



August 11, 2017

Commissioner Mitchell J. Silver  
New York City Department of Parks and Recreation  
24 West 61st Street  
New York, NY 10025

Dear Commissioner Silver,

National Advocates for Pregnant Women (NAPW) is a non-profit legal advocacy organization committed to protecting and advancing the human and civil rights of pregnant and parenting women. We are writing to support East Harlem Preservation (EHP) in their call for the removal of the Dr. James Marion Sims statue at 103rd St. and Fifth Avenue, on the border of East Harlem. Although the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation has offered to attach an explanatory plaque to the statue, we feel that this step alone is insufficient.

NAPW joins EHP's request because of what Dr. Sims did and because the statue with its current inscription and location suggests that our history of slavery and its many forms of dehumanizing brutality need not be acknowledged but instead will be honored and celebrated. As you may know, Dr. Sims is most famous for developing a surgery to correct obstetric fistulas, painful and embarrassing complications of childbirth. He developed this technique by experimenting on enslaved Black women with fistulas in Montgomery, Alabama from 1845 to 1849. These women did not volunteer for or consent to these traumatic operations: They were consigned to Dr. Sims' clinic by slaveowners and physically restrained during surgery. The surgeries Dr. Sims attempted were excruciatingly painful, and although the use of ether anesthesia became widely accepted and available in 1846, Dr. Sims refused to anesthetize his subjects. In other words, Dr. Sims rose to fame by torturing enslaved Black women.

The East Harlem monument obscures and whitewashes this history. Built at the insistence of white male physicians seeking to consolidate their professional status at the end of the 19th century, the statue celebrates Dr. Sims uncritically and effaces the enslaved women whose torture enabled his research. Those women carried out real and valuable labor: In addition to performing the productive and reproductive labor of enslavement, they lived the experiences that Dr. Sims would later exploit to testify to his own accomplishments. Scholar Nicole Ivy terms this contribution "representational labor." The East Harlem statue idealizes Dr. Sims and denies these women's labors and sufferings. It records an inaccurate and harmful version of history.

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Indeed, Dr. Sims' experiments are consistent with a long history of medical, gynecological, and obstetric violence against people of color in the United States. For example, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, experimental cesarean surgeries were predominantly conducted on Black women and resulted almost inevitably in maternal death. From 1932-1972, low-income Black men endured syphilis undiagnosed and untreated, in some cases passing this terrible disease to their family members, as part of the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment. In the 1950s, birth control developers tested hormonal contraception with severe side effects on Puerto Rican women without obtaining actual informed consent. This history of violence and racism in the name of scientific progress illustrates the importance of enforcing medical and scientific accountability today. Dr. Sims tortured enslaved Black women, and New York City should not minimize or perpetuate that legacy.

NAPW joins EHP in calling for action. In order to limit the contemporary harm enacted by a memorial to racist, antebellum-era torture, NAPW believes that the statue should be removed. It is especially offensive in East Harlem, a neighborhood predominantly occupied by people of color. This step is long overdue.

National Advocates for Pregnant Women  
Lynn M. Paltrow, Executive Director

cc: The Honorable Bill de Blasio  
Mayor of New York City

Chirlane McCray  
First Lady of New York City

Melissa Mark-Viverito  
Speaker, New York City Council

Mark Levine  
Chair, New York City Council Committee on Parks and Recreation

Kate Spellman  
Chief of Community Outreach and Partnership Development,  
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Jonathan Kuhn  
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Marina Ortiz  
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