

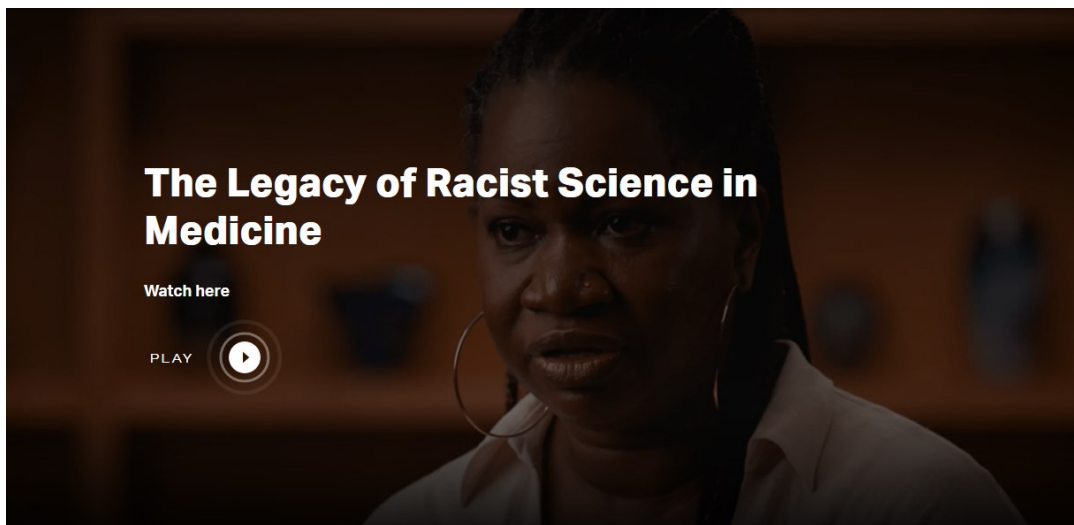
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The Legacy of Racist Science in Medicine

What structures of power have influenced modern medicine? And at whose expense? In this installment of the *Humans & Race* video series, Dr. Deirdre Cooper Owens delves into the legacy of racist science in medicine.

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In this installment of the [Humans & Race video series](#), Dr. Deirdre Cooper Owens delves into the legacy of racist science in modern medicine. Dr. Cooper Owens breaks down the way racist fallacies, such as the false theory that Black people have a higher pain tolerance than white people, and nonconsensual procedures done on Black enslaved women have defined and shaped the history of medicine, specifically in the field of gynecology. She pushes us to ask tough questions, challenging us to reexamine modern practices and beliefs that were built upon racist structures of power.

Featured Scholar:

Dr. Deirdre Cooper Owens is the Charles and Linda Wilson Professor in the History of Medicine and Director of the Humanities in Medicine Program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Dr. Cooper Owens is one of two Black women in the U.S. running a medical humanities program. You can learn more about her [here](#).

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

ENGLISH

So in 2016, a then doctoral candidate, Kelly Hofmann, surveyed UVA's medical residents. And what she found was, I think, shocking for people in the 21st century. The medical residents believed that black people just didn't experience pain, even from very painful conditions. Like kidney stones, childbirth. When black people

complained about pain, they were either not believed or they were thought to really be advocating for the use of drugs.

We are considered a nation that's technologically advanced due to science and medical research. And yet you have people believing the things that rabidly racist people believed in the 19th century.

So this idea around pain perception is one that it persists, but it can be traced back to the 19th century. Benjamin Rush. He was a founding father known as the father of American medicine and American psychiatry.

Benjamin Rush in 1799, presents an argument to the American Philosophical Society that essentially blackness is caused by leprosy. He tells them a story about a Negro who was insensible to pain. So when his leg was amputated, he simply held it up without as much as a scream.

Throughout the 19th century, there are these observations really around difference, but also the pathology of blackness. They live in a state of arrested development, that they can't even experience human feelings. Or if you enter into an intimate relationship with a black person, that somehow the pathology, the mark of blackness, will be placed upon your children. And so there's always this kind of observation that is also linked to really a moral story about black people's behavior

Even with the most racist folk that we think about in the 19th century or even the late 18th century. What's really interesting is they may write about biological distinctions, but the practice is the same because they know if I'm performing an experiment on a cervix, they know intimately, physically through observation that the black woman's cervix is no different than a white woman cervix. Which is why the experimentation is done on black people to cure white people.

The father of the C-section. This happens in the south. This medical experimentation happens on enslaved women. James Marion Sims known as the father of American gynecology. This happens in the South on enslaved women. Ephraim McDowell, who is the father of the ovariectomy, he perfects this technique on enslaved women and one free woman of color.

And so these are procedures that happened that made the United States emerge in terms of its global impact on medicine.

What's most important is what's the legacy? Some of the earliest structures of American medicine and science were mired in anti-blackness. It was mired in sexism and classism. How do we make sense of a world where racial inequities continue to persist? And we are literally looking to science and medicine to provide us with answers. And so those are the things that we really have to contend with.

SPANISH

En 2016, la entonces candidata doctoral, Kelly Hofmann, encuestó a los residentes médicos de la Universidad de Virginia. Y lo que descubrió fue, creo, impactante para tratarse de personas en el siglo 21. Los residentes médicos creían que las personas negras no sentían dolor, incluso bajo condiciones muy dolorosas, tales como cálculos renales, parto. Cuando las personas negras se quejaban del dolor, o no les creían o pensaban que estaban a favor del uso de drogas.

Se nos considera una nación tecnológicamente avanzada debido a las investigaciones científicas y médicas. Aún así, hay personas que creen lo mismo que creían las personas extremadamente racistas en el siglo 19.

Entonces esta idea sobre la percepción del dolor persiste, pero se remonta al siglo 19. Benjamin Rush. Él fue el padre fundador conocido como el padre de la medicina americana y la psiquiatría americana.

En 1799, Benjamin Rush, presenta una teoría ante la Sociedad Filosófica Estadounidense en la que planteaba que el hecho de ser negro era provocado por la lepra. Les cuenta una historia sobre una persona negra que era indiferente al dolor. Y cuando le amputaron la pierna, simplemente la sostuvo sin siquiera un grito.

A lo largo del siglo 19, hay observaciones relacionadas con las diferencias, pero también con la patología de ser negro. Viven en un estado de desarrollo interrumpido, y ni siquiera pueden experimentar emociones humanas. O si entablas una relación íntima con una persona negra, la patología, la marca de la negrura, se le transmitirá a tus hijos. Entonces existe una especie de observación que también está relacionada con la historia moral sobre el comportamiento de las personas negras

Incluso con la persona más racista que se nos ocurra en el siglo 19 o a fines del siglo 18. Lo interesante es que pueden escribir sobre las distinciones biológicas, pero en la práctica es lo mismo porque saben que si estoy realizando una prueba con un cérvix, saben en el fondo, físicamente y por observación que el cérvix de la mujer negra no es diferente al de una mujer blanca. Es por ello que las pruebas se realizan con personas negras con el fin de curar a las personas blancas.

El padre de la cesárea. Esto pasa en el sur. Estas pruebas médicas las realizan con mujeres esclavizadas. James Marion Sims es conocido como el padre de la ginecología estadounidense. Esto pasa en el sur con mujeres esclavizadas. Ephraim McDowell, que es el padre de la ooforectomía, perfecciona esta técnica con mujeres esclavizadas y una mujer negra no esclavizada.

Estos procedimientos hicieron que los Estados Unidos trasciendan en términos de su impacto global en el campo de la medicina.

Pero lo más importante es, ¿cuál es el legado? Algunas de las primeras estructuras de medicina y ciencia estadounidense estaban repletas de racismo. Estaban repletas de sexismo y clasismo. ¿Cómo encontramos el sentido en un mundo en el que las inequidades raciales persisten? Y esperamos que la ciencia y la medicina nos provean las respuestas. Y a eso debemos enfrentarnos.



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