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# Medical specimens and the erasure of racial violence: the case of Harriet Cole

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## ABSTRACT

This article analyses the complex narrative of Harriet Cole, a 36-year-old African-American woman whose body was delivered to the anatomy department of Hahnemann Medical School in 1888. The anatomist Rufus B Weaver used her preserved remains to create a singular anatomical specimen, an intact extraction of the 'cerebro-spinal nervous system'. Initially anonymised, deracialised and unsexed, the central nervous system specimen endured for decades before her identity as a working-class woman of colour was reunited with her remains. In the 1930s, media accounts began to circulate that Harriet Cole had bequeathed her remains to the anatomist, a claim that continues to circulate uncritically in the biomedical literature today. Although we conclude that this is likely a confabulation that erased the history of violence to her autonomy and her dead body, the rhetorical possibility that Harriet Cole might have chosen to donate her body to the medical school reflects the racial, political and legal dimensions that influenced how and why the story of Harriet Cole's 'gift' served multiple purposes in the century and a half since her death.

Harriet Cole, a 36-year-old African-American woman, died in Philadelphia Hospital on 12 March 1888. According to the certificate of death, her burial at the Hahnemann Medical College took place 1 week later. But Cole was not buried there, at least not on 19 March. Her body was embalmed and placed in a tank with other preserved cadavers, as anatomist Rufus Weaver researched methods for the complete extraction of the human nervous system, a project that he had long envisioned. There are no other surviving documents that explain how Harriet Cole's body ended up at Hahnemann. After the turn of the twentieth century, however, published references to Weaver's nervous system preparation began to include information about the source of the specimen, including the name 'Harriet Cole' and the claim that she 'donated' her body to the anatomist.

How and under what circumstances an African-American woman came to be renowned as an anatomical specimen is hardly a new story in the history of medical racism. When Saartjie Baartman, a Khoikhoi woman exhibited to divert and entertain audiences in England and France as the 'Hottentot Venus', succumbed to disease in 1815, her body was sent to the celebrated French anatomist Georges Cuvier for dissection. Cuvier made plaster casts of her body parts, including genitalia, which remained on display at the Musée de l'Homme through the

1970s. The French government did not repatriate Baartman's remains until 2002 (Qureshi 2004).

Unlike Baartman, whose sexual anatomy fascinated European researchers, Harriet Cole's emaciated condition at the time of her death (from tuberculosis according to her death certificate) rendered her corpse especially valuable to Rufus Weaver for separating her nervous system from her body. Cuvier acquired Baartman's body as a singular specimen of African women; Weaver celebrated the dissection of Harriet Cole's nerves as a singular achievement of his anatomical skill. Nonetheless, these two women experienced a particular kind of racialised medical violence that advanced medical knowledge, facilitated professional careers and encouraged the continuing exploitation of the bodies—living and dead—of people of colour in biomedical research and education (Berry 2017; Kenny 2020; Reiss 2001). New works in the history of medicine and public health—and the attention garnered by popular works by journalists Harriet Washington and Rebecca Skloot—have dramatically intensified the analysis of the exploitation of black bodies essential to the development of nineteenth-century medical theory and practice (Kenny 2013; Skloot 2010; Washington 2006). This exploitation not only significantly influenced knowledge production in the past, but also informs contemporary efforts to redress long-standing disparities and inequities in disease experience and health outcomes (Berry 2017; Hogarth 2017, 2019; Kenny 2020; Nuriddin, Mooney, and White 2020; Owens 2017; Owens and Fett 2019; Skloot 2010; Washington 2006; White 2020; White, Thornton, and Greene 2021).

Although tempting to regard Harriet Cole simply as another victim of medical racism, we take this opportunity to interrogate the representation of her agency. In so doing, we highlight Cole's singularity as an anatomical specimen. Initially anonymised, deracialised and unsexed, her central nervous system endured for decades before her identity as a working-class African-American woman was reunited with her preserved remains. The story that she gifted her body to an anatomist began to circulate in the 1930s and continues to circulate uncritically in the biomedical literature (Nwaogbe, Schmidt, and Tubbs 2018). While it is very likely a confabulation that erased a history of violence towards both her autonomy and her dead body, the historical context opens the possibility—faint as it may be—that Harriet Cole might have chosen to donate her body to the medical school. Thus, we acknowledge that this version of her story exists and complicates any chance of deciding on a single



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narrative for the origins and meanings of this anatomical specimen. Here we explore at greater length the structural and racialised dimensions that influenced how Harriet Cole, later identified as a working-class African-American woman, became a source of human material for Weaver's specimen creation, and the irony—given the historical exploitation of bodies of colour in American anatomical research and education—of her media canonisation in the 1930s as 'a big-hearted Negro' who willed her body to a medical college.

## GRAVE ROBBING

Defilement of the graves of African-Americans was only one way that deep-seated structural racism shaped the lives and afterlives of African-Americans in late nineteenth-century Philadelphia. The long shadow of slavery in American society continued to define black people as inferior, pathological, criminal and ultimately ungovernable. Just as white social scientists—political scientists, criminologists and anthropologists—identified the failings of individual black people for high rates of crime, physicians and public health experts blamed the same individuals for failing to take the necessary steps to prevent disease and injury, all the while ignoring the structural factors—environment, housing, low wages, poor diets—that resulted in much higher rates of diseases such as tuberculosis (Muhammad 2019). As a working-class black woman in Philadelphia, Harriet Cole experienced the brutality and violence of everyday life in an urban landscape that afforded her little visibility in the traditional archive (Gross 2016).

When Harriet Cole died in March of 1888, 5 years had passed since a notorious grave robbing scandal rocked Philadelphia. Louis Megargee, editor of the short-lived muck-raking *Philadelphia Press*, and several of his reporters staked out the Lebanon Cemetery, a burial ground for African-Americans, to catch grave robbers in the act. During the spring of 1882, they regularly watched the cemetery get plundered of the bodies of the newly dead, but only set up a plan to catch the culprits in late November of that year. On the night of Monday, 4 December, they apprehended three men—one African-American and one white man who did the digging, and one white wagon driver—carrying the exhumed bodies of four black men and two black women in a wagon bound for Jefferson Medical College (*Philadelphia Press* 1882a).

The *Philadelphia Press* reporters provided detailed accounts of their exciting venture on 5 December and of its immediate aftermath in the following days (*Philadelphia Press* 1882a; *Philadelphia Press* 1882b; *Philadelphia Press* 1882c; *Philadelphia Press* 1882d; *Philadelphia Press* 1882e; see also *Philadelphia Press* 1882a). After describing the apprehension of the men involved, the reporters explained that relatives and friends identified all but one of the bodies, which had been taken to the city morgue, on the morning of 5 December (*Philadelphia Press* 1882a). When the hearing to charge the three men was announced for that afternoon, the news 'created a tremendous excitement among the colored population'. Understandably angry, people in the crowd outside the magistrate's office shouted "'Who's got a rope?" "Bring a rope," passing from lip to lip and a disposition to lynch the prisoners plainly betraying itself, though only within verbal limits' (*The Times* (Philadelphia) 1882). In a rare public demonstration of black grievance, over 600 African-Americans protested this egregious violation of their loved ones' graves and called for prosecutions and punishments during a meeting held at Liberty Hall on 7 December (*Philadelphia Press* 1882d; Wright 2016: 440–44).

In the meantime, a *Philadelphia Inquirer* story recounted, medical students at Jefferson Medical College made the event into 'a source of hilarity' by singing 'John Brown's Body' at the start of lectures (*Philadelphia Inquirer* 1882a; *Philadelphia Press* 1882b). 'John Brown's Body' was a Civil War marching song about the noted white abolitionist who was executed after leading a failed slave revolt. The lyrics included 'John Brown's body lies a-moldering in his grave' sung to the tune of the Battle Hymn of the Republic; perhaps they were particularly amused at the notion that black bodies were no longer 'a-moldering' in theirs. They also played 'practical jokes'

upon every colored person whose business took him or her into the vicinity of the college whenever any of the students were about. A party of them [medical students] were moving slowly away from the [medical school] building, after the lectures, when they encountered a poor old colored woman at a crossing. To her great terror she was immediately pointed out as a desirable subject. Cries of "Catch her!" "Where's a knife!" and so on were raised, and the incipient physicians were greatly amused at witnessing her tottering walk turn into a precipitate flight (*Philadelphia Inquirer* 1882a).

The contrast between the students' despicable behaviour and the black Philadelphians' angry distress highlights the power that white medical schools had to acquire bodies, especially African-American bodies, for dissection, in defiance of social norms that expected the dead to remain undisturbed in their graves (Holloway 2003; Laqueur 2015; Sappol 2002; Smith 2010).

During the ensuing weeks, the three men, other accomplices, and—in an extremely rare instance where a doctor was indicted—the Demonstrator of Anatomy at Jefferson Medical College, Dr William Smith Forbes, were charged and tried for violation of sepulture and conspiracy to violate sepulture (*Philadelphia Inquirer* 1883b; *The Times* (Philadelphia) 1883a). Juries found the grave robbers and the wagon driver guilty, and they went to jail. Different juries (for different charges) acquitted Forbes, who resolutely claimed that he just dealt with bodies that came into the anatomy department and did not know where they came from. He simply assumed that they were legal bodies sent from the morgue, alms-house, hospital or prison. Justice nicely maintained the social distinctions between the disreputable body snatchers and the respectable doctor, much to the jubilation of Jefferson Medical College's students, alumni and friends (Wright 2016: 432–34). Not coincidentally, more than a month before Forbes went to trial in March, Senator John E. Reyburn of Philadelphia introduced legislation that would become the 1883 Anatomy Act, a law justified in part because it would prevent the horrible crime of grave robbing by expanding the number of legal bodies available for dissection. Professors of anatomy at most of Philadelphia's medical schools organised writing the Act and getting it to the capital while feelings still ran high (McNight 1917; *Philadelphia Inquirer* 1883a:261–63). The Act passed the state Senate on 7 March and, after minor revisions, Governor Robert E. Pattison signed it on 13 June 1883 (Wright 2016: 429–32; Montgomery 1966: 390–93).

## THE ANATOMY ACT OF 1883

Pennsylvania had had an Anatomy Act since 1867 but ongoing grave robbing demonstrated how inadequate it was. As was typical of early anatomy acts, the 1867 Pennsylvania law was permissive, not mandatory. It allowed those in charge of public institutions or services to send bodies that had no relatives to pay for burial costs to anatomy departments; doing so could save taxpayers the funds required for interments. The law only applied to the cities of Philadelphia and Pittsburgh and their surrounding

counties, however. According to Philadelphia's anatomists, county and city officials regularly chose to pay to bury their dead instead of giving them over for dissection. Considering that Philadelphia was the centre of American medical education, with New York and Baltimore close behind, having enough bodies for medical students to study was a pressing matter, one solved by supplementing the legal supply with those from we-will-pretend-that-we-do-not-know sources (Montgomery 1966: 382–83; Guerassio 2007: 22–25; Wright 2016: 426).

In a prescient editorial printed on 28 December 1882, the *Christian Recorder*, a nationally known African-American weekly newspaper published in Philadelphia by the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the unnamed author firmly supported anatomical dissection and suggested some suitable candidates for cadavers. The essay pointed out that 'a dead body is quite as necessary to modern students of medicine as any book of the most approved curriculum'. No one wanted to see a doctor who had not properly studied anatomy. Thus 'the authorities... should say how this necessity is to be met' because if they do not 'we may expect to have such exhibitions as the work of those termed 'ghouls,' as we have recently had in regard to Lebanon Cemetery in our own city'. The author emphatically declared that the bodies of all executed murderers should go to anatomists, to help deter them from such heinous crimes. Next, 'we would give to the dissectors' knives all suicides' to help 'stop the rage of self-murder'. Finally, 'such as may be had from the ranks of the unknown and unclaimed' could go to anatomists. Then 'a body could rest with tolerable security in the grave prepared for it by loving hands' (*Christian Recorder* (Philadelphia) 1882). At least part of the black community thus agreed that Pennsylvanians needed better legislation to both protect the graves of the beloved dead and to provide a legal supply of bodies, at least if those bodies were essentially marginalised by all citizens, white and black.

The 1883 act did not turn over the bodies of murderers and suicides to anatomists. But it did considerably strengthen the core principles of the 1867 law. The new act created a state anatomical board composed of representatives from Pennsylvania's schools, expanded the scope of the law to the entire state, and made supplying the bodies of those who would cost the public money to bury them to the anatomical board compulsory (Pennsylvania State Law 1883: 116). The board then distributed them equitably among the schools and, in theory, ensured that the final remains were buried or, starting in the early twentieth century, cremated and interred. Historian Venetia Guerrasio has thoroughly analysed how much this legislation legitimised exploitation of the bodies of the poor and made anatomists themselves arms of the modern, rationalising state. These dead, whose bodies had been illegal commodities, were transformed into bureaucratic objects (Guerassio 2007). One of those may have been Harriet Cole. Unfortunately, we cannot confirm this because the cadaver registers of the Pennsylvania Anatomical Board only exist from 1901 on (Pennsylvania State Archives).

The dissection of black bodies has been frequently discussed in the critical history of anatomy in the USA (Berry 2017; Blakely and Harrington 1997; Sappol 2002: 148–193). And for good reason. Enslaved African-American bodies were particularly easy to exploit in the antebellum period, as were the segregated cemeteries of African-Americans throughout the nineteenth century. Not only were many African-Americans among the poor who only had resources for cheap funerals in unprotected burial grounds, but white Americans were only too happy to ignore common stories about predatory robbing of African-American

graves unless newspaper reporters made them into a public scandal, as events in Philadelphia in 1882–1883 attest.

One of the effects of the 1883 anatomy act, ironically, was to subject poor white people to increasing state jurisdiction over their bodies. For her study of the Pennsylvania Anatomy Act, Guerrasio analysed cadaver records sampled from 1900 to 1925. Of the 1109 records with race given, 289 (26%) bodies were black. While still a very disproportionate percentage compared with the black population in Pennsylvania (4% estimated from census data for 1900, 1910 and 1920), and obviously from a later time period than the 1880s, under the 1883 anatomy act black bodies no longer made up the majority of those on the dissecting tables in the first decades of the twentieth century—if, in fact, they had in 1880s.

At the time of the exposé of grave robbing at Lebanon Cemetery, nevertheless, most people certainly assumed that cadavers were black bodies, although Forbes assured the court that white bodies also came to his department (*Philadelphia Inquirer* 1882b). After the 1883 act went into effect, white inmates of county poorhouses reportedly—and not surprisingly—did not welcome their new vulnerability to postmortem dissection. Nine months after the act's passage, newspapers throughout Pennsylvania reported on the 'panic' precipitated by the law at the Berks County poorhouse that led many residents to flee the institution. The Berks episode prompted one editor of a Scranton newspaper to muse about the need to find some way to satisfy the obvious needs of medical science other than 'promptly shipping the pauper dead' to Philadelphia (*The Tribune* (Scranton, PA) 1883).

More stories in the greater Philadelphia area press reveal that the passage of the 1883 Anatomy Act hardly protected black people (or white people) from continued postmortem violence and predation. In 1884 a reporter from *The Times* (Philadelphia) regaled readers with a purported account of anatomy students at the Jefferson Medical College who terrorised Elijah Wilson, 'a brawny negro [*sic*]', from Burlington, New Jersey. Wilson visited the dissecting rooms in April 1884 seeking to dissuade 'the embryo doctors' from stealing 'cullud chillen' from poor black folks and illegally taking them across state lines to use for dissection. With evident embellishment, the reporter described how the 'cadaver-carving medical students' brandished their scalpels in amusement before they uncovered the body of a black man on a dissecting table, to Wilson's horror and dismay (*The Times* (Philadelphia) 1884).

The body that shocked Wilson might have come to the college under the provisions of the 1883 Act (cold comfort, to be sure), but others were still purloined from graves. In March 1885, newspapers in nearby Camden, New Jersey, ran the stark headline 'The Body Gone', reporting the missing body of African-American James Johnson, an inmate of the Blackwood Almshouse. An investigation into burials at the asylum disclosed that the body of the 'unfortunate negro [*sic*]' could not be located, which 'astounded the committee' convened to investigate the 'ghoulish work' (*Morning Post* (Camden, NJ) 1885a). Reporters from the *Morning Post* located a man in Philadelphia who positively identified Johnson's body in the dissecting rooms of the Jefferson Medical College before the body was dissected. Readers were reminded of the serious penalties for grave robbing in the 1883 act and told to wait for the arrest of freeholder John Smith who had participated in the alms-house body removal (*Morning Post* (Camden, NJ) 1885b).

The 1883 Act thus may have promised a solution to the supply of bodies for dissection but getting those in charge of unclaimed bodies to turn them over to anatomists was a persistent challenge well into the twentieth century (Lawrence and Lederer, in



progress). More importantly, as Wilson's story reveals, the 1883 Act, and other states' anatomy acts, failed to assuage African-Americans' continuing, constant fear of having not only adults' but children's bodies stolen for medical use. Communities of colour existed with a vivid heritage of 'night doctors' who appropriated both the dead for dissection and the living for experiments well into the twentieth century (Berry 2017; Fry 1975; Washington 2006).

Elijah Wilson's 1884 story not only underscored black experiences with cruel medical students, but also included a narrative twist for Philadelphia's newspaper reading audiences. According to *The Times* (Philadelphia), Wilson asked the medical students where they obtained the body they had revealed to him with such flourish. 'A kindly student volunteered the information that the deceased colored man had bequeathed his body to the college because of his desire to promote scientific research' (*The Times* (Philadelphia) 1884). It is impossible to determine if this is correct; we don't even know the man's name. Yet this remarkable claim illustrates the fact that body donation was a concept available in public discourse as a way to assert voluntary participation in the procurement of bodies for 'research', a frequent euphemism for anatomical dissection. Even as newspaper articles about body donations circulated, grave robbing continued, along with the increasingly successful appropriation of dead bodies under anatomy acts directing the unclaimed to medical schools. If the students lied to Elijah Wilson, then we see a new discourse of body bequeathal that could easily have been a convenient fiction to conceal that bodies had been obtained the old-fashioned way, through appropriation, theft, deception and violence. On the other hand, just *maybe* the students spoke the truth.

## ANATOMICAL DONATION

References to individuals seeking to donate their bodies in the nineteenth century belies the common assumption that body donation arose in the 1950s. To be sure, the first organised, systematic donor programmes in the USA began shortly after World War II. But the lack of such formal programmes had not deterred individual Americans—men, women, white, black, urban, rural, religious or free-thinker—from seeking to send their remains to a doctor, hospital or medical college. In the decades after the Civil War, American newspapers published thousands of articles that described the desires of Americans to gift their remains, their reasons for doing so, and more often than not, their failure to have their wishes heeded (Lederer and Lawrence 2022).

Philadelphia newspapers, together with Pennsylvania papers outside the metropole, included accounts of efforts by white men to donate bodies both in and outside the Commonwealth in the 1880s. In 1883, for example, a story circulated widely that Isaac Sprague, a so-called living skeleton, had given 'his body in the interests of science to Harvard Medical College'. The 40-pound Sprague, a man who earned his living as a sideshow exhibit, put several conditions on the gift including preserving his remains in alcohol following the dissection. 'Probably the living skeleton is a benefactor of science', opined the Scranton writer, 'and wants to set an example for others to follow' (He dismissed the prospect as unlikely) (*The Tribune* (Scranton, PA) 1883). Similarly, newspapers in both Chester and Indiana, Pennsylvania, reported how a young Chicago man requested that his body be turned over to the Chicago Medical College in appreciation of the college president's success in curing him 5 years earlier 'of a very tough disease', and of 'an ex-journalist of Cincinnati' who willed his

body to the Medical College of Ohio for the 'benefit of medical science'. James Archibald Joyce, another man, further stipulated that his body be rendered into a skeleton to become a permanent fixture of the school, and that the specimen be properly labelled with a copy of his will attached (*Delaware County Daily Times* 1880; *The Times* (Philadelphia) 1880; *Indiana Progress* (Indiana, PA) 1880).

Amid the extraordinary coverage of the notorious assassin Charles Guiteau, who fired a gun at President James A Garfield on 2 July 1881, the idea of directing one's remains to an individual received enormous attention. The fact that Guiteau bequeathed his body to his spiritual advisor Reverend Dr Ira Hicks was widely reported, including the reverend's decision to give the assassin's body to the Army Medical Museum. Newspapers around the nation followed the subsequent disposition of Guiteau's skeleton and body parts. In 1887 the *Lancaster New Era* (Pennsylvania) reported how Guiteau's head had 'fallen into the possession of a New York showman'. Recapping Guiteau's bequest and the possession of his remains at the Army Medical Museum (at least the skeleton, the spleen and the brain), the article included details of the preservation of Guiteau's face and 'his stubby mustache', which had been carried off by another anatomist and was likely to be exhibited at a popular anatomy museum (*Lancaster New Era* (Lancaster, PA) 1887). By 1904 Howard Medical School professor Daniel Smith Lamb, who performed the postmortem examinations of both President Garfield and Guiteau, reported that the assassin's skeleton was no longer on exhibition at the Army Medical Museum. The anatomist explained that, as a longtime curator at the Museum, he had retained parts of Guiteau's brain, 'many portions of which were shared with alienists throughout the country' (Lamb 1904: 389).

Philadelphians who attempted to direct their remains to a physician or medical college also appeared in the popular press. In 1883 when his will was read, mourners learnt that Alexander Villers bequeathed his body to the University of Pennsylvania for 'dissecting purposes', and expressed a wish that the remaining fragments be cremated at the same institution (*The Times* (Philadelphia) 1883b). Reports in local newspapers offered no explanation for the 'singular will' of the 35-year-old white man nor for his unusual request that his ashes not be given to or viewed by anyone acquainted with him (He was living separately from his wife, and some testators apparently sought to prevent their spouses from any control of their remains (Enos v. Snyder 1900)). Although some papers described his widow's absolute objection to this proposed disposition of his body, Philadelphia papers reported that Coroner Janney issued a permit for the transfer of the body to the 'dissecting rooms of the University' (*Morning Journal-Courier* (New Haven, CT) 1883; *The Times* (Philadelphia) 1883b).

Requests for alternative burials from African-Americans represent a tiny fraction of the body donations that appeared in the white popular press between the Civil War and World War II. Given the deeply entrenched racism of the period, claims about African-Americans seeking to donate their bodies need to be carefully interrogated. For example, in 1879 when Jim Porter died in the Evansville, Indiana county poorhouse, newspapers reported that the man labelled the 'Negro dwarf' had 'left his body to the Medical College for scientific purposes'. The extraordinary spectacle of the dead man's body interested editors much more than the circumstances that may have made dissection possible. 'There was a full attendance of all the city's physicians at the dissection', observed the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, and 'all regarded the specimen as the most remarkable ever

seen' (*Cincinnati Enquirer* 1902). The circumstances of Porter's desire for his final disposition remain ambiguous at best. In a perhaps less ambiguous 1902 case, before he drank an overdose of laudanum James Bracy left a note for the Philadelphia coroner with his final instructions. The 50-year-old 'colored man' wrote: 'This is to certify that I bequeath this body to the University of Pennsylvania for medical purposes. Don't divulge my name to the newspapers unless necessary'. The newspapers clearly did not honour his request and there was no subsequent report of Bracy's death in the Philadelphia press (*Philadelphia Inquirer* 1902).

The white press devoted considerably more attention to the final requests of African-Americans legally sentenced to death for their crimes against the state. Whereas some newspaper accounts recorded the soon-to-be executed's fear that their bodies would be turned over for dissection, others reported that some of these individuals—both men and women—were able to direct the transfer of their bodies to doctors and surgeons either for 'science' or for financial considerations.

White newspapers allocated generous press to the executions of black women. Like the more numerous stories covering the execution of black men, these stories reflected the white press's desire to emphasise that the state could subject the recently enslaved to harsh punishments (Shipman 2002). In 1881, when Lucinda Fowlkes was hanged in Virginia for the murder of her husband, her execution received substantial coverage in local papers. But the hanging of the 'colored murderess' also became front-page news in Philadelphia, Wilmington, Washington, DC, and in cities across the Midwest. Although the *New York Times* did not feature a lengthy story about Fowlkes' crime and execution on the front page (it appeared on page 2), the paper included information about her final disposition. After her body was taken down from the gallows, it was placed in a 'rude coffin, and buried near the jail'. Because 'the woman had consented that the doctors might have it', the paper predicted it would be 'taken up' after dark, or, as another reporter noted, 'resurrected' (*New York Times* 1881: 2; *Snyder County Tribune* (Middleburg, PA) 1881: 2).

Reports of African-American men executed for their crimes who purportedly consented to transferring their bodies to doctors and medical students appeared regularly. Before he was hanged in Louisville, Kentucky, James Ross willed his body to James H Rollins. The press account recorded that 'the body was cut down and turned over to a medical student [Rollins] to whom Ross had bequeathed it' (*Boston Globe* 1889). Unlike lynchings where bodies were mutilated and dismembered by violent mobs, judicially sanctioned executioners of African-Americans apparently permitted prisoners to name doctors and surgeons as recipients of the body in the interests of medical science. In other cases, the transfer of the body after death involved small sums of money made available to the prisoner before his death or intended for the surviving family members. Refracted through the white press, these accounts raise more questions than answers, but they demonstrate the extent to which directing one's remains to the doctors for anatomical dissection was represented as a choice available to both white people and African-Americans.

In 1886 the bequest announced with the death of an elderly African-American woman, a resident at the Montgomery County Almshouse in Upper Providence, Pennsylvania, attracted considerable attention. Reportedly over 100 years old, born into slavery and twice-widowed, Mrs Leah Hector gained national and international celebrity for her extreme old age. When she died at the age of 108 in the alms-house, newspapers recounted the death of the 'oldest inhabitant', together with the fact that the

'old colored woman bequeathed her body to Dr. Wm. Corson' (*Reading Times* 1886). The details of Hector's relationship with William Corson are few. Corson (1806–1886) was a well-known physician in Philadelphia. He came from a family of physicians distinguished for 'their hostility to slavery and their adherence to the teachings of the Society of Friends'. An active participant in the 'underground railroad' in the Philadelphia area, ferrying escaping African-Americans northward, Corson also advocated the education of women physicians. Like his brother William, physician Hiram Corson (1804–1896), active in the abolition of slavery and the education of women physicians, apparently knew Leah Hector. In October 1883, Corson attempted to arrange a room for an 'old colored woman (114 years old) in the Alms House where the white women are'. The doctor reflected in his journal: 'Should I succeed, she will be the first one who had thus been favored. I will have her there, or I will publish the conduct of the Directors in reference to the colored paupers, the pauper colored women at least' (Meier 1889. 2:113). Leah Hector may well have shared the views of the writer in the *Christian Recorder* discussed earlier who supported anatomical dissection as essential to medicine and, moved by gratitude to her physicians, volunteered her own body. Like many nineteenth-century persons seeking to bequeath their remains to medicine, she was not permitted to make the gift. The elderly physician 'had no use for it' at the time she died and she was interred in the alms-house cemetery.

## BECOMING AN ANATOMICAL SPECIMEN

After Harriet Cole died and her body was moved to Hahnemann Medical College, the staff preserved her remains with injections of zinc chloride. After months of research, anatomist Rufus Weaver then patiently, painstakingly separated each somatic and sensory nerve from its surrounding tissues while keeping them attached to the trunks arising from the brain and spinal cord. He managed to keep the nerves from decay and from drying out by wrapping them in alcohol-soaked gauze. The 12 pairs of cranial nerves—'supported as nearly as possible in their natural position and relation by fine wires'—presented especially perplexing challenges. 'The base of the skull has to be laboriously and carefully chipped away, piece by piece, the greatest care being required to prevent the injury to the nerves, or their detachment at the point of exit through the dura mater'. After carefully removing the skull, Weaver removed the brain, filled it with curled hair, and closed it with stitches. He left the eyes attached to the optic nerves and gave them 'a hard injection' to keep them distended. When he was finished, he painted the nerves with white lead paint and mounted all of the delicate fibres using tiny pins on a black board. He mounted the brain case and the eyeballs, as well (Thomas 1889). Laboratory assistants likely disposed of the unwanted tissues and bones mixed together with remains from the dissecting room, either incinerated or buried in large boxes or barrels at a local cemetery (Guerassio 2007: 121–123). There was no mention of any religious service, no mourners saying goodbye to their friend or kin, no marker on her gravesite. Such sequences of postmortem physical and spiritual humiliation and violence completed a long arc of dehumanisation (Berry 2017).

Like the other specimens—wet and dry—in his collection, the preparation of the cerebrospinal nervous system underwent de-identification. It is highly unlikely that Weaver left his preparation unidentified out of concern for Harriet Cole's postmortem privacy or for the feelings of possible relatives. Instead, Cole's identity was deliberately erased precisely so that her nervous system could complete the transition from person

to anatomical specimen. To be useful for the study of normal anatomy, a body part can no longer represent a unique individual. As it was dissected and mounted, Harriet Cole's nervous system ceased being Harriet Cole's and become simply Human. No longer black and female, it was thus simultaneously dehumanised and Humanised; less person, more universal object.

This was (and is) conventional practice for nineteenth (to twenty-first) century anatomical preparations (Alberti 2011; Morgan 2009; Sappol 2002). John Shaw Billings, then director of the Army Medical Museum in Washington, DC, decried the popular attention to the relics of famous people when what mattered was not the specimen's identity but its scientific merit. Visitors to the Army Medical Museum (which was open to the public), for instance, often asked to see Guiteau's skeleton and were regularly disappointed when it was not on view. The curator would then offer

but a few words of explanation as to what the main purpose of the museum is, and the suggestion that one would not like to have his or her father's skull displayed and labeled with his name, no matter how great or infamous he may have been, is usually quite sufficient to satisfy the seeker.

Billings even argued that 'the rule should be to wait a hundred years before publicly labelling them with the names of the persons from whom they are derived' if that was ever seen as necessary (Billings 1888: 371).

In 1893 Weaver displayed his unique preparation of the human nervous system at the World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago. It received an exhibition medal and a blue-ribbon Premium Scientific Award. Beginning in 1902, accounts of this 'most remarkable anatomical model' appeared in the American popular press, alongside interviews with Weaver, who described the hardships he encountered 'guarding and explaining it to visitors' at the Columbian Exposition as more gruelling than making the dissection itself. He informed reporters that under no circumstances would he 'permit it to go to St. Louis. If broken or destroyed it could not be replaced' (*Los Angeles Times* 1902). Weaver's unique specimen continued to reap awards and praise. In 1909 the anatomist received the first honorary fellowship conferred by the Philadelphia Academy of Medicine (*Hopewell Herald* (Hopewell, NJ) 1909). In 1924 Weaver told reporters from his hometown that an engraving of the specimen hung in the Royal College of Surgeons in London: 'Although the rumor is untrue that I had been offered \$200 000 for the mounting by a London medical society, nevertheless', Weaver modestly observed, 'I venture to suggest that the piece is valuable to medical men throughout the country' (*The Evening Sun* (Hanover, PA) 1924). When the anatomist died at age 95 in 1936, obituaries published around the country celebrated his dissection of 'the complete nervous system of a human being' (*New York Herald Tribune* 1936).

## BECOMING HARRIET COLE

At the Hahnemann anatomy museum, the Columbian Exhibition, and in the engraving, the specimen bore the label 'Human Cerebro-Spinal Nervous System'. Unlike nearly all specimens preserved by Weaver and other anatomists, the preparation of the nervous system regained and lost and again regained its association with the individual who provided the anatomical material. For more than century and in different forums, the visibility of elements of her life—her sex, her race, her occupation and the circumstances of her availability—occurred in a piecemeal fashion; this was no linear development. In both professional

discourse and in popular media, the instability of Harriet Cole's personal details served multiple purposes.

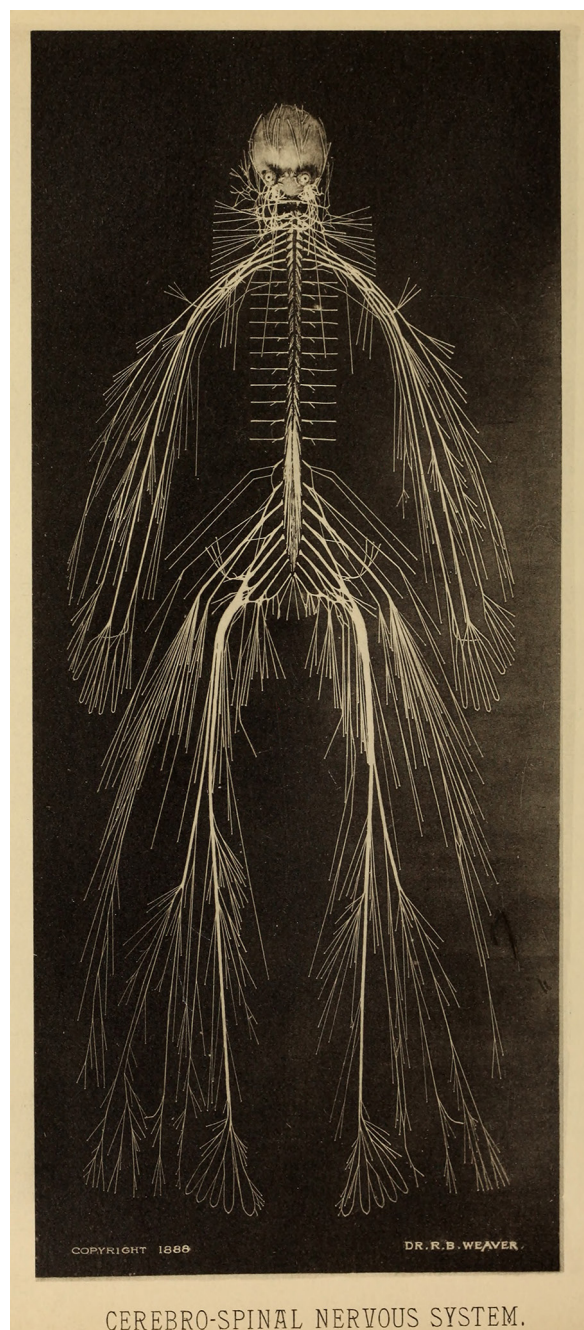
In September 1888 Weaver first presented his nervous system specimen at the convention of Pennsylvania state homeopathic physicians. Philadelphia newspapers covered the local story, emphasising the uniqueness of the preparation and the fact that 'no other college, hospital or museum has such a specimen'. The report described how Weaver, after research in Europe, succeeded in 'procuring the body of a colored woman who had died in a very emaciated condition' (*Philadelphia Inquirer* 1888). The *Chicago Tribune*, the *New York Times*, and papers in some seven states reprinted the *Inquirer* story, including the specimen's racial origins (*Chicago Tribune* 1888; *New York Times* 1888). Here, the authors included details about the source of the human material as part of the specimen's newsworthy background. Including Cole's race kept its identity safely othered for white audiences, whether procured under the 1883 Anatomy Act or stolen from a grave: no anxieties about a white body would disturb their readerships.

The first mention of the source of the specimen in the medical literature appeared in 1889. A R Thomas, anatomist and dean of the Hahnemann Medical College, shared details of Weaver's novel preparation of the nervous system in the *Hahnemannian Monthly*, including the fact that the anatomist chose 'a female subject about thirty-five years old, with moderate adipose development'. It is not clear why Thomas omitted the fact that the source was 'colored'. Racial identification when the subject or patient was not European-American was a standard practice in the clinical literature in the late nineteenth century. As the 1888 reference above to the emaciated condition of the source implies, minimal levels of fat facilitated easier dissection of the nerves. Thomas's article included perhaps the first photographs of the specimen (figure 1); newspapers and others would use the photographs in popular articles (Thomas 1889).

In July 1902 the *North American* (Philadelphia) published a feature article on the 'anatomical marvel' of the nervous system. The reporter described how the 'little professor' spent his days 'surrounded by bottles of horrible monstrosities, villainous sections of the human body, and preserved diseases'. In this story, the reporter identified the source of the specimen by name—but, ironically, by the wrong one. According to the report, Weaver spent months planning his dissection before he selected 'the cadaver of a woman who in life bore the name of Henrietta \_\_\_\_\_. She was about thirty-five years old, of good form and with a healthy development of adipose tissue.' (Why accounts circulated that she had a 'moderate' or 'healthy' amount of fat is puzzling) (*North American* (Philadelphia, PA) 1902; see also Bradford, Thomas Lindsley 1916: 33 q.v. Weaver). The *Los Angeles Times* reprinted the story, including the name Henrietta (*Los Angeles Times* 1902). Two years later, when the *Buffalo Courier* and the *Times Democrat* (New Orleans) reran the story, replete with a large photograph of the 'nerve skeleton', some 300 newspapers around the nation picked it up (*Buffalo Courier* 1904; *The Times Democrat* (New Orleans) 1904). One enterprising professor from the University of Minnesota, Dr L J Cooke, even used the image without crediting Weaver or Hahnemann to advertise his private institution for 'the treatment of all nervous affections of both men and women' (*Minneapolis Journal* 1904). None of the 1904 papers provided a name for the woman; most referred to the source as simply 'a thirty-five-year-old woman with healthy adipose tissue'. With this editorial choice, 'Henrietta' disappeared.

In 1915 when Hahnemann Medical College celebrated Professor Rufus Weaver's 50 years of teaching anatomy to





**Figure 1** A R Thomas, 'A New Preparation of the Nervous System', *The Hahnemannian Monthly* (February 1889), 24: plate between 64 and 65. Photo courtesy of the Legacy Center Archives, Drexel University College of Medicine. Public domain.

medical students, William Weed van Baun, one of Weaver's former students and a professor of paediatrics, hailed what he called 'the greatest and most wonderful dissection in all the world', that of the cerebrospinal nervous system. In his remarks at the Golden Jubilee celebration, he not only gave the specimen a first and last name—Harriet Cole—but also identified her as an African-American woman. Harriet Cole, van Baun informed the assembled physicians, alumni and students was 'a poor, ignorant negro [sic] woman, age 36 years, with no superfluous flesh or fat', who had 'greatness and world-renown forced upon her after death, by yielding up her entire Cerebro-Spinal Nervous System under the deft touch of the World's greatest Anatomist'

(:404–405). In his focus on Weaver as a remarkable anatomist, van Baun eschewed scientific neutrality and anonymity to contrast the human being's humble origins with the specimen's fame, a transformation of a black woman's body at the hands of a white man.

Nine years after Weaver's golden jubilee, a fresh run of newspaper articles appeared about the specimen and for the first time provided the woman's occupation. In 1924 George T Hook, a staff correspondent for the International News Service, authored an article describing Hahnemann Medical College's 'mounted human nervous system' as coming from 'a scrubwoman who had been employed at the Hahneman [sic] Hospital and who was considered by Dr. Weaver the ideal subject for his planned dissection'. It is not clear where Hook learnt that Harriet Cole was 'a scrubwoman', but it was a plausible attribution. The article contained many errors: Harriet Cole died in 1888 not 1916; Weaver's dissection was completed in 1889, not 1923 (Hook 1925). This misinformation did not prevent newspapers around the nation (including Pennsylvania, Ohio, New York, Kansas and Indiana) from running the story (or parts of it) over the next year. It is not surprising that errors and misattributions, at times, even complete inventions, multiplied over the years and in different popular media. The nerve skeleton and the person who provided the material enjoyed no stable or permanent historicity.

An interesting (and puzzling) example of Harriet Cole's plasticity was her appropriation by the Zion Lutheran Church of Indiana, Pennsylvania. In April 1926 the church exhorted people to bring a friend to church with a banner about spinal religion. The advertisement relayed the information that three decades earlier Hahnemann anatomist Rufus Weaver 'dissected a colored woman and took her whole nervous system, well mounded [sic], to the Chicago Exposition' (figure 2). Noting that the specimen was still preserved at Hanneman [sic], the ad assured potential attendees that 'We will not have her in Zion Lutheran Church tomorrow night', but promised an exhibit of three other spinal columns in a sermon followed by fellowship and singing (*Indiana Gazette* (Indiana, PA) 1926).

Weaver devoted his labours to anatomical dissection, specimen preparation and teaching medical students. He was not one for recording his notes and publishing his results. We do not know how he referred informally to the nervous system preparation he regarded as his most signal achievement. In 1924 when he was celebrated by the *Hanover Sun*, the paper quoted an article in the *Public Ledger* published in 1919 in which Weaver—in an apparent first—referred to the specimen by name: 'An engraving of Harriet, which is the name of the specimen, hangs in the Royal Surgeons' Society [sic] in London' (*The Evening Sun* (Hanover, PA) 1924). In 1929, when he recorded his last will and testament, Weaver's first bequest, after authorising his executor to pay his just debts and funeral expenses, was to give Hahnemann Medical College and Hospital 'all of my wet and dry specimens, including my dissection of the Cerebro Spinal Nervous System of Man, known as HARRIET'. Although the will was amended before his death in 1936, he kept the provision about his specimens, identifying only one by name (Harriet); this was the version that was picked up in numerous newspaper articles (City of Philadelphia PA Register of Wills 1936). Nowhere did he elaborate on the person from whom 'HARRIET' was made. We found no reference by Weaver to her work at Hahnemann College, her race, her last name or her request that she wanted to bequeath her body to the anatomists. Nevertheless, calling the specimen 'Harriet' more than three decades later suggests that Weaver maintained an unusual personal connection to the person whose remains he toiled over so long.



## BRING A FRIEND TO CHURCH

# Spinal Religion

Some thirty years ago Dr. Rufus Weaver, Professor of Anatomy at Hahnemann Medical School, Philadelphia, Pa., dissected a colored woman and took her whole nervous system, well mounded, to the Chicago Exposition. It took him a year and a half to do the work but the achievement was worth it. She is still preserved at Hahnemann.

**We will not have her in**

## Zion Lutheran Church

tomorrow night, but we will exhibit three twenty-five hundred year old spinal columns that were

**KING PROOF  
CROWD PROOF  
GOLD PROOF  
FIRE PROOF**

Whose they were and how they did it will be explained in the sermon, also whether they left any descendants and where they are,

## COME

**Good Singing  
Good Fellowship  
Good Start For Another Week  
Bring a Friend With You  
All Pavements Wide Enough For Two.**

Figure 2 'Spinal Religion', *Indiana Gazette*. 17 April 1926, 9. Public domain.

The popular press then developed its own narrative for Harriet Cole, for the first time including the idea that she had bequeathed her body to the medical college. A reporter for the *New York Herald Tribune* stated that the 'scrubwoman' had 'willed' her body to Hahnemann (*New York Herald Tribune* 1936). *Time* magazine, the first national publication that covered the story, further elaborated on Weaver's bequest in late August. According to the author, Cole, now labelled 'a big-hearted Negro' who worked in Hahnemann's dissecting rooms, was moved by Rufus Weaver's dedication to anatomy. 'She doubtless heard him complain about getting good specimens to dissect' leading to the fact that she 'willed her body to the hospital' (*Time* 1936). Describing Harriet Cole as a 'big-hearted Negro' comported with nostalgia for antebellum America, what one 1937 writer described as 'the big-hearted Southern negro [sic] of slavery times' (*Middlesboro Daily News* (Middlesboro, KY) 1937). This imaginative interpretation illustrates both enduring American

assumptions about race and a growing respect for medical science that made plausible the idea that even an African-American scrubwoman could benefit medical research by donating her body to anatomists. When the Baltimore *Afro-American* ran its version of the *Time* story on the nerve skeleton a few weeks later, the paper made no mention of Harriet's 'big-heartedness', preferring to record the fact that the white physician's death brought to light 'a fantastic story of medical research' made possible by a woman 'recalled only as Harriet' who 'willed her body to the hospital before she died' (*Afro-American* (Baltimore) 1936). The newspaper writer apparently found her willingness to assign her body to the doctors unremarkable.

### FROM MUSEUM SPECIMEN TO ARCHIVAL ARTEFACT

In the 1937 Hahnemann yearbook, newly minted physician Thomas Snyder acknowledged the extraordinary importance of the anatomist to the students at the medical college. 'Few in our time have done more for Hahnemann than Doctor Rufus B. Weaver, the creator of Harriet. To our class he was but a tradition, but a tradition of such strength that it is most fitting to note his passing in our annals' (*Medic* 1937). 'Harriet's' continued presence at the medical college connected incoming students to Hahnemann's illustrious past.

The specimen also continued to make news. In 1960 Hahnemann professor George Geckeler, one of the founders of the college's Institute for Cardiovascular Research, sought to restore the Harriet display after years of neglect. *Life* magazine, one of the nation's most popular weeklies, featured several photographs of 'Harriet's Celebrated Show of Nerves' (*Life* 1960). The article rehearsed the biography that Harriet Cole acquired over the years, omitting only that she had been a woman of colour. In *Life*, Harriet was a 'college scrubwoman', who 'eavesdropped' on Rufus Weaver's lectures to the medical students. Taking 'to heart his complaints about the shortage of corpses for study', she 'willed her body' to the anatomist. 'When she was alive', the magazine copywriter wrote, 'the eyes above stared in fascination at the cadavers'. Once 'resurrected', her eyes no longer evince her humanity. Instead they 'gleam vacantly' (figure 3). In another photograph, *Life's* photographer posed Geckeler and Harriet face to face, as the doctor inserts his finger into the specimen above the bulging eyes, probing Weaver's initial dissection (figure 4).

Unlike most anatomical specimens, Harriet Cole's nervous system remained on display at Hahnemann and today at its successor institution, Drexel University School of Medicine (Rogers 1998). In 2008 when the Hahnemann Library underwent renovation the specimen was relocated to Drexel University College of Medicine's Queen Lane campus. No longer used in medical teaching, 'Harriet still oversees current medical students; she is posted just outside the bookstore in the Student Activities Center' (Grimm 2010). In a 2012 blog, Harriet Cole was featured as 'Drexel's Longest-Serving Employee'. According to reporter Katie Clark, the specimen had become an aesthetic object rather than a medical specimen. 'She's more like a piece of art, now, but her presence still commands respect' (Clark 2012).

In her 2021 incarnation, Harriet Cole appeared as the subject of a lengthy post for the website Atlas Obscura. (A search of the name Harriet Cole in a search engine will lead to many posts and blog entries that discuss aspects of her story). For her article on 'the mystery of Harriet Cole', Jessica Hester combined details from multiple earlier stories to provide the conventional narrative of the Cole-Weaver story, namely that Harriet Cole was 'a Black woman who worked as a maid or scrubwoman in a university laboratory at Hahnemann Medical College, died in the late 1800s, and donated





**Figure 3** 'Harriet's Celebrated Show of Nerves', *Life*. 8 February 1960, 59. Photograph by Sam Nocella. Public domain.

her body to the medical school. Her nervous system, the story goes, was dissected by Weaver, then preserved and mounted as a teaching tool and masterpiece of medical specimen preparation' (Hester 2021). Hester's article emphasised the fact that nearly all the details



**Figure 4** 'Harriet's Celebrated Show of Nerves', *Life*. 8 February 1960, 60. Photograph by Sam Nocella. Public domain.

of the conventional narrative—except for Weaver's preparation of dissected nervous system that gained fame as a uniquely valuable anatomical specimen—rested on supposition and suggestion rather than archival documentation.

Interviewed for Hester's article, Matt Herbison, archivist at the Legacy Center Archives at Drexel University College of Medicine, and archival researchers Alaina McNaughton and Brandon Zimmerman acknowledged that they faced evidentiary ambiguities telling the Cole-Weaver story at their own institution. The display label written at some point between 1975 and 2005 for the 'Harriet' specimen no longer fit the powerful narrative of medical racism and appropriation rendered highly visible in popular works (Harriet Washington's *Medical Apartheid* and Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*) on the implications of structural racism for American medicine and public health (Washington 2006; Skloot 2010).

In August 2021 the 'Harriet' specimen in the College of Medicine's Student Activity Center received new labels (Herbison 2022). The new text explicitly acknowledges how the Harriet Cole story, and the few facts that ground her story, has been told differently over time. 'Complicating our understanding of Cole is a century's worth of unconfirmable stories. Most make the same claim: before she died, Harriet Cole willed her body to Dr. Weaver for the purpose of the making this dissection. While these accounts make for an exciting story, they are likely false' (Legacy Center, Drexel University 2022). The Legacy Center is currently at work on a new website that restores Harriet Cole as a person in her own right and recognises the archival omissions and absences that render her story suggestive and incomplete (Herbison 2022).

Harriet Cole's dissected nervous system today still hangs in the Student Activities Center, near ping-pong tables and the students' kitchen. Others dead from racialised medical violence in Philadelphia also rest uneasily. Amid the George Floyd killing and the extraordinary effort to confront racialised violence and death at the hands of the state, controversy at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology intensified over its continuing possession and display of the Samuel G Morton Cranial Collection. The nineteenth-century collection of more than 1300 human skulls provided 'scientific evidence' used to promote white supremacy. In 2019 when the Penn & Slavery Project uncovered evidence that the collection included more than 50 skulls that once belonged to formerly enslaved persons in Cuba and the USA, Dr Christopher Woods, newly appointed director of the Penn Museum, announced plans for repatriation and burial of the skulls, and the institution apologised for its use of the Cranial Collection, (Kelleher 2021; for more recent steps see <https://www.penn.museum/sites/morton/>). The same month, Philadelphians heard the news that the Penn Museum's collections continued to house bones from African-American children killed in the 1985 police bombing of the group MOVE in the city. Moreover, the families of the dead children who had been given the remains of their deceased loved ones for burial learnt that bones were retained for research and teaching, even used in an internet course on forensic anthropology (Dickey 2022).

Reckoning with the dead and their remains continues to challenge our collective thinking about what the living owe the dead, especially the unconsenting and exploited dead (Fabian 2010; Redman 2016). New voices and novel approaches may lead the way. Margaret Elise Sanford offers an 'intervention into the physical, public landscape in Philadelphia that begins to mark sites of resistance against the body trade and display' (Sanford 2022). Moving outside the archive, Sanford focuses on the need to memorialise physical landmarks of the traffic in bodies, including the Lebanon Cemetery Scandal of 1882. Given the 'postmortem exploitation and exhibition' of marginalised communities, Sanford argues for making visible the

long-standing resistance to such violation that continues in the 2021 protests against the Penn Museum. To this discussion, we add the Pennsylvania Anatomy Act that made possible the state conscription of the bodies of the poor and unclaimed, such as Harriet Cole, regardless of their own wishes for their final dispositions.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have highlighted the ways in which the representations of Harriet Cole's identity and agency played into assumptions about race (the 'big-hearted Negro'), racial erasure (omitting markers of racial identity) and medical science, especially anatomical procurement of bodies via donation rather than state appropriation. 'Harriet Cole' is a complex creation, one that over time and space has served multiple purposes, from a monument to an anatomist's skill to a human-interest story for newspaper readers and website visitors. Although we have little access to knowledge about her human existence, we can restore some aspects of her legacy to the historical record. As anthropologist Lynn Morgan has pointed out in her study of the history of embryological specimens, trying to erase humanity from human body parts is a social and technical process that, depending on the viewer, is not always successful (Morgan 2009). Thus it is now possible to view Harriet Cole's remains on display at Drexel School of Medicine as a remarkable dissection of a human's nervous system and use it to self-test the names of nerves. It is possible at the very same time to see an individual human's tissue and know that it came from a real, once living person. And, since the display now has a label telling a story about Harriet Cole, it is now even possible to identify her by name and to feel sadness, even grief, at the idea she was abused beyond death (Hester 2021).

We acknowledge the multilayered history of Harriet Cole named on the death certificate that placed her at Hahnemann Medical School in 1888. She lived in a city marked, as most cities were, by racial tensions and persistent, debilitating racism, but we know very little about her life (McNaughton 2018). Time simply erases people, leaving us to imagine what she experienced, felt and believed. But we do know that she died of tuberculosis and parts of her body were dissected and were once displayed as an anonymised anatomical specimen. Her nervous system joined the hundreds of thousands of unidentified body parts used in medical education and research over the centuries. She is unusual because we know her name. We do think it is implausible that she gave her body to Hahnemann Medical School. Instead, Weaver likely acquired it under the provisions of the 1883 Anatomy Act. He then subjected her body to the disintegrative violence inherent in the process of dissection and her spirit to a disrespectful assault on her autonomy. The later narrative of her supposed donation then further erased the appropriation of her body not by just ignoring it, but by turning that appropriation into a voluntary act of selfless subjugation to the needs of a white doctor, enhancing his reputation and piquing medical students' curious gazes. And the story of her 'donation' and Weaver's dissection continues to intrigue anatomists and the public alike (Nwaogbe, Schmidt, and Tubbs 2018).

But suppose that Harriet Cole did choose to give her body to the medical school when she died in 1888. We must see that is historically possible, given the stories that some black and white people did, in fact, make that choice in the 1880s. We think that there is at least enough credibility in Mrs Leah Hector's story to warrant including the donation narrative among the rest of those told about Harriet Cole's body. Weaver still destroyed her body in search of her nerves, an act that many today simply cannot accept as anything other than abhorrent, repulsive and transgressive. Nevertheless, tens of thousands of students in the health sciences have

found dissecting a human being to be fascinating, engrossing and a deeply meaningful journey into death and identity. Dissection per se is just another path to the inevitable physical dissolution of the body. What matters today is knowing that a person chooses that path, that loved ones accept their decision and that the process is carried out with respect. Knowing that a body was donated changes the relationship between the dissector and the cadaver from an appropriation to a gift. The once living person gave permission to proceed. So, too, does donation change the relationship between the anatomical specimen and the viewer. If the body was given, at least the original dissection had a legitimacy we might recognise, even if explicit permission to preserve a body part in perpetuity was never part of the bargain. If Harriet Cole chose to give her body to the medical school, could we respect that decision and at the same time emphasise the deeply troubling history of bodies stolen, cut up and made into specimens without their consent? No doubt Harriet Cole experienced racism and subjugation during her life. The question then shifts to the extent to which an African-American woman could have chosen a path contrary to contemporary expectations and mores for the disposition of her body. We believe that was possible, although unlikely; others may not. Can we look on the display of her nervous system and explore *all* the many conflicting and uncomfortable histories it represents?

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