

Dr. Cartwright Describes “Negro Diseases” (1851)

Source: William Katz (1995). *Eyewitness: A Living Documentary of the African American Contribution to American History*.

Dr. Samuel Cartwright was a Southern author who wrote about medical issues. These excerpts are from an article in *De Bow's Review*, published in September, 1851. In the article, Cartwright identifies and discusses two “psychological diseases” which he claimed to observe among enslaved Africans in the United States South.

A. Drapetomia, or the disease causing Negroes to run away

“Drapetomia is from [a Greek word meaning] a runaway slave, and [another Greek word meaning] mad or crazy. It is unknown to our medical authorities, although its diagnostic symptom, the absconding from service, is well known to our planters and overseers. . . . The cause in most of the cases, that induces the Negro to run away from service, is as much a disease of the mind as any other species of mental alienation, and much more curable as a general rule.”

“Before Negroes run away, unless they are frightened or panic-struck, they become sulky and dissatisfied. The cause of this sulkiness and dissatisfaction should be inquired into and removed, or they are apt to run away or fall into Negro consumption. . . . The experience of those [overseers and owners] on line and elsewhere, was decidedly in favor of whipping them out of it, as a preventive measure against absconding, or other bad conduct. It is called whipping the devil out of them.”

B. Dysaesthesia Aethiopica - A Disease Peculiar to Negroes - Called by Overseers, “Rascality”

“From the careless movements of the individuals affected with the complaint, they are apt to do mischief, which appears as intentional. but is mostly owing to the stupidity of mind and insensibility of nerves induced by the disease. Thus they break, waste, and destroy everything they handle - abuse horses and cattle, - tear, burn or rend [rip] their own clothing, and, paying no attention to the rights of property, steal others, to replace what they have destroyed. . . They raise disturbances with their overseers and fellow-servants, and seem insensible to pain when subject to punishment. . . .”

Questions

1. What are the “psychological diseases” Cartwright reports?
2. Can you come up with other explanations for these “symptoms”? Explain.
3. What does Cartwright’s report tell us about attitudes toward slavery and African Americans in the United States during the pre-Civil War era?