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Night Doctors: Exhuming the Truth

The curious case of night doctors in the American South was born of over-eager medical professionals seeking bodies for their use in study and practice as well as Ku Klux Klan terrorism. There are some that say that the “night doctors” are a myth belonging solely to black folklore, a story used to frighten and manipulate. There is no doubt that is indeed what the lore achieved but the night doctors, aka “sack-em-up boys” aka “resurrectionists” aka night riders, did indeed live in more than just whispered stories. The night doctors were a real force that made a lasting impression on history and the repercussions of their horror story can still be felt in African American communities today. In this paper, I will delve into a journey through history, both near and far, of multiple genres in order to exhume the true chronicle of night doctors.

“The term ‘night doctor’ (derived from the fact that victims were sought only at night) applies to both students of medicine, who supposedly stole cadavers from which to learn about body processes, and professional thieves, who sold bodies- living and dead- to physicians for medical research” (Fry 171). The concept began in the South but traveled to the North as African American people began to move towards industrialized cities.

An informant explains the fear some Blacks had of city life:

I have heard many stories about the night doctor, but it usually related to fear of the city. From my experience this is the story that the elders in the country would tell about city life. You see the hospitals were there, and these are the places

where the doctors were to be found, and it was there that one was apt to be caught and, well, eventually killed, as it were, for the purpose of medical inspection or investigation. You were safe in the country. (Fry 179)

The night doctors had a dual role in the South. In Europe, grave-robbing, kidnapping and murder, all for the sake of medical “advancement” had been happening for quite a while to the poor and socially downtrodden. In the South however, the night doctors weren’t just getting bodies for the medical profession, they were controlling a population.

Originally practiced during slavery by masters and overseers dressed as ghosts, psychological control was later extended to the system of mounted patrols (or ‘patterollers’) designed to monitor slave movement in antebellum days, the Ku Klux Klan of the Reconstruction era, and finally the night doctors. (Fry 3)

The night doctors in the American South progressed through time under the specific circumstances of slavery and racial hatred. It is this fact that sets the night doctors of the South apart from those that existed in Europe.

To the modern person of the 21st century, grave-robbing and kidnapping people in the dead of night to experiment on them seem like antiquated stories that have no credence or relevance to today. This practice however, was strongly tied to the medical profession when it was in its new-born and growing stages and did do a great deal to advance knowledge of anatomy and proper surgical procedure. That knowledge however, came at a price. In regard to the atmosphere of the time, Julia Frank in the Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine wrote,

Both a cause and a product of the frictions that existed between physicians and the public in 18th century England, the resurrection trade may be viewed as a bizarre example of what can happen when a profession and a society find themselves at

cross-purposes during a period of rapid scientific advance and far-reaching social change. (399)

This explains the problem; doctors at the time were extremely ardent about their work and were willing to go to great lengths to get the human remains they needed to conduct their research. There were those that firmly believed the ends justified the means, and so, saw no harm in taking bodies from gravesites and yet others who preserved their consciences by ignoring the moral implications of accepting these bodies completely.

The practice of human dissection as a learning tool for medical students began in the early 14th century at the University of Bologna in Italy. The practice was met with great apprehension but as it appeared to be unavoidable, authorities stepped in and it soon became legally regulated. This unfortunately did not prevent incidents of grave-robbing, as there were many aspiring doctors eager to study human anatomy directly from the source.

In England, unlike other European countries, it was not universities that were in charge of medical education but rather a guild, which was granted by royal declaration a certain number of executed felons to dissect each year. “In 1752 the common law provision for the dissection of murderers was made statutory law by George II, for the reason that ‘the crime of murder has been more frequently perpetrated than formerly...and...it is thereby become necessary that some further terror and peculiar infamy be added to the punishment of death’ (2)” (Frank 400). The problem however, soon became one of supply and demand. The medical profession was growing at an astounding pace and there were medical students as well as practicing surgeons looking for cadavers. According to English law it was a crime to steal one’s coffin but not one’s body...and so, grave-robbing became common place.

At first, “body-snatching” was done independently by committed students but it did not take long for some to see the potential for it to become a booming business. Groups of men known as “resurrectionists” crept in on the market and began selling cadavers for money. “Before they were finally put out of business by the Anatomical Act of 1832, these men had elevated their racket to the status of a criminal profession, with diversification into import and export and extortion from the surgeons they served” (Frank 3). This piece of legislation (the Anatomical Act of 1832) required doctors to become licensed to dissect human bodies and removed executed prisoners as the major source of cadavers. Only bodies that were not claimed after death, donated, or exchanged by the next of kin in lieu of paying for burial could be used. In her book, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*, Ruth Richardson wrote, ““Before 1832 dissection was a feared and hated punishment for murder. The 1832 Anatomy Act requisitioned instead the corpses of the poor, transferring the penalty from murder to poverty. The Act contributed to the terrible fear of the Victorian workhouse and influences attitudes to death even today”” (Marshall 23). I would further assert that in the case of America, the penalty went from murder to poverty *and* the color of one’s skin.

If considering it to be “big business”, what happened next in relation to body-snatching was bound to happen sooner or later. The “resurrectionists” turned away from bringing back the dead and looked to murdering the living. The most infamous case of this involved two men by the names of William Burke and William Hare. These men murdered 16 people for a Dr. Robert Knox before they were caught and convicted. Perhaps fittingly, the punishment for Burke was hanging and public dissection. There were others that worked in organized gangs to find and deliver bodies as well. In this regard, the London Borough Gang seems to be the most notorious. This group of men provided bodies for many of the larger anatomy schools, including that of Sir

Astley Cooper, who was known to have no qualm about the moral aspects of human dissection. “Cooper was so dependent on Crouch [leader of the gang] and his cronies that he exerted his influence to keep them out of jail on numerous occasions, and, if a member did run afoul of the law, Cooper paid his family a pension while the breadwinner was serving his term” (Frank 401).

Looking now towards America, the history and progression of this practice of getting bodies for medical use progressed in similar ways, which is horrifying enough, yet there is another aspect of it that must be considered as well; the majority of victims were “the poor, the black, and the marginalized” (Halperin). “Since the deterrence of grave robbing took time and money, those elements of society who were least economically and socially advantaged were the most vulnerable. Enslaved and free African Americans, immigrants, and the poor were frequently the target of grave robbing” (Halperin Intro). The business of acquiring bodies wasn’t an easy job, particularly when people started to catch on to the “sack-em-up” men’s schemes and began to protect the bodies of their dead by keeping vigil and using lead or steel coffins. “Body snatching and purchasing was an opportunistic business. Low risk for the body snatcher or buyer meant obtaining the bodies of persons with few spokespersons to represent them and few rights to protect them” (Blakely and Harrington quoted in Halperin 5). In the American South, before the Civil War, slaves had little control over their fates and even less control over their bodies.

Slave owners ‘donated’ or sold the bodies of deceased slaves to medical schools (Savitt, 1977, 1978). The slave was viewed as property and the owner was at liberty to dispose this property without the consent of the family (Allen, 1971; Savitt, 1978, 1984; Bankole, 1998). Southern slave cadavers were also shipped up north in barrels of whiskey to supply northern medical schools (New York Times,

1878, 1879; Waite, 1945). African Americans played a particularly important role in anatomic education because of their social status as chattel (Whitten, 1977; Boney, 1984). (Halperin 5)

Slaves were easy targets for body-snatchers. In the South, they were not even looked upon as human, merely as workhorses. The atmosphere at the time was one of blatant disregard for the rights and dignity of black people, as highlighted in the following excerpt.

Southern medical schools frequently used slave bodies for anatomic dissection.

An 1831 advertisement in the Charleston Mercury from the South Carolina Medical College touted the benefits of the school...

Some advantages of a peculiar character are connected with this institution, which it may be proper to point out. No place in the United States offers as great opportunities for the acquisition of anatomical knowledge. Subjects being obtained from the coloured population in sufficient numbers for every purpose, and proper dissection carried out without offending any individuals in the community! (Weld quoted in Halperin 3)

The American South is known for two things; agriculture and oppression. These two things seem inextricably linked for the South. The region was and somewhat still is a predominantly agricultural center with staple crops of sugar, rice, tobacco and cotton. This fact has been a defining characteristic of the area since its beginnings. It was the needs of hard labor to work the fields that led to slavery and it was the fight for “planter” rights after the Civil War that furthered the divide between white and black.

Indeed, one of the most salient realities of race relations in antebellum society was the ubiquity of prejudice against black people. During the 1850s an English

traveler observed: 'There seems, in short, to be a fixed notion throughout the whole of the States, whether slave or free, that the colored is by nature a subordinate race...' (Nash 28)

Although that particular passage refers to the antebellum period, it holds true for a much, much longer time. The state of race relations by the time slaves were freed by the Emancipation Proclamation was combustible. It was this atmosphere and attitude that allowed the Ku Klux Klan to eventually take such a strong and pervasive hold over the South. For a time, the Klan was a symbol of the region. "In effect the Klan wrapped itself in the Stars and Bars, recited the racist litanies which had been devised to justify Negro slavery, threatened death to unbelievers, and thereby rendered itself unassailable by orthodox Southerners" (Trelease xii).

The Ku Klux Klan found its beginning as a social organization created by former Confederate soldiers in Pulaski, Tennessee in 1866. "All of the six founders were young Confederate veterans, 'hungering and thirsting' for amusement, as one of them later put it, after the excitements of wartime had given way to the tedium of small-town life" (Trelease 3). They chose the name of their organization for its catchy alliteration and mysterious character. They went on to choose even stranger titles for themselves, such as Imperial Wizard, Grand Cyclops, and Grand Magi, and required absolute secrecy from their membership. The initiation was reminiscent of fraternity hazing and in fact, original members claim the group's purpose was simply entertainment. It was not until about a year later that they acquired the distinctive attributes of vigilantism and terrorism. Tensions from Reconstruction activity and the issue of black suffrage grew to an incendiary level. "It was in these circumstances that the Ku Klux Klan made its transition from a social club to a band of regulators, self-dedicated to the curbing of lawlessness and Unionism, and above all to keeping the Negro in his place" (Trelease 10). The

KKK began to spread throughout the Southern states and so too did its violent and abhorrent tendencies.

Beyond the violence, one of the favorite pastimes of Klan members was to play tricks on black men and women, fostering their own belief in the gullible, superstitious stereotype they saw them as. “It was the supposed terror evoked among the blacks by these tricks which frightened them into good behavior and away from the polls”. (Trelease 57) Although there is evidence that black people did have an established belief in ghosts and superstition, the extent to which they did may have been overly purported by whites and continued as a means to avoid further cruelty by these “tricksters”. “The freedmen unquestionably were terrified by the Klan, but they feared ghosts in white sheets far less than they did the ruthlessness of the mortals they knew to be hiding in sheets while threatening or committing crimes of violence” (Trelease 57). Nonetheless, Klansmen used the power of fear to further their mission of white supremacy.

In line with their original purpose of secrecy, their regalia mainly involved head to toe white robes and conical white headpieces. And although they paraded through towns in the daylight, most of their actions were taken in the cover of night. “Nearly all of the violence was done at night by disguised parties of six to sixty or more men, although the average was probably nearer to a dozen...several stops were made before the night riders called a halt, doffed their uniforms, and returned home” (Trelease 58-59).

Night doctors were never formally acknowledged as a society of men that wreaked havoc on African American communities. They were not truly organized like the KKK and remembered by history. There remain those that believe the night doctors never existed in actuality, that they were merely a ghost story passed down over time.

But night doctors weren't just fictions conjured as scare tactics. Many doctors tested drugs on slaves and operated on them to develop new surgical techniques, often without using anesthesia. Fear of night doctors only increased in the early 1900s, as black people migrated north to Washington, D.C., and Baltimore, and news spread that medical schools there were offering money in exchange for bodies (Skloot 166).

There are numerous accounts of the night doctor included in the black oral tradition. It is to these oral stories that we must look for answers because reading and writing were traditionally and systematically denied to black people in the 19th century.

The following statement concerning night doctors appears in an 1896 issue of the *Journal of American Folklore*:

On dark nights negroes in cities consider it dangerous to walk alone on the streets because the 'night doctor' is abroad. He does not hesitate to choke colored people to death in order to obtain their bodies for dissection. The genesis of this belief from the well-known practice of grave-robbing for medical colleges, several of which are located in Southern cities, is sufficiently evident (Fry 173).

There are accounts of the dress, methods, and motives of the night doctors in black folklore. In many cases, the attire is described similarly to both the robes of the KKK and the lab coats of medical doctors. In her book, *Night Riders*, Gladys-Marie Fry writes, "Often the night-doctor garb was simply a white sheet...Another Black stated that in Virginia whites disguised as night doctors wore white 'hoods with long robes'" (Fry 181). In another instance, "An eyewitness who 'used to see them here in town,' gave the following description: 'Well, most of them used to be dressed in a long white coat like these doctors wear, long like that, straight down

to the ankles” (Fry 188). Eyewitnesses also reported the night doctors wearing surgical face masks, so that only their eyes were visible. “Many informants were of the opinion that body-snatchers especially preyed on helpless people because they offered less resistance to capture. The aged, infirm, drunk, and physically disabled fell in this general category” (Fry 190). Others still, offered that the night doctors wanted those with particular diseases or conditions. There were two methods that were agreed upon that the night doctors used to abduct their victims. “Either a person would be captured while walking alone on the street at night, or he could be lured to a special house and seized there by the waiting doctors” (Fry 192). In regards to the manner in which people were abducted,

Night-doctor victims were frequently rendered unconscious and thus completely helpless in a number of ways:

They used to carry things in their pocket and if they got near to you, see, whatever they would do to you, see, you couldn’t holler or nothing. I imagine it was some kind of morphine or something, you know, they’d carry. And then they’d put this on you, and you couldn’t holler and they would just take you on, see, wherever they chose, see? (Fry 195-196)

Night doctors were such a powerful manipulative tool because of the amount of dread they inspired. Kidnapping and murder alone are frightening, but with the night doctors, people had to fear being dismembered and cut apart, disregarded and disposed of as medical waste. This horror took root in the minds of the black population and grew. “It is a common belief among Blacks that night doctors bled their victims to death, usually by making an incision at the bottom of the foot. The blood so obtained was then believed to have been used by whites in the preparation of various medicines” (Fry 200). To the minds of those that have been historically

categorized as chattel, denied education and advancement, it is not hard to see how this kind of mistreatment would be realistic. It has affected the way in which black people view the medical profession, their acceptance of treatment, and overall health in a negative manner. As evidenced in the book, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, this fear still lingers in African American communities today.

The atmosphere of looking upon African Americans as sub-human chattel and the desire for medical students to have study cadavers cultivated and fostered the stories of the night doctor. The similarities in dress furthered the link between doctors and KKK members. Members of the black community were left fearful and distrustful of both groups. “At least until the 1930s a number of disadvantaged people chose to avoid certain cities altogether, certain parts of cities in the daytime (areas adjacent to hospitals), and many avoided traveling at all at night unless accompanied by small groups. Whether fact or simply fear, the night doctors had certainly captured the imagination of the folk.” (Fry 211)

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