

AARON MAYES, UNLV



Statues that perpetuate lies should not stand

Monuments to the ‘father of gynaecology’ cannot be defended as historical documents because they hide grave injustices, says **Harriet A. Washington**.

The bronze colossus of James Marion Sims, the central example in *Nature*’s regrettable editorial (*Nature* 549, 5–6; 2017), proclaims his virtues as the ‘father of American gynaecology’ and founder of the New York Women’s Hospital. It stands across the street from the New York Academy of Medicine. I spent many months there researching what would become an award-winning book, perusing antebellum medical journals and physicians’ memoirs that documented the enslavement and medical torture of African Americans, and the racial calumny that scientists of the era used to justify it.

I learned of other statues of the man. I postponed my research on Sims, believing him to be an altruistic outlier who could be a balm in my distressing work: someone who, according to one statue’s inscription, treated “alike empresses and slaves”. I shunned a comfortable bench to eat lunch under the statue of the acclaimed ‘medical hero’.

Soon, I discovered I’d been duped. Although there are many accounts of Sims’ legacy, I take my conclusions from direct readings of Sims’ personal and medical correspondence, as well as contemporary and modern scholarship.

Sims performed dozens of fruitless experimental surgeries on 11 or so enslaved women in his quest to cure a devastating complication of protracted labour that results in fistulas — openings between the vagina, bladder and rectum that leave women incontinent invalids. The women had no right to refuse. Only their owners’ permission was required.

Sims did not use anaesthesia because, he said, his procedures were “not painful enough to justify the trouble and risk attending the administration”. (He did, however, administer chloroform and ether to white women who suffered from painful contractions of the vagina, rendering them unconscious so their husbands could have intercourse with them.) His actions reflect a convenient, widespread belief that African Americans did not feel pain.

He did state that his motive was to cure women, not just to experiment on them, but my research found that soon after he was able to permanently close one opening in one woman without fostering infection, he left to pursue fame elsewhere. (He eventually treated Empress Eugenie, wife of Napoleon III.) His assistant, Nathaniel Bozeman, complained bitterly that he was left to cure the women himself.

Sims also claimed that the women gave permission and had “clamored” for the experiments. Voluntary consent is impossible if you do not own your own body. Sims himself wrote about Sam, an enslaved man diagnosed with a cancerous jaw who had previously refused surgery on account of the pain. Sims had several medical students force Sam into a chair fitted with restraints, removed much of his jawbone without anaesthetic and later published accounts in

medical journals of how surgery can be executed whether a subject is willing or not.

An oil portrait commissioned for a medical-history series around 1952 shows Sims in coat and tie, regarding a fully clothed enslaved woman who is calmly kneeling before him on a table. Two other African American women peer around a sheet, apparently hung for modesty’s sake. In fact, Sims wrote openly of inviting local physicians and elites to watch surgeries in which naked women were held on all fours as Sims sliced into their genitalia.

Some have argued that Sims’ indefensible actions complied with accepted mores of the past. But Sims was criticized by contemporaries. Enslaved workers decried their treatment. So did free blacks, some whites, and some physicians, who criticized Sims in medical journals and at public meetings. Bozeman openly condemned Sims’ ethics and even accused him of creating a fistula through clumsiness.

When I first lectured on this neglected history at the New York Academy of Medicine almost a decade ago, one medical student leapt to her feet, saying: “We should tear that statue down!”

At the time, I disagreed. I thought people should know how long the lie — a celebration of contributions without admission of atrocities — had been allowed to stand, and suggested that a statue to the women should be erected, with a corrective plaque. I have since changed my mind. Over the years, as I visited friends in Germany, I realized that I never saw a statue to Hitler, Goebbels or their ilk. Instead, memorials continue to be erected to victims of the Holocaust.

Be they Confederate generals or physicians whose success was based on the savage abuse of African Americans, we in the United States have chosen to honour the perpetrators. Moreover, the erection of many such statues correlates with terror campaigns against African Americans: peaks in lynchings and retaliations for civil-rights skirmishes. They are symbols of racial power. Statues are raised to those people a culture wants to honour. And plaques installed to commemorate victims have sometimes been placed in less than conspicuous positions, downplaying past wrongs.

This is why the Sims statue must go.

As the statues and portraits of Sims make clear, art can create beautiful lies. To find the truth, we must dig deeper and be willing to confront ugly facts. No scientist, no thinking individual, should be content to accept pretty propaganda. ■

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Harriet A. Washington is a medical ethicist and historian. Her books include *Medical Apartheid, an account of experimentation on black Americans from colonialism to the present*. e-mail: haw95@aol.com