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Truth in numbers? Emancipation, race, and federal census statistics in the debates over Black mental health in the United States, 1840-1900

Abstract

To the keen observer of American political and medical history, a disturbing set of debates surrounded the sanity of free Black residents of the United States of America after the publication of the controversial 1840 census returns on race and insanity. This article analyzes how the census became a battlefield where physicians and other commentators fought over—and thus shaped—various political meanings of Black insanity before and after the United States Civil War, up until the 1890s, as the South underwent a massive political and social transformation, from slavery to emancipation. It also highlights the arguments raised by authors such as James McCune Smith and Ramón de la Sagra who attempted to disprove the returns shortly after their publication, and whose arguments contributed to efforts to combat scientific racism.

Keywords: race, insanity, slavery, emancipation, census statistics, racism, physicians

To the keen observer of American political and medical history, a disturbing set of debates surrounded the sanity of free Black residents of the United States of America in the 1840s. The United States census of 1840 showed for the very first time in American history a stark contrast between numbers of Black “insanes” in the North and in the South: in the free Northern states, the 1840 census recorded that one in 143 free Black persons was insane, while in the slave states of the South, the ratio dropped down to only one in every 1,605 Black slaves, an outcome bolstering contemporary arguments that Black insanity was much more prevalent in places where Black residents were free (Anonymous, 1843b, p. 341).

As soon as the 1840 census results started to circulate, Northern and Southern US physicians alike noticed the stark contrast between the number of Black “insanes” and “idiots” listed in the census for the Northern states and those for the South. Reviewing the statistics in 1842, Edward Jarvis, a physician from Massachusetts then living in Kentucky, claimed enthusiastically that the census returns showed that “slavery [had] a wonderful influence upon the development of moral faculties and the intellectual powers,” given that Black men and women seemed to be insane in fewer numbers in the South than in the North (Jarvis, 1842, p. 119). In his review, Jarvis included a table that reproduced the census returns and listed the number of “white” and “colored” people classified as “insane” in Northern and Southern states in order to support his assertion (Table 1). In contrast, no such pattern existed for the geographic distribution of the white population. Jarvis thought it important to look at the numbers for each region, in order to compare and contrast the situation in the Northern states, which opposed slavery, and the Southern states, where slavery still persisted. By structuring the data regionally, Jarvis sought to evaluate the effect slavery had on the mental health of Black Americans, in the context of the rise of sectional tensions over abolitionism in the Southern states.

Although the literature (to be discussed below) has already analyzed the 1840s production of these racialized statistics, little light has been cast either on the aftermath or the revival of the statistics of Black insanity in the ensuing decades, including after the abolition of slavery. This literature tends to focus on the production of data and statistical errors made by census officials, instead of the circulation of those returns within broad medical, political, and journalistic circles over the decades following their publication. For example, in one of the earliest historical analyses of the 1840 census, Albert Deutsch (1944) claimed that the statistics on Black insanity were purposefully produced and manipulated towards pro-slavery use. Leon Litwack (1961) briefly referenced the 1840 census statistics in an effort to show how they fostered vivid debates in Congress between 1842 and 1845. Theodore Porter (1988, p. 37) showed how the insanity statistics from the census paved the way for a new era of social statistics in the country. Margo Anderson and Stephen E. Fienberg (2001, p. 19) retraced the debates on census accuracy with a focus on the 1840 statistics on Black insanity in their exploration of the history and origins of the census.

Historical probes into the likely factors responsible for the controversial statistics also stop short of an extended analysis of their fate within contemporary medical and political discourse. Patricia Cline Cohen (1988) and, more recently, Paul Schor (2017) questioned whether the 1840 census statisticians had intentionally manipulated the data. According to them, the returns were largely due to successive errors. For a start, William A. Weaver, in charge of the census of 1840, noted the irregularities but quickly pleaded ignorance, explaining that he had not had time to look at the figures before they were published (Cohen, 1988, p. 185). Indeed, former US President and Representative John Quincy Adams had lobbied in the summer of 1841 to obtain census results faster than expected, and this haste would have been one of the potential reasons for the large number of errors in the 1840 census, since the results had not yet been “digested” (Cohen, 1988, p. 190). Therefore,

following Cohen's and Schor's arguments, it is unlikely that the errors were intentional manipulations or planned for propaganda. Contrary to the argument put forward by historian Albert Deutsch (1844), the statistical errors were not due to political manipulations: instead, they were most likely due to incompetence, because Weaver had surrounded himself with a poorly trained team to handle the production of census statistics, and he was himself a novice (Schor, 2017, p. 32-38; Nobles, 2000, p. 32).

Against the backdrop of the literature, this article brings into focus the politicization of medical theories about Black insanity from the 1840s up to the 1890s, i.e., subsequent uses of the 1840 census numbers following their production. Through an examination of various and sometimes contradictory arguments, this article shows how the census became a battlefield where physicians and other commentators fought over—and thus shaped—various political meanings of Black insanity before and after the US Civil War, up until the 1890s. Standing at the crossroads of history of science, history of medicine, and history of race relations in the Old and New South, I first propose to analyze the political economy of Black insanity in relation to sectionalism and scientific racism, a context in which Southern physicians used their scientific legitimacy and authority, as public figures, to condemn the civil rights of newly freed Black residents in the North before the Civil War. Secondly, I will discuss the arguments raised by authors such as James McCune Smith and Ramón de la Sagra who attempted to disprove the returns shortly after their publication. The last section of the article will deal with the ways in which the census returns continued to circulate in the South after the abolition of slavery, from 1865 until the 1890s. I will explore how the rhetoric of Southern commentators evolved when mentioning the census returns, as the South underwent a massive political and social transformation, from slavery to emancipation.

The rise of statistical tracking of insanity in the United States

The 1840 census's inclusion of statistics on insanity, published for the first time at the federal level, marked insanity's emergence as a topic of medical discussion and presence in the public sphere, in Jurgen Habermas's (1989) sense of that term. Yet, this inclusion was the result of a long-term process culminating in a paradigm shift. As shown by Schor (2017), from 1790 to 1820, the formulation of the census questionnaires served the goal of determining political representation. Thereafter, a gradual shift in the census's status from that of a sheer cog in a political machine, to that of a tool intended to wield social change, was paralleled by further developments, particularly a growing attraction for the natural sciences, and an increasingly acute governmental concern for the public health—particularly mental health—of the US population. Indeed, statistics on insanity were part of an ensemble of metrics useful to statesmen, physicians, and physiologists in the nineteenth century. The statistics thus became objects worthy of scientific interest and appeared sufficiently legitimate to foster popular curiosity (Schor, 2017, p. 113).

The emergence of statistical measures of Black and white insanity in the general population leveraged the racial categories used in the census questionnaires since the 1790s. For example, two separate columns had been created to distinguish the number of “deaf and dumb” whites from the number of “deaf and dumb” Black people as early as 1820 (Schor, 2017, p. 16). The focus on measuring the number of free people of color and slaves in the American Republic had indeed been a constant in census questions since the Republic's foundation. Race was always a category included in the federal census, ever since state delegates to the US Constitutional Convention of 1787 inserted the Three-Fifths Compromise into Article 1, Section 2, Clause 3, of the US Constitution. In the census questionnaires, the number of enslaved men and women were recorded in a separate column, and the numerical total was then reduced to 3/5ths, the value thus used in calculating states' levels of political representation in the House of Representatives. In the 1830s and 1840s, understanding the

birth rate of slaves was one of the self-explanatory arguments for the proliferation of census statistics: as Cohen noted (1988, p. 176), “an 1835 article conjured up rows of black children, ten abreast, stretching forty miles in the distance, to represent vividly the vast numbers of enslaved children in the South, as an illustration of the meaning of statistics.” In spite of the evolution of the notion of race in censuses that Schor (2017) documented—from one of a dichotomous view of “people of color” and “whites,” to the multiple categorizations of the “ethno-racial” pentagon (Hollinger, 1996)—race always embodies a category that has not only served to count individuals but to produce a plural and distinct definition of citizenship.¹

Counting the number of “insane” persons also became a recurring activity in the first half of the nineteenth century because new public asylums had been opened one after the other, and it was thus necessary to report on the proper functioning of institutions both in the North and South. As local public policies came to grips with the dispossessed masses and the persons classified as “insane,” the census returns could provide a better picture of the situation in each asylum. These institutions had indeed been opened in wave after wave under the influence of Enlightenment empiricism and with the support of philanthropists who pleaded for the care of the poor (Foucault, 1972, p. 66, p. 374).

At the same time, the creation of statistics on insanity also popularized the mental hygiene movement conducted by Dorothea Dix and others in the United States (Roberts and Kurtz, 1987). Between 1840 and 1860, thirty asylums opened their doors in both Northern and Southern states, compared with the fourteen opened in the previous period, from 1771 to 1839, and over a period of almost seventy years. The fervent supporters of the creation of asylums, such as Dix, often drew on statistical resources to argue for the opening of these new institutions. In 1852, for example, Dix presented a text to the Maryland legislature asking them for financial support to open a new asylum (Dix, 1852, p. 6). In order to argue

¹ On the census from a contemporaneous perspective, see Prewitt (2013).

her case, she cited the results of the 1840 and 1850 federal census data for Maryland, arguing that they showed “year by year, the increase of insanity in the youthful classes of society,” which had to be taken into account as justification for the building of new asylums (p. 6). She thus used the official statistics, with their corresponding authority and legitimacy, to appeal for public and political support of her agenda. This example illustrates the prominence given to these figures in the middle of the nineteenth century.

For physicians, the availability of these statistics offered the prospect of measuring and counting the number of insane residents in each state of the union. As early as 1835, the statistics on blind, “deaf and dumb” persons were commented upon and widely discussed in such medical journals as the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*, suggesting the level of public interest in the first socially oriented statistics published at the federal level (in 1830) (Davenport, 1835, p. 248). In 1830, the federal marshals were asked to count the number of blind and deaf persons in order to show the frequency of physical disabilities in the US population (Gorwitz, 1974, p. 181). Those numbers were aggregated in the census reports by age, sex, race, and place of residence (Gorwitz, 1974, p. 180). However, rates of insanity were not yet counted (Grob, 1976; Gorwitz, 1974, p. 181). In 1833, physician Amariah Brigham, who would later become superintendent of the New York State Lunatic Asylum, lamented that the local statistics gathered in the very first public asylums and institutions of the USA did not offer the possibility to compare numbers on a wide scale, as they had not been produced in a standardized way. A well-known and respected specialist of mental illness who would become, in 1844, one of the founding members of the *American Journal of Insanity*, Brigham had penned the appendix to *Observations on the Deranged Manifestations of the Mind, or Insanity*, a book written by German-born physiologist Johann Gaspar

Spurzheim, a pioneer in studies on phrenology and collaborator of Franz-Joseph Gall.² In this text, Brigham deplored that “[no] state in the Union [had] correct returns of the number of its insanes” (Brigham, 1833, p. 234). In order to sustain his argument, Brigham quoted the poor results of Dr. Theodric Romeyn Beck, a New York physician who, in 1825, had gathered statistics designed to count the number of insane inhabitants in the state of New York, yet to no avail. At the same time, Brigham explained that federal statistics could shed some light on the state of mind of territories, political regimes, and the moral status of their inhabitants, as, according to him, insanity could be understood as a medical and political barometer to examine whether inhabitants in various states were living happily. The more insane in this or that state, the greater the discrepancy there had to be between the political system in place (such as slavery or abolition) and the moral upbringing of the inhabitants. His arguments therefore show how insanity was understood by physicians as a politically charged disease, thus suggesting that physicians themselves could become experts of social and political change, their opinions seemingly reinforced by their medical expertise.

Edward Jarvis’s interpretation of the 1840 census returns

One of the most prominent and influential physicians to promulgate the insanity statistics of the 1840 census was Edward Jarvis. Because of his influence, I will analyze Jarvis’s role in the post-1840s medical reception in more detail here. Jarvis, a physician who graduated from Harvard in 1826 and trained at the Boston Medical School, laid hands on the first edition of the 1840 census returns published by Blair and Rives while practicing in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1842 (Grob, 1978; Cassedy, 1979). Recognized in his field, Jarvis was also an elected member of the American Statistical Association, and his work as a

² On phrenology as a science see Van Whye (2004). On phrenology and the American politics of slavery, see Bittel (2019, p. 354, n. 6).

physician was often cited by his peers in the leaflets of the oldest and most prestigious journals of medicine, including the *Philadelphia Medical Journal* (Davico, 1992). Intrigued by the census figures of madness, Jarvis decided to write on the causes of the madness of whites and Black people from the raw data that had been published in the census (Grob 1978; Litwack, 1958). Yet, few scholars have actually paid attention to the fact that Jarvis first paid credence to the statistics and legitimized the links between slavery and insanity. Jarvis (1842) published an essay in the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* in which he carried out a close examination of some errors that he had found in the 1840 census tables. Despite the demonstration of these early mistakes and inconsistencies, Jarvis (1842, p. 119) did not disapprove of the 1840 census and instead announced that it was a document “equally true in all its parts,” since (according to him) the errors balanced themselves out—a fact often missed in the secondary literature that deals with this material (Deutsch, 1944; Grob, 1978; Litwack, 1958). Rather, Jarvis’s purpose was to defend the honor and the legitimacy of the published census, rather than to fundamentally question or undermine its data.

Jarvis also noted a quite astonishing statistical dynamic: according to him, the census showed “a vast difference between the condition of the colored men in the free States and that in the slave states” (p. 119). Noting that there was a “ten-fold proportion of colored insane in the free, above that in the slave states,” he argued that the large numbers of lunatics in the population proved that slavery freed slaves from the dangers of more mental excitement and daily worries than their minds (judged too small for complexity) could solve:

Slavery has a wonderful influence upon the development of moral faculties and the intellectual powers; and refusing man many of the hopes and responsibilities which the free, self-thinking and self-acting enjoy and sustain, of course it saves him from some of the liabilities and dangers of active self-direction. If the mental powers and the propensities are kept comparatively dormant, certainly they must suffer much

less from mis-direction or over-action. So far as this goes, it proves the common notion that in the highest state of civilization and mental activity there is the greatest danger of mental derangement; for here, where there is the greatest mental torpor, we find the least insanity. There are many other considerations to be taken into the account; and indeed the whole subject of the effect of slavery, in all its bearings, upon mental health, is worth an extensive and thorough investigation, which we have not space here to pursue (Jarvis, 1842, p. 119).

Adapting a rather common race-based, hierarchical logic, Jarvis here considered a lack of “civilization” to be a preventative against insanity. For him, the state of slavery, equating to a lack of civilization, disciplined Black people within a mental state that would not have been dangerous to themselves or to others. Moreover, Jarvis’s argument echoes one of the most common arguments already mentioned in the medical field of the time about insanity and civilization: people lower in the hierarchy were seen as less developed in evolutionary terms, incapable of the higher faculties such as moral behavior, self-control, and mature intelligence (Adas, 1989; Desmond and Moore, 2009). To Jarvis, slavery therefore served a specific pacifying function because it sustained a form of hierarchy of civilization that kept slaves in what was seen as their natural station. Based on his published commentary, Jarvis positioned himself as the first (and foremost) authority to accept the insanity statistics of the 1840 census. Claiming to have no time to dwell on this new statistical indicator of a potential cause for insanity, Jarvis invited other medical professionals to conduct research on the issue in his closing words, “the effect of slavery in all its bearings upon mental health is worth an extensive and thorough investigation [...]” (p. 119).

The editors of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, a periodical that printed poetry, historical notes and non-fiction, quickly followed up on Jarvis’s proposition, though without

referencing his article. In June 1843, the journal published “Reflections on the Census of 1840,” which strongly supported the hypothesis that these statistics implied the maladaptation of freed Black slaves. The article developed a lengthy discussion of the “dark shades” in the American picture as the “census exhibits a startling amount of insanity among our people” (Anonymous, 1843b). Surprised by the census figures, the author undertook to rationalize them by stating that the madness seemed to correspond to the number of years of emancipation, thus extending Jarvis’s argument. The *Southern Literary Messenger* article remains one of the first to use the viciousness and profligacy argument to expose how Black madness was thought to diverge from white madness. The piece circulated in Washington, District of Columbia, which was a thriving center for slavery; in the same month of publication, *The Daily National Intelligencer*, published in the nation’s capital, featured an article titled “Curious Statistical Facts,” in which the author quoted that very issue of the *Southern Literary Messenger* (Anonymous, 1843a).

These statistics could have remained hidden in a set of obscure, forgotten publications, commented upon by Edward Jarvis in a medical peer-reviewed journal and by the local press in Washington. Yet, events took another turn as former US Vice-President John C. Calhoun, a slaveowner and notorious supporter of slavery, eagerly seized upon the numbers as scientific confirmation that Black men and women had a natural propensity to enslavement.³ Writing in 1844 to Richard Pakenham, the British ambassador to the United States, Calhoun claimed that the census results showed that freedmen “ha[d] been invariably sunk into vice and pauperism, accompanied by the bodily and mental inflictions incident thereto—deafness, blindness, insanity and idiocy—to a degree without example.”⁴ At the time, Calhoun was Secretary of State (under President James K. Polk), and in this role served

³ J. C. Calhoun to R. Pakenham, Senate Documents, 28 Cong., 1st sess., April 18, 1844, 50–53.

⁴ Ibid.

as the Cabinet member charged with oversight of the census. Calling the census an “authentic document,” Calhoun argued that for as long as Blacks had lived in “the ancient relation” (slavery), “they ha[d] improved greatly in every respect—in number, comfort, intelligence, and morals.”⁵ For Calhoun, this implied that the longer abolition endured, the worse the mental condition of Blacks would become, thus forging a direct causal link between the duration of freedom and the extent of Black madness.

In his speech on the reception of abolition petitions of 1837 at the Capitol, Calhoun stated that the attack of the abolitionists on the slaveholding institution was a “systematic design of rendering [the South] hateful in the eyes of the world—with a view to a general crusade” (Calhoun, 1888, p. 626). In opposition to abolitionism, he argued that “the peculiar institution of the South” should prevail, because “the existing relation between the two races in the South, against which these blind fanatics are waging war, forms the most solid and durable foundation on which to rear free and stable political institutions” (Calhoun, 1888, p. 627). He justified this claim by asserting that “the political condition of the slaveholding states has been so much more stable and quiet than that of the North” (p. 627). In a way, Calhoun’s use of federally produced numbers allowed him to keep the status quo and defend slavery in Southern states.

Calhoun’s views, however, were far from unique. His rhetoric was very much aligned with that of other Southern authors, some of them physicians and naturalists who used their scientific authority to justify Black inferiority, as Terence Keel (2018) and Stephen Kenny (2015) have shown. Theories by physicians Josiah C. Nott on the supposedly inferior cranial capacity of Black people (Horsman, 1987) and by Samuel Cartwright on *drapetomania*, an alleged mental illness that was described as targeting slaves fleeing captivity on plantations (Willoughby, 2018), constitute revealing examples of the rise of racial science in the 1840s

⁵ Ibid.

and 1850s and its potential political use in favor of a pro-slavery agenda. Consistent with the rhetoric emanating from these Southern physicians who claimed that Black people were uniquely fitted for bondage, Calhoun found in the census an analogous justification for slavery on political grounds, in the context of rising tensions between the North and the South.

Abolitionist refutations of the Southern interpretations

In the Northern states and abroad, divergent voices emerged to condemn the pro-slavery use of these statistics. These abolitionist commentators have been greatly overlooked by the historiography, which has mostly focused on the *pro-slavery* uses of the statistics immediately after their publication. The statistics indeed crossed the Atlantic, and in 1843, a Spanish physician, Ramón de la Sagra, published an essay about the “worrisome numbers” of Black insanity in the USA. Ramón de la Sagra was a botanist, economist, and anarchist from Galicia who founded the newspaper *El Porvenir* in 1845, which was later considered the world’s first anarchist newspaper. Close to Proudhon, de la Sagra was also interested in medicine, which he had studied before moving to France. Recognized both in Europe and the USA, his work on the 1840 census is still unknown to historians to this day, despite the fact that the tenor of his argument is so very different from that of his American counterparts. It was not uncommon for the first journals of Francophone medicine and psychiatry, such as the *Archives générales de médecine*, to publish reports commenting on the medical statistics of censuses in the USA and other countries (see, e.g., Académie royale des Sciences, 1832).

In his article, published in the *Annales médico-psychologiques*, one of the very first French psychiatry journals, de la Sagra (1843) commented upon the statistics and the differential between Black and white insanity in the South and the North, reporting the results as “remarkable,” and “worthy of attention,” specifically when one “looks precisely at the

insane persons who belong to the categories of the free people of color and to the slaves” (p. 283).⁶ He remarked with amazement that “the number of lunatics among the first category is far greater than among the second category, to the extent that one can never find or even imagine the same situation happening in Europe” (p. 283). De la Sagra then announced that he intended to seek the causes of this madness of free people of color. The rhetoric used by de la Sagra is original, in that he commented upon a social context different from his own, from his position as an outsider who observed “from afar” the medical and institutional practices in the United States. He considered the census statistics to be a reliable instrument:

The enormity of these reports astonished the statisticians of a famous academy to such an extent that they questioned the accuracy of the official document that served as the basis for my work. But this suspicion is unfounded. The official documents may contain some errors, and yet the manner in which they are made gives guarantees which may not be offered by the officers of other countries; but, if in the Southern states, for example, that is to say in the slave states, we may suspect some omissions on the part of the masters (which would lead us to believe that the number of lunatics is even greater than what transpires from the census), there is no reason to think that the number of lunatics among free men of color has been exaggerated. No government or local government has any vested interest in pretending that the country is covered with idiots and imbeciles, in the white race and in the African race. As for me, I do not hesitate to affirm as very probably exact and true the figures which I have used, and I found my conclusions on the numerous causes that can produce these numerous cases of insanity in the United States (de la Sagra, 1843, p. 283).

⁶ All quotations from de la Sagra (1843) are translated from the French original by the author.

De la Sagra did not conceive that systematic error was possible, because in this case and on this precise scale, such errors could only have resulted from direct manipulation. However, according to him, a government, whether or not pro-slavery, would have nothing to gain in increasing the numbers of lunatics within its region. De la Sagra (1843, p. 284) concluded that the causes of madness in the United States had multiple origins:

It is the search for these causes and the study of these conditions that have put me on the path of the results that I present today, and which are only part of a larger work that will include the social status of people of color, free and emancipated, in terms of their education, their vices and their criminality, prostitution in women, drunkenness among men, misery amongst all, etc. The figures concerning the number of lunatics, among men of color, provide remarkable data, which should be compared with the conditions of their existence in the United States: the disdain and scorn of which they are victims, by the effect of a fatal prejudice which, against them, dominates the white class of the northern states of the Confederation; the almost complete lack of public amusements in this country of severe puritanism; religious exaltation, frequently excited in meetings of Methodist and other sects, etc., etc., etc. This study is still to be done; I can only indicate it. Statisticians, doctors and philosophers will recognize their importance. A part of the same causes, namely: religious exaltation, the absence of distractions, combined with the cerebral activity which is the result of the industrial and commercial mania, which is observed to such a high degree among the Americans. These causes, I say, can help to explain the large number of lunatics which also exist among the whites of the northern states, a number which, though less than that of free people of color, is, however, very considerable. Until now, no country in Europe has offered such high ratios.

De la Sagra's interest illustrates how the census of 1840 provoked new questions among essayists, philosophers, and doctors who tried to explain this prevalence of Black madness in the North. De la Sagra's distinctiveness is significant for three reasons. First, he anticipated bona fide programs of studies on the social conditions of "people of color" in the USA. For example, he proposed to investigate "the social status of people of color, free and emancipated, in terms of their education, their vices and their criminality, prostitution in women, drunkenness among men, misery amongst all." Second, de la Sagra did not see a distinction between Black people and whites but between individual "Americans" driven by "industrial and commercial mania," "religious exaltation," and/or "puritanism," any or all of which would provoke madness, while among Europeans, madness has never "offered such high figures." His reading of the statistics was therefore profoundly different from that of the American doctors, because it did not rely on the "racial" frameworks previously established in American history. Third, de la Sagra explained the insanity of people of color "by the disdain and scorn of which they are victims, by the effect of a fatal prejudice which dominates, against them, among the white class of the states of the north of the Confederation" (p. 284), thus paying more attention to the social and psychological causes of racial prejudice in the manifestation of madness than to biological notions. To him, the high ratios of Black madness were due potentially to the poor living conditions of this population, and not to some innate biological predisposition. All in all, de la Sagra's argument was radically different from Jarvis's writings on insanity and civilization. De la Sagra's argument was also opposed to the pro-slavery rhetoric naturalizing madness and inscribing it in the essence itself of the Black race. Despite the publication of de la Sagra's commentary in a French academic journal, for a Francophone audience, his contribution shows that the arguments about the US census indeed circulated beyond the USA to Europe as well.

Yet, the most impassioned and determined denunciation of the statistics and of Calhoun's prose was issued by James McCune Smith, one of the first Black doctors living in New York at the time (Morgan, 2003), who published an article in the *New York Tribune*, in which he bitterly responded to the *Southern Literary Messenger* article (Anonymous, 1843b). He asserted that "freedom has not made us [African Americans] mad, it has strengthened our minds by throwing us upon our own resources and has bound us to American institutions with a tenacity which nothing but death can overcome" (McCune Smith, 2006 [1844], p. 65). McCune Smith's denunciation was directly linked to his self-defined position as a spokesperson of free people of color in the North. Three months after the publication of this first article, McCune Smith attended a public meeting, held on Friday May 3, 1844, organized in New York City's Zion church by the Reverend Henry H. Garnett, a prominent Black spokesperson in the free Black community (Seraile, 1985).⁷ The meeting was advertised as follows:

Fellow citizens! will you suffer yourselves to be branded by a bigoted slaveholder, as being invariably sunk into vice and pauperism, accompanied by the bodily and mental inflictions incident thereto and company, without a murmur, without a denial? Then let every man and woman attend en masse. The coloured citizens of Brooklyn, Williamsburg, and Newark are respectfully invited to attend (Anonymous, 1844).

The meeting proved to be a success. The *New York Herald* reported that "at 8 o'clock, the church (which is a neat and simple edifice) was crowded to excess with 'the gentlemen of color,' and the galleries were filled to overflowing with the choicest specimens of the 'fair portion of creation,' who seemed much interested in the emancipation of their 'sable' brothers of the South." The meeting was then concluded by a reading and vote on a memorial

⁷ *Garnet* also appears as a variant spelling of *Garnett*, the form used here.

to be presented to Congress to oppose Calhoun's interpretation of the statistics. The memorialists argued that "in asserting the existence of free coloured persons insane, blind, deaf and dumb in certain towns in the free States, in which towns, it appears by the same census of 1840, there are no free coloured persons whatever of any condition," thus asking for the 1840 census to be "re-examined, and so far as possible, corrected and, in the Department of State, in order that the head of that Department may have facts upon which to found his arguments" (Anonymous, 1844). Overlooked by historians, this episode shows that the Black community of New York City, including spokespersons like McCune Smith and Garrett, was deeply concerned with the release of the US census returns in 1840 and fought vigorously and collectively against their acceptance, especially because these statistics were used to support arguments that questioned legitimate Black claims to freedom and emancipation.

Yet, perhaps ironically, the most famous denunciation of the census returns came from their earliest medical defender, Edward Jarvis. Jarvis published relentlessly between 1842 and 1851 to argue that the numbers were flawed (Grob, 1976). In December 1844, several months after the New York memorial to Congress, Jarvis and two colleagues, William Brigham, the home secretary of the American Statistical Association, established in Boston, and John Wingate Thornton, a lawyer from New England, proposed to draft a memorial to Congress in order to investigate the errors contained in the census (Jarvis et al., 1844). They argued that the errors were potentially due, at two different levels, either to the US Marshals, who, at the time, compiled the results in the field, or to the Washington administrators who worked at the printing office and who copied the Marshals' reports incorrectly (Jarvis et al., 1845, p. 131). On February 12, 1845, Secretary of State Calhoun responded to the memorialists and expressed "that the correctness of the late census, in exhibiting a far greater prevalence of the diseases of insanity, blindness, deafness, and

dumbness stands unimpeachable,” further detailing that the small errors that the census returns might have contained did not “materially [affect] the correctness of the general result” (Calhoun, 1859 [1845], p. 272). Calhoun’s response to the memorialists signaled the victory of pro-slavery politicians’ views, clothed in medical rhetoric, despite the resistance of Northern statisticians and physicians who vehemently opposed the use of questionable state statistics to underpin medical and political claims.

Finally, in 1859, the *Christian Examiner*, a periodical published in Boston, ran an article by the Reverend James Freeman Clarke, who sought to debunk falsehoods he observed in the next census, of 1850. A Unitarian minister from New Hampshire and an active member of the national movement for the abolition of slavery (Neufeldt, 1982), Clarke denounced the census’s insanity figures, claiming that they “were consummate liars, and that, in many of the localities given, the insane coloured people existed only in the figures of the census. It was the census that was insane, and not the coloured people” (Clarke, 1859). Furthermore, Clarke attacked the new census superintendent, James Dunwoody Brownson De Bow, an influential Southerner publisher and editor of *De Bow’s Review*, for presenting “false” figures that clearly supported pro-slavery arguments, thus repeating the mistakes of 1840:

Whether similar blunders, all on the side of slavery, may not have been committed in preparing the tables of 1850, we know not; but we cannot rely fully on the fairness of statement in one like Mr DeBow, whose principal business in life, down to the time that he was appointed Superintendent of the Census [...] was editing a magazine of the most pro-slavery proclivities, and which he still continues to edit (Clarke, 1859, pp. 258-259).

These various dissident voices—de la Sagra, McCune Smith, Jarvis, Clarke—show the range of motivations behind the attempts to debunk the insanity statistics of the censuses. Their own social positions within the public arena also determined their points of view. Despite the fact that Jarvis first accepted the 1840 census results, he soon dedicated a series of articles to disprove the truthfulness of the figures. Observing from the outside, even as he accepted the figures' (rough) accuracy, de la Sagra nevertheless critiqued the dysfunction of American political institutions (including the census) and the weight of racial prejudice in the United States from a new perspective. Residing in the North, McCune Smith and Clarke denounced the figures that they saw as reinforcing a Southern pro-slavery agenda in the context of the rise of sectionalism. As a Black American spokesperson, McCune Smith was concerned with the long-term political repercussions the statistics could have for the Black freed communities of the North. Furthermore, these different critiques, including one published in the 1850s, well after the publication of the original 1840 census returns, underline that the debate was far from closed.

Extensions of the 1840s arguments beyond the 1850 census

Despite the critiques, the 1840 insanity statistics remained a live issue amid the 1850 census's reception. An 1851 article in the *New York Weekly Herald* highlighted the continuity between the 1840 and 1850 censuses, stressing that the latter's superintendent, J. G. C. Kennedy (prior to his replacement by De Bow), wanted to keep the categories rigorously the same:

I understand the plan of the superintendent, Mr J. G. C. Kennedy, for the compilation and publication of the census is substantially as follows:—First. To classify the population of the different states, male, and female, white and black, free and slave, as

they were classified in 1840. In addition, to give, in a condensed table, the number of persons, free and slave, male and female, white, black, and mulatto, living in each of the United States, of every age, from less than one to one hundred and upwards (Anonymous, 1851b).

The major innovation behind Kennedy's plan was to assign each individual to a distinct row in the data tables, and to preserve data linkage, while keeping the same categories as those of 1840. However, the 1840 and 1850 census returns were far from similar. First (as Jarvis had observed), certain systematic errors of 1840 were byproducts of the structure of the printed census schedules, but, as the 1850 census was structured differently, it could not introduce the same kind of errors. Second, the fundamental data units that fed into the aggregated insanity statistics also differed between the two censuses, a fact missed by the contemporary readers. In the 1850 census, insanity and other demographics were written on the schedule next to the individual's name, rather than summarized by household (as in 1840). But, Southern physicians and commentators did not take this recording variation into account. It did not serve their interests, as they wished to prove that the 1840 census returns established a link between insanity and emancipation. Instead, they persistently drew a continuity between the 1840 and 1850 census results that, they argued, demonstrated a relation between insanity, emancipation, and race.

The 1850 census results were also seen as confirmation, to Southern journalists, that the 1840 census results were correct. The *Charleston Mercury* in September 1851 published an article in which data from the 1840 census was compared to data from the 1850 census (Anonymous, 1851a). Despite the fact that "the tables of 1850 [were] not yet published," the analyst explained that

some of the returns have been ascertained sufficiently to confirm the results obtained from those of 1840. [...] These details furnish materials for ample speculation to the physiologist, the moralist and the statesman. They touch the great problem which philanthropists, not ranting enthusiasts or reckless theorists, but sound and humane thinkers, study with painful solicitude: what is the destiny of this race, morally and physically, in any state but that of slavery? (Anonymous, 1851a)

Thus the writer advanced and defended a pro-slavery agenda, by blithely misreading the 1850 compendium, whose results had not yet been officially released. The pro-slavery apologist concluded,

In this country, all the evidence goes to show that freedom has been to them [slaves], morally and physically, a curse instead of a blessing; that it has degraded instead of elevating them socially, weakened their physical powers, and wasted their energy as a race. On this continent, with society as now organized, every slave liberated is one more added to a mass of inevitable suffering and predestined decay—a fact which develops itself more and more strongly every day (Anonymous, 1851a).

Such a conclusion highlights for us today that the career of these statistics indeed did not come to an end in the 1850s. In 1854, a similar claim was made by journalists from the *Washington Sentinel*. Quoting the 1840 census and returns on insanity, they argued that “the Southern slave is infinitely better cared for and more comfortable than the free coloured population of the Southern States” (Overton, Smith, and Tucker, 1854).

The statistics found their way past the mid-1850s. The *Macon Weekly Telegraph* (of Georgia) examined the state of “the physiological deterioration of the free Blacks, particularly in the non-slaveholding States of the Republic” (Anonymous, 1856). Citing the

1850s census results, the Southern newspaper asserted its confirmation of the earlier views based on the 1840 census results, even despite the intervening memorials to Congress: “it will be seen [...] that after a thorough scrutiny by the government, the authenticity of the census, so unfavourable to the physical and sanitary condition of the free Blacks of the North, is fully established” (Anonymous, 1856). The paper did not discuss the statistics in detail, however, nor did it further comment upon the controversy concerning their accuracy.

By the mid-1850s, the census returns also continued to attract many comments from the North. In 1856, *Hunt's Merchants' Magazine and Commercial Review*, a prominent New York journal, published an article which summarized the results of the latest census. A major part of this short essay concerned the figures for Black insanity in 1850 and their comparison with those of 1840. The article indicated that for “all classes, the mean of the last three censuses shows one affected person to every 957 whites in the slaveholding States, and one to 1060 in the other States; one to every 1444 colored in the slaveholding States and one to 503 in the non-slaveholding” (Woodruff, 1856, p. 172). All in all, the author of the article, a Michigan attorney, tried to demonstrate that the results obtained in 1850 remained the same as those of 1840, especially when one compared the averages. “This singular disproportion in the number of free colored and slave deaf, dumb, blind, & c., is observable throughout previous censuses,” he explained. Although the 1830 census did not include statistics on insanity but on people classified as blind and deaf (Gorwitz, 1974, p. 181), his trick of averaging all the results over the three censuses from 1830, 1840 and 1850 was a way to normalize the anomalous 1840 figures for Black lunacy and therefore to legitimize them.

A year later, in 1857, the *Charleston Mercury* ran a story on “Black and White Insanity,” dealing with a similar issue as the one reported in *Hunt's*. The article reprinted data published the same year in *Hall's Journal of Health*, carrying forward its explanation that the insanity of Black Northerners was the direct result of freedom (Anonymous, 1857a). The

Charleston author contended that while Black Northerners were more anxious in their day-to-day lives as responsible employees (a responsibility that they were seen as unfit to assume), Southern slaves were “merrier” and “happier,” and thus considerably less afflicted with mental health problems than their Northern counterparts. The author relied on the observation that slaves were regularly seen singing while working in New Orleans, which was assumed to be proof of their sound mental health and happiness, in contrast to Irish workers of the North, who are described as miserable and unfit for work in such conditions:

It is the struggle and anxiety for daily bread which eats out the mind of the Northern negro. Slaves have no such anxieties; their lives are merrier than those of their masters; they know that bread will be given to them, and their water shall be sure; and having food [...] they are therewith content, measurably. [...] the mass of slaves in our country assent to the religious sentiments either by practice, profession, or proclivity and have learned in whatsoever state they are, therewith to be content. There can be no doubt that with other aids, the burden of slavery is comparatively light to them. A thousand times have we heard the lively song on the levee, in New Orleans; it was the song of the slave—the song that helped them to work easy, and they found it out. We never heard a note of music from the hundreds of Irish men in ten years (Anonymous, 1857b).

More than fifteen years after their first publication and despite the efforts of Jarvis, Brigham, and Thornton, and the Black residents of New York (as represented by McCune Smith) to disavow and condemn the document, the statistics on insanity from the 1840 and 1850 censuses were still viewed as authentic proof, reflecting the mental situation of the free people of color in the North.

Physicians, mostly in the South, continued to quote and dissect the statistics through the 1850s and 1860s, their impact gaining popularity as sectional tensions rose. James D.

Barkdull, a graduate of the Medical College of Louisiana and physician at the Louisiana State Hospital in Jackson, explained in 1858 that the relative lower incidence of insanity among slaves was

due to their situation, the protection the law guarantees to them, the restraint of a mild state of servitude, the freedom from anxiety respecting their present and future wants, the withholding (in great degree) of spirituous and drugged liquors, and other forms of excess into which the free negroes plunge in this and all other countries, to the utter ruin of mind, body, and estate. As far as my knowledge extends in the surrounding parishes, [...] I have never seen a single case of insanity in this State [Louisiana], or Mississippi, where I practiced medicine for several years. But, on the contrary, it is also my experience, that free negroes, from the before-mentioned and other causes unnecessary to detail, are peculiarly predisposed to insanity (Chaillé, 1858, p. 9).

Barkdull's claims, which were based on the 1850 statistics, also emerged in the context of the reception of the 1840 census returns, which were thought to demonstrate the presupposed chain of causality between freedom and Black madness.

Finally, in 1860, the *American Journal of Insanity* published a short report written by Robley Dunglison, an English immigrant and physician on the University of Virginia's first faculty. Dunglison (1860, p. 111) stipulated that despite the "extreme unreliability of the statistics presented," one could see that "insanity prevails to a greater extent among the white and free colored population than among the slaves," and that Black insanity was especially "due to the freedom of the latter from care and anxiety, and from intemperance and other excesses." Dunglison's views illustrate how the argument that freedom was a cause of madness survived more than twenty years after the publication of the first census returns. All in all, the articles in local newspapers fed into a widespread discourse about the causal relationship between Black freedom and insanity, bolstered by the authority of statisticians

and politicians, as well as of medical professionals such as Duglison who published in a prominent academic journal, the *American Journal of Insanity*. These various publications show that the 1840 and 1850 census returns cemented the links between slavery and insanity all around the country, for both lay circles and more specialist audiences.

Post-Reconstruction interpretations: From emancipation to “political excitement”

Freedom as a cause of Black insanity gained credence in the Reconstruction era as well, more than thirty years after the original publication of the 1840 census statistics. For example, New Orleans’s *Weekly Louisianian* ran a news story that quoted census data to once again reiterate that Black freed men and women suffered from insanity at a much higher rate than white Southerners (Anonymous, 1871). But, in a post-slavery, Reconstruction context, the purpose of this statistical argument had slightly shifted: commentators now quoted the insanity statistics in support of a return to slavery and against newly acquired Black civil rights.

Examples of the same rhetoric can be found in other Southern states such as Virginia. Six years later, in 1877, at the end of the Reconstruction era, Robert F. Baldwin, a physician working in the Virginia State Asylums and former physician in the Confederate army, received a letter from Martin Scott, a trained physician and professor at the Virginia Medical College in Richmond. Quoting the previous census results, Scott wanted Baldwin to send him the admissions statistics from the Central Lunatic Asylum for Colored Insane at Petersburg, the Black asylum that had opened in Virginia seven years previously, in order to compare them to the national average. “In your opinion has Emancipation increased the numbers of insane negroes? Had the war and its results increased the number of insane whites in Virginia?” asked Scott, eager for Baldwin’s view on whether “there had not been an increase in the number of insane negroes, the ratio of insane, since the war and as a consequence of

the delights of freedom.”⁸ Scott, also a former Confederate physician, had political motives for obtaining the admission statistics, as he sought scientific proof of Black insanity to vindicate the Confederate cause despite the Confederate defeat some twenty years earlier. In his letter, Scott elaborated on his view that the rise in Black insanity in Virginia was due to the fall of the Southern order after the Civil War:

I want the Yankees [Northerners] to have the satisfaction of knowing how much evil they have brought upon Virginia without whose aid that self-satisfied, self-glorifying people would still be under British rule [...] [I desire] them to know that not only have they brought ruin upon her people but have consigned so many to her mad-house, [...] but also that their peculiar pets [i.e., Black freed men and women] can't stand the cons and responsibilities of freedom.⁹

Martin Scott interrogated the admissions statistics in connection with the recent opening of the first asylum for Black residents in Virginia, in 1869. “Virginia has recently established I believe a negro insane asylum [...]. Was this rendered necessary by the increase of her negro insane, or as a matter of caste? Or both? Do you receive negro insane in your institution? How does the percentage of ‘cure’ of the two races compare?” asked Scott, trying to make sense of the new institution.¹⁰ Scott’s line of questioning exposed his anxiety about the potential for the proliferation of further Black insane asylums. Fueling this fear was the worry that white Southerners would have to pay for the Black institutions, in the context of a new social order for which they had no sympathy (Grossi, 2016).

⁸ Letter to Baldwin, Superintendent of Western Hospital by Dr Martin Scott, box 55, folder 24, Western State Hospital Collection, Library of Virginia (hereafter “Letter to Baldwin”). For further analyses of this correspondence, see Foltz (2015), pp. 37-38; Grossi (2016), pp. 237-38; Grossi (2018), pp. 199-201.

⁹ Letter to Baldwin.

¹⁰ Letter to Baldwin.

This impugning of emancipation as the main cause of Black insanity resurfaced in medical discourse in the late 1880s. In his 1889 lecture given at the Eleventh Annual Session of the Louisiana State Medical Society, in New Orleans, medical professor and former Confederate officer Joseph Jones advanced his view that the significant numbers of Black people classified as “insane” in the South could be attributed to their “political excitement.” Citing cases of Black insanity from the New Orleans Charity Hospital, Jones defined “political excitement” as similar to “religious excitement,” conditions provoked by “hereditary or congenital imperfections of the nervous system” as well as by “chronic alcoholism and masturbation.” For Jones, “political excitement and certain political and race changes, such as those wrought by the great American civil war of 1861-1865,” were the cause of his Black patients’ mental afflictions, having provoked a “demoniacal” change in their mental state (Jones, 1870, pp. 252-53).

Jones’s rhetoric illustrates how physicians and natural scientists penned theories in scientific racism that aimed to limit Black civil rights during the Jim Crow era, after the 1870s and the Reconstruction era, when Southern states started to enforce racial segregation in public facilities (Ayers, 1992). After the 1860s, “racial science” was current in Southern elite intellectual and academic circles (Patterson, 2009). Biologists such as Nathaniel Shaler cited the effect of topography and climate on racial development to justify the institution of slavery, while early anthropologists and physicians promoted racially based pathologies that they described as a consequence of inherent racial deficiencies (Marcus, 2021). Similarly, by developing such a medical argument, Jones intentionally pointed a finger at the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation, effectively accusing it of directly impacting the health and “weak” moral character of freed slaves, unable to handle the new era of freedom. However as much as the new era of emancipation and Reconstruction may have durably impacted the health and morality of former slaves, Jones explained that white Southerners and former

Confederacy officers were not affected by the same severe change in their mental condition, unlike Freedmen and Freedwomen, who were affected by episodes of political excitement (Jones, 1870, pp. 252-53). For Jones, “the consciousness in the justice of the cause for which their lives and fortunes were risked,” “their brave [...] nature,” “the physical development and perfection of the men and women of the Southern States,” as well as “the four years of incessant marching, entrenching and fighting which characterized the campaigns of the Southern army during the struggle (1861-1865)” inured the soldiers to hardship, “hard work, frugal and scant meals, and educated their minds to face, without a murmur, disease, disaster and death.” Moreover, while “the heroic struggle tried the hearts of the entire male population of the Southern States in the fierce fires of battle and prepared them to struggle manfully with subsequent degradation resulting from defeat,” Jones believed that Black men and women were doomed to insanity, due to their new political and moral condition after the “great American civil war of 1861-1865” (Jones, 1870, p. 254). Jones’s double-edged argumentation thus further affirmed and accentuated the rise of Black madness while highlighting the white man’s moral and mental qualities after Reconstruction.

Insanity in the Black population was still discussed in relation to emancipation and the extension of some civil rights to freed Black men and women in the 1890s. In the 1880s and 1890s, J. F. Miller, superintendent of the Eastern Hospital in Goldsboro, North Carolina, T. O. Powell, superintendent of the Georgia Lunatic Asylum, W. F. Drewry, Superintendent of the Central Hospital at Petersburg, Virginia, E. D. Bondurant, assistant superintendent of the Alabama Insane Hospital, and T. J. Mitchell, superintendent of the Mississippi State Lunatic Asylum, all discussed the rates of Black insanity throughout the South by using the successive census returns (from 1840 onwards) and statistics from their local institutions to forward the claim that former slaves and their descendants had rapidly become insane as they

were not able “naturally” to handle their status as freed men and women (Miller, 1896).¹¹ The statistics were also quoted in newspapers: in 1890, the Detroit Black newspaper *Plaindealer* claimed that insanity was becoming “an alarming future in the course of present civilization.” “Until recently the Afro Americans were almost exempt from its influence,” explained the paper, “but now having entered into the energy and restlessness of the present age, they too are becoming subjects of dementia” (Anonymous, 1890). The Black freed men and women were thus seen as having just joined civilization—some of them had had the experience of relocating to cities after leaving the plantations—which, according to the author, did not necessarily bring them better living conditions. This article can therefore be read as a statement of concern for the (mental) health of Black Americans as they make the transition into free society and face a new range of discriminations from white Americans.

The tenacity of the logic that ascribed Black insanity to freedom indeed persisted into the twentieth century. In 1900, J. Addison Hodges, a physician from Richmond, Virginia, read a paper before the *American Medico-Psychological Association*, on “The Effect of Freedom upon the Physical and Psychological Development of the Negro.” Hodges observed that the number of Black persons classified as “insane” had drastically increased since 1865 in Virginia. To argue his case, he quoted census results from 1840, 1860, 1880, and 1890, and he drew upon the authority of his South Carolinian colleague, Dr. Powell, who argued that “there has been a radical change in the susceptibility to certain diseases, notably insanity, phthisis and similar maladies in this class of our population, from which they were almost entirely exempt up to 1867” (Anonymous, 1900). According to Hodges, under slavery, slaves’ “habits of life were regular, their food and clothing were substantial and sufficient as a rule, and the edict of their masters restrained them from promiscuous excesses and the

¹¹ On J. F. Miller, see Powell (1991); on T. O. Powell, see also Segrest (2021); on W. F. Drewry, see Norris (2017); on E. D. Bondurant, see Hughes (1992); on T. J. Mitchell, see Barringer (2016, p. 174).

baneful influences of unrestricted indulgences.” He elaborated, “By other authorities it has been claimed that the increase of insanity among the negroes in Virginia has been for 25 years at the rate of 100, or more, per cent, every ten years.” He conjectured that “the negro race is especially liable to certain forms of nervous diseases,” particularly following the disruptions caused by the Civil War (Anonymous, 1900).

How can one explain the persistence of the freedom/insanity relation tying up madness and freedom, more than fifty years after the publication of the 1840 census? Were the words of Martin Scott, James Barkdull, Joseph Jones, J. Addison Hodges, among others, isolated acts or were they part of a consistent medical discourse? In many respects, their words were not freak occurrences. Reconstruction had actively marked the Southern political and collective imagination and was seen as a disastrous and nightmarish moment, a debacle, by the white Southerners, who had lost the hope of sovereignty over their states apart from the Union (Hale, 1998; Du Bois, 1835; Taylor, 1938).

Scott’s letter reacted bitterly to the social changes that he saw as brutal and unfair to white Southerners. Up until the 1860s, white Southerners had mobilized the argument of Black madness (caused by freedom) in order to raise the threatening specter of a racial dystopia in the South, trying to dissuade abolitionists from pushing forward their movement, announcing that this would further weaken vulnerable whites against the hordes of mad and dangerous Black men and women. Yet, after emancipation, the freedom/insanity relation, or “freedom causality factor,” marked a shift in purpose, from a defense of slavery against abolition, to a (post-slavery) critique of emancipation. Southern physicians now used its logic to fuel a new rhetorical strategy that criticized the ill-effects of emancipation in favor of a return to a (presumably healthier) slave-based social order.

Conclusion

Drawing upon the authority of census numbers and racial science, the commentaries appearing in the Southern press—newspapers like the *Charleston Mercury* and the *Macon Weekly Telegraph*—and the medical discourse constituted in physicians’ letters and lectures, over a prolonged period from the 1850s to the 1890s, show the durability of the causal freedom/madness relation beyond the context of emancipation. Furthermore, the arguments transformed over time to in response to the new Southern political context after abolition. In the new rhetoric, it was no longer a question of saying that the longer the Black people had been freed, the more insane they were, but rather of insisting on the accelerated growth of Black madness, resulting in a broader medical-political interrogation of Black civil rights and mental soundness as freed men and women. While the statistical reliability of the 1840 census returns was questioned, Southern officials, physicians, and political commentators persistently defended the validity of these returns in order to advance their political agendas. Despite their controversial status, the flawed data continued to influence public and psychiatric perceptions of freed Black people in the postbellum period. In the context of the Jim Crow era, this put newly gained Black civil rights under siege (Wacquant, 2001).

The pro-slavery applications of the statistics therefore offer a striking example of how scientific racism could emerge out of medical rhetoric that aimed to limit Black civil rights and argue for Black residents’ mental inferiority. In this scenario, the theories that emerged out of the repeated misuses of the 1840 census returns illustrate the process of creating science and scientific argumentation by numbers, which, in themselves, did not contain a clear meaning, until they were captured by and integrated into a more general political argument which unfolded throughout the nineteenth century.

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Table 1. Comparison of Northern and Southern States, from Jarvis, 1842, p. 117.

	White Population.	No. of Insane.	One in	Colored Population.	No. of Insane.	One in
Northern States.	9,557,065	9736	970	171,894	1058	162.4
Southern States.	4,632,153	4900	945.3	2,702,491	1734	1558
Total.	14,189,218	14636	962	2,874,385	2792	1030