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**“Still I Rebelled, from Inside of Me”: A Study
of Slave Disability and Resistance in the
United States**



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“Still I Rebelled, from Inside of Me”: A Study of Slave
Disability and Resistance in the United States¹

¹ Library of Congress, ‘Martin Jackson’ in *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 16, Texas, Part 2, Easter-King* <<https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn162>> [accessed 26 March 2024] p. 189

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Abbreviations

WPA – Work Projects Administration

A Note on Terminology

This study relays terms and descriptors of disability used by contemporaries of antebellum America which are no longer considered appropriate today. Examples include “lame”, “cripple”, “sickly”, and “unsound”. Contextual descriptors of nondisabled bodies also arise, such as “able-bodied”, “prime”, “healthy”, and “robust”.² When it is not directly quoting a historical source, this study does its best to use respectful and inclusive language as advised by *Guidelines* – a resource created from a survey of national disability organisations and individuals with disabilities.³ As per this guidance, “person-first” language is used throughout this study (i.e. “person with a disability”, rather than “disabled person”) in order to acknowledge that a person’s disability is only one aspect of their identity.⁴

This study also includes racial language as it reflects the precise wording of the primary sources it encounters - except for the “N-word”, which will be censored with asterisks when quoted. Finally, for the sake of variety, the terms ‘enslaved person’ and ‘bondsperson’ will be used interchangeably throughout this study.

Definitions and Caveats

Re-examining slavery through a lens of disability requires a comprehensive understanding of the term “disability”. In the context of slavery, disability exists at once as a social construct, a

² Importantly, any dichotomies presented between disability and a person’s agency/capability are not personal judgements. They have been drawn from the primary record and interpreted within the specific context of U.S. slavery.

³ The University of Kansas, ‘Guidelines: How to Write About People With Disabilities (9th edition)’, *Research & Training Center on Independent Living* <<https://rtcil.org/guidelines>> [31 March 2024]

⁴ There are different opinions among people with disabilities regarding this approach and one should always take care to ask the individual how they prefer to be written or spoken about when possible.

metaphor, and an embodied condition. That is to say, ‘slavery as an institution was predicated upon slaves’ “soundness” and thus produced a meaning of disability through the commodification of the human body and behaviour.⁵ However, slavery as an institution was at the same time inherently disabling; producing disability both metaphorically (through slave codes, constant surveillance, and denial of citizenship) and literally, as a temporary or permanent* embodied experience of the enslaved (through everyday realities of violence, intensive labour, and harsh conditions).⁶ ‘Many enslaved people lived with a range of conditions [that would today be] considered “disabilities” as a result.’⁷

But as Cristina Visperas cautions, while accounts of enslaved people with injury and impairment can tempt a ‘ready identification with disability’, it is important that scholars do not ‘enact their own politics of domination’ in the bid to write disability into the gaps of scholarship.⁸ Accordingly, this study locates its subjects in a way that mitigates the risk of such ‘interpretative violence’, taking care to ensure that it does not impose an identification with disability that was not defined by enslaved persons themselves.⁹ Therefore, throughout this study a person with a disability is someone who identified themselves, or was recognised by their enslaved counterparts, as having a congenital or acquired, physical condition that significantly shaped their treatment, roles, and actions in slavery. These individuals appear in the primary record as people whose names or experiences are prefaced or explained by their

⁵ Jeff Forret, “Deaf & Dumb, Blind, Insane, or Idiotic”: The Census, Slaves, and Disability in the Late Antebellum South’ *The Journal of Southern History*, 82 (2016), 503-548 (p. 504).

⁶ I fashion the term ‘permanent’ with an asterisk throughout this study to acknowledge the cultural beliefs held by some enslaved people about the ability to spiritually reverse what Western cultures might consider ‘permanent’ disabilities; For more work on the metaphorical disabling of enslaved and free Black people, see: Jenifer L. Barclay, *The Mark of Slavery: Disability, Race, and Gender in Antebellum America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2021); On that in the Caribbean, see: Stefanie Hunt-Kennedy, *Between Fitness and Death: Disability and Slavery in the Caribbean* (University of Illinois Press, 2020).

⁷ Barclay, *The Mark of Slavery*, p. 3.

⁸ Cristina Visperas, ‘The Able-Bodied Slave’ *Journal of Literacy & Cultural Disability Studies*, 13 (2019), 93-110 (p. 100).

⁹ Visperas, p. 100.

condition, and are commonly referred to by their counterparts with descriptive identifiers such as “the sickly”, “the feeble” or “cripples”.¹⁰ This approach does depend on sources that openly disclose disability, which can risk overlooking invisible or hidden disabilities among enslaved people. However, by highlighting disability as an important category of analysis for understanding the lives of enslaved people, this study hopes to inspire more research in this area and encourage more diverse representation in future scholarship.

¹⁰ Any conflation of disability with illness throughout this study does not intend to present an assumption that a disability is a disease or that people with disabilities are not healthy. This study includes terms or descriptors of illness such as “sickly” within its definition of disability due to its impact on an enslaved person’s perceived labour capabilities and a slaveholders’ subsequent judgement of their “soundness”. My definition does not include psychiatric conditions due to my methodology which seeks to engage only with those sources that openly disclose an identification with disability, and the resulting sparsity of the source pool regarding psychiatric conditions.

Introduction

‘Disability is everywhere in history, once you begin looking for it, but conspicuously absent in the histories we write... It is time to bring disability from the margins to the centre of historical inquiry.’¹¹

- Douglas C. Baynton

“Overboard with them, shipmates!”

Cutlass and dirk were plied;

Fettered and blind, one after one,

*Plunged down the vessel’s side.*¹²

These poetry lines, taken from abolitionist John Greenleaf Whittier’s ‘The Slave-Ships’, have as their subject the enslaved Africans thrown overboard the French slave ship in their state of blindness. The thirty-six lives lost were merchants’ money saved - the crew relieved of the ‘expense of supporting slaves rendered unsalable,’ and hopeful to submit a successful insurance claim.¹³ Though Whittier writes about those individuals on the voyage to the French Caribbean islands of Guadeleoue in 1819, his words encapsulate the lives of many more within the transatlantic slave trade who faced a vulnerable fate on account of their disabilities. To date, the names of those individuals lost at the hands of the seamen on board

¹¹ Douglas C. Baynton, ‘Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History’ in *The Disability Studies Reader* ed. by Lennard J. Davis (Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), pp. 17-31 (p. 30).

¹² John Greenleaf Whittier, *Anti-slavery Poems: Songs of Labor and Reform*, by John Greenleaf Whittier (New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1888) p. 21.

¹³ Whittier, p. 19.

Le Rodeur remain unknown. This study sets out to make more visible the lives of enslaved people with disabilities in the United States, making certain that their names and voices are heard.

Stolen and transported across the ‘Middle Passage’ as human cargo, the enslaved were treated as though they were commodities, undergoing quality assurance to prevent the inclusion of anybody that signified a ‘uselessness in the slave economy.’¹⁴ The financial interests of slave merchants and the labouring expectations of buyers were mapped onto the enslaved body from the moment of capture, and so began the process by which slave traders delineated the valuable and the unsalable, the useful and the refuse.¹⁵

Upon arrival in the United States, enslaved people remained subject to the slaveholder gaze and their concept of the ‘perfect labouring body’ - placed on the auction block to be bought and sold within the internal slave market.¹⁶ Enslaved people with disabilities found themselves especially vulnerable as slave health and physicality was translated into slave merchant profitability, rendering their fates uncertain.¹⁷ Indeed, plantation records and legal petitions provide evidence that the enslaved individuals who did not have a body or mind that was perceived to be profitable or fit for labour were considered to be “wholly useless” and viewed as paternalistic burdens.¹⁸

¹⁴ Sowande’ M. Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage* (University of Illinois Press, 2016) p. 47.

¹⁵ Mustakeem, p. 21.

¹⁶ Nielsen, p. 54-55; Mustakeem, p. 37.

¹⁷ Sharla M. Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (University of North Carolina Press, 2002) p. 25.

¹⁸ Digital Library on American Slavery, ‘Petition #20680704: To the Honorable the Superior Court for the Country aforesaid’ Greene County, Georgia, Records of the Superior Court, October 16, 1807 <<https://dlas.uncg.edu/petitions/petition/20680704/>> [accessed 20 March 2024]

This study seeks to excavate the experience of enslaved individuals with disabilities from the primary record of slavery in the United States. By prioritising first-hand accounts of disability in slavery, it sets out to make more visible the acts of resistance these individuals enacted in slavery. It contends that everyday acts that might otherwise be overlooked can be recognised as acts of resistance when viewed in the context of enslaved individuals with disabilities' devaluation by slaveholders, marginalisation on plantations, and occasional stigmatisation by counterparts.

If we are to uncover the acts of resistance performed by individuals with disabilities in slavery, we must look beyond the more conventional forms of resistance that are currently documented in the historiography. We need to understand the distinct experiences of individuals with disabilities in slavery to in turn realise those personal acts of everyday life that, for enslaved people with disabilities, were also political.¹⁹ If disability altered enslaved people's locations, plantation time and work, and social status, it also configured the ways they resisted and why.²⁰ This approach promises to uncover forms of resistance that are yet to be acknowledged as such by scholars.

This will be the first study of its kind to focus exclusively on the everyday, personal forms of resistance enacted by individuals with disabilities within the constraints of slavery. In doing so, this study hopes to highlight disability as an essential category of analysis to further our understanding of slave culture and resistance, presenting more

¹⁹ Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004) p. 3.

²⁰ Camp, p. 32.

ways in which enslaved persons reclaimed and marked ownership over their own bodies.

Literature Review:

Until recently, enslaved people with disabilities have existed in the margins of the historiography of U.S. slavery, merely implied by descriptions of slavery's brutality or reduced to statistical figures in quantitative medical studies of slave health. Scholars have long recognised slavery as an institution that was inherently disabling, but only with the rise of disability studies have they turned their attention to the ways disability shaped the experience of enslavement.

Disability Studies is an interdisciplinary field that dates back to the 1980s. The field calls for disability to be moved to 'the centre of historical inquiry', inviting scholars to conceptualise disability 'as a key defining social category on a par with race, class, and gender,' and increasingly in recent years, to examine their intersectionality.²¹ Catherine J. Kudlick and Kim E. Nielson have emphasised the importance of this intersectional approach, particularly regarding histories of race and the justification of inequality by physical difference.²² Their studies each highlight the necessity of exploring disability within different historical contexts and societies. Indeed, race and disability histories are burgeoning in response, spurred on further by the recent undertaking of a Global History approach by Esme Cleall, which has

²¹ Catherine J. Kudlick, 'Disability History: Why We Need Another "Other"' *The American Historical Review*, 108 (2003), 763-793 (p. 764).

²² Kudlick, p. 765; Nielsen, p. 10.

produced a number of important works on disability in non-Western societies, cultures, and colonial contexts - including that by Stefanie Hunt-Kennedy on slavery in the Caribbean.²³

However, to date, few scholars have examined disability in the context of slavery in the United States, and even fewer have dedicated studies exclusively to the everyday lives of enslaved people with disabilities. This dissertation intends to amend this shortcoming by making certain that the voices of those individuals with disabilities in U.S. slavery are heard in the historiography.

More scholars may be using disability as a distinct category of analysis, but only a handful have explored the ways in which disability affected the lives of enslaved people in antebellum slave society. Two scholars who have most notably done the latter, and whose works this dissertation builds upon, are Dea H. Boster and Jenifer L. Barclay.²⁴ The works by Boster and Barclay have made ground-breaking contributions to the historiography of disability in U.S. slavery in the past decade. Boster's pioneering study on disability and power in slavery helped to establish disability as an important category of analysis for understanding the experience of the enslaved, and Barclay's more recent work from 2021 on the social dimensions of disability in slavery has contributed valuably toward a more comprehensive understanding of enslaved communities and culture. However, both studies have limitations in fully recognising the agency and resistance exercised by enslaved individuals with disabilities that this dissertation seeks to address.

²³ Stefanie Hunt-Kennedy, 'The Middle Passage, the Market, and the Plantation: Slavery-Induced Disability in the Eighteenth-Century Caribbean' in *Global Histories of Disability, 1700–2015: Power, Place and People* ed. by Esme Cleall (New York: Routledge, 2023), pp. 23-39.

²⁴ Dea H. Boster, *African American Slavery and Disability: Bodies, Property, and Power in the Antebellum South, 1800-1860* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Jenifer L. Barclay, *The Mark of Slavery: Disability, Race, and Gender in Antebellum America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2021)

Boster's study argues that enslaved people with disabilities posed a significant challenge to the institution and its white authority figures, highlighting how disability – be that feigned, exaggerated, or self-inflicted – could serve as an 'important way for slaves to negotiate control over their bodies and resist the authority of their masters.'²⁵ However, by solely concentrating on slave disability as it affected their work and conditions of bondage, Boster's analysis falls short in recognising the ways disability affected the social dimensions of an enslaved persons' life. As a result, she overlooks the everyday, personal, and private forms of resistance enacted by enslaved individuals with disabilities regarding their identity, social status, and sense of belonging among the enslaved community.

On the other hand, Barclay's work delves into the social dimensions of disability in slavery, but fails to sufficiently realise individuals with disabilities as 'active agents in their own fate.'²⁶ Drawing on ex-slave narratives and plantation records, Barclay re-examines enslaved families and communities through the lens of disability. She explores how different views of disability among enslaved communities came to shape the lives of those with disabilities, highlighting both cases of their social acceptance and social exclusion.²⁷ However, by choosing to understand the social experience of enslaved people with disabilities by the way they were perceived by their counterparts, Barclay depicts their social status to be predetermined and fixed, and in turn fails to recognise the agency they exercised over this aspect of their lives.

²⁵ Boster, *African American Slavery and Disability*, p. 117.

²⁶ Kudlick, p. 781.

²⁷ Barclay, *The Mark of Slavery*, pp. 36-63.

While Barclay does recognise that people with disabilities were often valued by their communities for the contributions they made and the advantages their condition sometimes afforded, she assumes these benefits to be purely circumstantial or that they ‘had no choice in the matter.’²⁸ This denial of those with disabilities in slavery as active agents with intention is an oversight caused in part by the study’s focus on how they served their communities. In doing so, Barclay overlooks how their actions could serve themselves. This can be realised when more attention is paid to the significance of slave narratives as first-hand testimonies - for the insight they provide into the self-perception and self-revelation of enslaved people. This study will address the shortcomings of Barclay’s work by emphasising the ways in which those with disabilities reclaimed ownership over their social status, creating a positive identity for themselves and negotiating their sense of belonging among the community in slavery.

By combining and nuancing the findings of Boster and Barclay’s works to uncover the everyday, personal forms of resistance enacted by enslaved individuals with disabilities, this study not only addresses gaps in the historiography of slave disability, but also makes a significant contribution to the historiography of slave resistance.

Scholars have been eager to emphasise the agency and resistance exercised by enslaved people since the revision of the traditionalist narrative of paternalism, slave contentment, and passivity presented by the likes of Ulrich Phillips and Stanley Elkins.²⁹ However, enslaved people with disabilities have been overlooked in this

²⁸ Barclay, *The Mark of Slavery*, p. 42.

²⁹ Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959); Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Régime* (Louisiana State University Press, 1918).

revisionist pursuit, rendered invisible in the historiography as a result of the historically perceived dichotomy between disability and agency.

The existing literature recognises disability as a tool of resistance in slavery, but paradoxically does not recognise the resistance performed by enslaved people with disabilities. That is to say, malingering – the act of feigning illness or disability – has been recognised by scholars as a means to evade work and challenge the authority of masters since the 1970s.³⁰ More recently, scholars have highlighted how malingering also served enslaved people in the context of slave auctions and in fugitivity. Walter Johnson and Daina Ramey Berry recognise feigning disability as a means to deter or provoke sales, while Ellen Samuels and Jean Franzino have documented how it operated in fugitivity, as a form of visual disguise or a way to excuse oneself from potentially incriminating trials after having run away (such as having to read, write, or speak).³¹

Therefore, scholars have realised to some extent that slavery ‘destabilise[s] the parameters of disability’ that are typically assumed in disability studies, by producing bodies that can ‘at once [be] disabled and yet enabled [...] by the very condition that impairs them.’³² However, these studies tend to emphasise malingering as an act predominantly carried out by nondisabled individuals. There remains an enduring

³⁰ Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956).

³¹ Ellen Samuels, “‘A Complication of Complaints’: Untangling Disability, Race, and Gender in William and Ellen Craft’s *Running A Thousand Miles for Freedom*’ *Melus*, 31 (2006), 15-47; Jean Franzino, ‘Lewis Clarke and the “Color” of Disability: The Past and Future of Black Disability Studies’ *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 35 (2016).

³² Franzino.

silence around enslaved persons with disabilities that were not willingly self-inflicted in the historiography of slave resistance - a reflection of the long 'problematic relationship between disability and historical agency.'³³

Thus, this study finds itself in conversation with Stephanie M. H. Camp's *Closer to Freedom*, which brings to the fore the significance of exploring the 'everyday, private, concealed and even intimate' lives of distinct groups of people in slavery.³⁴ Simply put, Camp contends that by examining specific groups and their distinct experiences in slavery, one can in turn realise particular forms of resistance that might otherwise be overlooked. By applying Camp's approach to the study of people with disabilities in slavery, this study will uncover the overlooked acts of resistance that are embedded within the everyday lives of enslaved persons with disabilities.

Methodology:

This study aims to prioritise the voices of enslaved persons that reach us through the written and oral testimonies they left behind. It is therefore informed predominantly by slave narratives; both the published freedom narratives of the antebellum period and the oral testimonies collected and transcribed by the Works Project Administration (WPA) between 1936-1938.³⁵

³³ Kudlick, p. 789.

³⁴ Camp, p. 3.

³⁵ I use the term 'freedom narratives' to refer to the written autobiographical narratives of formerly enslaved people published in the antebellum period (1830-1861), and the term 'WPA narratives' to refer to the oral testimonies transcribed by the WPA. Both a form of 'slave narrative', I use the different terms for the sake of clarity while discussing them together; This dissertation has been informed by multiple published collections of

Slave narratives are invaluable sources for the insight they provide into the thoughts, emotions, and lived experiences of formerly enslaved people. It was only in the 1970s that scholars recognised the value of slave narratives as historical sources, and with them, challenged the traditionalist narrative of enslaved people as passive and docile subjects.³⁶ However, as the studies by Ellen Samuels and Jean Franzino highlight, details of slave disability within these narratives have generally been overlooked.³⁷ This study endeavours to locate the long-buried histories of disability and resistance in slavery within these first-hand testimonies of slavery.

Freedom narratives are notably unique in that the formerly enslaved were literate enough to record their own accounts or were afforded the opportunity to have it recorded by someone else. While they should therefore not be assumed as representative of the entire enslaved population, as first-hand accounts they do provide a useful window into the personal lives of people in slavery.

By appreciating freedom narratives as a means for enslaved people with disabilities to reclaim ownership over their sense of self and renegotiate their social reception, this study aims to emphasise the agency of these individuals that has not yet been

WPA narratives: Library of Congress, 'Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938' <<https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/about-this-collection/>> [accessed 31 March]; It has also been informed by: Virginia Writers' Project, *The Negro in Virginia* (New York: Arno Press, 1969); Virginia Writers' Project, *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, ed. by Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips (University of Virginia Press, 1976); *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*, ed. by John W. Blassingame (Louisiana State University Press, 1977).

³⁶ Notable examples include: George P. Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: the Making of the Black Community* (Westport: Conn., Greenwood, 1972) and Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974)

³⁷ Samuels, pp. 15-47; Franzino.

recognised by scholars. It hopes to nuance historians' understanding of slave resistance by contending that agency could be enacted through self-perception, and that this could continue or take place beyond enslavement.

Although incredibly valuable for the long-form insight they provide into individual lives in slavery, there are some key limitations to note. The constrained conditions of freedom narratives' production has led many scholars to scrutinise their reliability as historical sources.³⁸ Antebellum freedom narratives were being written in a particularly politically charged context, offering a powerful counter-narrative to those paternalist ideas presented by the competing pro-slavery literature of the time. However, 'as the political stakes and commercial success of their representations rose', freedom narratives struggled to maintain their authenticity.³⁹ They were typically edited by white abolitionists for a predominantly white readership, 'for slave narrators had to testify to their painful life stories under the thumb of restrictions against telling the truth.'⁴⁰ Some scholars even dispute their validity as autobiographies, such as James Olney who contends that freedom narratives were 'most often non-memorial descriptions fitted to a pre-formed mould.'⁴¹ But while it is important to consider the concerns regarding the authenticity of freedom narratives as mediated texts, it would be wrong to deny their autobiographical individuality.

³⁸ Jennifer Fleischner, *Mastering Slavery: Memory, Family, and Identity in Women's Slave Narratives* (New York University Press, 1996) p. 14.

³⁹ Calvin Schermerhorn, 'Arguing Slavery's Narrative: Southern Regionalists, Ex-slave Autobiographers, and the Contested Literary Representation of the Peculiar Institution, 1824-1849' *Journal of American Studies*, 46 (2012), 1009-1033 (p. 1010).

⁴⁰ Fleischner, p. 31.

⁴¹ James Olney, "'I Was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature' *Callaloo*, 20 (1984), 46-73 (p. 49).

To refute the personality of freedom narratives would be to ignore the idiosyncrasies that do exist in the voices of different narratives.⁴² As the ‘prior claims’ of self-authorship attest to, freedom narratives served as an essential means of self-definition and self-revelation for formerly enslaved people.⁴³ They offer invaluable insights into the narrator’s conscious reflections on the self, demonstrating what Jennifer Fleischner describes as an individuals’ ‘need to identify and disidentify’ with certain aspects of their enslavement.⁴⁴ While critics have supposed narrative self-conception to be invention rather than having reference to a real self in the past, this concern with how the self is represented in freedom narratives proves valuable to this study for what it suggests about the significance of identity and self-definition to the agency of enslaved people with disabilities.⁴⁵

The interpretive challenge posed by freedom narratives is one particularly worth taking up in the study of slave disability, for the ‘interesting and quite different way [each narrator] treats embodiment.’⁴⁶ By examining the different ways in which identity and ideas of the body are articulated, one can recognise the diverse and deeply personal ways in which disability was perceived and experienced in slavery – the personal frameworks through which disability was perceived and articulated.

That being said, in order to build a more comprehensive narrative of disability and slavery based on common accounts and insightful differences, this study will

⁴² Fleischner, p. 15.

⁴³ Olney, p. 50.

⁴⁴ Fleischner, p. 24.

⁴⁵ Fleischner, p. 19.

⁴⁶ Franzino.

supplement the antebellum freedom narratives with a diverse array of WPA slave narratives.

The interviewees ranged in age from one to fifty at the time of emancipation in 1865, so more than two-thirds of the participants were over 80 years old at the time of their interview.⁴⁷ As a result, the issue of memory is an important one to note. One must consider how the reliability of the accounts are affected by the insecurity of long-term memory, in addition to the impact the interview questions may have had on what the participants remembered of slavery.⁴⁸

It is also important to consider the power dynamics inherent within the interview format – the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee. The interviewing staff were overwhelmingly white, hired with apparently no serious consideration for the impact the race of the interviewer might have had on the conversation with former enslaved people.⁴⁹ A potential mistrust of the interviewers, in addition to the interviewers' control over the questions and editing of the responses, is likely to have somewhat impeded the candidness of the testimonies.

Despite these limitations, 'the hazards of attempting to comprehend slavery without using [the WPA narratives] far outweigh the limitations of their use.'⁵⁰ The WPA

⁴⁷ Norman R. Yetman, 'The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection' *American Quarterly*, 19 (1967), 534-553 (pp. 534-535).

⁴⁸ *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*, ed. by John W. Blassingame (Louisiana State University Press, 1977) p. xliii.

⁴⁹ Yetman, p. 551.

⁵⁰ Library of Congress, 'The Limitations of the Slave Narrative Collection'

<<https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/articles-and->

narratives provide a personal view into disability as it exists in the memory of the individuals themselves or in the memory of their counterparts and are absolutely essential to engage with if slavery is to be perceived from the perspective of the formerly enslaved themselves.⁵¹ However, to date, few historians have used the oral testimonies to give voice to those formerly enslaved individuals with disabilities in slavery time.

By using these sources together with an awareness of their limitations, this study aims to represent the voices of the enslaved as accurately as possible. Though a challenge, it is a challenge worth taking up, for the lives of these individuals should not be omitted from the historiography.

Structure:

This thesis will be divided into two chapters:

Chapter 1: Spiritual empowerment

Chapter 2: Identity and belonging

essays/introduction-to-the-wpa-slave-narratives/limitations-of-the-slave-narrative-collection/#note28> [accessed 20 April 2024].

⁵¹ Yetman, p. 553.

Chapter 1: Spiritual Empowerment and Purpose

*“Some come crippin’ / Some come lame / Some come walkin’ / In Jesus’ name.”*⁵²

This chapter explores how religion served as an important means for enslaved individuals with disabilities to renounce their devaluation, affirm their self-worth, and find purpose within the constraints of slavery. We need to be attuned to the more intimate ways religion and spirituality served individuals with disabilities. Not only in terms of health, healing and conjure, as examined by Fett and Barclay, or in terms of the abolitionist plight, as examined by Boster, but instead in terms of the individual’s self-empowerment and sense of purpose while in slavery.⁵³

‘During the slave regime,’ Ida B. Wells wrote in 1895, it was to [the Southern white man’s] interest to dwarf the soul and preserve the body.’⁵⁴ Part of the slaveholders’ efforts to diminish the inner beings of enslaved persons was to control the extent to which religion was allowed and practised. In cases where religion was allowed, the enslaved would likely attend a white preacher-led slave service, often located off/away from the plantation. Where religion was prohibited, enslaved communities would forge their own time and space for worship, gathering in one of the slave cabins after dark or stealing away to the woods at night. In both cases, the practice of religion served as an important source of community and solace, and

⁵² Library of Congress, ‘Liza Jones’ in *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 16, Texas, Part 2, Easter-King* <<https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn162>> [accessed 26 March 2024] p. 243.

⁵³ Fett; Barclay, *The Mark of Slavery*; Boster, *African American Slavery and Disability*.

⁵⁴ Ida B. Wells, *A Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynchings in the United States, 1892-1893-1894* (Chicago: Donohue & Henneberry, 1895) p. 4.

was crucial to how they perceived themselves and the institution in which they were enslaved.⁵⁵

Examining how the religiosity of individuals with disabilities was perceived by themselves and by their surrounding community reveals how the attendance of religious congregations served as a personal, embodied form of agency/resistance for individuals with disabilities against the constraints of slavery. In both first-hand and second-hand accounts of enslaved individuals with disabilities, their religiosity is posed as a feat in light of their disabling condition and the distance that often stretched between the plantation, the church, or the covert location of a clandestine prayer meeting. Both the journeys they would undertake and their presence among their peers at religious congregations served as a demonstration of their agency and an act of resistance that is to yet to be acknowledged by scholars.

This chapter argues that, for those bondspersons with disabilities: attendance of religious meetings took on a greater significance, as both a pursuit of spiritual empowerment and demonstration of agency; religion was transformative in that it recontextualised them as spiritual rather than physical beings; and religion granted them with a purpose independent of the conditions of enslavement. This chapter builds on the work of Daima Ramey Berry's concept of 'soul values' – a concept that takes on a greater significance when focused on the lives of enslaved individuals, for we know their devaluation was communicated to them not only by their monetary price but also by their treatment in their everyday lives.

⁵⁵ As James Cone suggests enslaved individuals were able to interpret their own suffering through the lens of biblical narratives, and saw in the story of Moses and the Israelites a prototype of their own struggle for liberation. See: James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 11.

To recognise religiosity as an embodied form of resistance by individuals with disabilities, one must first understand how disability intersected with the harsh conditions of enslavement to pose an additional barrier to their participation in religious practices. The attendance of white church services often required that enslaved persons endure an arduous walk. Allen Wilson, a man formerly enslaved in Virginia, remembered that during the ten mile journey to church each week, “ole marster would ride horseback leading the way [while] we walked along.”⁵⁶ Former bondsperson, Horace Muse, similarly recalled that “when we went to church we had to walk; warn’ ‘lowed to ride.”⁵⁷

The great journeys demanded by slaveholders, in addition to their disregard for the comfort of enslaved people, could have significant implications for individuals with mobility impairments in slavery. James Bolton, a man formerly enslaved in Georgia, explains that his master “didn’t ‘low his mules used none on Sunday” and so “anybody too old and feeble to walk the nine miles [to church] jus’ stayed home.”⁵⁸ This demonstrates how slaveholders’ disregard for enslaved individuals with disabilities could lead to their marginalisation – not merely excluding them from religious teachings but also from their surrounding community, who they were likely distanced from in their working lives also.

The attendance of church services and prayer meetings by individuals with disabilities are in this way an embodied form of resistance. In light of slaveholders’ common disregard for the inclusion of those with disabilities, their endeavour to attend church services alongside their

⁵⁶ Virginia Writers’ Project, ‘Allen Wilson’ in *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, ed. by Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips (University of Virginia Press, 1976) p. 328.

⁵⁷ Virginia Writers’ Project, ‘Horace Muse’ in *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, ed. by Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips (University of Virginia Press, 1976) p. 216.

⁵⁸ Library of Congress, ‘James Bolton’ in *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 1, Adams-Furr* <<https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn041/>> [accessed 29 March 2024] p. 98.

nondisabled counterparts represented both a pursuit of spiritual empowerment and an assertion of personal agency. Former bondsperson, Beverly Jones, remembered that his Uncle Silas had been “too feeble to do no work, but always got strength enough to hobble to church when de slave-service gonna be.”⁵⁹ Uncle Silas’ presence at church is significant for it demonstrates his resolve to overcome a great distance without any accommodations offered by his owner – a distance which would have otherwise excluded him from the experience offered to his counterparts.

By comparing Uncle Silas’ ability to labour with his ability to endure the walk to church, Jones presents the endurance of this journey as Uncle Silas’ active negotiation of his physical capability - selectively exerting himself in favour of his own spirituality. Religiosity can thus be realised as a means for individuals with disabilities to contest the lack of regard for their inclusion and assert their personhood – their attendance of church services an embodied statement against the marginalisation of individuals with disabilities in slavery.

The church was also a space/environment in which individuals with disabilities could gain more visibility. Although ‘no one ain’t ‘sposed to say nothin’ ‘ceptin’ “Amen” whilst [the preacher] was preachin’’, Beverly Jones remembers how his ‘Uncle Silas got up in de front row of de slaves’ pew an’ halted [the service]’ to ask “Is God gonna free us slaves when we git to Heaven?”... “Jesus says come unto Me ye who are free fum sin an’ I will give you salvation.”⁶⁰ The ‘old white preacher stopped an’ looked at Uncle Silas like he wanta kill him’, but ‘Uncle Silas wouldn’t sit down; stood dere de res’ of de service.’⁶¹ Not only is

⁵⁹ Virginia Writers’ Project, ‘Beverly Jones’, *The Negro in Virginia* (New York: Arno Press, 1969) p. 109.

⁶⁰ Virginia Writers’ Project, *The Negro in Virginia* (New York: Arno Press, 1969) p. 109.

⁶¹ ‘Beverly Jones’, *The Negro in Virginia*, p. 109.

Uncle Silas directly challenging the preacher and the religious ideas taught to enslaved people by slaveholders, but he is also challenging his invisibility in the eyes of his master, asserting his presence among his counterparts.

Just as Beverly Jones does on behalf of his Uncle Silas, James L. Smith, a formerly enslaved man who was physically ‘crippled for life’ in his childhood, takes pride in the physical discomfort he endured to attend prayer meetings that were hosted on neighbouring plantations. ‘How I ever [walked twenty-four miles that day], lame as I was, I cannot tell,’ he writes, ‘but I was so zealous [...] that I did not mind going any distance to attend a prayer meeting.’⁶² Smith details the physical debilitation he would endure – how he would be ‘laid up for two or three days’, ‘sick enough’ with swollen feet upon his return – presenting his physical comfort as a sacrifice for the wellness of his and others’ ‘immortal souls.’⁶³

The narratives of Uncle Silas and James L. Smith evince the will for the journeys undertaken by individuals with disabilities to be seen as a form of martyrdom – a pilgrimage whereby they subvert slaveholders’ resolve to ‘preserve the body and dwarf the soul’ to instead sacrifice their physicality to empower the spirit.⁶⁴ This underscores the importance of understanding the distinct oppression of those with disabilities in slavery to in turn uncover these intimate acts of resistance that are yet to be acknowledged as such.

⁶² James L. Smith, *Autobiography of James L. Smith: Including, Also, Reminiscences of Slave Life, Recollections of the War, Education of Freedmen, Causes of the Exodus, Etc.* (Norwich: Press of the Bulletin Company, 1881) p. 26.

⁶³ Smith, pp. 26-28.

⁶⁴ Ida B. Wells, *A Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynchings in the United States, 1892-1893-1894* (Chicago: Donohue & Henneberry, 1895) p. 4.

Religion and spirituality served as a tool for enslaved people with disabilities to refute their status as property and '[renounce] the monetary values placed on their bodies, instead clinging to an internal, personal, and spiritual valuation of themselves.'⁶⁵ In this vein, the practice of religion can be conceptualised as a form of truancy for those with permanent* disabilities, akin to that enacted by individuals with temporary disabilities and illnesses. Enslaved individuals, facing a reality of fluid and unstable soundness, would 'jes' run 'way to de woods fo' a week or two to git a res' fum de fiel', an' den dey come on back.'⁶⁶ For individuals like James L. Smith, who envisioned that his disability would affect him for life, religion provided a form of healing conceived within 'a vision of health that transcended the parameters of soundness' as defined in the interests of the slaveholder.⁶⁷ This is evidenced by the lyrics of slave spirituals which refute the :

*"My knee bones am aching, / My body's rackin' with pain, / I 'lieve I'm a chile of God, / And this ain't my home, / 'Cause Heaven's my aim."*⁶⁸

The language of embodied pain and physical debility suggests how spirituality provided enslaved people with a framework for understanding disability which was independent from that which was inbuilt in the slave market.

⁶⁵ Daina Ramey Berry, 'Soul Values and American Slavery' *Slavery & Abolition*, 42 (2021), 201-218 (pp. 202-203).

⁶⁶ Virginia Writers' Project, 'Lorenzo L. Ivy' in *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, ed. by Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips (University of Virginia Press, 1976) p. 153.

⁶⁷ Fett, p. 199.

⁶⁸ Library of Congress, 'Anderson and Minerva Edwards' in *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 16, Texas, Part 2, Easter-King* <<https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn162>> [accessed 29 March 2024] p. 5.

Another way in which religion served as a means to reaffirm self-worth was by providing enslaved individuals with disabilities a sense of purpose that was out of the control of the slaveholder. Across the slave narratives, there is a visible trend that those with disabilities assumed a position of spiritual authority among the enslaved community, including James L. Smith and Josiah Henson.⁶⁹

James L. Smith's narrative suggests that it was the resulting circumstances of his disability that actually facilitated his religiosity. Smith discovered his spiritual passion after overhearing a white church service from an adjoining room in a private house while learning the shoemakers trade as a, now, 18-year-old crippled man. In his narrative, he attributes this labour assignment to his being 'unfit to be a field hand,' in turn highlighting how his condition granted him access to a different geography on the plantation.⁷⁰ Smith's position on the plantation geography as an enslaved man with a disability facilitated his closeness to the slaveholding whites and their religious practice.

His discovery of religion as a result of his presence in the house suggests that religion was yet to be well practiced by his counterparts. In this way, his unique circumstances as an 'unsound' slave afforded him a unique insight to the routines of the slaveholders that those who did not work in the house may not. As a result, religion instilled within him a renewed sense of purpose. Smith 'commenced holding meetings among the people, and it was not long before [his] fame began to spread as an exhorter.'⁷¹ Equipped with a valued contribution to

⁶⁹ Smith; Josiah Henson, 1789-1883, *Truth Is Stranger Than Fiction: Father Henson's Story of His Own Life*. ed. by Samuel A. Eliot (Boston: J. P. Jewett, 1858).

⁷⁰ Smith, p. 7

⁷¹ Smith, p. 26.

offer his counterparts, while he may have been deemed ‘unprofitable’ by his masters, Smith’s religiosity served as a source of self-worth and purpose among his community.

This assertion of social status by that remarkability afforded to him as a result of his unique circumstances as an enslaved person with a disability is similarly found in the narrative of Josiah Henson. Josiah Henson, made unable to work for 5 months by cruel treatment and ‘[went] through life maimed and mutilated’ due to a lack of treatment and repeated injury, similarly highlights how his role as overseer afforded him more spirituality than his counterparts.⁷² Henson reflects on ‘the slave, whose appetite is always stimulated by as much labour as he can perform, and whose mind is little occupied by thought on subjects of deeper interest’, before he praises his own advantages as superintendent, ‘particularly with regard to those religious privileges [...] which had greatly occupied [his] mind.’⁷³ The connection made between labour and spirituality is interesting for it reveals the ways Henson perceives the physicality of work as a negative – a barrier to religion and spirituality. This is another example of how the value and status of the physical body could be renegotiated by individuals with disabilities in slavery.

Although abolitionist motivations may underpin this comment as an argument against slavery for its distraction from religious devoutness, this does not detract from the clear the ways in which this subject is also used by Henson to assert his own importance and purpose in his literary representation of himself as an enslaved man with a physical disability. He learned by practice how ‘to produce some good religious impressions on the ignorant and thoughtless community by which I was surrounded’ and hoped ‘[his] humble ministrations have not been

⁷² Henson, p. 40.

⁷³ Henson, p. 56.

entirely useless to those who have had less opportunity than myself to reflect upon these all-important subjects.’⁷⁴ Religion offered Henson a purpose and sense of self-worth that enabled him to assert his ‘usefulness’ that physical disabilities most common diminished in the context of the slave economy.

Conclusion:

This chapter has presented the many instances in which the significance of religion is framed in relation to the condition of individuals with disabilities. It highlights the particularly transformative power of spirituality that was envisioned by these individuals – that religion was a form of resistance that provided them with a sense of self-worth and humanity in a system that sought to dehumanise them. The next chapter will build upon this chapter’s recognition of the unique positioning of individuals with disabilities on the plantation and the sense of control they reclaimed over it.

⁷⁴ Henson, p. 57.

Chapter 2: Identity and Belonging

This chapter builds upon the previous one, continuing to investigate the agency and value individuals reclaimed from their unique positions and responsibilities on the plantation. It examines the work performed by enslaved individuals with disabilities as an important means by which they could construct their identity and challenge/affirm their social status and sense of belonging.

The disabilities of enslaved individuals often determined the work that they were assigned. Typically, this work would involve childcare responsibilities and house jobs, rather than field labour, since ‘domestic tasks were generally less strenuous—largely indoors, with less physical strain.’⁷⁵ But while the jobs performed by individuals with disabilities contributed meaningful support to the enslaved community, these roles often landed them in marginal positions on the plantation, away from their counterparts.

The work assigned to enslaved people with disabilities was seen by others to be markedly different, and would often come to be central to their identities in the minds and memories of their counterparts. For example, Estella Jones, who recalls a ‘cripple boy who didn’t do nothin’ but tote water and do things lak dat.’⁷⁶ The gendered dimensions of the slavery experience made outliers on the plantation even more pronounced; their work allocation typically disrupted the traditional social geography of the plantation and isolated individuals

⁷⁵ Boster, *African American Slavery and Disability*, p. 56.

⁷⁶ Library of Congress, ‘Estella Jones’ in *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 2, Garey-Jones* < <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn042/> > [accessed 24 March 2024]

with disabilities from their age and gender groups, greatly impacting their gender performance, sense of self and belonging.

‘As scholar David Brion Davis has noted, “like all humans, slaves were sensitive to privilege, status, and inequality,” which in the slave’s forced lifestyle was linked with their physicality and ability to labour.’⁷⁷ Only recently, in the work by Barclay, have the implications this had for people with disabilities been considered. However, by emphasising the perceptions of disability held by others, Barclay presents the social circumstances as determined and fixed by others, thereby ignoring the acts of resistance and modes of self-fashioning that individuals with disabilities used to reclaim ownership/control their identities and sense of social belonging.

Boster acknowledges gender and the emasculation of individuals with disabilities, but she fails to consider the ways in which this was resisted or overcome.⁷⁸ She presents a dichotomy between masculinity and disability that fails to recognise the agency of individuals with disabilities in regard to their own self-conceptualisation and sense of self and identity.

This chapter builds on the work by Barclay and Boster by centring the voices of those individuals with disabilities to uncover the many ways in which they reclaimed control over their social lives – their sense of self, social status, and sense of belonging. By paying attention to intersectional identities, we can understand more about how disability impacted the lives of individuals in slavery, and therefore also their forms of and motivations for

⁷⁷ Boster, *African American Slavery and Disability*, p. 29.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

resistance. This chapter looks specifically at the work of individuals with disabilities as modes of “self-making” that were realised and used as a form of resistance.

Historians have long recognised that work could be an important ‘arena of “self-making”’ for enslaved men and women, particularly in regard to gender identity and expression.⁷⁹

However, the same concept is yet to be extended to enslaved individuals with disabilities. By looking beyond the more visible impact of disability on enslaved persons’ lives, to the more private and intimate effect it had on the sense of self and belonging detailed in their first-hand testimonies, we can bring to light the more personal and nuanced forms of resistance they performed – that identity is both conceptualised and challenged through a sense of belonging (or the lack thereof). Not only could work serve as a means to challenge the authority of slaveholders, but it could also be a tool of social status and belonging.

This chapter responds to David Stefan Doddington’s assertion that historians ‘need to be attuned to how conflict, comparison, and exclusion were important elements of the [identities] created in work.’⁸⁰ This chapter argues that comparison is an essential detail to investigate in order to realise the sense of belonging as integral to the self-perception of enslaved individuals with disabilities, and that by understanding the importance of belonging to the identity of enslaved persons, we can subsequently recognise the agency of individuals with disabilities over their social status and identity expression as a powerful form of resistance to the dehumanising institution that scholars have overlooked.

⁷⁹ David Stefan Doddington, *Contesting Slave Masculinity in the American South* (Cambridge University Press, 2018) p. 90.

⁸⁰ Doddington, p. 90.

The narrative by James L. Smith offers a pertinent example of this. Smith navigates his experiences in slavery in constant comparison to the position of other men on the plantation, not only stating the work he *did* but also identifying the work he was *unfit* to do: ‘Being lame unfitted me for a slave for a field hand, so I had to do work about the house, to help the women.’⁸¹ From this, it can be inferred that Smith’s experience of his disability, and his sense of self and belonging, was intertwined with his identity as a man within the enslaved community.

Being attuned to the way Smith understands his identity as an individual with a disability within a gendered framework enables the nuanced display of agency/resistance he goes on to describe later in the narrative to be realised. Smith’s master, Mr. Mitchell, had put him in the field each Sunday ‘to attend to the crows, to prevent them pulling up the corn.’⁸² Meanwhile, ‘the field hand were away that day; the boys would be frolicking at some place they had chosen.’⁸³ This Sunday work, uniquely assigned to him as an enslaved man ‘unfit’ to be a field hand, is not protested in his narrative for its physical challenges. Rather, Smith’s complaints are articulated in terms of comparison and sense of belonging as a man.

This suggests that he held a counter-vision of masculinity that was not defined by physicality but by community and inclusion – a counter-vision of masculinity that was attainable by men with disabilities, like Smith, by resisting the work they were assigned by their masters. Declaring himself ‘a great hand to feign sickness’, Smith resolved that he would put an end to his Sunday employment by ‘intentionally striking [his] foot against a stone [and] making out

⁸¹ Smith, p. 7.

⁸² Smith, p. 21.

⁸³ Smith, p. 21.

that [he] had broken [his] leg again,' to make himself appear unfit to continue the assignment.⁸⁴ Smith's willingness to capitalise on his 'lameness' in front of both his master and his literary audience bolsters this argument that his masculine identity was not centred around his physicality, but rather his sense of social belonging.

Taking care to appreciate the ways disability intersected with other aspects of enslaved individuals' identity in this way reveals the greater personal significance of this act of resistance that other scholars are yet to acknowledge. Smith's feigned debility not only undermined the power structures of the institution and challenged the authority of his masters, but also actively revised his sense of self and social status by allowing him to reposition himself as a man among men in their Sunday recreation. Through his work assignments - recognising them not as performances of strength, authority, and status, but as determinants of an individual's space and time on the plantation - Smith reclaimed agency over his gendered identity and social belonging.

In some cases, this affirmation of identity and revision of one's sense of belonging through work was done in retrospect. Frank Fikes, a man formerly enslaved in Arkansas, was also 'crippled' in his childhood and recounts his experience in an interview conducted for the Federal Writers' Project between 1936 and 1938. However, unlike James L. Smith, Fikes did not experience slavery beyond the age of fourteen. As a result, his sense of self that was shaped by his disability and the work subsequently assigned to him was not informed by gender and a sense of belonging as a man, but rather by age and his sense of belonging among the other children.

⁸⁴ Smith, pp. 21-22.

Like James L. Smith, Fikes conceptualises his self-esteem by his comparison to the other children on the plantation and his sense of belonging among them. Fikes relays that his work was ‘very easy when [he] was a little slave’ due to his being ‘crippled’ and unable to ‘get around like the other children.’⁸⁵ As a result, his job was to nurse the babies on the plantation, a job that was predominantly performed by elderly individuals among enslaved communities whose slaveholders had determined were too ‘old and only serviceable as nurses of the younger negro children.’⁸⁶ Fikes explains his perception of his work as ‘very easy’ by comparing it to the ‘the rest of the children [who] carried water, pine, drove up cows and held the calves off and made fires at old mar’s house’, demonstrating similarly to Smith how his experience of disability in slavery was inextricable from the perceived experience of the collective identity he felt marginalised from: the other children.⁸⁷

However, where his self-worth was once informed by his marginalisation from the work assigned to the other children on the plantation - as it physically enacted his slaveholder’s perception of his value and usefulness - Fikes is able to retrospectively re-evaluate his role in slavery. Fikes repositions himself among the community in memory by reconsidering how his work served his counterparts, detailing that his master had around a hundred families, each with a baby to nurse, and that it was also his responsibility to ‘keep a heap fire so the boys wouldn’t have to beat fire out of rocks and iron.’⁸⁸ By recounting the contributions he

⁸⁵ Library of Congress, ‘Frank Fikes’ in *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 2, Cannon-Evans* <<https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn022/>> [accessed 22 March 2024] p. 283

⁸⁶ Digital Library on American Slavery, ‘Petition #20185821: To the Honorable T. G. Rainer Probate Judge of said County’ Dallas County Courthouse, Records of the Probate Court, March 2, 1858 <<https://dlas.uncg.edu/petitions/petition/20185821/>> [accessed 20 March 2024]

⁸⁷ ‘Frank Fikes’, *Arkansas, Part 2*, p. 283.

⁸⁸ ‘Frank Fikes’, *Arkansas, Part 2*, p. 283.

made on the plantation with his work, Fikes is able to revise his sense of belonging and assert that he ‘did have a big role after all.’⁸⁹

On the other hand, work could serve as a means for enslaved individuals with disabilities to *emphasise* their exceptionality in a renegotiation of their social status among their community. Contrary to the previous examples, Josiah Henson actively refutes his belonging amongst the other enslaved people in his freedom narrative, distinguishing himself by his authoritative position as overseer. Henson proclaims that although his disablement meant that ‘the free, vigorous play of muscle and arm was gone forever’, his ‘situation as overseer [he] retained.’⁹⁰ This was a role that was recognised by enslaved people to be an affirmation of a man’s strength and authority, with formerly enslaved woman Virginia Harris confirming that, indeed, ‘the best amongst them was picked for that job.’⁹¹ As an enslaved man with a physical disability, Henson’s role as overseer subverts the typical narrative of disability rendering individuals unsound in the eyes of slaveholders, a fact that Henson shows he is aware of by positing his disability in contrast to his retention of this role.

Henson also takes pride in the comments made by white superintendents he encountered:

““What a smart n*****!” was the usual exclamation [...] “Will your master sell you?””⁹²

Henson not only underscored his value and esteem with these details of the extract, but he also discursively distinguished himself from his counterparts, presenting himself as socially superior as per his authoritative status over them.

⁸⁹ ‘Frank Fikes’, *Arkansas, Part 2*, p. 283.

⁹⁰ Henson, p. 40.

⁹¹ Doddington, p. 51.

⁹² Henson, p. 50.

The authenticity of this account is irrelevant, for what is telling is the way Henson seeks to represent himself. Similarly to James L. Smith and Frank Fikes, Henson's experience in slavery is constantly informed by comparison to his counterparts. However, Henson's comparison emphasises his exclusion from the surrounding community as a positive remarkability, as opposed to a negative implication of his disability. His literary representation of himself shows a determination to distinguish himself and renegotiate his social status in slavery.

Conclusion

This study has taken freedom narratives alongside the WPA narratives to uncover the resistance enacted by enslaved individuals with disabilities in the United States.

In this thesis I set out to address the gaps in the literature on disability and resistance in slavery: to rectify the glaring absence of people with disabilities from the historiography of slave resistance, and build upon the current literature on enslaved individuals with disabilities which lack intersectional analysis and deny them sufficient recognition as active agents in their own lives. This study achieved this through two chapters.

Chapter 1 focused on religion and the inner sense of self of the individual. It demonstrated how religion not only provided enslaved people with disabilities a language with which to redefine themselves in a context independent of the institution of slavery, but it was also viewed and claimed by individuals with disabilities as a space and context in which they gained visibility. Recognising not only what the content of slave narratives reveal about the religiosity of enslaved individuals with disabilities, but also what is suggested by how they *sought* to present their religiosity enabled this chapter to uncover religion as a multifaceted tool of resistance used by individuals with disabilities in slavery.

Chapter 2 delved into the work and recreation of the individual as a form of “self-making”. It explored the relationship of work and recreation to the sense of self and sense of belonging of the individual as it was constructed in contrast to their nondisabled counterparts. By tracing the language of comparison used throughout the slave narratives, this chapter revealed the

deeply personal and diverse ways in which disability was perceived by the individuals it effected. This in turn uncovered the nuance of their actions and proved their resistance to take on more private, concealed, and intimate forms than those more conventional challenges of the institution and master's authority.

What both chapters come together to highlight is the relationship between disability and space and time on the plantation. Both chapters consolidate the argument that the space and time on the plantation that their disabilities determined - by the work they were assigned and experiences they were marginalised from - was realised by the individuals to be an integral component in their identity formation, social status, and sense of belonging. Therefore, the everyday resistance individuals with disabilities enacted often centred around the motivation to take control over the time and space they occupied.

By applying Camp's concept of everyday and personal resistance to the study of enslaved individuals with disabilities, this study made a huge historiographical contribution. This study is the first of its kind to focus exclusively on everyday forms of resistance by enslaved people with disabilities, and the first of its kind to dedicate itself predominantly to the inner voices and self-perceptions of enslaved people with disabilities. It has therefore engaged with the slave narratives belonging to these individuals in a way that values their limitations for what they reveal as self-authored representations of the self, and trusts more-so than other scholars the intention behind their language.

While my work has made a significant contribution to the historiography of slave resistance and disability, there is undeniably scope to take this study further. Freedom narratives proved

to be incredibly valuable to this study's analysis of how the individual sought to represent themselves, and how this in itself was a literary form of resistance. However, these sources are a rarity – and therefore, this study has worked with a limited selection of sources. As a result, my study is largely absent of female voices. The resistance of bondwomen with disabilities demands further research.

This study's findings have demonstrated that this was a worthy endeavour, no matter how challenging, for ignoring these individuals' lives is far more harmful than trying to interpret them.

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