Unequal Treatment book review by Alondra Nelson

– Excerpt

*Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans From Colonial Times to the Present By Harriet A. Washington*

Although medical experimentation with human subjects has historically involved vulnerable groups, including children, the poor and the institutionalized, Washington enumerates how black Americans have disproportionately borne the burden of the most invasive, inhumane and perilous medical investigations, from the era of slavery to the present day. (This burden has become global in the last few decades.) In 1855, John "Fed" Brown, an escaped slave, recalled that the doctor to whom he was indentured produced painful blisters on his body in order to observe "how deep my black skin went." This study had no therapeutic value. Rather, fascination with the outward appearance of African Americans, whose differences from whites were thought to be more than skin deep, was a significant impulse driving such medical trials.

Shielding whites from excruciating experimental procedures also proved a powerful motivation. J. Marion Sims, a leading 19th-century physician and former president of the American Medical Association, developed many of his gynecological treatments through experiments on slave women who were not granted the comfort of anesthesia. Sims's legacy is Janus-faced; he was pitiless with non-consenting research subjects, yet he was among the first doctors of the modern era to emphasize women's health. Other researchers were more guilty of blind ambition than racist intent. Several African Americans, including such as Eunice Rivers, the nurse-steward of the Tuskegee study, served as liaisons between scientists and research subjects.

The infringement of black Americans' rights to their own bodies in the name of medical science continued throughout the 20th century. In 1945, Ebb Cade, an African American trucker being treated for injuries received in an accident in Tennessee, was surreptitiously placed without his consent into a radiation experiment sponsored by the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission. Black Floridians were deliberately exposed to swarms of mosquitoes carrying yellow fever and other diseases in experiments conducted by the Army and the CIA in the early 1950s. Throughout the 1950s and '60s, black inmates at Philadelphia's Holmesburg Prison were used as research subjects by a University of Pennsylvania dermatologist testing pharmaceuticals and personal hygiene products; some of these subjects report pain and disfiguration even now. During the 1960s and '70s, black boys were subjected to sometimes paralyzing neurosurgery by a University of Mississippi researcher who believed brain pathology to be the root of the children's supposed hyperactive behavior. In the 1990s, African American youths in New York were injected with Fenfluramine -- half of the deadly, discontinued weight loss drug Fen-Phen -- by Columbia researchers investigating a hypothesis about the genetic origins of violence.

*Alondra Nelson, an assistant professor of African American studies and sociology at Yale University, is writing a book, "Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Politics of Health and Race."*