

SNATCHING BODIES

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On the thirteenth page of W. Reece Berryhill's book, *Medical Education in Chapel Hill: The First One Hundred Years*, one finds a particularly telling photograph. Its accompanying caption reads:

"Students working in the second dissecting hall around 1900. Located near the present site of Venable Hall, this building was abandoned after Caldwell Hall was occupied in 1912."¹

Indeed, taken at the turn of the 20th century, this picture shows seven aspiring medical students learning their trade. They are smartly dressed, some wearing aprons and others not. As the caption informs viewers, they are inside a "dissecting hall," a space designated specifically for exploring and understanding human anatomy. The caption ignores the focal point of this photograph, however. Under the gaze of each of the seven living men is one who has long since taken his last breath. With legs bursting into the foreground and threatening to fall off the dissecting table, this figure commands attention from its audience, which sits both within and beyond the photographic frame.

The longitudinal perspective of the cadaver on the dissecting table is rarely seen in photographs taken at this time. More commonly, the dissected body appears horizontally in the photographic frame with students and instructors positioned behind it.² The decision to photograph the cadaver from this angle allows for the observation of revealing details that would have otherwise gone unnoticed. The most important of these is that the body on the dissecting table, that which remains of it, once

¹ W. Reece Berryhill, William B. Blythe, and Isaac H. Manning, *Medical Education at Chapel Hill: The First Hundred Years* (Chapel Hill: UNC Medical Alumni Office, 1979), 13.

² John Harley Warner and James M. Edmonson, *Dissection: Photographs of a Rite of Passage in American Medicine 1880-1930* (New York: Blast Books, 2009), 40-89.

belonged to a living, breathing, black man. Although the photograph is poorly lit and the right leg of the cadaver has been so sufficiently dissected that it makes racial classification difficult, there can be no doubt that the man is of African descent: the paleness of the sole of his left foot contrasts substantially with his dark upper thigh.

How then, did this black man arrive on the table in a dissecting hall of a Southern medical school? It is doubtful that he “donated his body to science,” a modern concept that became popular much later than 1900.³ Furthermore, it is unlikely that his body was obtained legally. In fact, at the time of this photograph, not one law existed in North Carolina that directed medical schools on the acquisition of bodies, black or white, for dissection.⁴ Rather, it was at this time that medical schools in North Carolina, like many others across the American South, relied on more dubious means to supply their students with necessary “clinical material.” On one hand a horrifying desecration of the deceased, on the other a lucrative business practice supplying a scientific necessity, body snatching as a means of supplying cadavers to Southern medical schools was a practice that not only existed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries — it thrived.

Dissection, a Necessary Science

When the medical students in the photograph described made their first incisions into the human subject that lay before them, they were not engaging in a novel or innovative mode of academic exploration. In fact, human dissection has existed since at least the third century B.C. when Greek physicians made “extensive anatomical and physiological discoveries” by way of the ancient surgical knife.⁵ Although dissection was not widely practiced in the first thousand years A.D., its prevalence picked up again in the fifteenth century. During this time, however, dissections were not for medical purposes, but rather for artistic ones. The firsthand study of human anatomy was especially beneficial for artists like Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci, evidenced by their masterful renderings of the human form and its detailed musculature.⁶ Later in the 18th century, the practice of dissection spread from the realm of art back

³ Ann Garment, et al., “Let the Dead Teach the Living: The Rise of Body Bequeathal in Twentieth-Century America,” *Academic Medicine*, 82 (2007): 1002.

⁴ Isaac Manning, “History of the Medical School of the University of North Carolina” (unpublished manuscript, ca. 1940), annotated typescript, 18-19.

⁵ Heinrich von Staden, “The Discovery of the Body: Human Dissection and its Cultural Contexts in Ancient Greece,” *Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine* 65 (1992): 224.

⁶ Suzanne M. Schultz, *Body Snatching: The Robbing of Graves for the Education of Physicians in Early Nineteenth Century America* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1992), 1.

into the medical arena, where it would cement itself as a quintessential teaching tool; in London and elsewhere in Europe, “experience in dissecting was conventional practice” for aspiring physicians and surgeons.⁷ Yet it wasn’t until the nineteenth century that dissection for educational purposes was regularly practiced in the United States. At this time, students including Thomas Eakins, whose later paintings *The Gross Clinic* (1875) and *The Agnew Clinic* (1889) accurately depict contemporary surgeries, began the intense study of human anatomy through dissection in medical schools located in Philadelphia, New York, and Baltimore.⁸ From the first decades of the nineteenth century onward, the practice of dissecting human cadavers became increasingly common as more medical schools were established across the United States.

Human dissection was not always a mechanism for scientific enlightenment, however, and in some cases it was employed in a grisly manner. In sixteenth-century British law, for instance, public dissection was included as a means of punishment that was worse than death.⁹ This penalty was transferred into New York state law following the American Revolution, for in 1792 Albany man Whiting Sweeting was sentenced “to be hanged by the neck until [he was] dead, and [his] body delivered to the surgeon for dissection.”¹⁰ At this same time, the Massachusetts General Court ruled that anyone who died as a result of a duel would be sentenced to post-mortem dissection and dismemberment, a harsh punitive threat.¹¹ Of course, perhaps the most infamous, and chilling, use of dissection for non-medical purposes was the series of murders in the Whitechapel district of London in 1888 at the hands of the unidentified Jack the Ripper. At least three of Jack’s victims were found with their abdominal organs carefully removed.¹² Such gruesome applications led some to believe that dissection was a “desecration of the corpse” that “represented a gross

⁷ Helen MacDonald, *Human Remains: Dissection and its Histories* (London: Yale University Press, 2006), 12.

⁸ Michael Sappol, *A Traffic of Dead Bodies: Anatomy and Embodied Social Identity in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 49; Shultz, *Body Snatching*, 6.

⁹ Ruth Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 32.

¹⁰ “The Narrative of Whiting Sweeting, Who was Executed at Albany, the 26th of August, 1792,” in Sappol, *Traffic of Dead Bodies*, 103.

¹¹ John B. Blake, “The Development of American Anatomy Acts,” *Journal of Medical Education* 30 (1955): 433.

¹² Detailed accounts of the Ripper’s mutilated victims can be found in tens if not hundreds of works. Here I will cite Peter Ackroyd, introduction to *Jack the Ripper and The East End*, ed. by Alex Werner (London: Chatto & Windus, 2008), 8.

assault upon the integrity and identity of the body.”¹³ Nevertheless, for the past three centuries, dissection has remained an important avenue for the mastery of human anatomy. Its continued practice today suggests that any moral shortcomings have been sufficiently outweighed by its educational value. This value is nowhere more apparent than within the confines of the formal medical school.

The Medical School

The first medical school in British America was established in Philadelphia in 1765. In the decades that followed, additional schools were founded in New York City and Cambridge, Massachusetts.¹⁴ While the study of anatomy was indeed emphasized, the lack of cadavers available for dissection limited instructional experiences. At the Harvard Medical School in Cambridge, “a single body was made to do duty for a whole course of lectures.”¹⁵ The shortage of clinical material in medical schools restricted class sizes and reduced students’ opportunities for a hands-on experience. As a result, fewer physicians than society required graduated from medical schools in the United States’ earliest years. Historians Robert L. Blakely and Judith M. Harrington explain the dire consequence: “the dearth of anatomical training was evident in the poor treatment given to patients by physicians...if [medical students] were to become more than haphazard and butchers, they needed the intimate knowledge of the human anatomy provided by direct dissection.”¹⁶ Under pressure from the public, the medical school curriculum evolved. The result was a shift to the “Paris method” in which students were permitted to dissect cadavers first-hand, no longer resigned to the role of audience member in an impersonal lecture

¹³ Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*, in Edward C. Halperin, “The Poor, the Black, and the Marginalized as the Source of Cadavers in United States Anatomical Education,” *Clinical Anatomy* 20 (2007): 489.

¹⁴ Blake, “American Anatomy Acts,” 432.

¹⁵ Founded in 1782, the original Harvard Medical School was located in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The school was moved to Boston, where it is currently located, in 1810. Quote from *Boston Gazette*, May 5, 1788, in Jules Calvin Ladenheim, “‘The Doctors’ Mob’ of 1788,” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* Winter (1950): 25

¹⁶ Robert L. Blakely and Judith M. Harrington, “Grave Consequences: The Opportunistic Procurement of Cadavers at the Medical College of Georgia” in *Bones in the Basement: Postmortem Racism in Nineteenth-Century Medical Training*, ed. Robert L. Blakely and Judith M. Harrington (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), 165.

hall.¹⁷ Eventually, courses in anatomy styled in this fashion were not only preferred by medical students, they were required for their graduation.¹⁸

Of course, an increased emphasis on individual, “hands-on” dissection required a greater supply of cadavers. Yet in Massachusetts, where state law included dissection after death as a possible punishment, the number of executed criminals was scarce -- only forty between 1789 and 1830.¹⁹ A similar dilemma existed elsewhere. As medical schools in the United States multiplied with rapidity in the 19th century, increasing in number from five in 1810 to sixty-five in 1860 -- mirroring the rapid growth of the nation’s population -- the number of cadavers obtained through legal means could not keep pace with the demand.²⁰ For many schools, this created a critical problem. One university president warned that “without dissecting material, it will be necessary to close the [medical] school.”²¹ In an effort to avoid this outcome, snatching cadavers for dissection became a widespread occurrence. In Vermont alone, it is estimated that around 360 bodies were snatched between 1820 and 1840.²² By far the most effective method for procuring bodies, body snatching provided a means to an end and kept medical schools in operation.

Body Snatching: the History and the Act

Evidence of body snatching,²³ defined in this essay as the physical removal of bodies from their graves for the purpose of medical dissection, was recorded as early as 1763 in British America. It was in this year, according to the November 28 issue of the *New York Gazette*, that a “body has since been taken up, and likely to become a Raw Head and Bloody Bones, by our Tribe of Dissectors, for the better instruction of our young

¹⁷ Ibid., 166.

¹⁸ Meghan J. Highet, “Body Snatching & Grave Robbing: Bodies for Science,” *History and Anthropology* 16 (2005): 419.

¹⁹ Blake, “American Anatomy Acts,” 433.

²⁰ Linden F. Edwards, “Resurrection Riots During the Heroic Age of Anatomy in America,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 25 (1951): 178; Sappol, *Traffic of Dead Bodies*, 48.

²¹ Edwin Anderson Alderman’s Report at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, February 1899, in Manning, “History of UNC Medical School,” 16.

²² Shultz, *Body Snatching*, 15.

²³ This essay will use the term “body snatching,” rather than “grave robbing,” to indicate the removal of bodies from their graves. The decision is in accordance with historian Suzanne Shultz’s assertion that “would-be thieves took only bodies for their purposes, leaving behind all of the personal effects that were buried with the deceased” (Schultz, *Body Snatching*, ix). Grave robbing, as opposed to body snatching, is commonly associated with the stealing of material items within the grave, like clothes or jewelry, and was not usually practiced by body snatchers.

Practitioners.”²⁴ Body snatching in the Northeast United States continued throughout the end of the eighteenth century, evidenced by numerous newspaper accounts detailing public opposition to the practice. In 1788 alone, riots broke out against anatomy students and their professors in Philadelphia, Baltimore, and New York City due to body snatching activity.²⁵ Furthermore, one student at Harvard Medical School wrote that it was in 1796 when he “began the business of getting subjects.”²⁶

As the number of medical schools expanded in the first decades of the nineteenth century, so did the act of stealing corpses. Vast regional networks connecting body snatchers and medical schools developed in the Northeast and Midwest United States as well as the South and numerous newspaper reports from across the country detailed instances of body snatching in local communities.²⁷ In some regions, the body snatching business boomed. In a letter to a colleague in 1858, University of Virginia Medical School professor John Staige Davis wrote of the “extreme inconvenience” the abundant supply of cadavers was causing him; his dissecting room had become overcrowded with subjects.²⁸ In 1854, body snatchers were “emptying at least six hundred or seven hundred graves annually in and about New York City.”²⁹ At the dawn of the Civil War, however, body snatching came to a halt. There was no need to steal bodies from graves -- over half a million corpses were available if students had the time to dissect them. More commonly, however, students and physicians were kept busy tending to the masses of the wounded.³⁰ In the years following the war, body snatching resumed. In 1879, the author of a contemporary periodical suggested that “at least a majority” of the five thousand cadavers dissected each year in the United States were acquired

²⁴ Claude Heaton, “Body Snatching in New York City,” *New York State Journal of Medicine* 43 (1943): 1861-1865 in Sappol, “Traffic of Dead Bodies,” 104.

²⁵ Sappol, “Traffic of Dead Bodies,” 45 and Ladenheim, “Doctors’ Riot,” 23-43

²⁶ Edward Warren, *The Life of John Collins Warren, MD. compiled chiefly from his Autobiography and Journal* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1860), 409.

²⁷ James O. Breeden, “Body Snatchers and Anatomy Professors: Medical Education in Nineteenth-Century Virginia,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 83 (1975): 329; Martin Kaufman and Leslie L. Hanawalt, “Body snatching in the Midwest,” *Michigan History* 55 (1970): 31; Frederick C. Waite, “Grave Robbing in New England,” *Bulletin of the Medical Library Association* 33 (1945): 283.

²⁸ Breeden, “Body Snatchers in Virginia,” 342.

²⁹ David C. Humphrey, “Dissection and Discrimination: The Social Origins of Cadavers in America, 1760-1915,” *Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine* 49 (1973): 821.

³⁰ Sappol, *Traffic of Dead Bodies*, 238.

illegally, most likely through body snatching.³¹ For those schools engaged in the ghastly deed, long gone were the days of cadaver scarcity. In the nineteenth century, the decade of the Civil War notwithstanding, body snatching was having its heyday.

While the act of body snatching varied slightly in each instance it was practiced, the overall structure of the process remained fairly constant. In most cases, body snatching consisted of three distinct steps, the first of which was learning of an upcoming burial. This was often achieved by communication with informants in a local community. In 1820, a New York man described a conversation he had with a body snatcher passing through town who “inquired...about the sick, wanted to know their size, proportions, &c.”³² After acquiring all of the necessary information, the second step for snatching was locating the grave site. This was done in daylight, often times under the guise of hunters in search of small game or family members going to pay their respects to a deceased relative. Hours later, under the cover of night, the last step of disinterment commenced.

The actual snatching of a body required at least three men, two to exhume the corpse and one to hide and then return in a getaway vehicle. Before anyone broke ground, the grave site was carefully surveyed by shaded lantern light for any sticks, rocks, or flowers that if displaced, might suggest a disturbance. A large tarpaulin or cloth was then set adjacent to the grave to catch any dirt removed in the disinterment. To maximize efficiency, the entire coffin was not removed. Historian Suzanne M. Schultz writes that “no self-respecting [body snatcher] would have loitered in a cemetery for the length of time it would have taken to accomplish this task.”³³ Instead, an approximately three-foot-square hole was made at the head of the grave, determined by the position of the surrounding grave stones. Loose dirt as a result of the recent burial made digging easy. Once the coffin was exposed, an auger was used to bore holes into the lid, a much quieter alternative to a saw or an ax. After removing the lid, the corpse was strapped into a unique apparatus that involved a harness with a ring attachment. A rope was fastened to the ring and the body was slowly removed. Any clothes or jewelry found on the body was thrown back into the grave; the snatchers wanted to avoid any chance that their subject would be later identified. After restoring the site to its original condition, the party of men, now one more in number,

³¹ T.S. Sozinsky, “Grave-robbing and Dissection,” *Penn Monthly* 10 (1879): 216-217 in Humphrey, “Dissection and Discrimination,” 822.

³² N. P. Wiley to I.B. Van Schaik, New York, January 14, 1820? in Sappol, *Traffic of Dead Bodies*, 113.

³³ Schultz, *Body Snatching*, 32.

hurried away to the escape vehicle. The most experienced of body snatchers could exhume a body in under an hour.³⁴

Initially, bodies were delivered directly to medical schools following disinterment, usually by wagon. As body snatching operations expanded, however, bodies were stuffed into large barrels, whiskey casks, or boxes, packed in bran, and shipped long distances via railroad.³⁵ An excerpt from the 1879 *Galveston Daily News* details the arrest of a body snatcher who shipped bodies in boxes from Chattanooga all the way to Cincinnati and Atlanta under the impression that such boxes contained fish or fur.³⁶ To avoid similar detection, body snatchers in Virginia cut a deal with the Virginia Central Railroad, which “received increased freight rates” as payment for the transport of corpses.³⁷ Even with this additional cost, many body snatchers made a handsome profit. Adult corpses in Virginia could be procured for \$12 per body, excluding shipping rates. In New York, this price could be as much as \$30 per body. A pricing list from 1850 shows that body snatchers were not above stealing the youngest of corpses: “infants from birth to 8 years” were \$4 each.

Body snatching was a seasonal practice that only occurred when medical schools were in session, usually between November and February. Of course, this was the optimal period for snatching anyway, as cold weather delayed the body’s natural decomposition and therefore preserved corpses for dissection. Anything other than this natural refrigeration could wreak havoc on the body snatching trade. In November of 1849 in Virginia, for instance, uncharacteristically warm weather led to an “unavoidable” delay in the acquisition of cadavers. It had been so warm, stated one body snatcher, that, “the subjects are all in incipient putrefaction when buried.” Two attempts at exhumation were all for naught, the bodies were “too far gone.”³⁸

Since its inception in the eighteenth century, body snatching in the United States has served the vital purpose of supplying cadavers to medical schools for anatomical education. In the 19th century, the exhumation of corpses became systematic and as a result, snatchers located and unearthed bodies with swiftness and ease. Keeping well aware of unexpected weather and its potentially disastrous effects, some snatchers made respectable profits, transporting bodies to medical schools both

³⁴ The entire process of body snatching is paraphrased from Waite, “Grave Robbing in New England,” 279-281.

³⁵ Breeden, “Body Snatchers in Virginia,” 334.

³⁶ “Wholesale Body Snatching,” *Galveston Daily News*, November 30, 1879, col. D.

³⁷ Breeden, “Body Snatchers in Virginia,” 328.

³⁸ H.L. Thomas to John S. Davis, Charlottesville, September 25, 1849, in Breeden, “Body Snatchers in Virginia”, 331.

locally and across great distances. But just who were these people that busied themselves with the traffic of the dead?

The Snatchers

On December 6, 1875, the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* printed an editorial that described body snatchers as “unprofessional bunglers” who partake in “nefarious work.” Careful not to let the snatchers’ employers off the hook, the author added that “the respectable professors who hire such miserable starvelings...to get corpses for them are even more guilty than their wretched tools.”³⁹ The editorial sheds light on a critical aspect of body snatching in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the act of snatching was almost always instigated by medical schools, even when middlemen executed the disinterment. This fact is underscored in a brief report from an 1879 issue of the *Louisville Courier Journal* in which two men were arrested in Nashville for “attempting to unearth a corpse” at a local cemetery. Upon conviction, one of the men revealed that “he was employed by the medical department of the University of Tennessee to which place, if they had been successful, the body would have been taken.”⁴⁰ Indeed, many medical school administrators and instructors, including the aforementioned Davis in Virginia, dealt either directly or indirectly with professional body snatchers to secure their supply of cadavers.⁴¹ It is therefore important not to underestimate the role of the medical school establishment as the primary driving force for body snatching at this time. It was at the request of the schools and the promise of their patronage that professional body snatchers removed corpses from their graves.

These professional body snatchers, also labeled at the time as “resurrectionists,” “sack-um-up men,” and “night doctors,” are often portrayed by historians as shady, unreliable figures who were mostly “free-lancing rustics.”⁴² However, they were also enterprising opportunists, capitalizing on the spike in demand for cadavers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. What is more, they were often quite clever. One man who personified this ingenuity was William Cunningham, known as “Old Cunny” to his peers, who worked in the 1860s as a wagon driver by day and a body snatcher by night in Cincinnati, Ohio. On a typical evening, “Old Cunny” would remove a body from the grave, dress it in old clothes, and position it in his wagon beside him. If anyone came too close,

³⁹ “Body-Snatching,” *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, December 6, 1875.

⁴⁰ “Body Snatching: Jordan, the Nashville Grave Robber, Fined \$25 – The Sexton Implicated,” *Louisville Courier Journal*, November 25, 1879.

⁴¹ Breeden, “Body Snatchers in Virginia,” 328.

⁴² Halperin, “The Poor, the Black,” 490; Breeden, “Body Snatchers in Virginia,” 322.

Cunningham would reprimand his dead companion by shouting, “Sit up! This is the last time I am going to take you home when you get drunk,” and then, perhaps ironically, as “Old Cunny” was a heavy drinker himself, adding “The idea of a man with a family disgracing himself in this way!”⁴³ Around the same time in Washington D.C., another cunning body snatcher practiced her craft. Maude Pratt frequently attended funerals of the recently diseased where she acted genuinely distressed, accompanying the coffin all the way to the cemetery. Once the ceremony concluded, she would drop flowers at the site of the new grave, marking it for later resurrection.⁴⁴ Stories like these suggest that body snatchers were not all the “unprofessional bunglers” described above. Some resurrectionists were masterful at their jobs and, willing to risk arrest and public condemnation, could profit handsomely from their “nefarious work.”

While employing professional resurrectionists as middlemen distanced medical schools from body snatching, it was often easier, and less expensive, for professors and students to exhume bodies themselves. In 1818, Dr. Thomas Sewall, who would later go on to establish the George Washington University School of Medicine in Washington, D.C., was suspected of removing bodies from eight different graves. The bodies were eventually found in Sewall’s possession -- he was using them to teach surgery to a group of medical students.⁴⁵ In another instance, Dr. Valentine Mott, a surgical teacher and president of the New York Academy of Medicine in 1850, assisted in unearthing and transporting eleven corpses for dissection, all in one night. Mott was not the only president of the Academy to participate in body snatching; each of the first six men to hold the title were involved in body snatching at some point during their careers.⁴⁶

Students played an integral role in snatching bodies as well. Edward Dixon, a medical student at Rutgers in the early 1830s, remembered his educational experience years later as one characterized by “diligent use of the shovel and the scalpel.”⁴⁷ Students at the Columbus Medical College in Ohio could echo this sentiment forty years later. It was they, and not their professors, who were responsible for stealing bodies from the cemetery at the Columbus State Hospital.⁴⁸ Some students benefitted financially from body snatching. One 1872 Detroit Medical

⁴³ Schultz, *Body Snatching*, 59.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 51, 52.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁴⁷ Edward H. Dixon, “Scenes in a Medical Student’s Life – Resurrectionizing,” *The Scalpel* 7 (1855): 93-100, in Sappol, *Traffic of Dead Bodies*, 116.

⁴⁸ Shultz, *Body Snatching*, 54.

College graduate paid for his medical studies by moonlighting as a body snatcher, stealing corpses from a Canadian cemetery and selling them to the University of Michigan.⁴⁹ In other places, body snatching helped offset the cost of procuring a body for dissection. This was as much as five dollars at one medical school, a steep price in the early 19th century.⁵⁰

Although body snatching was very much an illegal enterprise, it was deemed absolutely necessary by medical schools across the United States. Many schools relied on professional body snatchers who eagerly participated in the “traffic of dead bodies”⁵¹ for personal income. While the employment of middlemen (and, like the case of Maude Pratt, middlewomen) distanced respectable professors and their students from criminality, it was often simpler and more economical to do the snatching themselves. A rich history exists of professors and students who braved both the law and personal trepidations to procure bodies for dissection. There is no doubt that these corpses, utilized as educational tools, became a vital aspect of medical learning. Equally important, however, were the living people to whom those bodies once belonged.

The Snatched

“There was a hierarchy for the 18th-century dead as surely there was one for the living,” historian Steven Wilf once observed.⁵² In the 19th century and at the turn of the 20th, this assertion continued to ring true. Usually, the wealthiest of the deceased were buried under a church floor or close enough to its walls to be guarded by a warden or a hired watchman.⁵³ Those families that could afford to protect their buried relatives with a host of mechanisms, including iron cages called “mortsafes.”⁵⁴ Also useful in fending off body snatchers was the invention of the iron coffin; an advertisement from 1894 claims that it is “burglar proof” and “cannot be penetrated by chisel or drill.”⁵⁵ More natural deterrents to potential resurrectionists also existed. One African-American newspaper from 1827

⁴⁹ Kaufman and Hanawalt, “Body Snatching in the Midwest,” 31-32.

⁵⁰ *Report of a Committee of the Regents of the University Appointed to Visit the College of Physicians and Surgeons in the City of New-York, Made to the Regents, January 12, 1826* (Albany, NY, 1826), 18-20, in Sappol, *Traffic of Dead Bodies*, 112.

⁵¹ This rather macabre phrase is borrowed from the title of Michael Sappol’s book on the subject of body snatching.

⁵² Steven Robert Wilf, “Anatomy and Punishment in Late Eighteenth-Century New York,” *Journal of Social History* 22 (1989): 511, in Sappol, *Traffic of Dead Bodies*, 106-107.

⁵³ Sappol, *Traffic of Dead Bodies*, 107.

⁵⁴ Halperin, “The Poor, the Black,” 491.

⁵⁵ “Coffins That Can Be Relied On: They Are Made Burglar and Fire Proof and Will Give Satisfaction,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 23, 1894.

suggests layering wheaten straw between a coffin and the surface of the ground, assuring that “the longest night will not afford time sufficient to empty the grave.”⁵⁶ Of course, the simplest and least expensive method to inhibit body snatching was to have family members stand guard at the grave site for several days until the body decomposed, thereby becoming unfit for dissection.⁵⁷ Unfortunately, the safeguarding options listed above required considerable amounts of money, a willing family, or both, things the impoverished and lonely lived without. Consequently, body snatchers concentrated their efforts on the cemeteries that held the bodies of this destitute demographic, those buried in potter’s fields. It was here that medical historian Frederick C. Waite observed, a body “did not remain long in the grave.”⁵⁸

In some cases, the bodies of those snatched did not even make it into the grave. In 1879, one doctor claimed that bodies frequently disappeared from morgues and the “dead rooms of hospitals.”⁵⁹ Those bodies that were interred in potter’s fields and cemeteries for the impoverished were often poorly guarded, if at all. Guards could be bribed by money and whiskey, and some were regular accomplices in the act of snatching.⁶⁰ In one instance in Nashville in 1879, a body snatcher “proved conclusively that he had been in the habit of purchasing stiffs [(bodies)] from the sexton of the cemetery at \$3 apiece.”⁶¹ Other sources of bodies were prisons, train stations, docks, asylum burial grounds, and almshouses.⁶² The number of bodies acquired from one almshouse in Philadelphia was so high that its guardians came to be known as the “Board of Buzzards.”⁶³

Indeed, some bodies of those at the higher echelons of society made their way onto the dissecting table. The most famous example occurred in 1879 when the body of United States congressman John Scott Harrison, son of President William Henry Harrison was found at the Ohio Medical College.⁶⁴ Reports of such instances of body snatching that involved the well-to-do members of society often made the newspapers, but these were few and far between. The great majority of bodies snatched

⁵⁶ “Varieties: An easy Way to Secure Dead Bodies in their Graves,” *Freedom’s Journal*, New York, NY, March 30, 1827, 4.

⁵⁷ Halperin, “The Poor, the Black,” 491.

⁵⁸ Waite, “Grave Robbing in New England,” 279.

⁵⁹ Sozinsky, “Grave-robbing and Dissection,” 216-217 in Humphrey, “Dissection and Discrimination,” 821.

⁶⁰ Halperin, “The Poor, the Black,” 491.

⁶¹ “Body Snatching,” *Louisville Courier Journal*, 1.

⁶² Hight, “Body Snatching & Grave Robbing,” 421.

⁶³ Humphrey, “Dissection and Discrimination,” 823.

⁶⁴ Halperin, “The Poor, the Black,” 491.

in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries belonged to the impoverished and disenfranchised and often went unnoticed. While “white paupers crowded the country’s almshouses,” another group, the black community, was far more vulnerable to body snatching, particularly in the South. It is here where this essay turns to focus on this group and their vital role in shaping American medical education.

Black Bodies: the Vulnerable

“In Baltimore the bodies of coloured people exclusively are taken for dissection,” commented English sociologist Harriet Martineau during her visit to Maryland in 1835, “because the whites do not like it, and the coloured people cannot resist.”⁶⁵ Indeed, voiceless and marginalized in society, the American black community was afforded little protection for their dead in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As a result, blacks fell victim to body snatching and, as easy targets, were often the preferred source of anatomical material for medical schools. As historian D.C. Humphrey put it, “Dissecting a white was risky business. Dissecting a black was largely a matter of finding a body.”⁶⁶

As early as the eighteenth century, black bodies were singled out for snatching in the United States. In 1788, free and enslaved blacks petitioned the New York City Common Council to put an end to body snatching in black cemeteries by white medical students. The appeal was ignored.⁶⁷ As one New Yorker wrote, “the only subjects procured for dissection are the productions of Africa...and if those characters are the only subjects of dissection, surely no person can object.”⁶⁸ Almost a century later, black bodies remained a vulnerable target. In one black cemetery in Philadelphia in 1883, melting snow revealed a number of empty graves, as if the ground “had been subjected to an aerial bombardment.”⁶⁹ It is important to note here that the medical school establishment at this time was one that was dominated by whites; black students were simply not admitted to medical schools. This trend would continue throughout most of the nineteenth century -- it was not until 1868 that the first medical school for African Americans was established in the United States and even then black doctors worked in a “Negro medical

⁶⁵ Harriet Martineau, *Retrospect of Western Travel* (London: Saunders & Otley, 1838) vol. 1, 140; Humphrey, “Dissection and Discrimination,” 819.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 820.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 820.

⁶⁸ T. M. Gallagher, *The Doctors’ Story* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World: 1967), 48-49, 53 in Humphrey, “Dissection and Discrimination,” 820.

⁶⁹ Halperin, “The Poor, the Black,” 490.

ghetto.”⁷⁰ Therefore, as long as body snatching existed, it was the corpses of the poor and marginalized that served as favored specimens for dissection. In an era characterized by racial discrimination, the black community was virtually defenseless against wily resurrectionists.

Snatching in the South

In the American South, the dilemma facing black communities was even more acute. For it was here that the concentration of blacks was the greatest and where, as historian Todd L. Savitt noted, “they were rendered physically visible by their skin color but were legally invisible because of their slave status.”⁷¹ The discrimination did not cease following Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. Instead, throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, blacks remained the primary subjects for dissection in southern medical schools.

A fascinating discovery in 1989 gives credence to this point. It was during this year at the Medical College of Georgia that construction workers stumbled across bones and other remains buried in the basement of the medical college’s dissecting hall. Archaeologists were called to the scene and by way of forensic technology, were able to classify by race those bones which are believed to have belonged to dissected bodies. In an examination of twenty four buried tibiae, it was determined that 79 percent belonged to African Americans, the other 21 percent to Euro-Americans. The result is particularly telling, as census counts during the period of dissection suggest that only 42 percent of the college’s surrounding population was African-American.⁷² Although a minority in the general population, black bodies were frequently employed as instruments for anatomical education.

There is no doubt that medical schools in the South were well aware of their geographic proximity to black communities and in turn, the access they had to their graves. Some schools openly advertised the fact. In

⁷⁰ The medical school designated specifically for black students was the School of Medicine at Howard University in Washington, D.C., founded in 1868. However, it is worth noting that Howard’s first graduating classes included a “large percentage” of white students. Other black medical schools established later, like Meharry Medical College in Nashville, TN, founded in 1876, had a significantly larger proportion of black students. See W. Montague Cobb, “Surgery and the Negro Physician: Some Parallels in Background,” *Journal of the National Medical Association* 43 (1951): 151.

⁷¹ Todd L. Savitt, “The Use of Blacks for Medical Experimentation and Demonstration in the Old South,” *The Journal of Southern History* 48 (1982): 332.

⁷² Robert L. Blakely, “A Clandestine Past: Discovery at the Medical College of Georgia and Theoretical Foundations” in Blakely and Harrington, *Bones in the Basement*, 3; Blakely and Harrington, “Grave Consequences,” 174.

an 1831 issue of the *Charleston Mercury*, the Medical College of South Carolina was described as follows: “No place in the United States offers as great opportunities for the acquisition of anatomical knowledge. Subjects being obtained for the coloured population in sufficient numbers for every purpose and proper dissection carried out without offending any individuals in the community!”⁷³ Similarly, the Louisiana Medical College in New Orleans advertised that among its “admirable advantages for instruction of medical students – particularly those destined for southern practice,” was “the great facility of obtaining subjects for dissection” from the nearby New Orleans Charity Hospital, one that admitted black patients.⁷⁴ Other schools, while avoiding the specific mention of dissection, did exalt the usefulness of black bodies for the advancement of medical knowledge. In 1853 the Hampden-Sydney College Medical Department (named the Medical College of Virginia after 1854) proclaimed that “The number of negroes employed in our factories will furnish materials for the support of an extensive hospital, and afford to the student that great desideratum – clinical instruction.”⁷⁵

Not all clinical material for dissection was supplied from local sources, however. In some cases, black bodies were disinterred in the North and shipped to the South. In the 1830s, one New York newspaper published an article under the headline, “More Pork for the South.” The text below described the intended transport of “two dead negroes” from New York City to Charleston, South Carolina.⁷⁶ Likewise, body snatchers in the South routinely shipped black bodies to medical schools in the North. During the 1880s and 1890s, an anatomy professor at one New England medical college received “twelve bodies of southern Negroes,” twice each academic session.⁷⁷ Such transport between the North and South underscores the importance of the black body for dissection purposes. Once snatched, black bodies became commodities in high demand that could be shipped hundreds of miles before they were laid on the hard surface of a dissecting table.

⁷³ “Prospectus of the South Carolina Medical College” in Theodore Dwight Weld, *American Slavery as it is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (American Anti-Slavery Society: 1839), 169.

⁷⁴ *New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal* (1833): 643-647, in Walter Fisher, “Physicians and Slavery in the Antebellum Southern Medical Journal,” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 23 (1968): 46.

⁷⁵ Savitt, “The Use of Blacks,” 335.

⁷⁶ J.S. Buckingham, *America, historical, statistic, and descriptive* (London: Fisher, Son & Co., 1841) 159.

⁷⁷ Humphrey, “Dissection and Discrimination,” 823-824.

In lieu of body snatching, professors and students at some medical schools in the South attempted to lure living black bodies into their examination rooms. Of course, blacks would never enter such places at their own will. Savitt writes that even “illiterate slaves did not have to read [the advertisements] to learn about medical-school hospitals; their reputations preceded them.”⁷⁸ Instead, advertisements for anatomical material were directed towards slaveholders. One rather frank example comes from a certain Dr. T. Stillman, affiliated with the Medical College of South Carolina:

“To planters and others – wanted 50 Negroes. Any person having sick Negroes, considered incurable by their respective physicians, and wishing to depose of them, Dr. S. will pay cash for Negroes affected with scrofula, or king’s evil, confirmed hypocondriasm, apoplexy, diseases of the liver, kidneys, spleen, stomach and intestines, bladder and its appendages, diarrhea, dysentery, &c. The highest cash price will be paid on application as above.”⁷⁹

Although there is no evidence to suggest Dr. Stillman’s advertisement found willing slave contributors, support for the vital role of the black slave in the advancement of medical knowledge can be found elsewhere. For instance, four of the eight articles in an 1836 issue of the *Southern Medical and Surgical Journal* mentioned the treatment of slaves.⁸⁰ In an 1838 issue of the same journal, a professor from Georgia reported that slaves served as the subjects of 80 percent of the eye operations he conducted. Also of note was the performance of six surgeries in the presence of students in the Medical College of Georgia’s anatomical theater in 1838, three of which involved slaves.⁸¹ A particularly vulnerable subgroup of the American black population, slaves could be forced to participate in medical procedures against their will, much to the benefit of medical students practicing their craft. Moreover, accepting slaves whose afflictions were “considered incurable,” allowed for the possibility of medical enlightenment before and after the subject’s inevitable death. While body snatching was often a criminal and burdensome task,

⁷⁸ Savitt, “Physicians and Slavery,” 336.

⁷⁹ *Charleston Mercury*, October 12, 1838, in Weld, *American Slavery as it is*, 171.

⁸⁰ *Southern Journal of Medicine and Surgery* 2 (1836): 335 in Fisher, “Physicians and Slavery,” 46.

⁸¹ *Southern Journal of Medicine and Surgery* 2 (1838): 643-647 in Fisher, “Physicians and Slavery,” 46.

admitting infirmed slaves and dissecting their corpses post-mortem was a much simpler yet less common alternative to body snatching.

A Range of Reaction

Public reaction towards body snatching during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries varied widely. Some raged against medical schools when they caught word of the removal of corpses for scientific purposes. Following the disinterment of bodies from a grave in Painesville, Ohio in 1845, a group of citizens adopted a series of resolutions, one of which proclaims:

Resolved, that we most solemnly believe that those who have no regard for the dead, can have but little respect for the living, and those who respect neither dead or living, should never receive the confidence of the public.⁸²

Other responses were far more violent. Following the precedent set by the “Doctor’s Mob Riot” of 1788, in which a mob of New York City citizens hunted down the anatomy professors of the city’s medical college for secretly unearthing bodies from a local cemetery for dissection, numerous rowdy protests broke out in the 19th century in states including Maryland, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Vermont, Illinois, and Missouri.⁸³ In Baltimore, following an 1807 riot that demolished the dissecting hall, architects designed a new medical building that still stands today, complete with “maze-like corridors to thwart potential mobs trying to break into the anatomy laboratory.”⁸⁴ Even after building this safeguard, the threat of continued riots prevented dissection at the medical department of the University of Maryland until 1832.⁸⁵

Following the Civil War, it was widely regarded that the nation was lacking in medical expertise. Historian Michael Sappol writes that “many diplomaed practitioners were exposed as incompetent, unable to perform amputations, set fractures, remove bullets, or do other basic surgeries.”⁸⁶ As such, there was a push to revamp medical education across the newly united country with an increased emphasis on first-hand dissection to develop critical skills. In turn, some members of the public adopted more moderate opinions of body snatching. These views were generally characterized by a criticism of the means but an appreciation for

⁸² *The Ashtabula Sentinel*, November 4, 1845 in Edwards, “Resurrection Riots,” 178.

⁸³ Edwards, “Resurrection Riots,” 180-184.

⁸⁴ Halperin, “The Poor, the Black,” 491.

⁸⁵ Edwards, “Resurrection Riots,” 180.

⁸⁶ Sappol, *Traffic of Dead Bodies*, 238.

its ends. That is, while many people abhorred the idea of ripping corpses from their coffins, they understood the importance of dissection for the education of future physicians. This point is illustrated in an 1875 article titled “Body-Snatching” which includes both assertions that “dissections of the human body are absolutely necessary for a medical course” and that “the crime of body snatching is one that should be punished with hard labor in the Penitentiary for life.”⁸⁷

Public opinion was also shaped by popular literature. When the American version of Charles Dickens’ *Tale of Two Cities* was published in *Harper’s Weekly* in 1859, readers were introduced to the character of Jerry Cruncher, who, like many actual body snatchers, had an ordinary job by day and resurrected corpses by night.⁸⁸ Body snatching also made its way into Mark Twain’s literary classic, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. When Tom and Huck Finn snuck off to a cemetery at midnight to cure a wart, they witnessed the snatching of “old Hoss Williams” by the hands of Injun Joe and Muff Potter on behalf of “Sawbones,” the “young Dr. Robinson.”⁸⁹ Such fictional accounts of body snatching, laid out clearly for public consumption, suggest that the subject was far from taboo. Rather, body snatching was a significant reality in American society and affected more than medical students and their procured specimens.

In some instances, the public called directly on the government to intervene so that cadavers for dissection could be obtained legally. In an 1881 letter to the editor, one Tennessee citizen suggests “allowing [medical] colleges to have the bodies of criminals and unclaimed paupers” for dissection.⁹⁰ Indeed, since 1831, legislative measures known as Anatomy Acts existed in the United States, authorizing local officials to deliver the bodies of those who would otherwise be buried at the public’s expense (those who died in state hospitals, prisons, almshouses, or other state facilities). In turn, body snatching was made illegal and could be punished by heavy fines. States in both the North and the South established their own Anatomy Acts throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁹¹ Not all acts were the same, however. Those written in the South commonly sought to assuage the fears of the white community and ensure that only blacks would be handed over to dissectors. One bill proposed in the Kentucky House of Representatives in 1833 called on the courts of the state to “adjudge and award [only] the corpses of negroes

⁸⁷ “Body Snatching,” *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*.

⁸⁸ Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1859), 183-187.

⁸⁹ Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (Hartford: American Publishing Co., 1876), 63-68.

⁹⁰ “Body-snatching Again,” *Daily American*, February 4, 1881.

⁹¹ Blake, “American Anatomy Acts,” 436.

executed by sentences” to medical schools “for dissection and experiment.”⁹² Years later in 1903, an Anatomy Act in North Carolina was amended to include that no white cadaver would ever be delivered to a black medical college for dissection.⁹³ Whatever their content, the Anatomy Acts were often weakly enforced and did not deter body snatchers. No clearer is this disregard for the law than in a report that stemmed from the arrest of a certain body snatcher named Richard Jordan. The report concludes with a line stating that, “Jordan, after securing the [punitive] fine, stated publicly that he would resume operations again as soon as the excitement blew over.”⁹⁴

Racialized Responses

Owing to the aforementioned preference resurrectionists had for black bodies, it is understandable that blacks and whites harbored different fears in regards to body snatching and dissection. Most members of the white population were concerned only about the deceased who shared their rung on the social ladder. This was evident in New York in 1788 when the exhumation of numerous bodies from a black cemetery went ignored while the snatching of a single white female led to rioting.⁹⁵ Exemplary of the racialized rhetoric of the time, some believed that body snatching allowed for blacks and other disadvantaged populations to “repay their debt to society.”⁹⁶ As long as it did not involve them or those they knew, many members of the white population were not overly concerned with body snatching. In the words of an anatomy professor at the University of Michigan, “the ‘better people’ could rest easy.”⁹⁷

Members of the black population, particularly in the South, were not afforded this luxury. Savitt wrote that “blacks usually knew full well how the bodies of their friends and relatives were being used, and they were both offended and frightened.”⁹⁸ For instance, in 1856, an elderly black woman exclaimed to her friend as they passed by the city’s medical school, “Please Gawd, when I dead, I hope I wi’ dead in de summah time,” alluding to the previously noted fact that body snatching and dissections

⁹² *Journal of the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Kentucky* (Frankfurt, Ky., 1833), 107.

⁹³ *1903 N.C. Session Laws*, 666, 1056.

⁹⁴ “Body Snatching,” *Louisville Courier Journal*.

⁹⁵ Wilf, “Anatomy and Punishment,” 512.

⁹⁶ Mieke M.F. Curtis-Richardson, “Corpses As Commodities: The Ethnography of Covert Medical Practices in Georgia, Ca. 1835-1997,” in Blakely and Harrington, *Bones in the Basement*, 340-370.

⁹⁷ Kaufman and Hanawalt, “Body Snatching in the Midwest,” 35-36.

⁹⁸ Savitt, “The Use of Blacks,” 340.

only occurred in the winter months, when medical schools were in session and the body could be sufficiently preserved.⁹⁹ Following the Civil War, whites, as a means of controlling recently emancipated black men and women, invented rumors of supernatural “night doctors” who stole, killed, and dissected blacks.¹⁰⁰ Although fictitious, the fear that such rumors bred was very much real. Four verses of a poem ominously titled, “The Dissecting Hall,” details the anxieties of the black community:

Yuh see dat house? Dat great brick house?
Way yonder down de street?
Dey used to take dead folks een dar
Wrapped een a long white sheet.

An’ sometimes we’en a nigger’d stop,
A-wondering who was dead,
Dem stujent men would take a club,
An’ bat ‘im on de head.

An ‘drag dat poor dead nigger chile
Right een dat ‘sectin hall
To vestigate ‘is liver – lights –
His gizzard an’ ‘is gall.

Tek off dat nigger’s han’s an’ feet –
His eyes, his head, an’ all,
An’ w’en dem stujent finish
Dey was nothin’ left at all.¹⁰¹

Blacks did not only play the role of “the snatched.” In several cases, blacks were complicit in the act of resurrecting bodies. In one 1883 episode, it was the black superintendent of a Philadelphia cemetery who permitted resurrectionists to unearth bodies at will.¹⁰² Four years earlier, a report out of Nashville highlighted the activities of three “negro body-snatchers.”¹⁰³ Blacks were also accomplices to body snatching in situations

⁹⁹ Robert Wilson, “Their Shadowy Influence Still Hovers About Medical College,” *Sunday News Courier*, Charleston, S.C., April 13, 1913, in Savitt, “The Use of Blacks,” 340.

¹⁰⁰ Gladys-Marie Fry, *Night Riders: In Black Folk History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 3 and Savitt, “The Use of Blacks,” 340.

¹⁰¹ *Scribe*, I, (December 1951), 17 in Savitt, “The Use of Blacks,” 341.

¹⁰² Halperin, “The Poor, the Black,” 490.

¹⁰³ “Body Snatching,” *Louisville Courier Journal*.

in which they had little choice. In the mid-nineteenth century, the previously mentioned Medical College of Georgia employed “resurrection slaves” to steal black corpses. Between 1842 and 1852, these slaves obtained no less than sixty-four bodies for dissection.¹⁰⁴

In 1852, the Medical College of Georgia officially purchased one of these slaves, a man named Grandison Harris. Harris’s task was to snatch black bodies from a local cemetery and deliver them to the medical college’s dissecting room. After several years of work, Harris gained an impressive degree of familiarity with human anatomy, and he often served as a teaching assistant alongside fledgling medical students. In fact, Harris’s expertise garnered great respect -- it was said that “students freely went to him, much more than they did to the instructors.”¹⁰⁵ Unfortunately for the black man, he was likely loathed in his local community. Historian Tanya Telfair Sharpe compared Harris’ presence in black neighborhoods to that of a drug dealer in today’s society: one that evoked both fear and jealousy. Following the one-time slave resurrectionist’s retirement in 1905, he was granted a pension of \$10 a month and his son was hired on as a janitor.¹⁰⁶ Although Harris was a rare example of a black man benefitting from the practice of body snatching, his story does add gray to a broader narrative that is often painted solely in black and white.

The Big Picture: Body Snatching and the Role of the Black Body

Placed in a larger context, body snatching and the subsequent dissection of cadavers was only one way in which the black body served to advance medical education in the American South in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Indeed, Dr. James Marion Sims, who practiced gynecological surgery in Alabama, had no known experiences with snatching bodies for dissection. Yet, in the 1840s and early 1850s, he performed numerous experimental surgeries on black slave women by which he developed a cure for vesico-vaginal fistula.¹⁰⁷ Years later, Dr. Sims reflected on his brave patients, who, without their “indomitable courage” would have left the “broad domain of surgery” without “one of

¹⁰⁴ Harold Jackson, “Race and the Politics of Medicine in Nineteenth-Century Georgia” in Blakely and Harrington, *Bones in the Basement*, 200.

¹⁰⁵ Tanya Telfair Sharpe, “Grandison Harris: The Medical College of Georgia’s Resurrection Man” in Blakely and Harrington, *Bones in the Basement*, 213.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 220.

¹⁰⁷ A “vesico –vaginal fistula is a break in the wall separating the bladder from the vagina, which allows urine to pass involuntarily to the outside from the vagina rather than the urethra. Women suffering from this defect, usually the result of trauma during childbirth, are incontinent of urine and continually uncomfortable.” See Savitt, “The Use of Blacks,” 344-345.

the most useful improvements that shall forever hereafter grace its annals.”¹⁰⁸ Additional medical breakthroughs, including the first successful ovariectomy, the first operations on anesthetized patients, and the perfection of the Caesarean section, relied on the black body.¹⁰⁹

Yet, even in the larger narrative of the black body as a useful medical tool, body snatching stands out in bold. This is because the very act of resurrecting the dead black body bestows an importance on it that never existed while the body was alive. Borrowing the words of anthropologist Lesley A. Sharpe, the black community in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries served as one example of the “socially expendable categories of persons [who were] ironically transformed into valued objects through their involvement in medical research.”¹¹⁰ In 1951, black anatomist W. Montague Cobb wrote on this irony, stating, “. . .our [white] colleagues recognized in the Negro [on the dissecting table] a perfection in human structure which they were unwilling to concede when that structure was animated by the vital spark.”¹¹¹ This is not to say that body snatching and dissection eliminated racialized and hierarchical feeling. In fact, the act of manipulating a helpless body is in many ways one that carries immense power. As medical students were educated during “that stage of life, when the transformation of character is inevitable,” it is possible that the body snatching and dissection of black corpses led them to perceive the black man as inhuman or subordinate.¹¹² Upon the dissection table however, a certain education in equality cannot be ignored. As aforementioned traveler Martineau claimed, white medical students who dissected black cadavers “cannot say that coloured people have not nerves that quiver under moral injury, nor a brain that is on fire with insult, nor pulses that throb under oppression.”¹¹³ Through dissections, students learned, whether they realized it or not, that differences between black and white bodies were, quite literally, only skin deep. It was body snatching that made this lesson possible.

Decline and Legacy

¹⁰⁸ J. Marion Sims to H.V. Wooten, January 23, 1850, Hardy Vickers Wooten Papers (Manuscripts Division, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Ala.) in Savitt, “The Use of Blacks,” 346.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 346-347.

¹¹⁰ Lesley A. Sharpe, “The Commodification of the Body and Its Parts,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 29 (2000): 296.

¹¹¹ Cobb, “Surgery and the Negro Physician,” 148.

¹¹² Warner and Edmondson, “Dissection,” 9

¹¹³ Martineau, “Retrospect of Western Travel,” 141.

While the bulk of body snatching activity occurred in the nineteenth century, some sources date its existence well into the twentieth. According to one author, body snatchers still operated in Tennessee in the 1920s, selling cadavers to four medical schools in Nashville and sending surplus bodies to Iowa.¹¹⁴ Eventually, however, the passage of Anatomy Acts, in conjunction with an improved public opinion of medicine, eliminated body snatching in the United States.¹¹⁵ Medical breakthroughs in bacteriology, surgery, and preventative medicine confirmed the importance of research, and an increasing number of people began donating their bodies to science.¹¹⁶ In 1968, this process was made easier with the passage of the Uniform Anatomy Gift Act. Adopted by all fifty states, it replaced the patchwork of previous state legislation and ensured the right of a donor to bequeath his or her own body to medical science and education.¹¹⁷

Without daily reminders, it is vital that the history of body snatching remains intact. Eased by the existence of donation programs today, the process of procuring bodies for dissection in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was complex and in most cases, criminal. Body snatching was meticulously planned and executed by aspiring medical students, their desperate professors, and enterprising middlemen, who all attempted to meet the rising cadaver quotas that resulted from the evolution of the medical school curriculum. From the beginning, the marginalized and disadvantaged populations of society were the most vulnerable to body snatching. In an era brimming with racial prejudices, the black community was an easy target. While public reactions to body snatching varied, the white population was generally content as long as their graves remained immune to desecration. On the contrary, the black community lived in fear of white doctors, as well as the black men that helped them. The institution of slavery and the greater concentration of black populations in the South made it a hotspot for body snatching, a practice that continued in the region into the early decades of the twentieth century.

The history of body snatching in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the American South provides more than evidence

¹¹⁴ Rhoda Truax, *The Doctors Warren of Boston: first family of surgery* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), 313, in Humphrey, "Dissection and Discrimination," 824.

¹¹⁵ Humphrey, "Dissection and Discrimination," 824.

¹¹⁶ Blake, "American Anatomy Acts," 437.

¹¹⁷ Aaron D. Tward and Hugh A. Patterson, "From Grave Robbing to Gifting: Cadaver Supply in the United States," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 287 (2007): 1183.

that “violation of the sepulchre [was] essential to the study of anatomy.”¹¹⁸ Rather, the purposeful resurrection of unguarded, and most often black, corpses, contributes to the greater assertion that blacks were vital in the advancement of medical knowledge. Of course, the role of race in medicine did not disappear when body snatching dissipated in the 1920s. Between 1932 and 1972, six hundred rural black men were the sole subjects of the Tuskegee syphilis experiment performed by the U.S. Public Health Service. As a part of the experiment, doctors and scientists allowed subjects infected with syphilis to go untreated. At least 128 men died of syphilis or related complications, causing outrage in the black community.¹¹⁹

The Tuskegee experiment, in addition to instances of forced sterilization, radiation testing, and “corrective” surgeries particular to blacks suggest that any strained relationship between the medical and African-American communities that exists today is one that began developing years ago. While it is impossible to pinpoint just when such an uneasy coexistence -- one characterized by suspicion, exploitation, and fear -- truly began, there is no doubt that body snatching during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had a significant impact. When historian Harriet A. Washington asserted that today’s “much bewailed racial health gap is not a gap, but a chasm wider and deeper than a mass grave,” she was halfway there. Such a chasm did not appear on its own. It was body snatchers that helped to dig it.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Z. Pitcher, “Historical Notice of the Territorial and State Medical Societies of Michigan,” *Peninsular Journal of Medicine and the Collateral Sciences*, I (May 1854), 501 in Breeden, “Body Snatchers in Virginia,” 321.

¹¹⁹ S.B. Thomas and S.C. Quinn, “The Tuskegee Syphilis Study, 1932 to 1972: implications for HIV education and programs in the black community,” *American Journal of Public Health* 81 (1991): 1498-1505, DOI: 10.2105/AJPH.91.11.1498.

¹²⁰ Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 189-190, 216-217, 284-285, 20.