



Profile

Vanessa Northington Gamble: pioneer in histories of race and health



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Vanessa Northington Gamble was confirmed as a member of the National Council on the Humanities by the US Senate in 2022. The nomination for that role from US President Joe Biden had followed Gamble's appointment as the first woman, and African American, to hold the esteemed position of University Professor of Medical Humanities at George Washington University in Washington, DC, USA, where she is also Professor of Health Policy, Professor of American Studies, and Professor of Medicine. Her work encompasses the history of race and racism in US medicine and public health, health equity, and bioethics.

Born in West Philadelphia, PA, USA into a community she describes as "under-resourced financially...but not poor in terms of the spirit of the people who live there, and how we tried to take care of each other", Gamble decided at an early age that she wanted to be a physician. That dream was encouraged by her mother, who "worked many odd jobs to raise me and my sister", and her grandmother, a minister and medium, who she describes as "a healer of a different sort". Looking back, Gamble also thinks her career choice partly came from the fact that she "grew up in a neighbourhood where there was a lot of illness. Both my mother, grandmother, and, later, sister all died of breast cancer. My sister had lead poisoning at one point so that I saw illness from a young age, and I got the sense it was because people didn't have money...I made that link early, early on. But I didn't know quite what to do with it." For her university studies she went to Hampshire College in Amherst, MA. It was "a real turning point", she says, when she learned about "the influence of social factors on health care" and first encountered medical sociology. Intent on combining medicine and the social sciences, she went to the University of Pennsylvania where she completed degrees in medicine and a PhD in the history and sociology of science, establishing a path across disciplines. What Gamble "wanted to do was look at the role of race and racism in the history of medicine".

Over the course of her studies and lived experience, it became clear to Gamble that "inequities aren't just about working in health care inequities....I worked with people in criminal justice, environmental justice, economics... history has always been important to me, to show what the contributions of Black people have been and what the resilience of Black people has been. For me, when I talk about African Americans and medicine, I think it's important not just to tell the stories of the US Public Health Syphilis Study at Tuskegee, or J Marion Sims or Henrietta Lacks, but also what Black people did to take care of themselves in the face of racism." In furthering this vision, in 1996, Gamble became the founding Director of the University of Wisconsin Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity in Medicine where she

"taught the first course in the US on the history of race and racism in American medicine".

In the 1990s, she recalls, "we were asking questions that today people might not think are that earth shattering: what do we mean by race? What's racism? What are these disparities? The word 'disparity' was controversial...we could not even use the words racism and public health at the CDC." Those early studies of Gamble and her contemporaries were "a real game changer", she says. Today, Gamble notes, the CDC accepts that "racism is a serious threat to the public's health". She adds: "one of the things that I have found encouraging over the course of my career is the acknowledgment in many spheres of the impact of racism on health".

Among her many historical contributions, in 2010 Gamble published the first article looking at the history of African Americans in the 1918 influenza epidemic. "There were so many gaps", she says, "very few articles and books written specifically on African Americans and health care...So we used a lot of primary documents." For Gamble, "primary sources are powerful...I think it's important for students to read an article from 1940 saying that Black mothers and babies die twice or three times in some locations the rate of white mothers and babies...When I talk with my students about racial inequities and infant mortality in the US now, I always try to get them not just to look at that as an abstract statistic, rather, how many parents have been grieving the loss of a child?"

Alongside her research and teaching, Gamble is currently "writing a biography of Dr Virginia Alexander, a Black woman physician-activist, who lived from 1899 to 1949. Our ancestors were enslaved in the same area of Virginia. As a Black woman physician myself, I really wanted to know from whence I came here." With the long view of a historian, she notes "what I do know is that you keep fighting racism, because it is a chameleon". Even with the progress forged so far, she is "not surprised that we have states in the US where African American history cannot be taught". For Gamble, in the present climate, the next steps are crucial. In terms of the impact of social factors, race, and racism on health care, she says, "we've demonstrated it, but what are we now going to do about it? There's still a lot more work to be done."

In all of her work, Gamble emphasises "the importance of keeping your eyes open, open your ears, open your heart". For physicians she underlines "the importance of listening to patients, to hear about their lives, not just telling someone to make sure you take this medicine not knowing that there's no pharmacy in their neighbourhood...Try and get a full picture of a patient. Because the patient in front of you might be your best teacher."

Aarathi Prasad