



Narrative Medicine and the Black Maternal Mortality Crisis

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As of 2018, African American women in the US were three to four times as likely to die from pregnancy-related causes than white women. But it was only when award-winning tennis player Serena Williams faced severe problems giving birth to her first child, Olympia, that many were willing to admit that perhaps there was a racial bias in the American health care system after all. This paper looks at the current black maternal mortality crisis through the lens of narrative medicine. As both a methodology and a field of research, narrative medicine uses the tools of literary analysis to enhance medical practice. Looking at racial disparities in the American health care system from a narrative medicine perspective, we may thus wonder whether medical practitioners listen to the narratives of black patients differently than is the case for white patients. In this context, both African American women and their relatives need to engage in a practice of what might be called medical storytelling in order to read the practice of medicine against the grain. Finally, while this paper looks at what narrative medicine can bring to medical practice and the didactics of medicine, it also asks what narrative medicine might do to the humanities as a critical practice. If literary analysis brings to medicine an attention to close reading and “close listening,” narrative medicine, in turn, may add a material dimension to the humanities. In the dichotomy of black and white but also far beyond it, bodies may indeed matter not only to medical practice, but to the humanities as well.