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Oliver Wendell Holmes, Racism, and Remembrance

SCOTT H. PODOLSKY

SUMMARY: Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. has long been a celebrated figure at Harvard Medical School (HMS) and in the history of medicine more generally. And yet in part on account of Holmes's putative link to eugenics, but especially on account of his role as dean in the dismissal of the first three African American students at HMS in 1850, his name has recently become associated with systemic racism as well. In October 2020, the Oliver Wendell Holmes Society at HMS (one of the society "homes" to which students are assigned at admission) was renamed the William Augustus Hinton Society, in honor of the pioneering African American syphilologist. This paper examines the shifting depiction of Holmes as well as Holmes's considerations of hereditary determinism and race over the course of his long career in the nineteenth century as a test case concerning the evolving evaluation of historical figures in the history of medicine.

KEYWORDS: Oliver Wendell Holmes, eugenics, scientific racism, race, Harvard Medical School

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In 1982, Harvard Medical School (HMS) celebrated its bicentennial, featuring as part of the festivities *An Evening with Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes*, a one-act play featuring one of its most recognizable and quotable luminaries.[1] That same year, academic leaders of the school formulated the twenty-five-student pilot program of what would become the New Pathway, a significant pedagogical shift at the school based in part on small-group tutorials designed to stimulate active learning. All New Pathway students would eventually be grouped into one of four student "societies" in which such learning would be based. The pilot program appears to have been named the Oliver Wendell Holmes Society even before the overall program received its final designation.[2] By 1987, the New Pathway began in full, with the Holmes Society joined by Cannon, Castle, and Peabody Societies, each named after a prominent white male physician.[3]

In 2020, in response to ongoing evidence of racial injustice in our country, HMS and Harvard School of Dental Medicine (HSDM) students petitioned to rename the Holmes Society, particularly in view of Holmes's apparent failure of leadership as dean in 1850 to recognize the humanity of the three Black students—Daniel Laing Jr., Isaac Snowden, and Martin Delany—expelled from HMS in response to white student protest, and in view of Holmes's purported

[1] "The Bicentenary Celebrated: Four Days in October," *Harv. Med. Alumni Bull.* 56 (Fall 1982): 10–12.

[2] "Alumni Day," *Harv. Med. Alumni Bull.* 57 (Summer 1983,): 26–27; "Oliver Wendell Holmes Society," *Harv. Med. Alumni Bull.* 58 (Summer 1984): 9.

[3] "The Path Now Taken," *Harv. Med. Alumni Bull.* 61 (Fall/Winter 1987): 17–21.

espousal of eugenics.[4] In response, HMS Leadership in 2020 asked its Subcommittee on Artwork and Cultural Representations to deliberate not only on the renaming of the Holmes Society, but on the "guiding principles concerning why we name features across our campus and under what circumstances we might consider changing an eponymous feature."[5] The committee concluded that such features serve as a source of *inspiration*, as a symbol of the school's collective *aspirations*, and as an opportunity for the school to communicate its values to the world around it and especially to its own staff, students, and faculty.[6] On September 23, 2020, the Oliver Wendell Holmes Society was renamed the William Augustus Hinton Society, in honor of the syphilologist, researcher, teacher, and first African American full professor at Harvard University.[7]

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[4] "Renaming Holmes Society at HMS/HSDM," https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeGz-HFs9NGE1vQxGSuAbaJQh_LRap8jzkvNadrtL1PtrMX-A/viewform.

[5] Dean George Q. Daley to Members of the HMS and HSDM Community, September 23, 2020, http://links.mkt3779.com/servlet/MailView?ms=MjM4Mzk1ODIS1&r=MjY5MzYyOTcyNTM2S0&j=MTgyMTQwMjk5NQS2&mt=1&rt=0.

[6] "Guiding Principles for Artwork and Cultural Representations," https://hms.harvard.edu/about-hms/campus-culture/diversity-inclusion/guiding-principles-artwork-cultural-representations.

[7] M. R. F. Buckley, "Winds of Change," https://hms.harvard.edu/news/winds-change; on Hinton, see Ángel Rodriguez, M. William Lensch, and Scott H. Podolsky, "William A. Hinton (1883–

HMS has hardly been the only academic or medical institution grappling with complex questions concerning symbols, figureheads, and the renaming of such "spaces" as buildings, monuments, societies, and awards.[8] Reasons for renaming range from the opportunity to communicate present-day values and priorities to the creation of an optimal working and educational space for staff, students, and faculty. Concerns about renaming range from the potential for presentism, erasure, and the forgetting of potentially important lessons to the multiple "costs" entailed in such deliberations and change. Most institutional deliberations on the

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1959): Diagnosing and Confronting Racism in the Medical Profession," *J. Racial Ethnic Health Disparities* 2021, https://doi.org/10.1007/s40615-021-01102-8.

[8] See, e.g., "Yale University Report of the Committee to Establish Principles of Renaming (November 21, 2016)," https://president.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/CEPR_FINAL_12-2-16.pdf; Stanford University, "Proposed Principles and Procedures for Renaming Buildings and Other Features at Stanford University (February 20, 2018)," https://campusnames.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2018/02/Renaming-Principles.pdf; University of Minnesota, "Report of the Task Force on Building Names and Institutional History (February 2019)," http://university-history.dl.umn.edu/sites/university-history.dl.umn.edu/files/report_of_the_task_force_on_building_names_and_institutional_history.pdf. Medical and scientific figures have often figured prominently in such discussions; see, e.g., recent discussions of William Osler, as in Nav Persaud, Heather Butts, and Philip Berger, "William Osler: Saint in a 'White Man's Dominion,'" *Can. Med. Assoc. J.* 192 (2020): E1414–16.

matter have focused on the need for an appreciation of context—the context in which actions took place, the context of such particular actions in the overall life of an individual, the context in which an original naming was conferred, and the context in which we consider such symbols and figureheads today. Several reports have emphasized that in any such deliberation, due diligence needs to be employed and sufficient evidence needs to be gathered to support a renaming recommendation.

Moreover, multiple reports have called for due humility in our assessments.[9] This, in turn, should perhaps lead historians as well as those making such assessments to a stance of reflexivity. If every era appears to choose (explicitly or not) its symbols and figureheads on the basis of reigning values, then what do such choices tell us about our own evolving values and priorities? And perhaps, why are certain aspects of biography celebrated, and others neglected, in these evolving histories, and how is historical nuance at times foreshortened in the celebration or critique of such individuals?

This paper represents an attempt to bring these questions of context to bear on Holmes, at the same time that it uses Holmes as a test case for such deliberations and especially to engage with our own evolving considerations of such historical figures. It begins with an overview of the evolving remembrance of Holmes since his own lifetime, all the way through the naming—and renaming—of the Holmes Society. It next represents my attempt to apply due diligence in proceeding thematically through sections on Holmes and eugenics (if largely to dismiss such

[9] "Yale University Report" (n. 8), p. 2; University of Minnesota, "Report of the Task Force" (n. 8), p. 2.

concerns), Holmes and scientific racism, Holmes's own actions and comments in the guise of "peacemaking" (in which he most clearly exhibited, and even instrumentally deployed, an existing racism), and his later apparent contrition over some aspects of his racism. It then concludes with reflections on the roles of context, "presentism," and self-reflection itself in framing our investigations and uses of historical figures in medicine. Ultimately, while I'm willing to offer my opinion in the conclusion on the renaming of the Holmes Society (I served on the committee that unanimously voted to suggest this), it would be impossible to offer a simple, generalizable algorithm for such renaming considerations. But it is far easier to demonstrate the shifting contexts in which individuals live and evolve, and in which they're remembered, and to advocate for a historical reflexivity concerning our own evolving assessments.

Remembrance in Transition:

Why Was There a Holmes Society, and Why the Petition to Rename It?

Holmes was born in 1809 (for context, the same year as both Darwin and Lincoln), and died in 1894. A member of the HMS class of 1836, he was the school's long-standing Parkman Professor of Anatomy, and Dean of HMS from 1846 to 1853.[10] Famed for his demonstration (predominantly through library research and canvassing) of the contagiousness of puerperal fever

[10] Technically, Holmes became Parkman Professor of Anatomy and Physiology in 1846, with the title shortened to Parkman Professor of Anatomy in 1871.

in 1843,[11] for his coining of such terms as "anesthesia,"[12] and for his critiques of homeopathy and overly aggressive "heroic" medicine alike,[13] Holmes has been considered a central figure in the nineteenth-century attempt to place orthodox American medicine on a rational, scientific footing.[14]

As a writer and poet, Holmes would extend beyond his *U.S.S. Constitution*–saving poem, "Old Ironsides," and giving Boston its moniker as the "hub" of the solar system, to become one of the most popular American authors of the nineteenth century, his Breakfast-Table series (first appearing in the *Atlantic Monthly*, which he named) serving to break new literary ground, his fictional "medicated novels" like *Elsie Venner* and *Guardian Angel* foreshadowing depth psychology and the notion of multiple levels of consciousness.[15] Physician-writer Arthur Conan

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[11] Amalie M. Kass, "A Private Pestilence: Holmes and Puerperal Fever," in *Oliver Wendell Holmes: Physician and Man of Letters*, ed. Scott H. Podolsky and Charles S. Bryan (Sagamore Beach, Mass.: Science History Publications, 2009), 39–58.

[12] "Anesthesia," in Podolsky and Bryan, *Holmes* (n. 11), 120–21.

[13] John S. Haller, "Oliver Wendell Holmes's 1842 Lectures on 'Homeopathy and Its Kindred Delusions': A Retrospective Look," in Podolsky and Bryan, *Holmes* (n. 11), 23–38.

[14] Charles E. Rosenberg, "Medical Therapeutics and its Kindred Delusions: Oliver Wendell Holmes on Drugs, Disease, and Rational Care," in Podolsky and Bryan, *Holmes* (n. 11), 59–70.

[15] Michael A. Weinstein, "Oliver Wendell Holmes's Depth Psychology: A Reconstruction," in Podolsky and Bryan, *Holmes* (n. 11), 93–103.

Doyle would name his incomparable detective after him.[16] William Osler considered him "the most successful combination which the world has ever seen, of the physician and the man of letters."[17]

Indeed, it would be hard to overstate the esteem in which Holmes would be held as the very ideal of this combination, from the time of his death onward, in both medical and literary settings, from Cambridge and Boston outward. Physician Edward Waldo Emerson, son of Holmes's dear colleague, Ralph Waldo Emerson, eulogized in 1909 on the centennial of Holmes's birth: "Cambridge, Harvard, Boston, our Country, the civilized world shall long and gratefully remember him,—helpful doctor, versatile, ingenious writer, brilliant, with a wit keen but sweet-tempered,—good, sincere, human man."[18] On the centennial of Holmes's 1882

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[16] Russell Miller, *The Adventures of Arthur Conan Doyle* (London: Harvill Secker, 2008), 54, 110.

[17] William Osler, "Oliver Wendell Holmes," in *An Alabama Student and Other Biographical Essays* (London: Oxford University Press, 1908), 55–67, quotation on 57.

[18] Edward Waldo Emerson, "Address on Oliver Wendell Holmes, April 27, 1909" [reprinted from *Proceedings of the Cambridge Historical Society, IV*], Oliver Wendell Holmes biofile, Center for the History of Medicine, Countway Medical Library. In his three-volume 1905 history of HMS, Thomas Francis Harrington devoted thirty-one pages in the "eminent alumni" section to Holmes, the most attention devoted to any faculty member. Wrote Harrington at the time, "In my wide search for material for this history of our School, I have interviewed alumni ranging from the oldest living graduate down to the youngest teachers in the School. Of the many

retirement from HMS, Richard Warren would remind readers of the *Harvard Medical Alumni Bulletin* that when it comes to the "broadly compassionate" Holmes, "all of us are his beneficiaries."[19] In between, and further afield, Holmes would be held up as "an exemplary humanitarian," having lived "a life of even, sweet-temperateness, of kindness, and toleration."[20] When New York University Press published a nine-hundred-page bibliography of Holmes in 1953, the Boston-based *New England Journal of Medicine* (perhaps speaking for a city still smarting from the loss of Babe Ruth to the Yankees decades earlier) cheekily reminded New York that while grateful for the "alien" city's contribution to Holmes-related scholarship, it

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reminiscences given me, none surpass in number, sweetness and enthusiasm those of Holmes's old pupils. No general estimate would satisfy them or do him justice." In Thomas Francis Harrington, *The Harvard Medical School: A History, Narrative and Documentary*, vol. 3 (New York: Lewis, 1905), 777.

[19] Richard Warren, "Oliver Wendell Holmes, H.M.S. '36," *Harv. Med. Alumni Bull.* 56 (Spring 1982): 20–26, quotations on 20, 23. Among the numerous other admiring articles written since Holmes's death, see, e.g., "Medical Tributes to Dr. Holmes," *Boston Med. Surg. J.* 131 (1894): 423–25; David L. Dickson, "The Legacy of Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes," *JAMA* 208 (1979); 97–101; Park J. White, "Medical Leonardo of Boston, Oliver Wendell Holmes, M.D. (1809–1894): An Evaluation of Versatility," *Perspect. Biol. Med.* 24 (1981): 411–21.

[20] Brenda Halpert, "The Legendary Dr. Holmes," *Mass. Physician* 37 (March 1978): 12–15, quotation on 14–15; Philip Q. Roche, "Famous Men in Medical History: Oliver Wendell Holmes," *J. Mich. State Med. Soc.* 30 (1931): 34–39, quotation on 39.

"must be remembered by all borrowers . . . that the amiable autocrat belongs in the Back Bay . . . and must be returned to his owners."[21]

By the early twenty-first century, fears that Holmes might be forgotten were alleviated by a resurgence of Holmes-related scholarship, including Peter Gibian's *Oliver Wendell Holmes and the Culture of Conversation*, placing skepticism and iconoclasm at the very center of Holmes's character, and Holmes himself at the very center of America's nineteenth-century debate over the fixity of ideas and the importance of open, iterative, even jarring conversation and debate.[22] As recently as 2009, on the bicentennial of Holmes's birth, Charles Bryan and I edited a celebratory

[21] "Bibliography of Oliver Wendell Holmes," *N. Engl. J. Med.* 249 (1953): 505. In the article, Holmes's own former contributions to the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* were hailed as "like transfusions of verbal erythrocytes to that aspiring publication." For the bibliography itself, see Thomas Franklin Currier, *A Bibliography of Oliver Wendell Holmes*, ed. Eleanor M. Tilton (New York: New York University Press, 1953).

[22] Peter Gibian, *Oliver Wendell Holmes and the Culture of Conversation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Other significant works include William C. Dowling, *Oliver Wendell Holmes in Paris: Medicine, Theology, and the Autocrat of the Breakfast Table* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2006); Michael A. Weinstein, *The Imaginative Prose of Oliver Wendell Holmes* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006). For such earlier fears of consignment to "oblivion," see Edward O. Otis, "The Medical Achievements of Dr. Holmes," *Boston Med. Surg. J.* 161 (1909): 951–57, quotation on 957.

volume, *Oliver Wendell Holmes: Physician and Man of Letters*, intending to offer "a balanced perspective on Holmes the physician and Holmes the man of letters."[23]

Amid such fond remembrances, racism rarely surfaced as a topic of inquiry. William Sloane Kennedy, in a biography of Holmes written while Holmes was still alive, pointed critically to Holmes's conservative antebellum anti-abolitionist statements, while Eleanor Tilton, in her definitive (for now) 1947 biography of the "Amiable Autocrat," briefly pointed to the potential intersection of Holmes's early "prejudice" and his later anti-abolitionist stance.[24] But these were rare occurrences. The most prominent focus I have found on Holmes's "own gentle racism" appears in Edwin P. Hoyt's 1979 biography, *The Improper Bostonian*, with almost no citations to support his arguments.[25] In 2009, given my own focus on Holmes as skeptic and therapeutic rationalist, I was admittedly comfortable pushing race and racism to a future, albeit important, topic of inquiry, noting in the preface to our volume: "Much remains to be said and written about Holmes—for example, about his positions on race, gender, hereditary predispositions, or comparative anatomy and evolution."[26]

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[23] Podolsky and Bryan, *Holmes* (n. 11), xiii.

[24] William Sloane Kennedy, *Oliver Wendell Holmes: Poet, Littérateur, Scientist* (Chicago: Thompson and Thomas, 1883), 181–85; Eleanor M. Tilton, *Amiable Autocrat: A Biography of Oliver Wendell Holmes* (New York: Henry Schuman, 1947), 7.

[25] Edwin P. Hoyt, *The Improper Bostonian* (New York: William Morrow, 1979), chaps. 14 and 15; for "gentle racism," see 159.

[26] Podolsky and Bryan, *Holmes* (n. 11), xiv.

Within five years, however, as Harvard and other institutions began to grapple with their own historical connections to slavery and racism, some of Holmes's actions and words could increasingly be considered in a different light.[27] More immediately, in 2014, in the aftermath of the deaths at the hands of police of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, medical students from across the country formed White Coats for Black Lives.[28] Drawing further attention to the linked history of structural racism in medicine and society, the organization began in 2018 to produce an annual Racial Justice Report Card. They have consistently given HMS its lowest grade in response to the category: "The physical space of the medical school acknowledges the contributions of alumni and other physicians of color (through plaques, statues, portraits, and building names) and does not celebrate racist or white supremacist individuals." The report has specifically noted that "the physical space explicitly celebrates racist/white supremacist individuals. . . . Oliver Wendell Holmes, after whom one of the Harvard Medical School academic societies is named, was a former dean of Harvard Medical School. When, in 1850,

[27] See, e.g., Craig Steven Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

[28] Dorothy Charles, Kathryn Himmelstein, Walker Keenan, and Nicolas Barcelo, for the White Coats for Black Lives National Working Group, "White Coats for Black Lives: Medical Students Responding to Racism and Police Brutality," *J. Urb. Health* 92 (2015): 1007–10.

white students protested the admission of three Black students to Harvard Medical School, Holmes led the faculty in expelling the Black students."[29]

Then, in June 2020, in the context of the "inextricable connection between the murders of—Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade and the countless other Black lives unjustly lost to racism—and the lack of representation of Black people in academia including Harvard Medical School and School of Dental Medicine," HMS/HSDM students petitioned the school to rename the Holmes Society, garnering approximately 850 signatories (including staff, students, faculty, and alumni) by mid-July.[30] In support of this proposal, they noted that on the official HMS website, "there is a lack of mention that [Holmes's] social commentary often centered on the promotion of eugenics and his violence toward Black and Indigenous peoples." Further, they noted in response to Holmes's actions as dean in 1850 that it is "clear Holmes did not acknowledge the basic rights and humanity of Black medical students." As such, the "Holmes name has far too long been accepted as a toxic fixture in our academic environment, and it is time for our HMS/HSDM community to demonstrate that the lives of Black students truly do matter."

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[29] See "White Coats 4 Black Lives Racial Justice Report Card, 2019: Full Report with Supplementary Materials," 81. https://whitecoats4blacklives.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/RJRC-2019-Full-Report-Final-8.28.19.pdf.

[30] Meera S. Nair, "Harvard Medical and Dental Students Petition to Rename Holmes Society," *Harvard Crimson*, July 12, 2020, https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2020/7/12/holmes-society-petition/.

Holmes had thus gone from "an exemplary humanitarian" to a "toxic fixture." Yet if the racism he displayed in his lifetime had long been ignored or downplayed or deferred for later analysis, the present moment likewise forces us to attempt to be rigorous in our own examination of Holmes's purported toxicity. It would be too easy to take quotes and actions out of context, to once again substitute caricature for a fuller description of Holmes. This paper—drawing extensively on Holmes's own words, in context—thus next examines Holmes in relation to eugenics, race, and racism, respectively, before turning to his own apparent (if limited) contrition and evolution.

Holmes and Eugenics

In 1883, Francis Galton coined the term "eugenics," roughly meaning "well-born." Grounded in notions of hereditary determinism, and apparently supported by genealogies of "defective" families, eugenics by the first decades of the twentieth century was a global "discipline," with particular prominence in the United States.[31] Most critically, it could be translated into action, whether through the encouragement of breeding among the apparently well-born or the

[31] Daniel Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (New York: Knopf, 1985); Diane B. Paul, *Controlling Human Heredity, 1865 to Present* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1995); Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers in Better Breeding in Modern America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Paul Lombardo, *Three Generations, No Imbeciles: Eugenics, the Supreme Court, and* Buck v. Bell (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

restriction of breeding—notably, through sterilization—among apparent defectives. In 1927, Supreme Court justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., in the case of *Buck v. Bell*, (in)famously wrote the decision that "three generations of imbeciles is enough," permitting Carrie Buck's sterilization in Virginia and representing perhaps the most visible expression of eugenic thought in interwar America.

Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. has been considered an important influence on Holmes Jr.'s eugenic thought and a central proponent of eugenics in his own right. As Adam Cohen has written, in an article cited in the HMS/HSDM student petition, "Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. . . . acclaimed writer, and father of the future Supreme Court justice—was one of the first American intellectuals to espouse eugenics. . . . Holmes believed eugenic principles could be used to address the nation's social problems. In an 1875 article in *The Atlantic Monthly*, he gave Galton an early embrace, and argued that his ideas could help to explain the roots of criminal behavior."[32] In this telling, there is a direct link between the elitist and self-proclaimed Brahmin Holmes and his son's later beliefs and actions.

Yet there was a far more complicated history, itself reflective of the complicated relationship between Holmes Sr. and Holmes Jr.[33] Most critically, we should regard Holmes Sr.'s

[32] Adam S. Cohen, "Harvard's Eugenics Era," *Harvard Mag.*, March–April 2016; see also Adam S. Cohen, *Imbeciles: The Supreme Court, American Eugenics, and the Sterilization of Carrie Buck* (New York: Penguin, 2016), 240.

[33] Multiple biographies of Holmes Jr. refer to the complicated nature of the relationship, making the degree to which Holmes Jr. reflected, versus reacted against, his father's thinking hard to

focus on hereditary determinism as one form of what twentieth-century sociologists have deemed "medicalization" (or the transformation of social problems into medical ones) and particularly as a means of absolving "sick" individuals of responsibility for their actions.[34] Directly turning away from his own minister father's fierce Calvinism and the notion of predestination in heaven, and from his own year of aborted studies at Harvard Law School, Holmes focused ever more on heredity and apparent predestination on earth.[35] Reflecting Holmes's nineteenth-century positioning of the authority of medicine vis-à-vis the clergy and the law, psychopathology, in

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decipher. See, e.g., Mark DeWolfe Howe, *Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes:* Vol. 1, *The Shaping Years* (1957; repr., Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014), 15–21; Sheldon M. Novick, *Honorable Justice: The Life of Oliver Wendell Holmes* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1989), 14; G. Edward White, *Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes: Law and the Inner Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 9–12.

[34] There is an extensive literature on medicalization and its consequences, both positive and negative. See, e.g., Peter Conrad and Joseph W. Schneider, *Deviance and Medicalization: From Badness to Sickness* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992); Peter Conrad, *The Medicalization of Society: On the Transformation of Human Conditions into Treatable Disorders* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).

[35] On the broader context of nineteenth-century hereditarian thinking, see Charles E. Rosenberg, "The Bitter Fruit: Heredity, Disease, and Social Thought in Nineteenth Century America," *Perspect. Amer. Hist.* 8 (1974): 189–235.

particular, was to be contrasted with sin on the one hand, and legal responsibility on the other. The goal, for Holmes, was to replace damnation and punishment with sympathetic treatment.

This seems, in fact, the key theme underlying his most famous "medicated" novel, *Elsie Venner: A Romance of Destiny*, relating the tragic story of the destructive title character, who would today likely be diagnosed with schizophrenia and whose mother was literally bitten by a snake while Elsie was in utero. Midway through the book, Holmes has medical student Bernard Langdon (taking time off from his studies while earning money as a teacher, in the same village as Elsie) write his former medical professor, "Do you think there may be predispositions, inherited or ingrafted, but at any rate constitutional, which shall take out certain apparently voluntary determinations from the control of will, and leave them as free from moral responsibility as the instincts of lower animals? Do you not think there may be a *crime* which is not a *sin*?"[36] The professor responds, "Crime and sin, being the *preserves* of two great organized interests, have been guarded against all reforming poachers with as great jealousy as the Royal Forests. It is so easy to hang a troublesome fellow! It is so much simpler to consign a soul to perdition . . . than to take the blame on ourselves for letting it grow up in neglect and run to ruin for want of humanizing influences!"[37] Later in the book, Holmes gets closer to the notion of hereditary predisposition per se, with the village's Doctor Kittredge (apparently standing in for

[36] Oliver Wendell Holmes, *Elsie Venner: A Romance of Destiny*, vol. 1 (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1861), 273.

[37] Ibid., 280.

Holmes) speaking with another of the book's chief characters, Reverend Honeywell, likely standing in for Holmes's own minister father. As Kittredge notes,

> We have nothing but compassion for a large class of persons condemned as sinners by theologians, but by us as invalids. We have constant reasons for noticing the transmission of qualities from parents to offspring, and we find it hard to hold a child accountable in any moral point of view for inherited bad temper or tendency to drunkenness,—as hard as we should to blame him for inheriting gout or asthma. . . . We are constantly seeing weakness where you see depravity. . . . We used to be as hard on sickness as you were on sin. We know better now.[38]

Still closer to notions of "breeding," Kittredge continues,

> I have heard of . . . a famous cattle-breeder, who used to say he could breed to pretty much any pattern he wanted to. Well, we doctors see so much of families, how the tricks of the blood keep breaking out, just as much in character as they do in looks, that we can't help feeling as if a great many people hadn't a fair chance to be what is called "good," and that there isn't a text in the Bible worth keeping always in mind than that one, "Judge not, that ye be not judged."[39]

Such hereditarian notions were thus to be linked to compassionate care rather than to breeding—or restrictions on breeding—per se.

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[38] Holmes, *Elsie Venner* (n. 36), 2:114–16. Peter Gibian makes an excellent case for Dr. Kittredge's serving as a stand-in for Holmes (and especially for Holmes's "conversational" approach to therapy); see Gibian, *Holmes and the Culture of Conversation* (n. 22), 126, 156–57, 297. Tilton, on the other hand, equates the Professor in the novel with Holmes; see Tilton, *Amiable Autocrat* (n. 24), 261. While such attributions are of course somewhat conjectural, both characters express a similar approach to hereditary illness in the novel.

[39] Holmes, *Elsie Venner* (n. 36), 2:116.

A similar ethos runs through "Crime and Automatism," the 1875 *Atlantic Monthly* article referenced by Cohen, in which Holmes supposedly "gave Galton an early embrace." Critiquing "instinct" (as exemplified by the vengeful lynch mob), theology, and the law alike in their response to apparent crime, Holmes again notes,

> In place of the doctrine of predestination, in virtue of which certain individuals were to become or remain subjects of wrath, we are discussing organic tendencies, inborn idiosyncracies, which, so far as they go, are purely mechanical, and are the best excuse that can be pleaded for a human being, exempting him from all moral responsibility when they reach a certain extreme degree, and exculpating him just so far as they are uncontrollable, or unenlightened by any moral sense.[40]

His invocation of Galton appears in the midst of a long review of the work of French physician Prosper Despine: "If genius and talent are inherited, as Mr. Galton has so conclusively shown; if honesty and virtue are heirlooms in certain families . . . why should not deep-rooted moral defects and obliquities show themselves, as well as other qualities, in the descendants of moral monsters?'"[41] And Holmes's response, invoking Despine, is a compassionate, medicalized one: "It is plain enough from M. Despine's doctrines as to the mechanism of crime, especially in the worst cases, that he would substitute a moral hospital for a place of punishment. Moral idiocy is

[40] Oliver Wendell Holmes, "Crime and Automatism" (1875), in *Pages from an Old Volume of Life: The Works of Oliver Wendell Holmes*, Standard Library ed., vol. 8 (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1892), 322–60, quotation on 327.

[41] Ibid., 343–44.

the greatest calamity a man can inherit, and the subjects of it deserve our deepest pity and greatest care."[42]

In Holmes's focus on hereditary predisposition or even predestination, he thus appears to have been fighting against his own father's Calvinist notions of predestination, rather than intentionally laying the groundwork for anything that would result in intentional breeding or sterilization. And I have found no evidence that Holmes discussed such issues in class throughout his tenure at Harvard.

This admittedly does not absolve Holmes from the later purposes to which such medicalization and hereditary determinism could be applied. But to argue that "Holmes believed eugenic principles could be used to address the nation's social problems" would appear to anachronistically apply the term "eugenic" to his hereditarian musings. Moreover, it would seem to conflate Holmes's initial intentions with the potential later impact of his writing. We can each judge Holmes in this respect by which aspect we find more relevant.

Holmes, Race, and Scientific Racism

Of course, such questions concerning heredity easily shaded into those concerning race. Holmes came of age during the very hardening of race as a scientific concept in the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century, and at the height of debate over "monogenesis" versus

[42] Ibid., 344.

"polygenesis," or the single versus separate origins of races.[43] While environmental explanations for apparent racial difference had been articulated from the late nineteenth century onward, a distinctly "American school" of ethnology would seemingly support the notion of biologically separate and unequal races throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, most centrally through the efforts of Philadelphia physician and naturalist Samuel Morton. Amassing and measuring an enormous collection of human skulls, Morton constructed an apparent hierarchy of average cranial capacity and hence racial superiority, with "Caucasian" at the top, "Ethiopian" at the bottom, and "[Native] American" in between.[44] Publishing his *Crania Americana* in 1839, Morton would find devoted supporters in surgeon Josiah Nott, George Gliddon (an Egyptologist), and Harvard's own Louis Agassiz in the 1840s and 1850s.[45] By the time of Morton's death in 1851, according to Thomas Gossett, he "had convinced most of the scientific

[43] See, e.g., William Stanton, *The Leopard's Spots: Scientific Attitudes toward Race in America, 1815–1859* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); Thomas F. Gossett, *Race: The History of an Idea in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963); Bruce Dain*, A Hideous Monster of the Mind: American Race Theory in the Early Republic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002); Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Bold Type Books), 2016.

[44] Samuel George Morton, *Crania Americana: Or, a Comparative View of the Skulls of Various Aboriginal Nations of North and South America, to Which Is Prefixed an Essay on the Varieties of the Human Species* (Philadelphia: J. Dobson, 1839).

[45] On Nott, Gliddon, and Agassiz, see Stanton, *Leopard's Spots* (n. 43).

community, at least, that the theory of separate species among human races was the most logical explanation for the differences between races."[46]

Where do we locate Holmes in all of this? Holmes would later very publicly admit in his popular Breakfast-Table series that he had grown up racist. His father, Reverend Abiel Holmes, had spent seven years as a minister in Georgia before his later relocation to Cambridge, and Holmes grew up with *The Negro Plot* (likely referencing the reprint of Daniel Horsmanden's account of a feared slave revolt in New York City in 1741) on his bookshelf.[47] As Holmes recounted in 1872, the volume "helped to implant a feeling in me which it took Mr. Garrison a good many years to root out."[48]

And yet, as early as from the mid-1840s, Holmes was more than willing to dispute racist conclusions in the setting of apparently shoddy data. Holmes considered himself a proponent of careful data acquisition (as he utilized to demonstrate the contagiousness of puerperal fever) and the "numerical method" in medicine, though he was aware of the potential pitfalls concerning the

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[46] Gossett, *Race* (n. 43), 63.

[47] John T. Morse Jr., *Life and Letters of Oliver Wendell Holmes*, vol. 1: *The Works of Oliver Wendell Holmes*, Standard Library ed., vol. 14 (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1896), 303; Tilton, *Amiable Autocrat* (n. 24), 7. See also Daniel Horsmanden, *The New-York Conspiracy; or, A History of the Negro Plot* (New York: Southwick and Pelsue, 1810).

[48] Oliver Wendell Holmes, *The Poet at the Breakfast-Table* (Boston: James R. Osgood, 1872), 30.

interpretation of such data.[49] Based on the 1840 census, physician Edward Jarvis published in the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* in 1842 the finding that free Black men and women appeared to have a far greater tendency to insanity than enslaved Black men and women, a finding quickly taken up by such southern leaders as John Calhoun as a defense of the seemingly protective aspects of slavery.[50] Jarvis himself, however, soon reexamined the figures, finding problems in the census data themselves and publishing a series of retractions of his own initial conclusions.[51] In the controversy that followed, the Massachusetts Medical Society performed its own analysis, with Holmes a member of a five-person committee that published a critique of the original census data and attempted to contribute to the refutation of the relationship between freedom and insanity among the "colored" population.[52]

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[49] See, e.g., Holmes, "The Position and Prospects of the Medical Student" (1844), in *Currents and Counter-Currents in Medical Science: With Other Addresses and Essays* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1861), 279–322, esp. 300–301.

[50] Edward Jarvis, "Statistics of Insanity in the United States," *Boston Med. Surg. J.* 27 (1842): 116–21; Stanton, *Leopard's Spots* (n. 43), 58–65.

[51] Edward Jarvis, "Statistics of Insanity in the United States" *Boston Med. Surg. J.* 27 (1842): 281-82; Jarvis, "Insanity among the Colored Population of the Free States," *Amer. J. Med. Sci.* 7 (1844): 71–83.

[52] John Homans, John Ware, Ephraim Buck, O. W. Holmes, and E. Jarvis, "[Report of the Committee Appointed . . . to Investigate the Subject of Insanity among the Colored Population of the State of Massachusetts]," *Med. Commun. Mass. Med. Soc.* 7 (1845, Appendix): 90–95.

At the same time, though, Holmes was happy to praise Morton for his apparently rigorous craniometric analyses. In 1849, he wrote to the Philadelphia naturalist, critiquing the vagueness of botanist Charles Pickering's attempted contribution to the question of polygenesis, terming Pickering's *The Races of Man and Their Geographical Distribution* (1848) "amorphous as a fog, unstratified as a dumpling and heterogeneous as a low priced sausage."[53] In contrast, as Holmes continued to Morton, "I am delighted with the severe and cautious character of your own most extended researches, which, from their very nature, are permanent data for all future students of Ethnology, whose leader on this side of the Atlantic, to say the least, you have so happily constituted yourself by well-directed and long-continued efforts."[54] And such praise by Holmes for Morton's cautious data gathering would be cited in an essay included in Nott and Gliddon's own widely circulated 1854 volume, *Types of Mankind*.

The late 1840s and early 1850s, at the height of the polygenesis debate, appear to have represented the height of Holmes's own engagement with the biological notion of race, at a time

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[53] Oliver Wendell Holmes to Samuel Morton, November 27, 1849, as quoted in Stanton, *Leopard's Spots* (n. 43), 96.

[54] Oliver Wendell Holmes to Samuel Morton, November 27, 1849, as quoted in Henry S. Patterson, "Memoir of the Life and Scientific Labors of Samuel George Morton," in Josiah Clark Nott and George R. Gliddon, *Types of Mankind: Or Ethnological Researches, Based upon the Ancient Monuments, Paintings, Sculptures, and Crania of Races and upon Their Natural, Geographical, Philological, and Biblical History* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, 1854), xlvii; see also Gossett, *Race* (n. 43), 59.

of unrepentant and often racialized collecting of human remains.[55] Between 1846 and 1868, Holmes would donate at least seventy-five items to HMS's Warren Anatomical Museum (WAM).[56] Fifteen of these were wooden models. Twenty-four were comparative anatomy specimens. But two entries in the 1870 WAM catalogue stand out for this analysis, both dating to the late 1840s. In 1847, he donated to the "male genital organs" section of the "healthy anatomy" component of the museum a penis "from a negro," stating that "it measures in length 10 ¾ in., and in circumference 5 ¼ in.; displacing [8 ounces] of water."[57] There is no further description attached, and the penis itself is no longer in the collection. A year later, Holmes donated an

[55] On such collecting, see Ann Fabian, *The Skull Collectors: Race, Science, and America's Unburied Dead* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

[56] Figures derived from J. B. S. Jackson, *Descriptive Catalogue of the Warren Anatomical Museum* (Boston: A. Williams, 1870). Note that Holmes likewise contributed at least five specimens to the Boston Society for Medical Improvement, which merged into the WAM in the 1870s. See J. B. S. Jackson, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Boston Society for Medical Improvement* (Boston: William D. Ticknor, 1847).

[57] Jackson, *Descriptive Catalogue of the Warren Anatomical Museum* (n. 56), p. 74. Such focus on the size of the "African" penis ("preparations of them are preserved in most anatomical museums") dates back at least to Charles White, *An Account of the Regular Gradation in Man, in Different Animals and Vegetables, and From the Former to the Latter* (London: C. Dilly, 1799), 61; Gossett, *Race* (n. 43), 47–50.

"African" skull, "strongly characterized" (and likewise not extant in the collection).[58] These appear to be Holmes's only two WAM entries, out of seventy-five, related to race, and the timing of their donation is likely telling, as it appears that Holmes particularly engaged with the meaning of such data during this time.

In early December 1850, in his annual series of lectures on anatomy, Holmes devoted three lectures to the "Races of Mankind."[59] The outline notes for the lectures, along with the "authorities" cited to support them, appear in Figure 1.[60] On the one hand, we see Holmes beginning with "modes of examining crania." We see him citing Morton and Agassiz. We see him referencing Peter Camper, who published on the distinction of races based on facial angle,

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[58] Jackson, *Descriptive Catalogue of the Warren Anatomical Museum* (n. 56), 702.

[59] Holmes likewise appears to have given a Lyceum Lecture on "Races" in 1849–50, though Tilton is able to provide no context to the lecture; see Tilton, *Amiable Autocrat* (n. 24), 439. He appears also to have given at least one lecture on race at the medical school the prior year, in December 1849, having thanked Morton in the above-referenced letter of November 27, 1849, for a "catalogue of crania" before that lecture. No notes or outline for the lecture have been found. See Currier and Tilton, *Bibliography of Oliver Wendell Holmes* (n. 21), 531.

[60] Oliver Wendell Holmes, "Lectures on Anatomy and Physiology to Students at the Harvard Medical School, 1850–1882," vol. 1 (1850–51), H MS b 28.2, 9 vols., Center for the History of Medicine, Countway Medical Library. I am grateful to Chris Willoughby for first pointing me to these lecture notes, for his insights concerning them, and for valuable discussion regarding scientific racism more generally at HMS.

and devoting nearly half of the first lecture to "transcendental anatomy," most likely as described by Robert Knox, who likewise focused on racial distinctions (especially between Celts and Saxons).[61] On the other hand, we see Holmes repeatedly reference British physician James Cowles Prichard, who prominently argued for the unity of descent and the kinship of the races.[62] We see him reference Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, who had pointedly refused to rank races along any axis of value, and Thomas Smyth, whose *Unity of the Human Races* had been published earlier in 1850.[63]

[61] Gossett, *Race* (n. 43), 69–70, 95–97.

[62] Ibid., 54–56.

[63] Thomas Bendyshe, trans. and ed., *The Anthropological Treatises of Johan Friedrich Blumenbach* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, & Green, 1865); Thomas Smyth, *The Unity of the Human Races Proved to Be the Doctrine of Scripture, Reason, and Science: With a Review of the Present Position and Theory of Professor Agassiz* (New York: George P. Putnam, 1850).

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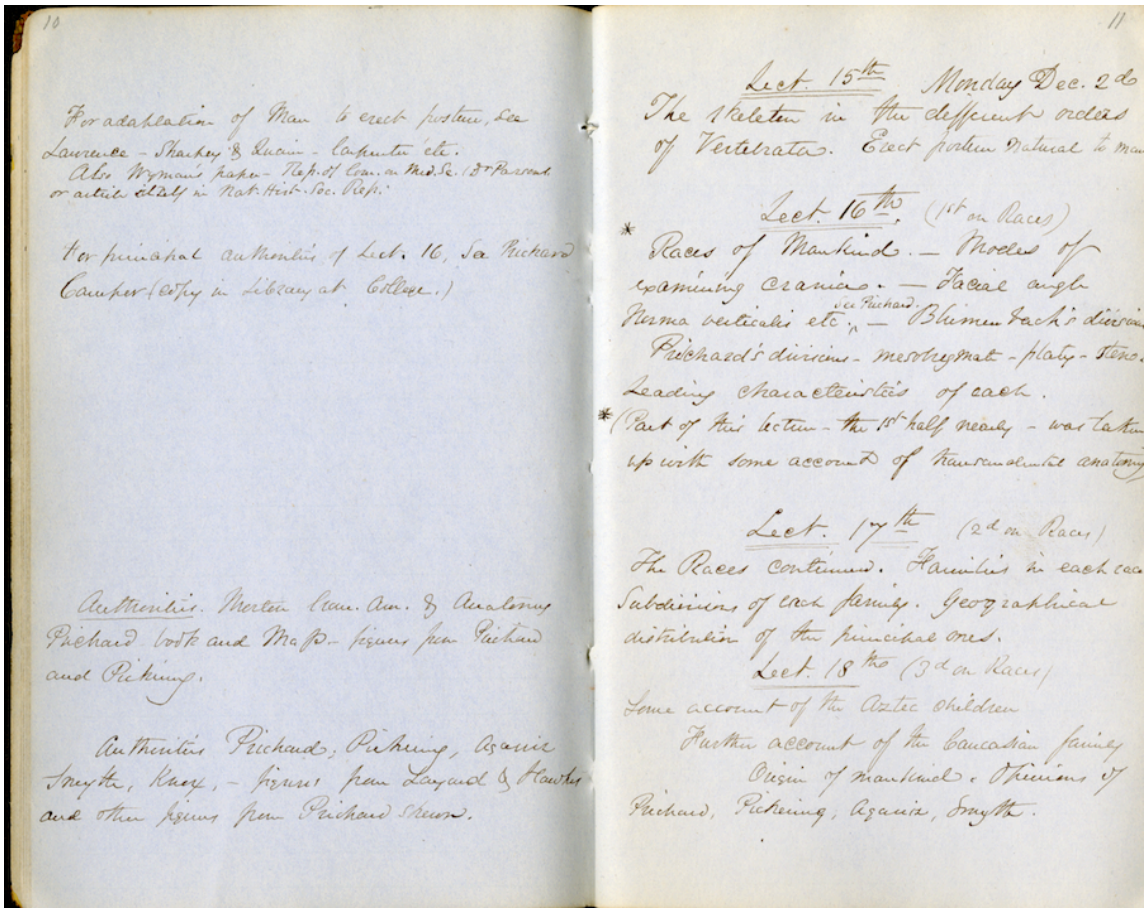

Figure 1. Oliver Wendell Holmes's outlines for lectures 16–18 ("1st on Races," "2nd on Races," "3rd on Races," along with adjacent page listing "authorities" cited) for the 1850–51 academic year, in Oliver Wendell Holmes, "Lectures on Anatomy and Physiology to Students at the Harvard Medical School, 1850–1882," vol. 1 (1850–51), H MS b 28.2, 9 vols., Center for the History of Medicine, Countway Medical Library.

What exactly did Holmes communicate, and where exactly did he stand? We have no direct lecture notes from that year. But the controversy (discussed in the next section) that would erupt the following week over the presence of three Black medical students attendant at the lectures may be telling. One anonymous writer in the *Boston Daily Journal* would assert that "a portion, at least, of the medical professors at the school, do not hesitate to avow their opinion of

the inferior capacity of the negro race."[64] Another, however, likely pointing to Holmes, replied, "A single professor has indeed mentioned the alleged inferiority of the African race; but, if the kind and considerate language in which the allusion was made, and the touching tribute to the virtues and excellences of that race, which accompanied the remark, could be here given, they would be found to do honor to the heart as well as the tongue of one of whom American science and American letters are alike justly proud."[65] Holmes himself, whether on account of the controversy that would follow, or otherwise, appears to have significantly scaled back from such lectures in his extensive anatomy courses, with nothing again approaching an overt, three-part series on the "races of mankind." In 1851–52, over the course of seventy-eight lectures, there appears to be nothing on race.[66] The only partially verbatim transcript we have of Holmes's

[64] Doris Y. Wilkinson, "The 1850 Harvard Medical School Dispute and the Admission of African American Students," *Harv. Libr. Bull.* 3 (Fall 1992): 13–27, quotation on 14; Nora Nouritza Nercessian, *Against All Odds: The Legacy of Students of African Descent at Harvard Medical School before Affirmative Action, 1850–1968* (Boston: Harvard Medical School, 2004), 18.

[65] Wilkinson, "1850 Harvard Medical School Dispute" (n. 64), 16; Nercessian, *Against All Odds* (n. 64), 20.

[66] Oliver Wendell Holmes, "Lectures on Anatomy and Physiology to Students at the Harvard Medical School, 1850–1882," vol. 2 (1851–52), H MS b 28.2, 9 vols., Center for the History of Medicine, Countway Medical Library. The Countway's holdings are admittedly incomplete but include his lecture outlines (with some volumes containing the outlines for more than one year's

anatomical lectures, twenty-eight pages of notes taken by Edward A. Whiston in (likely) 1859, goes into minute detail concerning the bones of the skull, face, and teeth—all ripe for racial interpretation—with no mention of race.[67] Then, after an admittedly substantial twenty-year gap in retained lecture outlines between 1851–52 and 1871–72, and after no mention of race in the 1871–72 series, we see a nearly annual lecture (amid over a hundred lectures for the course, each year) related in one way or the other to the "crania of different races" (as the lecture was labeled for the 1874–75 series).[68]

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lectures) for the 1850–51, 1851–52, 1871–72, 1873–74, 1874–75, 1875–76, 1876–77, 1877–78, 1879–80, 1880–81, and 1881–82 academic years.

[67] Oliver Wendell Holmes, "Lectures on Anatomy [as recorded by Edward Andem Whiston in likely 1859]," HMS C 9.4, Center for the History of Medicine, Countway Medical Library. James Clarke White recalled that Holmes gave a talk before the Mercantile Library Association in February 1854 on the "Races of Mankind," though Currier and Tilton suggest this was instead a medical school lecture; cf. James Clarke White, *Sketches of My Life, 1833–1913* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1914), 65; Currier and Tilton, *Bibliography of Oliver Wendell Holmes* (n. 21), 531–32.

[68] Oliver Wendell Holmes, "Lectures on Anatomy and Physiology to Students at the Harvard Medical School, 1850–1882," H MS b 28.2, 9 vols., Center for the History of Medicine, Countway Medical Library. See, e.g., lecture 31 for 1873–74, lecture 31 for 1874–75, lecture 33 for 1876–77, lecture 30 (on "Ethnological crania") for 1879–80. I again thank Chris Willoughby for his insights regarding such lectures.

Overall, looking at the existing data regarding Holmes's teaching career, it's hard not to conclude that for such a prominent anatomist and teacher, at the height of ongoing debate over the nature of race and human genealogy, Holmes was relatively quiet regarding the matter, contributing little original research and publishing almost nothing, despite his copious writing output throughout this time. His lectures, whether on skulls or genitalia, appear from his outlines and existing notes to have focused on minute structural detail, rather than broad anthropological considerations. That said, there are enormous evidentiary gaps, and we can certainly read racist notions into his correspondence with Morton, some of his collecting, and likely some of his teaching, the latter of which continued long after the height of the monogenesis/polygenesis debate of the 1840s and 1850s. The potential impacts of such actions upon his students and the public are easy to imagine, if difficult to quantify.

Holmes as Would-Be "Peacemaker": Evidence and Uses of Racism

It is in his guise as would-be "peacemaker" that we see Holmes most dramatically exhibit an underlying racism.[69] The 1850 episode concerning the first African American students at HMS—and the expulsion of such students for the sake of maintaining apparent unity at the school—has received the most attention to date. But it would be in an 1855 talk, in an attempt to maintain *national* unity, in which Holmes would most visibly apply notions of what nineteenth- and

[69] On "peacemaker," see Tilton, *Amiable Autocrat* (n. 24), 225.

twenty-first-century readers alike would likely regard as white supremacy, with respect to both African Americans and Native Americans.

1850: HMS and the Admission—and Expulsion—of Daniel Laing Jr., Isaac Snowden, and Martin Delany

In the fall of 1850, the Harvard medical faculty received two letters, one from a local clergyman and the other from the American Colonization Society, asking if two Black men, Daniel Laing Jr. and Isaac Snowden, could be admitted to Harvard Medical School so that both could practice medicine in Liberia. The faculty, headed by Holmes, discussed both men in early November and voted to accept them, waiving the fees for Laing Jr. and with Snowden's to be paid for by the Colonization Society.[70] Soon thereafter, a third Black man, Martin Robison Delany, applied in person at Dean Holmes's office. The remarkable Delany (among many other things, a notable abolitionist and coeditor of *The North Star* with Frederick Douglass) had applied to and been rejected by multiple medical schools and brought seventeen letters of recommendation from

[70] Harvard Medical School Archives, Medical Faculty Minutes, vol. 2, 1847–67, Center for the History of Medicine, Countway Medical Library (hereafter "HMS Archives"); Wilkinson, "1850 Harvard Medical School Dispute" (n. 64), 13, 18–19; Philip Cash, "Pride, Prejudice, and Politics," *Harv. Med. Alumni Bull.* 54 (December 1980): 20–25; Nercessian, *Against All Odds* (n. 64), 9–10. The faculty voted four (including Holmes) in favor, two opposed, for Laing Jr., and four (including Holmes) in favor, one opposed, for Snowden.

physicians in Pittsburgh and Allegheny, Pennsylvania, as well as three letters from clergymen. After the meeting, Dean Holmes accepted Delany as well.[71]

However, on December 10 (it should be noted, the week after Holmes's lectures on "Races"), sixty students met to discuss the Black students. Thirty-four signed a petition resolving "that we have no objection to the education and elevation of blacks, but do decidedly remonstrate against their presence in College with us."[72] They further noted that "we cannot consent to be identified as fellow-students, with blacks; whose company we would not keep in the streets, and whose society as associates we would not tolerate in our houses." Twenty-six students signed a petition in opposition to these thirty-four students, protesting that "they would feel it a far greater evil if, in the present state of public feeling, a medical college in Boston could refuse to this unfortunate class any privileges of education, which it is in the power of the profession to

[71] Nercessian, *Against All Odds* (n. 64), 10–11.

[72] HMS Archives (n. 70); Wilkinson, "1850 Harvard Medical School Dispute" (n. 64), 21; Nercessian, *Against All Odds* (n. 64), 13. The students noted that the presence of such Black students would be "highly detrimental to the interests, and welfare, of the Institution of which we are members, calculated alike to lower its reputation in this and other parts of the country, to lessen the value of a diploma from it, and to diminish the number of its students." Projecting to the future, they continued that "we feel our grievances to be but the beginning of an evil, which, if not checked will increase, and that the number of respectable *white* students will, in future, be in an inverse ratio to that of *blacks*."

bestow."[73] The faculty, concerned "that the intermixing of the white and black races in their lecture rooms, is distasteful to a large portion of the class and injurious to the interests of the School," allowed concerns over the "irritation" and "distraction" ("more general and serious than might have been apprehended," and hence interfering with the students' eventual capacity for "being useful to those who require their assistance") among the class to outweigh those over "justice" and voted to permit Laing Jr., Snowden, and Delany to finish their term in March 1851 but to not permit them to complete their education at HMS.[74] Essentially, the three men were expelled.

The actions of Holmes can admittedly be contextualized, if not justified, by reference to events at HMS and in Boston that year. Holmes's own HMS diploma had been signed in 1836 by seven HMS professors, including John Webster, professor of chemistry.[75] In the summer of 1850, months before Holmes admitted HMS's first Black students, Webster had been publicly hanged for the murder of fellow physician (and HMS benefactor) George Parkman.[76] Holmes

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[73] HMS Archives (n. 70); Wilkinson, "1850 Harvard Medical School Dispute" (n. 64), 22; Nercessian, *Against All Odds* (n. 64), 14.

[74] HMS Archives (n. 70); Wilkinson, "1850 Harvard Medical School Dispute" (n. 64), 23–26; Nercessian, *Against All Odds* (n. 64), 22, 53–54. The faculty voted four (including Holmes) in favor, two opposed.

[75] Oliver Wendell Holmes diploma, GA 38, Center for the History of Medicine, Countway Medical Library.

[76] Cash, "Pride, Prejudice, and Politics" (n. 70), 20.

had been called as witness for both the prosecution and the defense.[77] Moreover, as Peter Gibian notes, "especially in his role as Dean—fearful that the virulent public hostilities aroused in Boston just at this time by the Fugitive Slave Law might spill over into his academic realm and tear it apart—Holmes was not a political crusader."[78] In this telling, Holmes appears less as racist for his time than as one who was unwilling to stand up—as HMS/HSDM students noted in their petition—for the rights and humanity of Black students in the interests of expediency and in a self-given role of protecting the fragile union of the HMS class.[79] But Holmes's "peace-making" would take on a more overtly racist form five years later.

1855: Holmes and the Oration Delivered before the New England Society

By 1855, Holmes appears to have been less afraid of personal controversy or debate—that same year saw him update his 1843 address on the contagiousness of puerperal fever, engaging in acrimonious public exchanges with critics of his thinking on the matter.[80] But with the country heading toward potential civil war, he feared disunion nationally. As Gibian portrays him,

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[77] Tilton, *Amiable Autocrat* (n. 24), 201–2.

[78] Gibian, *Holmes and the Culture of Conversation* (n. 22), 176.

[79] After the Civil War, Black students would be admitted to HMS in 1868 (with the faculty minutes silent on the matter), while HSDM, that same year, pioneered in the admission of Black students to schools of dental medicine in the United States. See https://perspectivesofchange.hms.harvard.edu/.

[80] Kass, "Private Pestilence" (n. 11), 53–56.

Holmes would eventually serve as the leading proponent in the nation of an ongoing exchange of ideas among opponents, exemplified by his later sitting at the table at Boston's Saturday Club, with, for example, Louis Agassiz on one side and Ralph Waldo Emerson on the other;[81] one can imagine Holmes, in this depiction, hoping for friends and the nation to reason their way to the end of slavery. In parallel, Eleanor Tilton describes Holmes as a "Websterian," referring here not to John but to Daniel Webster, whose Seventh of March (1850) speech supported the Compromise of 1850 and helped to forestall national disunion, while angering abolitionists for its tolerance of existing (if geographically delimited) slavery.[82]

Holmes's wife Amelia was an ardent abolitionist, Holmes brought home *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) for his children to read (and, apparently, weep over), and Holmes considered that "in a little club of ten physicians I rather think I occupy the extreme left of the liberal side of the house."[83] Yet as Gibian relates, for Holmes, iterative conversation was indicative of personal and

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[81] Gibian, *Holmes and the Culture of Conversation* (n. 22), 5, 116–18; Tilton, *Amiable Autocrat* (n. 24), 238–42.

[82] Tilton, *Amiable Autocrat* (n. 24), 224.

[83] On Amelia Holmes and abolition, see Novick, *Honorable Justice* (n. 33), 15; White, *Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes* (n. 33), 14–15. On Holmes's bringing home *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, see Catherine Drinker Bowen, *Yankee from Olympus: Justice Holmes and His Family* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1944), 106. On Holmes as a self-described "liberal," see Holmes to James Russell Lowell, November 29, 1846, in Morse, *Life and Letters of Oliver Wendell Holmes* (n. 47), 298.

national health alike;[84] and while Amelia Holmes "refused to consider such questions [concerning abolition] complicated," Holmes as of 1855 regarded abolitionism as expressed by the likes of Horace Greeley and William Lloyd Garrison as an explicit attempt to provoke hostility and disunion, with conversation (and perhaps further compromise and progress) itself closed off in the process.[85]

As Tilton writes in her biography of Holmes, on December 22, 1855, Holmes "addressed the New England Society in New York City and expressed a criticism of the extreme abolitionists and the Maine Law for prohibition."[86] Tilton gently continues, "His heart *was* in the right place; but his head, when it came to politics, was incredibly innocent. He liked the role of peacemaker and thought it a suitable one for the poet and lecturer."[87] Discussing the controversy that would follow, she concludes, "A few mild paragraphs in the middle of an innocuous, rather windy and provincial after-dinner speech were misrepresented and distorted in paper after paper."[88] Tilton did yeoman's archival work in producing her biography of Holmes; but she, like Holmes and any of us, was of course of her own time.

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[84] Gibian, *Holmes and the Culture of Conversation* (n. 22); Gibian, "Doctor Holmes: The Life in Conversation," in Podolsky and Bryan, *Holmes* (n. 11), 71–92.

[85] For the Amelia Holmes quote, see Novick, *Honorable Justice* (n. 33), 15.

[86] Tilton, *Amiable Autocrat* (n. 24), 224.

[87] Ibid., 225.

[88] Ibid., 226.

The printed version of Holmes's talk runs to over thirty pages, and much of his talk was indeed a long-winded, "familial" celebration of the Pilgrims and the character of New England and its people.[89] Having drawn his audience into this warm embrace, Holmes prepared them for his challenges to temperance and the most vituperative (to him) expressions of abolitionist discourse. Holmes was to be followed that night by the poet and noted abolitionist John Pierpont. And in keeping with Gibian's depiction of Holmes as one eager to toss ideas into the arena, Holmes offered, "If there is a trace of questionable conservatism in any of my remarks, bear with me kindly; the antidote will follow close upon the poison."[90] Then, after spending a few pages on what would turn out to be a prescient critique of prohibition, Holmes turned to "the great question in which the destinies of the whole country are involved": namely, slavery.[91]

Holmes began by framing "this detested social arrangement of our neighbors" as follows: "There is hardly need of saying that we all agree in saving every inch of American soil we fairly can for freedom, and reducing our involuntary participation in slavery to the minimum consistent with our existence as a united people. The question is, whether New England, bound up with a group of confederate sovereignties, cherishes the right temper and uses the right language to her

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[89] See Oliver Wendell Holmes, "Oration," in *The New England Society Orations: Addresses, Sermons, and Poems Delivered before the New England Society in the City of New York, 1825–1885*, vol. 2, ed. Cephas Brainerd and Eveline Warner Brainerd (New York: Century Co., 1901), 267–302, esp. 272, 274.

[90] Ibid., 287.

[91] Ibid., 295.

slaveholding sister States."[92] Switching genders, and certainly maintaining a familial sensibility, Holmes got still more to the point: "Shall we of the North feel and act to these Southern men as equals and brothers; shall we treat them always in the spirit of Christian love; or shall we proscribe, excommunicate, anathematize, vituperate and irritate them until mutual hatred shall ripen into open warfare?"[93]

For Holmes, all of this invocation of caution was in the service of the preservation of the Union and may have been expressed in pragmatic tones. But there is no doubt that Holmes's willingness to make such a delay, to foster familial ties to engender debate and constitutional deliberation as a long-term approach to the dissolution of "the detested social arrangement of our neighbors," rather than to go to war with his (white) southern brethren, was grounded in—and publicly expressed with respect to—white supremacy. As Holmes admitted, "Here, as in the case of the Indians [more on this below], or any other inferior natural tribe of men, our sympathies

[92] Ibid., 295–96; on Holmes's invocation of such race-based notions of "family," see Susan M. Ryan, *The Grammar of Good Intentions: Race and the Antebellum Culture of Benevolence* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003), 146.

[93] Holmes, "Oration" (n. 89), 297. For the invocation of such "familial" relationships among white northern and southern members of the American Medical Association during this same period, see Douglas M. Haynes, "Policing the Social Boundaries of the American Medical Association, 1847–1870," *J. Hist. Med. Allied Sci.* 60 (2005): 170–95.

will go with our own color first."[94] Only slightly qualifying his admission, and further displaying his "familial" links to southern whites, he continued,

> Far be it from us to palliate any act of injustice that a man of one complexion may be guilty of against a man of a different one. Whatever wrongs we can win the master away from committing; whatever woes we can alleviate in the weaker people; we should remember and care for. But always in the last appeal it will come to this; if we must choose between the two races, alliance with the superior one, which we may hope to raise to our own level, if it is below it, or with the lower one which we never can, no abstract principle of benevolence can reverse the great family instinct that settles the question for us.[95]

And in offering what may have seemed a plan for transforming the attitudes of the South, yet grounded in a sense of superiority and a fundamental distinction between races, he concluded,

> The Creator has hung out the colors that form the two rallying points, so that they shall be unmistakeable [*sic*], eternal; nay, there is hardly a single sense that does not bear witness to the ineffaceable distinction of blood, only prevented from producing open opposition by the unchallenged supremacy of the higher of the two races. The white man must be the master in effect, whatever he is in name; and the only way to make him do right by the Indian, the African, the Chinese, is to make him better by example and loving counsel.[96]

Holmes may have been no more racist (and simply a more polished speaker and writer) than most of his contemporaries. Yet when given a prominent platform—with seemingly full agency to speak his mind—he expressed such sentiments at a key moment in U.S. history.

Moreover, in a mere supporting paragraph regarding such distinctions and the apparent difficulties of racial relations, Holmes included remarkably disparaging comments regarding

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[94] Holmes, "Oration" (n. 89), 299.

[95] Ibid., 299.

[96] Ibid., 299.

Native Americans. Seemingly reflecting the collective impressions of white New Englanders regarding well-remembered apparent Native American massacres of colonists, Holmes lamented of Native Americans, "As soon as any conflict arises between [Native Americans and white New Englanders], his savage nature begins to show itself. He dashes the babes' heads against their fathers' hearthstones—as at our Oxford [1696]—a heap of stones still shows you where he did it; or flings them out of windows, as at Haverhill [1697]; he mutilates his prostrate enemy; he drives away the women like beasts of burden."[97] Such a depiction may again not have strayed far from the norm of the time, deriving at least from the attempt to differentiate white New Englanders from Native American "savages" during and after King Philip's War (1675–78).[98] Pierpont, the abolitionist poet who followed Holmes that night, included in his poem,

> Where the poor Pilgrim heard the Indian's yell,
> The school-house stands and children learn to spell; . . .
> Where, in a wigwam *then*, the Pilgrim saw
> A lazy Indian and his laboring squaw,
> Living 'mid smoke and smut, and steam and stench,
> Without a chair, a bedstead, or a bench,
> There, *now* (in silence passing princely domes,)
> Are seen ten thousand hospitable homes . . .[99]

[97] Ibid., 298.

[98] Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York: Knopf, 1998); Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy* (n. 27).

[99] John Pierpont, "The Pilgrims of Plymouth," in *New England Society Orations* (n. 89), 303–25, quotation on 322.

But Holmes's own depiction was no less stigmatizing and damning:

> Look at the aboriginal inhabitants of the land we occupy. It pleased the Creator to call into existence this half-filled outline of humanity; this sketch in red crayons of a rudimental manhood; to keep the continent from being a blank until the true lord of creation shall come to claim it. Civilization and Christianity have tried to humanize him, and he proves a dead failure. Theologians stand aghast at a whole race destined, according to their old formulae, to destruction, temporal and eternal. Philanthropists mourn over them, and from time to time catch a red man and turn him into their colleges as they would turn a partridge in among the barn-door fowls. But instinct has its way sooner or later; the partridge makes but a troublesome chicken, and the Indian makes but a sorry Master of Arts, if he does not run for the woods, where all the *feræ naturæ* impulses are urging him.[100]

This may have led to a mildly sympathetic conclusion to his analysis, but the consequent seeming inevitability of Native American extinction was likewise grounded in a racist determinism: "These instincts lead to his extermination; too often the sad solution of the problem of his relation to the white race. . . . [After conflicts . . .] then the white man hates him, and hunts him down like the wild beasts of the forest, and so the red-crayon sketch is rubbed out, and the canvas is ready for a picture of manhood a little more like God's own image."[101]

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[100] Holmes, "Oration" (n. 89), 298.

[101] Ibid., 298. On such "pessimism" as depicted by Holmes and his colleague and fellow Bostonian, historian Francis Parkman, see Gossett, *Race* (n. 43), 242–44; Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1982). It is perhaps notable that Parkman's depictions of Native Americans appeared prominently in his *History of the Conspiracy of Pontiac and the War of the North American Tribes Against the English Colonies after the Conquest of Canada* (Boston: C.C. Little

It is telling that Holmes appears to have received not a single rebuke for his remarks on Native Americans. His comments on abolition and slavery, however, created a temporary tempest, especially in abolitionist newspapers and among his abolitionist friends. Holmes's own responses in this respect are telling, as he vehemently reiterated his opposition to slavery but did not retreat at this time from his espoused white supremacy. In a note penned to Charles Sumner only six days after the talk, he again focused on the pragmatic, union-saving underpinnings of his appeal to the South: "What do we want but to let in truth and light without breaking down the fundamental conditions on which the progress of our brethren [?] section of the race depends."[102] In a deferential note to Emerson, he repeated the rationale for his critique of the behavior of the abolitionists and his own attempts at conciliation with the South: "If the law of conscience carried out fully by the ultra-abolitionists, had been proclaimed in strict accordance with the law of love, I believe the question would be far more nearly solved than it is at present. But they have used every form of language calculated to inflame the evil passions and the consequence is that

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and J.B. Brown, 1851), four years prior to Holmes's oration. On the broader history of apparent explanations of Native American mortality, see David S. Jones, *Rationalizing Epidemics: Meanings and Uses of Indian Mortality since 1600* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004).

[102] Oliver Wendell Holmes to Charles Sumner, December 28, 1855, 012/617, "The Papers of Charles Sumner, 1811–1874" (microfilm), GEN (Film A665), Houghton Library.

growing sectional hostility, the nature of which is the disruption of the government."[103] In March 1856, the tension between Holmes's white supremacy and his apparent belief in the *moral* equivalence of individuals was on full display in a letter he wrote to the *Exeter News-Letter* (of New Hampshire): "Our feelings with reference to different individuals and races differ in degree, if not in kind. The interests of the white race, the most improvable, take strongest hold upon me; then those of the Blacks, the most attachable; and lastly those of the Indians, the least amenable to the higher social and civilizing influences. But all are human, and I would suffer no wrong that I could help, to be inflicted on any."[104] Holmes would extend such musings on moral equivalence in a letter to abolitionist Theodore Parker that April: "An African or an Indian in the right, is better to me than an Anglo-Saxon in the wrong."[105] But Holmes did not retract his hierarchical musings on race, with only a slight hint of self-doubt in his reiteration: "I say the white race of the South must always have the upper hand—I think so. I may be wrong, but there

[103] Tilton, *Amiable Autocrat* (n. 24), 227; see also Oliver Wendell Holmes to Ralph Waldo Emerson, March 26, 1856, "Oliver Wendell Holmes additional papers, 1825–1893," Ms. Am 1234.1, Houghton Library.

[104] Reprinted in Currier and Tilton, *Bibliography of Oliver Wendell Holmes* (n. 21), 414–15.

[105] Tilton, *Amiable Autocrat* (n. 24), 226; see also Oliver Wendell Holmes to Theodore Parker, April 1, 1856, "Oliver Wendell Holmes additional papers, 1825–1893," Ms. Am 1234.1, Houghton Library.

is nothing blamable I suppose in my entertaining this opinion."[106] Such doubts, however, would appear to extend soon thereafter.

Contrition?

Indeed, we should not consider Holmes as a static figure. With respect to the question of abolition and slavery, Tilton notes that by the spring of 1856 Holmes appears to have engaged in self-reflection: "Of Holmes's political views from that point on we have no sign until the war itself, but we can read his silence as evidence of either a complete change of heart or possibly a conviction of his own incompetence."[107] By 1861, war had begun, with Holmes's twenty-year-old son and namesake eager and early to enlist.

As for Holmes Sr.'s own service, in January 1863 he contributed to a celebration at the Boston Music Hall of the Emancipation Proclamation, with the funds from the "Grand Jubilee Concert" to be directed to "benefit the freed slaves" through an "Educational Commission" on which Holmes would serve alongside Emerson, Longfellow, Charles Eliot Norton, and Francis Parkman.[108] More memorably, on July 4, 1863, the day after the conclusion of the Battle of Gettysburg, Holmes delivered "The Inevitable Trial," a fiery and lengthy oration in Boston in support of the war effort. Wearing his clinical hat, Holmes had traveled far from his former

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[106] Holmes to Parker, April 1, 1856, "Oliver Wendell Holmes additional papers, 1825–1893," Ms. Am 1234.1, Houghton Library.

[107] Tilton, *Amiable Autocrat* (n. 24), 228.

[108] See https://library.harvard.edu/onlineexhibits/lincoln/commander/27.html.

musings on the connections and even "familial" relations between the North and the South. As he now retrospectively diagnosed, with the "hereditary character of the Southern people moving in one direction, and the awakened conscience of the North stirring in the other, the open conflict of opinion was inevitable, and equally inevitable its appearance in the field of national politics."[109] More "inevitable" still, from the vantage point of 1863, had been open warfare: "It might have come a little sooner, or a little later, but it must have come. The disease of the nation was organic, and not functional, and the rough chirurgery of war was its only remedy."[110] Discussing the defense of the Constitution and national sovereignty, Holmes acknowledged, "We cannot fight for these objects without attacking the one mother cause [i.e., slavery] of all the progeny of lesser antagonisms. . . . And this ought to make us willing to do and to suffer cheerfully."[111] In the midst of debate over war financing and with his own son having been nearly mortally wounded, Holmes called for ongoing national sacrifice: "If our property is taxed, it is only to teach us that liberty is worth paying for as well as fighting for. We are pouring out

[109] Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Inevitable Trial" (1863), in *Pages from an Old Volume of Life: The Works of Oliver Wendell Holmes*, Standard Library ed., vol. 8 (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1892), 78–120, quotation on 92.

[110] Ibid., 83.

[111] Ibid., 117.

the most generous blood of our youth and manhood; alas! this is always the price that must be paid for the redemption of a people."[112]

Perhaps he sought his own redemption. As he admitted of slavery, "Northern acquiescence or even sympathy may have sometimes helped to make it sit more easily on the consciences of its supporters."[113] It may not have been the most overt mea culpa, but it represented a significant shift from his 1855 oration. By 1872, Holmes would offer a still more public act of contrition, describing (as noted earlier) the origins of his own racism in his widely disseminated *Poet at the Breakfast-Table*.[114]

Regarding Native Americans, Holmes appears to have been less contrite. Admittedly, in the second of the Breakfast-Table series, *The Professor at the Breakfast-Table*, he introduces the following scene between the provincial character Little Boston (LB) and the less provincial Divinity Student (DS):

> LB: Yes,—Boston sunsets;—perhaps they're as good in some other places, but I know 'em best here. Anyhow, the American skies are different from anything they see in the Old World. Yes, and the rocks are different, and the soil is different, and everything that comes out of the soil, from grass up to Indians, is different. And now that the provisional races are dying out—

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[112] Ibid., 111. Similarly, Amelia Holmes wrote to a friend during the war: "I only hope and pray that the war may go on till every slave is free, and that my child will always be ready to defend and struggle for humanity." As quoted in White, *Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes* (n. 33), 14.

[113] Holmes, "Inevitable Trial" (n. 109), 88.

[114] Holmes, *Poet at the Breakfast-Table* (n. 48), 30.

> DS: —What do you mean by the *provisional* races, Sir?—said the divinity-student, interrupting him.
>
> LB: Why, the aboriginal bipeds, to be sure,—he answered,—the red-crayon sketch of humanity laid on the canvas before the colors for the real manhood were ready.
>
> DS: I hope they will come to something yet,—said the divinity-student.
>
> LB: Irreclaimable, Sir,—irreclaimable!—said the Little Gentleman.—Cheaper to breed white men than domesticate a nation of red ones. When you can get the bitter out of the partridge's thigh, you can make an enlightened commonwealth of Indians. A provisional race, Sir,—nothing more. Exhaled carbonic acid for the use of vegetation, kept down the bears and catamounts, enjoyed themselves in scalping and being scalped, and then passed away or are passing away, according to the programme.[115]

Holmes's own former lines, in only slightly modified form, are now in his most popular writing put into the mouth of the most narrow-minded of his characters. As Gibian writes, Little Boston is often used in the book to utter a provincial and/or prejudicial statement that could be punctured by others, and his "mysterious dwarfism is finally diagnosed by the medically-inclined Professor as the fatal, physiological result (a somaticization) of a pathological provincialism."[116] Yet this is a fairly oblique act of contrition at best, and it remains unclear whether such subtle distinctions

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[115] Oliver Wendell Holmes, *The Professor at the Breakfast-Table* [with the Story of Iris] (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1859), 103–4.

[116] Gibian, *Holmes and the Culture of Conversation* (n. 22), 146. Along these lines, Gibian warns us about taking any of Holmes's extracted quotes at face value, without close examination. It should of course be noted that Holmes's own allegorical equation of Little Boston's provincialism and lack of moral and intellectual growth with the character's physical size raises an entirely separate set of ableist concerns.

between message and messenger were appreciated by contemporary audiences. And Holmes allowed critical comments about Native Americans, and their apparent lack of civilization (and perhaps even lack of *capacity* for such civilization), to come out of the mouths of less provincial characters in other works.[117]

Holmes had thus reflected and changed—to a degree. How much we consider him as constrained by his time, versus free to reflect upon his own prejudices—along with the context, evolution, and impact of his own thinking—of course informs our judgments of his uses as a symbol today.

Conclusions

Like all figures, Holmes was an evolving person of his time. Moreover, remembrances, like figures themselves and those institutions and individuals doing the remembering, are not static. In short, individuals are multifaceted, and context matters at each step in the evolving process of the lives of individuals and the afterlives of their representation.

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[117] See, e.g., Holmes, *Professor at the Breakfast-Table* (n. 115), 308; Holmes, *Elsie Venner* (n. 36), 2:107–8, 115; Holmes, "Crime and Automatism" (n. 40), 325–26. In *The Guardian Angel*, the story's heroine, Myrtle Hazard, bears the imprint of multiple ancestors, including having a "hint of Indian blood in her veins." Such an influence emerges at a telling moment in the story, when Myrtle behaves in a stereotypically "savage" manner. See Holmes, *The Guardian Angel* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1867), 271–74.

Holmes appears to have wrestled with the notion and implications of "racial" difference at the intersection of his own upbringing and his evolving medical, political, and moral considerations over the course of many decades. As for how representative of his time and context was Holmes's ability in the 1850s to reconcile an underlying racism (as displayed in his New England Society Oration) with his personal support (at a time when such support was in seemingly short supply elsewhere) for individual Black students at HMS, we need look no further than the pages of the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*. On May 3, 1854, we find, in the unsigned "Medical Intelligence" section, a notice concerning the publication of Nott's and Gliddon's racist, polygenesist *Types of Mankind*. As the reviewer gushed,

> It must be read deliberately, and pondered upon, in order to enjoy the rich feast of antiquarian food prepared for the student of ethnology. . . . A rarer or more instructive book is seldom given to the world. Its facts, from authentic sources, cannot be denied, and these would be appreciated by medical gentlemen, who will also, more than most other men, profit by the suggestions that pervade the pages furnished by Dr. Nott and Dr. Gliddon.[118]

Yet on the very preceding page, with no sense of irony, we find a similarly glowing notice that Daniel Laing Jr. and Isaac Snowden themselves were expecting to embark for Liberia as physicians. As the anonymous commentator concluded of Snowden and Laing, without reference to the events of 1850, "They have had every opportunity [!] of acquiring a thorough medical education. They are smart and intelligent, and we can see no good reason why they should not

[118] "Types of Mankind," *Boston Med. Surg. J.* 50 (1854): 285. It is unclear who the author was, though it seems very unlikely to have been Holmes, given that there is no documentation of his having written such an unsigned notice.

succeed in their field of labor. We wish them health and success, and hope they may be enabled to accomplish much good, and to take a high rank in the profession to which they have devoted themselves."[119] This was not an aberration. It was common by this time (not the least among abolitionists) to consider Black and white people morally equivalent, if biologically distinct, and "to dissociate . . . person-to-person human contact from one's presentation [in scientific and political discourse] of race as a fixed hierarchy, and to do so with no sense of hypocrisy or guilt."[120]

Moreover, Holmes in the 1850s was not the Holmes of 1863 or 1872. Indeed, as Peter Gibian relates, Holmes more than anything stood for ongoing debate, discussion, self-reflection, and change.[121] In Holmes's own work, this sense of ceaseless growth and change (and even exchange) was perhaps best exemplified in the concluding stanzas of his most famous poem, "The Chambered Nautilus":

> Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,
> As the swift seasons roll!
> Leave thy low-vaulted past!
> Let each new temple, nobler than the last,
> Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast,
> Till thou at length art free,
> Leaving thine outgrown shell by life's unresting sea![122]

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[119] "Colored Physicians for Liberia," *Boston Med. Surg. J.* 50 (1854): 284.

[120] Dain, *Hideous Monster of the Mind* (n. 43), 204.

[121] Gibian, *Holmes and the Culture of Conversation* (n. 22).

[122] Holmes, *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table* (Boston: Phillips, Samson, 1858), 111.

And overt attention to race appears to have represented a very small component of Holmes's teaching, his scientific writing, or his popular versifying. He was far better known at the time—and certainly to posterity—for his attempts to ground medicine in science (when this was far from inevitable) and for his contributions to the national discussion over the very fixity of ideas in the first place. The choice of Holmes as the symbol of medical education in 1982 was made not in deference to his teachings or writings on race but owing to his symbolizing scientific inquiry and perhaps even ongoing education and growth.[123] For years, Holmes was celebrated for these facets of his persona, including in Charles Bryan's and my 2009 coedited volume.

And yet over the past decade, as academic medicine has increasingly engaged with the legacies of interpersonal and structural racism alike, and admittedly informed by additional primary sources (e.g., I had not yet read Holmes's 1855 New England Society Oration when we prepared our 2009 volume), different facets of Holmes's life have taken on increasing importance. Holmes himself, one of the developers of the stereoscope, was long interested in the multiple perspectives that could be applied to any subject.[124] In 2020, as HMS increasingly prioritized diversity, inclusion, and antiracism within medical education and within society, and a critical examination of its own history, it became clear to me that as the students stated in their petition, several of Holmes's actions and writings were "not emblematic of the HMS/HSDM community we strive to be in 2020." More specifically, Holmes was no longer an appropriate

[123] Lisa W. Drew, "Inside H.M.A.B.," *Harv. Med. Alumni Bull.* 58 (Winter 1984): 2.

[124] Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Stereoscope and the Stereograph," in Holmes, *Soundings from the Atlantic* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1864), 124–65.

symbol for a society of assigned students at HMS/HSDM, essentially a student home within the institution.[125] Prominent symbols (and prominent role models) may have prominent impacts, and speak to the identity and values of the institutions in which they're deployed.[126] I was honored to serve on the Subcommittee on Artwork and Cultural Representations that not only articulated "guiding principles" concerning naming but unanimously voted to suggest changing the Oliver Wendell Holmes Society to the William Augustus Hinton Society.[127]

Renaming decisions are generally not easy and require extensive research ("due diligence") to underpin them, along with the humility to recognize that additional findings and interpretations may emerge moving forward.[128] This may be extended to biography more

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[125] See, e.g., "HMS Diversity Statement," https://hms.harvard.edu/about-hms/campus-culture/diversity-inclusion/harvard-medical-school-diversity-statement. The New Pathway program would be succeeded by the Pathways program in 2015, with the society structure remaining in place. See Sruthi L. Muluk and Ellen Zhang, "At Medical School, New Curriculum Met with Praise," *Harvard Crimson*, April 1, 2016, https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2016/4/1/new-medical-curriculum-feature/.

[126] See, e.g., Iris Bohnet, *What Works: Gender Equality by Design* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016), chap. 10.

[127] Buckley, "Winds of Change" (n. 7).

[128] See also Harvard University's "Report of the Committee to Articulate Principles on Renaming," released on December 9, 2021, and available at https://www.harvard.edu/president/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/12/Committee-to-Articulate-Principles-on-Renaming-Final-Report1.pdf.

generally. Holmes wrote in 1860 that "medicine, professedly founded on observation, is as sensitive to outside influences, political, religious, philosophical, imaginative, as is the barometer to the changes of atmospheric density."[129] Likewise, those aspects of one's biography that we emphasize are sensitive to our own context-dependent interests and priorities. This is not the presentism of holding an individual's actions accountable to our contemporary values, but rather a presentism of deciding which facets of one's biography we wish to investigate—whether to commemorate or critique—in the first place.[130] In the process, the debates we hold and the priorities we emphasize become markers themselves for potential later analyses. This calls for self-reflection, whether in medicine or in the humanities. Indeed, such self-reflection is the very essence of the medical humanities.

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SCOTT PODOLSKY is a primary care physician at Massachusetts General Hospital, professor of global health and social medicine at Harvard Medical School, and director of the Center for the History of Medicine at the Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine. He is presently working on a book-length history of the relationship between the medical profession and the medical journal in American medicine.

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[129] Oliver Wendell Holmes, "Currents and Counter-Currents in Medical Science," in *Currents and Counter-Currents in Medical* Science (n. 49), 8.

[130] I would like to thank Mark Sorin and Charley Bryan for their thoughtful insights regarding such considerations of "presentism."

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