

# An Overview of the Misguided Perception of Expertise in Medicine in the Early Caribbean

  
ecda  
early caribbean digital archive  
-Natalie Hackman

# Competing Medical Knowledge in the Atlantic World



‘The Plantation,’ oil on wood, ca. 1825. Credit: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, CC BY

“The want of skill, or inattention of the black midwives, who, like their fairer sisters in Europe, are always illiterate, generally careless, and often intoxicated. This inattention is often displayed by their neglecting to purge off the meconium; by their dividing the umbilical cord with a blunt, lacerating instrument, and applying stimulant applications to it; and by their neglecting to provide for the comfort of the mother, who is generally exposed to cold, by lying in a wretched hut.” – Historian Robert Renny (1807)

With the enormous scope of the Atlantic Slave Trade encompassing the West Indies, European doctors traveled to the Caribbean to serve on plantations, bringing their common medical practices with them. It quickly became evident that the medical practices employed in Europe were not sufficient when employed in the Caribbean environment for a multitude of reasons, specifically surrounding the climate difference.

Given the stark contrast between the European climate and that of the Caribbean, the diseases that were able to manifest and fester in tropical conditions were largely unfamiliar. Hence, the term ‘tropical disease’ came about to describe these unfamiliar diseases as physicians struggled to find adequate cures. Thomas Dancer, a prominent physician in Jamaica, cautioned that despite the quality of medical books, their results were not “well suited to .... tropical climates, were diseases put on a different aspect and character; where they commonly run a shorter course and have a more fatal tendency.” In contrast to the European physicians, enslaved Africans were more familiar with ‘tropical’ diseases and had developed strategies for cure and prevention.

# Competing Medical Knowledge in the Atlantic World

However, given the view of enslaved peoples as inferior in society, their traditional medical practices were often belittled and disregarded. For instance, childbirth in Africa was a communal female activity, involving a gathering in a hut and the presence of multiple midwives. This practice became regarded as primitive and inefficient to the plantation complex.

Within the plantation complex, physicians were providing treatment for the purposes of keeping enslaved individuals healthy enough to work, which was economically beneficial for plantation owners. For example, women were not allowed to cease working until the very day that they were giving birth, and then were sent back to work almost immediately afterwards, per the physician's recommendations. In such cases, the ideas and priorities of the plantation owner dominate particularly given that best medical practice in England dealt with childbirth much more delicately.

“ Negro Population of the district referred to, on 1st January, 1818	. 5042
“ Ditto, ditto, 1st January, 1819	. 5063
“ Births in the year 1818	. 162
“ Deaths, ditto, ditto	. 141
“ Increase, being somewhat less than half per cent.	. 21

William Sells, *Remarks on the Condition of Slaves in the Island of Jamaica*



# Scholarly Questions

How did physicians' efforts to cater to the desires of plantation owners influence the medical practices towards enslaved individuals in the early Caribbean?

Was the understanding of tropical diseases by enslaved individuals considered in European medicine?



# Carl Linnaeus and Medical Racism in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century

Linnaeus, commonly known as the father of modern taxonomy, became famous in the 18<sup>th</sup> century for his work on classification, which became one of the century's primary roots of scientific racism. The premise of Linnaeus' *Systema Naturae*, was to provide a classification of the then current three kingdoms of nature: mineral, vegetable and animal. Linnaeus' taxonomy began to serve as a central tool for the justification of the Atlantic Slave trade, the mass colonization and enslavement of people for labor purposes, because Europeans perceived themselves as higher in the hierarchy than enslaved individuals.

Species	1	2	3	4	5
Americanus	Red, choleric and straight	Straight, black and thick hair; gaping nostrils; [freckled] face; beardless chin	Unyielding, cheerful, free	Paints himself in a maze of red lines	Governed by customary right
Europaeus	White, sanguine, muscular	Plenty of yellow hair; blue eyes	Light, wise, inventor	Protected by tight clothing	Governed by rites
Asiaticus	Sallow, melancholic, stiff	Blackish hair, dark eyes	Stern, haughty, greedy	Protected by loose garments	Governed by opinions
Africanus	Black, phlegmatic, lazy	Dark hair, with many twisting braids; silky skin; flat nose; swollen lips; Women [with] elongated labia; breasts lactating profusely.	Sly, sluggish, neglectful	Anoints himself with fat	Governed by choice [caprice]

Table from <https://www.linnaean.org/learning/who-was-linnaeus/linnaeus-and-race-review>



Table of the Animal Kingdom (Regnum Animale) from Carolus Linnaeus's first edition (1735) of *Systema Naturae*.

As much as our voices and bodies share many traits, our constitutions also differ radically. Happy is the physician who seizes upon these similarities and takes care to guard against the differences! – *Gazette de médecine pour les colonies* (1778)

With the widespread acceptance of Linnaean taxonomy, the social environment of 18th century Britain facilitated the introduction and subsequent flourish of medical racism. Because test subjects were unevenly available for medical experimentation, physicians would run experiments on subjects regardless of race. However, a growing belief that Europeans were superior to people of color-due to Linnaean taxonomy -meant that this sense of superiority eventually extended to anatomy and physiology. As a result, physicians began to divide their medical approaches based on the race of their patient. For enslaved patients, the medical approach would often involve disregarding pain and the need for recovery.

## Key Physicians

To create a baseline for the best current practices in medicine in the 18<sup>th</sup> century early Caribbean, several prominent doctors and their texts must be considered. These physicians include Thomas Dancer, Hans Sloane and William Sells.

### Thomas Dancer

Thomas Dancer (1750-1811) was a physician and affluent botanist from Scotland, receiving a formal education as a doctor in Edinburgh. Dancer spent a considerable number of his professional years in Jamaica, with an eventual appointment to island botanist in 1797. After some disagreements in the house of assembly, Dancer decided to shift his focus from botany to medicine, and published his most famous work, *The medical assistant, or Jamaica Practice of Physic* (1801). The book provides a thorough overview from recipes to disease remedies and was specifically tailored for the use of families that resided on plantations.

### Hans Sloane

Hans Sloane (1660-1753), originally from Ireland, studied to become a physician in London. In 1687, Sloane, after becoming a fellow of the College of Physicians, embarked on a journey to Jamaica, to serve as the personal physician to the new Governor of Jamaica, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Duke of Albermarle. His work on slave plantations formed the basis of his book, *a Voyage to the Islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, Saint Christophers and Jamaica* (1707-1725).

### William Sells

Williams Sells' date of birth is unknown, however he did serve as a prominent member of the Royal College of Surgeons, as well as a doctor in the Jamaica parish of Clarendon in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Upon his return to England in 1823, Sells published a refutation of abolitionist William Wilberforce's text. Sells' text, titled *Remarks on the Conditions of the Slaves in the Island of Jamaica*, argues that enslaved individuals lived comfortable lives on plantations.



Thomas Dancer

**Above:** Image of Thomas Dancer, as it appears in *The medical assistant, or Jamaica practice of physic: designed chiefly for the use of families and plantations*



**Right:** Image of Hans Sloane from the National Portrait Gallery

# Midwifery in the Early Caribbean

In response to an abolitionist text, William Sells aimed to reinforce the idea of humane living conditions for enslaved individuals. Sells suggests the abundance of sanitary “lying-in houses” for pregnant women, and the presence of “properly instructed midwives.” Although neither suggestion carries any truth, Sells’ acknowledgement of the importance of midwives suggests that there was an understanding amongst physicians that midwives were an essential presence at childbirth. This contrasts the popular image of the incapability and failure of midwives which physicians propagated in the early Caribbean in order to medicalize childbirth in such a way that it was efficient to the plantation structure.

Europeans kidnapped Africans and brought them to the Caribbean, inaugurating a system of plantation slavery. Europeans imposed their medical practices on enslaved peoples. One of these practices was the management of childbirth. Europeans perceived midwives as incompetent and often advised that they were not necessary at delivery, despite a robust tradition of midwifery that enslaved people brought from Africa.

Happily for females in warm climates, they seldom stand in need of much assistance in delivery; they are more liable to suffer from the officious intermeddling of uninstructed persons, than from the want of manual help.

Thomas Dancer, *The medical assistant, or Jamaica Practice of Physic*

Thomas Dancer, referring to enslaved women, notes that they seldom need “assistance in delivery.” Dancer suggests that women are more likely to suffer from the interference of untrained individuals. Dancer’s evaluation of delivery echoes the desires of plantation owners. Indeed, as the target audience of his medical treatise was literate individuals living in the early Caribbean, Dancer’s suggestions could be considered a confirmation that there was little need to invest in personnel to be present during childbirth, an economically beneficial solution to a plantation complex. Dancer’s referral to specifically “females in warm climates” suggest that the physician would not provide the same recommendation in Europe. Dancer’s note regarding “uninstructed persons” aligns with the popular view that African midwives were untrained and incapable.

William Sells, *Remarks on the Condition of Slaves in the Island of Jamaica*

following paragraph. “So strongly is the writer “impressed with the utility of lying-in houses, “that he believes on their establishment taking

“place, and properly instructed midwives being “provided, (a matter deserving most serious attention, and without which all else can be of no avail,) tetanus, or lock-jaw, would become “almost as rare among negro as among white “infants. The mischievous results of this “destructive malady would be made apparent, “were it a practice of managers of estates, in “keeping their increase and decrease lists, to “enter all births, and not, as is too common a “practice, to omit taking any notice of such as “die within the ninth day. It would also be

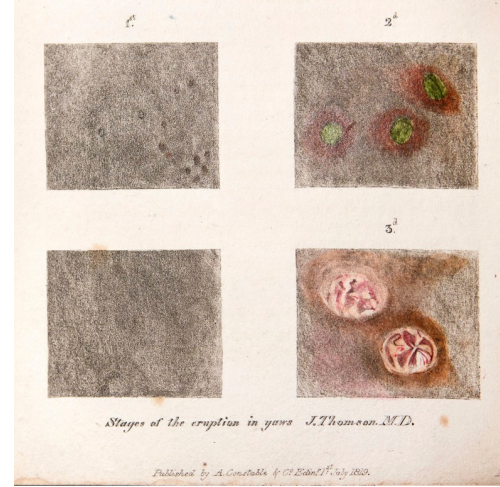
Thomas Dancer, *The medical assistant, or Jamaica Practice of Physic*

Midwives are frequently in too great haste to separate the Child from the Mother. The Navel-String ought never to be cut, till the Child shews signs of respiration and life, by crying.

On DISEASES of WOMEN, &c. 263  
C H A P. XI.

Dancer points out his specific disagreement with the methods of Midwives, providing a sort of justification for his previous claim that “uninstructed persons” will cause more suffering than the pain of childbirth itself. Dancer’s critique echoes the circulating idea of a lack of proper expertise amongst African midwives, supporting the more economical solution of allowing the mother suffer childbirth without assistance.

# Yaws in the Early Caribbean



An early drawing by doctor James Thomson shows different stages of yaws, a tropical infection of the skin, bones and joints. (Image credit: Courtesy Stanford Medical History Center)

Yaws was a prolific bacterial infection that created horrible ulcers and lesions in its victims. If untreated, yaws was excruciating and could be fatal. Given their unfamiliarity with tropical diseases, European physicians tended to assume yaws was a venereal disease, so a mercurial treatment was applied as a cure.

cvi

## The Introduction.

A Negro Woman, belonging to Mr. Forwood, was brought to me, she had a great many Ulcers in the Extremities of the Fingers and Toes, and about the Joints There was also several Bladders fill'd with Serum on several of her Joints, as if *Cantbarides* had been applied there to raise a Blister. These Bladders or *Cuticula* fill'd with ferous Matter, came either on her Fingers or Toes, every Full and New Moon, and in process of time each of these Bladders brought an Ulcer, leaving the Fleth raw, and sometimes deeper, sometimes Shallower corroded, so that the longer the Bladders had been rais'd, the deeper were the Ulcerations. The virulency of the Humour was such, as that after it had eaten into the Bone, the joints of the Fingers and Toes would drop off, and they die, as I have been assur'd by those who have lost several *Negros* of this Disease, I was assured was peculiar to Blacks. Her Master told me she had been in the Hands of a great many Physicians, who had Bled, Purg'd, Sweated, &c. her to the greatest degree, without any success. I told him, I thought Fluxing, or Salivation, bid fairest for the Cure of this Disease, and having got a corner of an Out-house ready, she was therein flux'd by Unction. After a while she was not only so well that all the Symptoms of Bladders formerly rising on Full and Change of the Moon, did not appear as usually, but the Ulcers all over her extremities dry'd up, and were cicatriz'd, so that I did not doubt but all was perfectly well, Salivation being a great Remedy in Diseases where the Serum of the Blood is Peccant, either as to quantity or quality. I was very much disappointed, when her Master told me about three Months after, that her Distemper was again, on Full and Change, return'd on her. I concluded that the Salivation had not been prosecuted to the heighth, by my judging her Disease cured, and therefore order'd her to be shut up, and seen rub her self as directed. This second Salivation was very copious, and she well again. I, notwithstanding, towards the latter end gave her a Vomit of *Turpeth. Min.* and continued her Spitting for several days with *Merc. Dulc.* and afterwards order'd her a Diet Drink made of the Woods *Sarja, &c.* boil'd in Lime-water. This preserv'd her as formerly, for some time, but did not secure her from a Relapse. So

Of a strange Disease in a Black Woman rotting her Fingers and Toes, following the Full and Change of the Moon.

The excerpt to the left is Hans Sloane's account of yaws, although the physician is very unfamiliar with the disease and does not name it. Sloane states that the ulcers appear in correlation with "every Full and New Moon." Sloane implies that the disease may have some connection with menstrual cycles.

The plantation owner assures

Sloane that the disease

"was peculiar to Blacks," suggesting the popular belief at the time that race is a predicate of certain

illnesses. Sloane notes that the enslaved

woman has been "purg'd, sweated"

with no great success by other physicians,

suggesting the universal inadequacy of physicians to understand and treat the disease.

"The Negroes Method is making them stand in a Cask where there is a little fire in a pot & sweating them powerfully in it twice a day giving them decoctions of 2 woods in this country called *Bois Royale & Bois fer ..*"

-A. J. Alexander, planter, Bacolet, Grenada, 1773

The excerpt above is from correspondence of the physician A.J. Alexander. Alexander noticed increasing infection rates of yaws amongst the enslaved individuals on his plantations. The resident surgeon was unable to cure the patients, using a mercurial treatment which only increased the excruciating pain being suffered. Taking a chance, Alexander enlisted an enslaved healer to treat some of the patients. Alexander, shocked that the enslaved healer's patients recovered overnight, detailed the methodology used by the enslaved healer. Alexander, deferring to the expertise of an enslaved healer familiar with tropical diseases, was able to discover a way to cure yaws, a cure that had existed and been disregarded by the plantation complex.

Excerpt from Sloane's *a Voyage to the Islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, Saint Christophers and Jamaica*





## About the Project

As an Undecided major in my freshman year at Northeastern, I explored a variety of classes across many subjects, which expanded to research projects. While taking a compelling 18<sup>th</sup> century British Literature course, I discovered the Early Caribbean Digital Archive. I began working on the Archive around the same time as I declared my major Behavioral Neuroscience on the pre-medicine track. I became intrigued with the idea of creating an interdisciplinary project by overlapping my passion for medicine with the Early Caribbean research. I have been researching the best practices in medicine, the influence of the plantation complex, and the vast understanding of tropical diseases by enslaved peoples through the lens of various physician texts.



# The Importance of the Digital Exhibit

This exhibit is designed for a digital archive. All the sources that have been used to create the exhibit are digitized, allowing the information to be very easily accessible.

The digital aspect of the exhibit is especially important because it is exceptionally convenient for displaying purposes. Specifically, the digital nature allows for a side-by-side comparison of different digital texts, which contributes to the strength of the exhibit.

# Bibliography

## Primary

1. [Linnaeus, Carl](#) (1758). [Systema naturae](#) (in Latin) ([10th edition](#) ed.). Stockholm: Laurentius Salvius.
2. Gazette de médecine pour les colonies, 8 issues published in Le Cap, Saint Domingue, between 1778 and 1779.
3. Dancer, Thomas. *The Medical Assistant, or Jamaica Practice of Physic, Designed Chiefly for the Use of Families and Plantations*. A. Aikman, Jun, 1819.
4. Sloane, Hans. *A Voyage to the Islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers and Jamaica with the Natural History ... of the Last of Those Islands; to Which Is Prefix'd an Introduction, Wherein Is an Account of the Inhabitants, Air, Waters, Diseases, Trade, &c. ... Illustrated with the Figures of the Things Describ'd, ... by Hans Sloane, ... in Two Volumes*. .. Printed by B. M. for the Author, 1707.
5. Sells, William. *Remarks on the Condition of the Slaves in the Island of Jamaica*. J.M. Richardson, 1827.

## Secondary

1. Carter, Harold B. (July 1995). ["The Royal Society and the Voyage of HMS Endeavour 1768–71"](#). *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*. **49**(2): 245–260. doi:[10.1098/rsnr.1995.0026](#). [JSTOR 532013](#).
2. <https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/sir-hans-sloane>
3. [https://www.brown.edu/Facilities/John Carter Brown Library/exhibitions/sloane/pages/culture.html](https://www.brown.edu/Facilities/John_Carter_Brown_Library/exhibitions/sloane/pages/culture.html) (Voyage to the Islands: Hans Sloane, Slavery and Scientific Travel in the Caribbean) This exhibition was curated by James Delbourgo, with assistance from Susan Danforth.
4. <https://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2012/07/12/whites-blacks-apes-in-the-great-chain-of-being/>
5. Schiebinger, Londa L. *Secret Cures of Slaves: People, Plants, and Medicine in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World*. Stanford University Press, 2017.
6. <https://www.linnean.org/learning/who-was-linnaeus/linnaeus-and-race>
7. [https://evolution.berkeley.edu/evolibrary/article/0\\_0\\_0/history\\_05](https://evolution.berkeley.edu/evolibrary/article/0_0_0/history_05)
8. <https://www.linnean.org/learning/who-was-linnaeus/linnaeus-and-race-review>