

# Bodies of Knowledge: The Influence of Slaves on the Antebellum Medical Community

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## (ABSTRACT)

The influence of slaves on the south is well documented in areas such as agriculture, music, diet, religion and language. This thesis extends the list to include medicine. It also suggests that the importance of cultural transfer to America from places other than Europe has been overlooked in the history of medicine. The medical influence of slaves took the form of botanical remedies, many of them with an African origin, and were disseminated through the treatments of slave healers. Slave medical knowledge offered a viable alternative for whites to both nineteenth-century “heroic” practices and to alternative methods, such as homeopathy and Thomsonianism. In addition, the slave’s body itself was a vehicle of medical influence. Informed by nineteenth-century beliefs about the differences between whites and blacks, antebellum physicians performed experiments upon slave bodies that they could not and did not perform on whites’. Transfer of slave medical knowledge was facilitated by personal contact between individuals, by the publicity surrounding slaves who were set free for revealing cures, through the services of slave healers, through newspapers and medical journals in which whites wrote of slave treatments and acknowledged the source of the information, and through word of mouth. This study uses the theme of ambivalence to reconcile the conflicting attitudes of southern physicians and slaveowners towards slave medical knowledge.