

East Harlem Community Health Committee, Inc.

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April 18, 2017

Central Park Conservancy
Douglas Blonsky, President & CEO; Central Park Administrator
14 East 60th Street
New York, NY 10022

The East Harlem Community Health Committee, Inc., a longstanding (over 40 yrs) coalition of East Harlem consumers and health provider organizations, calls for the removal the statue honoring Dr. J. Marion Sims located on E103rd and 5th Avenue. Simply put, this statute celebrates racism in medicine, more specifically anti-black racism, and entirely neglects the unconsented contribution of three Black enslaved women through the brutal mutilation of their bodies.

The statue pays tribute to Dr. J. Marion Sims as the “father of gynecology.” The historical significance of Dr. J. Marion Sims’ contribution to medicine is well documented, as he is known for the repair of vesicovaginal fistula. White women with vesicovaginal fistulas - usually the result of traumatic labor - were, in those days, social outcasts and no cure was available. Sims also devised instruments including the Sims’ speculum to gain proper visualization. However, the methods he used to practice his surgical technique to repair vesicovaginal fistulas are also well-known and documented thanks to the work of Harriet Washington, author of *Medical Apartheid*. From 1845 to 1849 in Montgomery, Alabama, he conducted brutal experiments on 3 Black slave women - Anarcha, Betsy, and Lucy respectively - to perfect his surgical techniques. Their bodies were brutally mutilated without their consent for the sole purpose of eliminating the social stigma of white women who had these trauma induced fistulas. He operated on one of them 30 times without anesthesia and had the women hold each other down during the surgeries. These experiments set the stage for modern vaginal surgery and modern racist and anti-black medicine and medical practice that would lead to the systematic perpetuation of health inequities experienced by non-white population groups in the United States.

East Harlem is a historically immigrant and minority community whose health and wellbeing has been acutely impacted by the racist history and practices of medicine and the health care delivery system. East Harlem’s Puerto Rican roots do not let us forget the history of national health care policies that legitimized abuse towards women of color in the U.S. and in Puerto Rico with its massive sterilization program during the 1930’s. Louis de Malave, author of *The Sterilization of Puerto Rican Women: A Selected, Partially Annotated Bibliography*, (1999), clearly summarizes the experience of Puerto Rican women’s systematic sterilization during the 1930’s” : The colonial legacy of controlling women’s sexuality and reproduction continued to prevail with such policies as the testing of the I.U.D., birth control pills and the sterilization of women. In the case of sterilization, between the 1930s and the 1970s approximately one-third of Puerto Rico’s female population of childbearing age had undergone the operation, the highest rate in the world. So common was the practice that the words “sterilization” and “la operacion” (the operation) were used interchangeably.

The continued presence of this statue in East Harlem perpetuates a factually incomplete narrative about a so-called hero of medicine and historical amnesia about the profound contribution and lives of Anarcha, Betsy, and Lucy. It is tragically ironic that their lives did not matter to medicine, a healing profession grounded in the oath of “do no harm.”

Sincerely,

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