiscent of Gunnar Myrdal’s *An American Dilemma*, ironically, she does not want to exterminate the living degenerates, but merely prevent those deemed unfit from producing a new generation of degenerates. For Sanger, permanent birth control for those broadly defined as “degenerates” was a more palatable method of depletion as opposed to one based on immediate extermination for the sake of betterment; the Negro Project racialized her agenda that agenda.

\(^89\) Sanger to Gamble
\(^91\) Ibid.
On a more local level, Watts and Dr. Sherbon’s experiences highlighted the impact of Sanger’s efforts on communities across the nation. Although there were major cities in the 1920’s, many Americans were still living in rural areas and state fairs were major events that drew participants from both urban and rural environments. Fitter Family Contests were inspired by a “Better Baby” contest that had taken place at the Iowa state fair in 1911. They created a system to measure human fitness in terms of pedigree, measurements, and similarity to perfection and awarded a silver trophy to the competitor that scored the highest in each category. The original contest lacked eugenicist ideals and underwent revision so that it could be more aligned with the ideals of the time. In addition to the actual examination, there was a segment in which both Watts and Sherbon would provide information to families about better breeding practices. The California Eugenics archive declares this as an example of the incorporation of eugenics beliefs into public health practice.”

Fitter Family Contests evaluated the home environment as well as the family inheritance” as a means of comparison amongst competitors, who usually consisted of white protestant families. They became integral parts of fairs all over the nation. Even the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), “used baby contests to showcase the fitness of black babies and fundraise for its anti-lynching campaign, limited the contestants to the black community’s ‘Talented Tenth’”, a term coined within DuBois’s book *The Souls of Black Folks.*

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93 Ladd-Taylor, “Fitter Family Contest.”
94 Ibid.
Part III: Tantalizing the Talented Tenth

“They must learn that among human races and groups, as among vegetables, quality and not mere quantity really counts.” 95

-W.E.B. DuBois

The “talented tenth” were black elites who had acquired access to higher education and socioeconomic status. 96 It was the result of the convergence among meritocratic sentiment, hard work, and chance. Class division within the black community prior to their emancipation was greatly dependent on phenotype. Africanness and Europeanness were viewed in slave economy as two extremes on a spectrum on which people could be placed based on various aspects of their appearance. The sexual exploitation of black bodies by white masters that resulted in new phenotypes to be encompassed by blackness complicated—allowing for a new social hierarchy to be established amongst slaves. The manifestation of new features encompassed a sort of middle ground between black and white: tight curls began to loosen, broad noses were made narrow, the range of skin tones attributed to blackness or that of “slave” widened to accommodate the new alleles introduced to the race because a baby was always identified as “belonging” to the mother who birthed her as opposed to the father who could refuse to acknowledge legitimacy. Notions of physical definitions of blackness, what it meant to be a descendant of Africa, a slave in America, began to change during slavery.

96 DuBois, 1
The more Eurocentric features with which one presented, the more like the people in power one was assumed to be. Lighter skin meant one was more like white and more capable of imitating whiteness. These features represented a place in culture that was closer to whiteness, but “not quite white” as marked by enslavement. President Jefferson even notes in his book *Notes on the State of Virginia* that white features were more beautiful, and served as a marker for various positive character traits. Lighter skinned slaves were the ones most likely to be considered “house slaves,” those whose main domain of servitude happened in a domestic setting. Eurocentricity symbolized betterness. Mixed phenotype was the basis for differentiation among slaves, a symbol for sexual exploitation, the betrayal of wedding vows made to mistresses by masters, marker of beauty, and representation of a decrease in proximity between the enslaved and whiteness.

Upon the elimination of “slave” as a social position came the ability for social advancement. Despite violence resulting from racism, black people within the United States were beginning to make efforts towards attaining success in the white world. Intellectual distinction was achieved through black admittance to Historically White Institutions, and the creation of black universities. Educational and professional development of the black community led to an increased range of jobs that could be occupied by blacks. There were black teachers, doctors, lawyers, academics. There were entrepreneurs like Madame CJ Walker. There were trained musicians like Marian Anderson. There were black maids, domestics, and caregivers like my great-grandmother, Ella B. Education was a means for mobility to the highest ranks of the “black world” and transcendence towards the white one, but everyone was not afforded such opportunity for mobility and were forced to remain stagnant, and talentless.

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This separation on the basis of education can be identified as the introduction of classism. It marks the creation of black groups that excluded members of the community who were not of a certain class status. This was the introduction of sororities and fraternities that were limited to black college attendees. This was the Jack and Jill of America that was limited to mothers of families who had been invited by mothers who were already members of the group. This was the plethora of black faces that populate *Who’s Who in colored America* editions. This was the establishment of a black elite that would go on to be named the talented tenth.

The talented tenth was targeted by and chosen as allies of Sanger because they were the only way by which she could bring this message into the black community in the light of racial violence from members of the white community. She knew they would not trust her and would be resistant to adopt her stance so she went to the most susceptible of the community—those who had received recognition within dominant white culture and those with the greatest influence in the black community. Du Bois’s talented tenth provided Sanger with a name for the group of black folk most aligned with her goals. He displays that support in the 1932 June edition of the *Birth Control Review* through his essay titled “Black Folk and Birth Control.”

Eugenic ideals could ironically be adopted by various black figureheads through the hope placed in the generation that would come to fruition through reproduction among the talented tenth mentioned in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Contrary to the position presented by Du Bois in the aforementioned excerpt, he was a proponent of eugenics. Du Bois advocated for the “talented tenth,” the top ten percent of black people that he thought would uplift the race. Coincidently, Margaret Sanger had also been interested in racial uplift and would form an alliance with black elites like DuBois due to their shared interest.

99 DuBois, “Black Folk and Birth Control.”
In “Margaret Sanger and the Racist Origins of the Birth Control Movement”, Roberts states that “Sanger’s shifting alliances reveal how the prevailing racial order influenced the meaning of reproductive freedom—whether reproductive technologies were used for women’s emancipation or their oppression.” The meaning of reproductive freedom relied heavily on whether one was considered as fit or unfit. Sanger was able to successfully align herself with the descendants of slaves as a means to regulate their fertility. The introduction of birth control blurred the lines between oppression and emancipation. In 1939, Sanger initiated The Negro Project as a means to further her crusade against poverty and unfit parentage to the black community with the support of black leaders like DuBois, King, presidents of historically black colleges and universities, and black Greek letter organizations. He is quoted in the Negro Project proposal saying that “the mass of ignorant Negroes still breed carelessly and disastrously, so that the increase among Negroes, even more than the increase among Whites, is from that part of the population least intelligent and fit, and least able to rear their children properly.” Among the list of powerful black men and women who supported Eugenics were various civil rights activists, including the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., as well as various other well known black citizens. (See Appendix-1 for full list.)

Resembling something along the lines of the “all-star” council of black leaders, this list demonstrates Sanger’s ability to craft her argument in a manner that allowed for them to view her efforts to limit reproduction as productive. All of the leaders who were in support of the initiative were in fact members of the “talented tenth” because of their elite status and influence within the black community. Leaders like Du Bois and King were so caught up in the idea of the

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100 Roberts, Margaret Sanger and the Racist Origins of the Birth Control Movement, 198.
101 ibid.
102 Washington, 76
103 See appendix.
uplift of an entire community through a few that they had not considered the ways in which it would be detrimental to said community. Their endorsements of Sanger’s breeding ideology essentially endorsed the mass sterilization of and birth control enforcement among black women.

Sanger intended to exterminate the poor, and black people were among the poorest of minorities in the country. She intended to exterminate the feeble minded, but considering the immense educational disparities that existed, and continue to exist to this day, in white and black schools, that included a great majority of blacks as well. A classmate once asked me if racism was as big a factor in discrimination as classism, and I had to articulate for him that racism and classism have been inextricably intertwined since Europeans immigrated to North America. Because of the interconnectedness of racism and classism, in many cases, they can be viewed as synonyms. Even at present, conversations that speak in terms of class are often used to address race without the rhetoric of racial difference. It is the reason we are able to say “welfare” and imagine a black woman. It is the reason we are able to say “suburb” and envision a majority white neighborhood. Through Sanger’s determination to eradicate of feeblemindedness and poverty, she is advocating for the extermination of the talentless ninetieth.

Many historians have created narratives like Ellen Chesler’s Woman of Valor defend Sanger’s racially motivated endorsements as an act of political expediency similar to suffragettes. Their narratives are packaged as this phantasmal tales of women who wanted rights for everyone and used their disdain for blacks as a means to get closer to those who could change legislation for their benefit. It is the same. Racism for gain, like racism resulting from personal bias, is racial bias, is discrimination.
Part IV: The Role of Black Elites in the Eugenic Regime

“The correction of the environment involves the equalization of economic and social opportunities, but it is still within the power of the group itself to lessen the stress by more intelligent interpretation of obligation to maintain the race”\textsuperscript{104}

-Charles S. Johnson

“Society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind”\textsuperscript{105}

-Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes

While performing this research, I often questioned how the black elite could support eugenics. There were two possible explanations: the first being that they were not fully aware of what they had agreed to do by supporting Sanger’s ideology and viewed the issue from a biased perspective because of their belief that talented tenth ideology aligned with eugenics; the second being that they did not know that sterilization was a part of the deal.

The common thread of thought among all parties who supported the Negro Project was the belief that setting limitations on one’s family size was directly correlated to economic growth. Limiting births was a means for creating better, not more, black people which they hoped would result in the uplift of the community. Allowing for a minimization of “cradle competition”\textsuperscript{106} would lead to more time being allotted to the development of children into better citizens. For these reasons, birth control and family planning are seen as ways to make this

\textsuperscript{104} Charles S. Johnson, another black civil rights crusader and advocate for eugenics.

\textsuperscript{105} Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes in \textit{Buck v. Bell}.

\textsuperscript{106} Sanger, \textit{Pivot of Civilization}: Chapter 8, "Dangers of Cradle Competition"
possible for the black community. W.E.B. Du Bois served as my case study for this part in the project.

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, written in 1903, the “talented tenth” ideology served as black elitist thought underpinned eugenics for W.E.B. Du Bois. In this text, he declares the intelligence of black people to be directly related to black uplift and highly reflective of his primary conceptualization of race. According to Joel Olson, Du Bois had an initial understanding of race as “a scientific category referring to common ancestry and physical characteristics and a world-historic category referring to common history, temperament, and destiny.” This idea of shared ancestry was complicated upon his meeting famed anthropologist Franz Boas in 1906, who argued that “racial differences are rooted in culture rather than in biology” and also looked forward to the “lightening of the races” through intermarriage and racial mixing.

This, in conjunction with his witnessing lynchings, prevented him from allowing himself to “be a calm, cool, detached scientist while Negroes were lynched, murdered, and starved.” The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People declared that 3,436 people were lynched from 1889 to 1922. Archives at Tuskegee Institute confirmed in their report that “people” in this text meant black people with their own report of 3,446 black victims of lynching from 1882 to 1968. For example, there was the lynching of Ed Johnson, a black man from Chattanooga, Tennessee, who was accused of raping a white woman. He had been convicted of the crime, sentenced to death at a later date, and was to be housed at the local jail until his

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109 ibid., 218
110 ibid.
111 See Appendix-2
112 See Appendix-3
113 Lynching of Ed Johnson, a black man, who had just been convicted to hang by the state, who was was lynched much earlier by an angry mob.

Smith 58
execution date. The night of his conviction, a white mob came into the jailhouse with an ax and a sledgehammer, removed Johnson from his virtually unguarded jail cell, and took him. They hung his body from Walnut Street Bridge, a bridge frequented by the black workforce in Chattanooga, and began to shoot him after growing impatient. Upon seeing movement in his body after accidentally shooting him down from the noose, a member of the mob put his gun to Johnson’s head and fired five shots. As if this was not enough, they reduced this man’s body to a vessel by which to translate a message to the presiding judge over his case by attaching a note to his chest that read “To Justice Harlan, Come get your nigger now.”

Incidents like that one, according to Olsen, shifted his view of race from a “world-historic” perspective (in which race was thought to have originated amongst the first humans) to describing racial difference as the mere “result of climate and environment, no essence”-- attributing skin color to the darkening and lightening of humans as the result of conditions under which they lived. According to Olsen, the final transition of DuBois’s race concept stemmed from his “conversion to Marxism in the early 1930’s.” In this sense, he comes to regard races as “the greater groups of humankind which by outer pressure and inner cohesiveness, still form and have long formed a stronger or weaker unity of thought and action.” These internal and external pressures are products of dominant society conditioning: black people to fit into the place is designated to them in the workforce (in Marxist fashion).

\[^{114}\] Olson, 218
\[^{115}\] ibid.
\[^{116}\] Olson, 219
\[^{117}\] I realize that I am limited here. I was suggested to read his autobiography, Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept (1940), where he talks about being unsure what race is and then talks about the relationship between history and biology. However, my limited timeframe prevented me from exploring this source.
This is the Du Bois that takes on eugenic ideology and aligns it with his own agenda. For DuBois, racial uplift is associated with black people’s ability to seek equal levels of occupancy within society; only by becoming equal to those in “the white world” could black people become better as a whole. Becoming equal entailed achieving financial advancement and intellectual competency that is reminiscent of the white middle class. It gave an assimilationist aura to those who accepted eugenics as a means for betterment. In 1932, DuBois demonstrated his desire for blacks to be viewed on equal levels as whites through his essay titled “Black Folk and Birth Control.”\(^{118}\) Reminiscent of *The Souls of Black Folk*, he juxtaposes “the white world” against “the black world” by providing tangible examples of how black people could transcend from “the black world” to “the white world.” DuBois prescribes closing the educational and economic gaps through increased birth control use, emphasizing that “even birth control was secretly exercised by the more intelligent of slaves” as opposed to “careless breeding”\(^{119}\) to further associate intellect with positive reception of birth control.

The essay following DuBois’s in the *June 1932 Birth Control Review* stated that the need to have many children has subsided because of lower mortality rates resulting from disease and infant death. Author Charles S. Johnson states that high birthrates are not only unnecessary, but harmful to black women since they were more likely to die during childbirth than white women. Johnson goes on to say that “the same eugenic discrimination which applies to the whites is necessary with reference to selective fertility within the Negro group”\(^{120}\) Additionally, like DuBois, he mentions the financial stagnancy of the black community and how that could be subsided by the opportunity to dedicate incomes to other facets of life than child rearing. DuBois

\(^{118}\) DuBois, “Black Folk and Birth Control.”

\(^{119}\) Ibid., 166

\(^{120}\) Ibid., 167
goes on to identify the church as a proponent of high birth rates that should be used to persuade masses of black Americans towards the use of birth control.

However, there was never an endorsement of sterilization by the black elite. Sterilization was incorporated into Sanger’s eugenic agenda by 1922 as indicated by her book titled *Pivot of Civilization*. This was ten years before DuBois’s direct endorsement of Sanger’s ideals and 17 years before the Negro Project advisory council was created. However, Sanger’s black allies never preached the gospel of sterilization. In fact, their acceptance of Eugenics was largely selective of certain aspects of the practice. Roberts notes that there was a rejection of both claims of racial inferiority and sterilization as a means for betterment. A black publication called the *Pittsburgh Courier* exemplified this selectivity through its avid support of Eugenics but advocacy for “blacks to oppose sterilization programs.” The council consisted of many leaders of the black community: preachers and clergymen to influence religious blacks, members and presidents of black Greek letter organizations to influence the college educated blacks of higher socioeconomic status, and civil rights leaders to influence everyone in between who was striving for humanity.

A representative of all three categories, son of sharecroppers and eldest of 9 children, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was one of the four recipients of Planned Parenthood Federation of America’s (PPFA) Margaret Sanger Award, “given annually to individuals of distinction in recognition of excellence and leadership in furthering reproductive health and reproductive rights,” in 1966, its first year. He had been in jail at the time of the ceremony, but his wife, Coretta Scott King, recited the speech he had written for the occasion. King writes:

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121 Sanger, *Pivot of Civilization*.
There is a striking kinship between our movement and Margaret Sanger’s early efforts.…Our sure beginning in struggle for equality by nonviolent direct action may not have been so resolute without the tradition established by Margaret Sanger and people like her.\textsuperscript{123}

One wonders what King and the other black elites understood to have been the “tradition established by Margaret Sanger.” In the framework of the talented tenth, the “tradition” consisted of providing a means by which degenerate black folk, those who would not positively impact the next generation of black Americans, could not pollute the next generation of talented tenth offspring—or exist at smaller rates. However, “human rights” were violated through such management.

Essentially, the black elite were well-aware of the aspect of sterilization that accompanied eugenic ideology, rejected that aspect as made evident by the blatant dissociation from sterilization in the \textit{Pittsburgh Courier}, and embraced the other aspects of eugenics that encouraged better breeding of fewer children for the means of racial uplift. As previously mentioned, major eugenic segues into the black community can be broken down into three categories: black elitist organizations that limited intake to college graduates and members of the middle class, religious epicenters like churches, and civil rights leaders. “Sterilization,” especially “forced sterilization”, violates each group’s moral code.

For example, Alpha Kappa Alpha, the first National Panhellenic Council sorority and one of the first black elitist organizations that limited admittance based on education, has a mission statement that attests to the organization’s dedication to “ethical standards,” “family” and

\textsuperscript{123} King Jr., “Family Planning - A Special and Urgent Concern by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.”
“human rights” on a global scale. In that same statement, the organization's commitment to "help[ing] alleviate problems concerning girls and women in order to improve their social stature, to maintain a progressive interest in college life, and to be of “Service to All Mankind”" is highlighted. Additionally, churches have traditionally held an ideology that is pro-reproduction and pro-free will as long as it aligns with Christian values. A common verse referenced to defend this stance was Genesis 1:28, in which God which advises Adam and Eve to “Be fruitful and multiply.” It was not until the appropriation of religious arenas for pro-contraceptive speeches that this ideology began to shift towards one that was more accepting of pregnancy prevention.

Finally, civil rights leaders ultimately fought for black people’s equality in and uninhibited access to all aspects of American life.

However, members from each of these facets were able to serve on a branch of an organization driven by eugenicist thought and speak highly of its commitment to the betterment of people. On principle, each group should have denied the Negro Project Council their service, but the opportunity for uplift caused them to become invested in the project. Ultimately, the practice of sterilization was purposefully disregarded by the elites on the council as a tradeoff for access to family planning efforts headed by Sanger. Although they rejected sterilization, the talented tenth’s involvement in this movement provided access by which black populations could be disenfranchised from their reproductive autonomy through new, more forceful and coercive, regulations on black fertility. In the typical fashion of the rich and elites speaking for society, they were able to give consent for the rest of black Americans for sterilization through their participation in eugenic ideology—whether that was the goal or not.

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124 Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Incorporated, “Our History Our Sisterhood.”
125 God, The Bible.
Saidiya Hartman poses the question of what consent entails in her essay “Seduction and the Ruses of Power.”126 In essence, she states that in order for one to consent, there needs to be the option to refuse; there was no such option to refuse once one’s free will was taken. The masters were in charge of the slave’s consent—which was overshadowed by the masters’ own desires. The master would not refuse that the slave be subjected to his desires nor would he allow the slave that power—thus illustrating the relationship between power dynamics and consent or lack thereof.

When speaking of consent for sterilization, this relationship must be considered. The “who” of consent? The “what” of consent? And whether or not “the what” granted permission to “the who.” Consent is the granting of permission of some action to happen to an object. Sexual consent is when a party involved in a sexual act grants permission for another party to engage in sexual activity with them. At the most basic level, it is an agreement that allows a party’s agency and autonomy to be valued during interaction through acquiring permission to act and granting permission to be acted upon. Acting upon a body without consent for the action performed upon it is force. This leads to the question of who granted permission for the neglected ninetieth who were subjected to forced sterilization and coercion into “non-forced” sterilization. I make this distinction because, over the course of my research, I came across instances of black women who had been sterilized without their knowledge as well as ones who had been persuaded to undergo the procedure to avoid judicial repercussions. The commonality in these examples of “forced” and “non-forced” sterilization is the missing element of consent resulting from the inability to refuse the procedure. The Negro Project was a vessel by which consent was given by the talented tenth regarding the ways in which contraceptives were provided to black communities.

Section Three: Remnants of Anti-Reproductive Practices Today
Part I: Living Testament to Modern-day Medicosocialism

“but bein alive & bein a woman & bein colored is a metaphysical dilemma/ i havent conquered yet/ do you see the point my spirit is too ancient to understand the separation of soul & gender”

-Ntozake Shange, for colored girls who have considered suicide /when the rainbow is enuf

I was 16 years old when I had experienced “spotting” or unexpected bleeding between periods. Alarmed, my parents took me to the emergency room in hopes of gaining an explanation for what had been going on with my body. Upon being taken back to the examination room, the doctor begins to ask me a series of questions and provides me with a cup to perform the routine “something is wrong with your vagina so you need to do this” pregnancy test. My mother asks me if there was any way that the test could come back positive. I tell her no. I was a virgin, after all. The physician announces that the test was negative, as expected. Perplexed, he finally looked towards my mother and back at me, determined, and asked “Are you sexually active?” to which, I responded “No.” “Really?” he said in disbelief, squinting his eyes as if he was searching for truth on my skin. “We’re going to check to see if your hymen is still there,” he continues as though he wanted to prove to my mother and the nurse in the room that I had lied. My hymen was still there.

As an aspiring health professional, this is an experience that has stuck with me over the years. I find myself occasionally wondering why the physician so desperately wanted to find a lascivious reason behind my ailment instead of seeking solutions for it. I find that I am always at odds with whether or not it was more about my being a woman or my being black, but I always
reach the conclusion that it was both, because I am both. My identity lies somewhere at the intersection where my black and woman self, cis-gender and Christian self, young and ambitious self meet, but I can only be identified as the foremost two at the surface level. For him, I was a black woman who was responsible for her own misfortune. The emphasis of the appointment was based on an inference resulting from my appearance. As an aspiring medical professional, it is not the appointment that bothered me, but the doubt behind the “really” accompanied by a condescending gaze. Upon speaking with black women of various walks of life, many of them have experienced or have a friend who experienced that “Really?” moment during gynecological exams. “Really? You’re not sexually active;” “Really? The speculum hurts?”

The question before the “really” signifies the physician’s assumption about a patient. This assumption is made off of a reading of the patient’s physical appearance—reminiscent of Hortense Spillers’s “flesh.” The physical self is the concentration of one’s external identity, and the place in which stereotypical tropes created in the past are recognized at present. The “Really?” signifies the physician’s inability to accept information from the patient that contradicts their preconceived notions about a patient. The statement following the “really” serves as marker of doubt, and a desire to affirm rather than dismantle the ascribed identity, characteristics, and tendencies that have come to be associated with the flesh of the patient before them. Black women (sometimes) unknowingly carry the stigma of promiscuity and carelessness and into clinical visits. Their bodies still sexualized and personhood still doubted. Involvement with physicians at present can often feel oppressive, inhibit the physician’s ability to treat black women, and detour black women from seeking proper medical treatment. Doctor-patient interaction plays a vital role in modern-day health disparities. It allows for a reaffirmation of the historical stance physicians took on the black female body: to treat them based on the
needs of society as opposed to the needs of the woman, and be a state apparatus for the enforcement of black women’s oppression by pushing them away from medicine. This is done every single time the “Really” moment happens. Experiences such as these within clinical settings reaffirms the idea that medical professionals tend to use, belittle, and embarrass women of color for wanting to be healthy instead of serving as a liaison between them and the medical field. It gives them the illusion that they do not deserve to be healthy, blames them for their own poor health, and serves as an arena that fosters oppression as opposed to healing.

Health disparities for black women, especially regarding sexual and reproductive health, are often reported to be the results of internalized historical betrayal of communities of color and lower socioeconomic status. And these factors are extremely important when considering the causational relationship between the past and the present. History is eternally “present and always tense.”\(^{127}\) It is another ring gained after a year of growth that last with the tree for the duration of its life. It is the roots on the tree whose flowers reach to full bloom in the springtime; it is the roots on the tree whose leaves wither as temperatures drop in autumn. History happens and is not malleable. We can learn from it, and use it as a reference, but it cannot actively solve problems at present. Reporting causes for health disparities in terms of historical context solves nothing; history can be used to examine the origin of the issues but does very little to help eradicate their existence today. It is a cop out. It serves as a naturalization of health status. It removes responsibility from administrators, public health professionals, and physicians by providing them with justification for inefficiency that says “some things are unchangeable”.

The roots of the tree will always be there to hold the tree in place--old, resilient, strong. The leaves, however, are more directly impacted by the seasonal conditions it encounters.

\(^{127}\) Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe”
Strength can be drawn from the roots to the leaves, but change in the leaves happens as the result of the environment created by the current seasonal conditions. This may be reflective of my own optimism, but health disparities can be eradicated with sufficient external effort. Instead of allowing the historical narrative to negate the idea that a solution exists, health professionals should be actively combating the effects of history. This being said, I believe that there have been strides made in the public health arena concerning community work and outreach, however the clinical setting serves as the primary place in which health disparities are sustained. Physicians that cultivate negative patient experiences are directly responsible for reestablishing poor doctor-patient relationships with marginalized communities. It is the responsibility of physicians and other health professionals to actively counter the history that has come to define their current relationship with members of these communities. Ase.
“For once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of.”

-Audre Lorde,

Uses of the Erotic
## Appendix-1: List of Negro Council Members for 1939 Negro Project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position/Institution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mary McLeod Bethune</td>
<td>Founder of the National Council of Negro Women, Washington, DC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rev. Adam Clayton Powell Jr.</td>
<td>Pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, New York, NY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walter G. Alexander, MD</td>
<td>Past-President, National Medical Association, Orange, NJ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claude A. Barnett</td>
<td>Director, Associated Negro Press, Chicago, IL</td>
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<tr>
<td>Michael J. Bent, MD</td>
<td>Meharry Medical School, Nashville, TN</td>
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<tr>
<td>M.O. Housfield, MD</td>
<td>Director for Negro Health, Rosenwald Fund, Chicago, IL</td>
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<td>E.R. Carney</td>
<td>President, National Hospital Association, Detroit, MI</td>
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<tr>
<td>William M. Cooper</td>
<td>Director of Extension, Hampton Institute, Virginia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Frank R. Crosswaith</td>
<td>Chairman, Negro Labor Committee, New York</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paul B. Cornely, MD</td>
<td>Assoc. Prof. of Preventive Medicine, Howard University, Washington, DC</td>
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<tr>
<td>John W. Davis</td>
<td>President, West Virginia State College, West Virginia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albert W. Dent</td>
<td>President, Dillard University, New Orleans, LA</td>
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<tr>
<td>W.E.B. DuBois, PhD</td>
<td>Dept. of Sociology, Atlanta University, Atlanta, GA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crystal Bird Fauset</td>
<td>Philadelphia, PA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dorothy Boulding Ferebee, MD</td>
<td>President, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Washington, DC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.L. Holsey</td>
<td>Secretary, National Negro Business League, Tuskegee, AL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. John Hope</td>
<td>New York, NY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles D. Hubert, DD</td>
<td>Morehouse College, Atlanta, GA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles S. Johnson, PhD</td>
<td>Director, Dept. of Social Science, Fisk University, Tennessee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eugene Kinckle Jones</td>
<td>National Urban League, New York</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John W. Lawlah, MD</td>
<td>Dean of Medicine, Howard University, Washington, DC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Position/Institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walter Maddux, MD</td>
<td>Slossfield Health Center, Birmingham, AL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frederick D. Patterson</td>
<td>President, Tuskegee Institute, Alabama</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ira DeA. Reid</td>
<td>Dept. of Sociology, Atlanta University, Atlanta, GA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emmett Scott</td>
<td>Secretary, Southern Education Foundation, Washington, DC</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bishop David H. Sims</td>
<td>African Methodist Episcopal Church, Philadelphia, PA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mrs. Mabel E. Staupers, RN</td>
<td>Executive Secretary, National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses, New York</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mrs. Mary Church Terrell</td>
<td>Honorary President, National Association of Colored Women, Washington, DC</td>
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<td>Jesso O. Thomas</td>
<td>National Urban League, New York</td>
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<tr>
<td>Forrester B. Washington</td>
<td>Director, Atlanta University School of Social Work, Atlanta, GA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John West</td>
<td>Medical Director, Provident Hospital, Chicago, IL</td>
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<tr>
<td>Walter White</td>
<td>Secretary, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, New York, NY</td>
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<tr>
<td>J. Finley Wilson</td>
<td>Grand Ruler of I.B.P.O.E., Washington, DC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Max Yergan</td>
<td>President, National Negro Congress, New York, NY</td>
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</table>
## Appendix-2: Tuskegee Institute Lynching Statistics

### Lynchings: By State and Race, 1882-1968 *

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alabama</td>
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<td>299</td>
<td>347</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Arkansas</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>284</td>
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<td>California</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>43</td>
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<tr>
<td>Colorado</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>Delaware</td>
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<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>257</td>
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<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
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<tr>
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<td>19</td>
<td>34</td>
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<td>33</td>
<td>14</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kansas</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>54</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kentucky</td>
<td>63</td>
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<td>Louisiana</td>
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<td>335</td>
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<td>27</td>
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<td>352</td>
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<td>Vermont</td>
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<tr>
<td>Virginia</td>
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<td>Wyoming</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>5</td>
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</table>

*Statistics provided by the Archives at Tuskegee Institute.

Total: 1,297 3,446 4,743
FOR THE GOOD OF AMERICA

Do you know that the United States is the Only Land on Earth where human beings are BURNED AT THE STAKE?

In Four Years, 1918-1921, Twenty-Eight People were publicly BURNED BY AMERICAN MOBS

3436 People Lynched, 1889 to 1922

For What Crimes Have Mobs Nullified Government and Inflicted the Death Penalty?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Alleged Crimes</th>
<th>The Victims</th>
<th>Why Some Mob Victims Died</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Murder</td>
<td>1,201</td>
<td>Not turning out of road for white man in auto</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>355</td>
<td>Being a relative of person who was lynched</td>
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<tr>
<td>Crimes against the Person</td>
<td>355</td>
<td>Jumping a labor contract</td>
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<tr>
<td>Crimes against Property</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>Being a member of the Non-Partisan League</td>
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<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous Crimes</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>&quot;Talking back&quot; to a white man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assaults of Crime</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>&quot;Insulting&quot; white man</td>
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</table>

Is Rape the "Cause" of Lynching?

6 of 3436 people murdered by mobs in our country, only 571, or less than 27 per cent., were ever accused of the crime of rape.

83 WOMEN HAVE BEEN LYNCHED IN THE UNITED STATES

Do lynchers maintain that they were lynched for "the usual crime"?

AND THE LYNCHERS GO UNPUNISHED

There were four lynchings in eight days after the failure to pass the Dyer Anti-Lynching bill. One of the victims being publicly burned at the stake.

TO MAINTAIN CIVILIZATION IN AMERICA

AND FOR THE GOOD NAME OF THE NATION

BEFORE THE WORLD

YOU

CANNOT ESCAPE YOUR RESPONSIBILITY

Will You Not at Least Aid the Organization Which Has Been Fighting for Ten Years to Wipe Out Our Shame?

Send your check to J. E. SPINGARN, Treasurer of the NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF COLORED PEOPLE

75 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK CITY
Bibliography


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