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### Cover Page Footnote

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# Black Sanity: Understanding Mental Health Diagnoses Post Emancipation

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## **Abstract**

In the years following emancipation, something peculiar was observed in the mental state of Black Americans: they were going insane in large numbers. What was once a rarity was growing to become an epidemic. Nineteenth century psychiatric specialists believed that freedom was the culprit behind the rising rate of insanity in Black Americans. The purpose of this work is to examine the arguments of why freedom caused insanity in Black Americans, and how the increasing diagnosis of insanity post emancipation was used to aid discrimination. Knowledge of this segment of psychology's history is crucial to understanding how the treatment of mentally ill African American evolved over time. This project will give an in depth look into black insanity post-emancipation by analyzing primary and secondary source documents pertaining to psychologists and asylums of the mid to late nineteenth century. This work will prove that increasing insanity diagnosis among African Americans was effectively used as a reason to justify institutionalization and future discrimination towards Black Americans.

*Keywords:* Insanity, Black Americans, Emancipation

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In 1865, Dr. Thomas Green stated that while enslaved Black people, “enjoyed entire freedom from cares and anxieties, and in the rare instances in which an insane negro could be

found, there was an owner who could and did take care of the poor Creature” (Varner 45). Dr. Green was the superintendent of the Georgia Lunatic Asylum, and the theory he asserted about the rarity of insanity in enslaved Black people was a popular and highly accepted idea in the nineteenth century. Many doctors believed the institution of slavery and ‘benevolent’ enslavers acted as a protective factor against mental illness. Once Black people were emancipated, there was a backlash in the form of increasing insanity diagnoses to keep them subordinate to White society. Under the guise of aid, Black Americans were institutionalized in insane asylums and had their freedom stripped from them.

### **Methodology and Terms**

For this project, I examined primary and secondary source documents written concerning nineteenth-century doctors’ and politicians’ views on insanity and slavery. Articles about the treatment of Black people in asylums and the enumeration of the insane were also analyzed. I focused on the mid to late nineteenth century as a time frame for this project to allow for a comparison between pre-emancipation and post-emancipation treatment of mentally ill Black people to be made. The terms ‘manumitted’ and ‘almshouse’ are used in this paper.

Manumission is defined as the process of formally freeing an enslaved person (Merriam-Webster n.d.). An almshouse is defined as a home built by a charitable person or organization that houses impoverished people (Oxford University Press 2005). Understanding these terms along with the historical context in which insanity in Black people purportedly increased is important for understanding this paper.

## **Historical Context**

Numerous pivotal events in American history happened in the mid to late nineteenth century. In this time frame, a civil war was fought and won. Black Americans were all declared to be free people. Black Codes, racist laws created to maintain control over newly freed people by replicating elements of slavery, were enacted (Harris). Southern American states also underwent the Reconstruction period during the mid to late nineteenth century. It was during Reconstruction that Black codes were made void and attempts were made to institute civil and political equality for Black Americans (Harris). After the end of Reconstruction, “Pig Laws” were enacted by Southern states to restrict the lives of Black Americans as they were before Reconstruction (Public Broadcasting Service). Under Pig Laws, Black Americans were unjustly penalized for crimes such as stealing a farm animal (PBS). For a significant portion of this paper’s time frame, slavery was legal.

## **Enslaved People, Mental Illness, and Asylums**

While slavery was legal, enslaved people were rarely noted as insane or institutionalized, despite displaying symptoms of mental illness if they were capable of performing labor (Brooks 9 & 11). This is because enslavers would rather keep the Black people they owned and continue to force them to do labor, instead of sending them to asylums where they had to pay for their treatment (Deutsch 479). Instead of being sent to an insane asylum, mentally ill enslaved people were often abused, killed, or manumitted (Brooks 11). Even if an enslaver wished to send the person they enslaved to an asylum, there were few insane asylums for Black people and many states had laws or regulations against admitting Black people into insane asylums (Deutsch 480). There were some exceptions to this rule. For example, the Friends Asylum for the Insane in Philadelphia actively solicited the admission of Black patients (Lowe 41). There was eventually

a shift towards accepting enslaved people into asylums instead of having them manumitted. For example, in Virginia, a law was passed that required enslavers to care for the Black people they manumitted, which led to enslavers petitioning, and being allowed, to admit the Black people they enslaved into insane asylums (Brooks 14 & 15). The reluctance of allowing Black people into insane asylums was partially due to nineteenth-century doctors' view of mental illness.

### **19th Century View of Mental Illness**

In the nineteenth century, doctors had radically different views about Black people and mental illness. Dr. Campbell, a nineteenth-century doctor, remarked: “the excellent care taken of the negro before the war induced his exemption from many diseases” (Powell 1188). One of the many diseases he was referring to was insanity. It was a popular idea of doctors in the nineteenth century that enslaved people were exempt from insanity. This idea was popular in part because psychiatrists believed only people who lived in a civilized society could be insane (Brooks 2). This, of course, exempted Black people from insanity because they were excluded from ‘civilized’ White society. Another reason enslaved people were considered immune from insanity was because they were under their enslaver’s control (3). Psychiatrists of that time thought an enslaver’s control over Black people prevented stress-induced insanity in them (14). They also believed enslaver’s attention to the health and living conditions of the people they enslaved made it impossible for the conditions that cause insanity among Black people to arise (Brooks 69-70). The terms guard and restraint were commonly used by these psychiatrists to describe the effect slavery had for Black people against mental illness.

Due to the perceived benefits of slavery, psychiatrists concluded it was best for Black peoples’ mental health to remain slaves (Brooks 10). As far as many nineteenth-century psychiatrists were concerned, enslaved people could only become insane while disobeying their

“masters” orders. For example, enslaved people who ran away or damaged plantation property were often regarded as mentally ill (8). While psychiatrists did notice insane enslaved people on such rare occasions, insanity in Black people did not become a noticeable problem at the forefront of doctors' minds until the institution of slavery was under threat.

### **The 1840 Census**

When the institution of slavery came under attack in the nineteenth century, more serious discussions about insanity in Black people began. The 1840 census, the sixth U.S. census, exemplifies this growing concern about the Black insane. The 1840 census was the first census to count the number of “insane or idiots”, as mentally ill and mentally handicapped people were referred to as in the nineteenth century (Deutsch 471). Data from the 1840 census was used to compare insanity among White people, free Black people, and enslaved Black people. It showed insanity was more prevalent in free Black people compared to enslaved Black people. The 1840 census also showed insanity was a more prevalent problem in the Black community than in the White community. The results of the 1840 census put insanity among free Black people eleven times higher than among enslaved Black people (Litwack 3). In the Northern states, one out of every one hundred forty-four Black people was insane (3), compared to one out of every nine hundred ninety-five White people (Deutsch 472). In the South, one in every one thousand five hundred fifty-eight Black people was insane compared to one out of every nine hundred forty-five White people (Litwack 3). There was also a divide in the number of insane Black people in states where they could live freely versus states where they were enslaved. For example, in Maine, where Black Americans could live free, every fourteenth Black person was considered insane (3). In Louisiana, a slave state, one in every four thousand three hundred and ten Black people was considered insane (4).

The census was later shown to be based on fraudulent data (Deutsch 475). One of the common errors of the census was the overrepresentation of Black people. For example, several towns in Maine were said to have more insane Black people than the total population of Black people (475). Despite these flagrant errors, many pro-slavery proponents clung to the census as proof that freedom would cause the Black race to go insane (475). The manipulated data found in the 1840 census was used by many professional journals, such as *The American Journal of Insanity*, to promote pro-slavery propaganda (478). Politicians, such as Secretary of State John C Calhoun, used it to argue to other government officials the negative effects emancipation would have on Black people (Litwack 265). Many pro-slavery proponents used this opportunity to question how society would function with a large amount of “insane Blacks” roaming among them (Deutsch 480). The 1840 census would be used for many years later to dissuade the abolition of slavery and chide the decision to emancipate Black people.

### **Emancipation and Asylums**

After Black Americans were emancipated, the diagnosis of insanity among them increased rapidly. From the years 1860 through 1890, the number of Black insane went from forty-four to nine hundred and ten (Powell 1185). According to Dr. Powell, superintendent of a Georgia asylum, it was with the advent of freedom that insanity and tuberculosis increased among them (1186). After Black Americans were emancipated, nineteenth-century doctors saw the increase of insanity as a clear indication that without their ‘masters’ care, the Black race was doomed to extinction (Haller 155). Without their masters keeping them healthy and stress-free, the Black race quickly succumbed to mental and physical illness because they lacked the sense to properly care for themselves. Dr. Hodges, a professor at the Richmond University College of Medicine, said, “some kind of restraining and inhibitory influences, such as once characterized



the institution of slavery, must be thrown around [them] as a safeguard for many years to come” (166). Seeing as Black Americans clearly could not care for themselves, their lives had to once again be put into the hands of someone more capable. It was the belief of many physicians in a post-emancipation society that Black Americans needed a new “guard” to quell the insanity epidemic they were facing.

The new “guard” for Black Americans came in the form of asylums. In circumstances where Black Americans could not gain access to asylums, they were thrown into prisons or almshouses where they received no treatment (Deutsch 480). Even when admitted to asylums, Black Americans received subpar care. Black Americans were cared for by the physicians who had the least amount of experience, who later went on to treat White patients once they had adequate experience (Hughes 450). In some instances, Black patients were charged with the care of White patients (Brooks 58). Black asylum patients remained in the asylum for far longer than White patients and had a higher mortality rate in asylums (Hughes 451). For example, on the Alabama Insane Asylum in 1870, twenty-three percent of Black patients died compared to thirteen percent of White patients (451). The high rate of death of Black Americans in insane asylums can be attributed to their living conditions. In insane asylums, Black Americans were put off into the annexes (441) that were overcrowded (National Conference on Social Welfare 180-182), dirty (Brooks 59), and disease-ridden (Hughes 452). Black patients were also given food that had little nutritional value, leading to illness (453). Besides poor living conditions and low-quality treatment, Black Americans were also limited in their autonomy while in asylums.

Black asylum patients had to live their lives based on their superintendent’s schedule because this was believed to return order and sanity to the mind (Hughes 442). As many doctors believed in working as a cure for insanity in Black Americans (Brooks 7), Black asylum patients

were therefore forced to do manual labor as a part of their therapy and to benefit the asylum. Some of the work therapy activities Black Americans in asylums had to take part in were: growing crops, working in a cotton field, and cooking all the meals for the institution (58). Black Americans in asylums were also made to work for local farmers, who paid the asylum for their services (Jackson 17). The way Black asylum patients were treated calls into the question of the legitimacy of having them institutionalized.

The treatment Black Americans faced while in asylums could not have possibly cured them of insanity. According to Dr. Powell, things such as poor living conditions and a bad diet were factors that could cause insanity (Powell 1186). Both of these and many other conditions that can lead to insanity were present in asylums. Black Americans' long stay in insane asylums is further evidence of asylums' inefficiency. For all the posturing doctors did about the decay of the Black race, their diagnosis of insanity did nothing to help Black Americans and only served to further oppress them. In many cases, the diagnosis of insanity in Black Americans was dubious. For example, on the Virginia Central Lunatic Asylum for the Colored Insane between 1874 and 1881, fifty-three percent of Black Americans were seemingly mentally ill, while the other forty-seven percent were there for not adhering to White Americans' expectations for their behavior (Brooks 55). Many Black Americans, for instance, were sent to this asylum for refusing to work or their religious practices (55). The mistreatment of the Black insane has had a lasting impact.

### **Impact**

It is important to acknowledge that insanity diagnoses were used as a tool to oppress Black Americans because this set the foundation of psychology's early relationship with the Black community. It shows, in the early moments of psychology's founding, mental health

professionals lacked genuine interest in Black Americans' mental health. This disregard for Black Americans' mental health carried on for many decades, as evidenced by ongoing mental health care disparities. Understanding the toxic start of psychologists' relationship with the black community is important to understanding the current contentious relationship between the two. Psychologists knowing how the relationship came to be can help more effective efforts be made towards mending it. Knowledge of the history of psychologists mistreating Black Americans can also be used to alleviate current mental health disparities.

Currently, Black people are less likely to seek out mental health services than White people (American Psychiatric Association 2). Many barriers prevent or discourage Black Americans from utilizing mental health services, such as distrust of the healthcare system and experiencing dehumanizing services (3). Only one in three Black Americans who need mental health care receive it, and those who do are less likely to receive guidance-consistent care than White Americans (2). Black Americans are also less likely than the general population to be offered evidenced-based psychotherapy (3). Black Americans with mental health conditions are more likely to be incarcerated than people of other races with mental health conditions (3), which is reminiscent of the way the Black insane were treated in the nineteenth century.

### **Future Research**

If I were to research this project further, I would investigate the historical mistreatment of mentally ill Black Americans starting from the founding of America to the present day. I would pay close attention to how the mistreatment of Black Americans differed based on gender and age. Another one of my focuses would be the diagnostic practices for Black people in the nineteenth century and how it compares to current practices. In particular, I would look at how the symptoms of schizophrenia, in which Black Americans are more frequently diagnosed than

White Americans (American Psychiatric Association 2), compares to the nineteenth-century symptoms of insanity. I would also investigate nineteenth-century mental illness specifically relating to Black Americans and insanity, such as drapetomania.

## **Conclusion**

In summation, the diagnosis of insanity in Black Americans post-emancipation was a transparent attempt to continue the oppression of Black Americans after slavery was abolished. This is evident due to enslavers overlooking mental illness in enslaved people when it would have meant losing money to send them asylums, yet noting an explosion of insanity in Black Americans after their emancipation made it more difficult to profit off Black labor. Physicians' and politicians' attempts to pin the rise of insanity in Black Americans on freedom with fraudulent evidence is further proof that insanity diagnoses were a tool to continue the marginalization of Black Americans. The diagnosis of insanity in Black people was the first step in their subjection to White society, being confined to asylums was the second step. The asylums Black Americans were incarcerated in were not a viable option to treat their insanity due to their living conditions. Asylum superintendents forced Black patients to do work for the asylum and be practice for doctors before they treated White patients. Many Black Americans institutionalized in asylums were not insane and were only admitted for defying the demands of White people. The legacy of the mistreatment of mentally ill Black Americans carries on to the present day, as evidenced by mental health care disparities. Mental health professionals of the current era must strive to be better than their predecessors and give Black Americans the competent care they deserve.

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