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**‘A man trying to catch his manhood’: Tactile
reclamations of masculinity for formerly
enslaved men in Post-Emancipation America.**

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TERMINOLOGY AND LANGUAGE

Works Progress Administration = WPA.

The pejorative term ‘Negro’ will be present within this study but only in context of relevant source quotation.

‘The study will avoid direct use of ‘slave’, instead using ‘enslaved person’ to acknowledge personhood.¹ Similarly, ‘Oppressor’ is used rather than ‘Master’ to ensure the study does not preserve the racial and dehumanising perpetuations of enslavement.² Historian Simon P. Newman also advises for ‘enslaver’ to be used over ‘slaveholder’ to highlight the active pursuit of enslavers to keep enslaved persons in bondage.³ This study acknowledges the importance of this distinction and will avoid use of this term.

It will use ‘Formerly Enslaved’ rather than ‘Freedmen’ to include fugitives.

The term ‘Tactile’ will follow Constance Classen’s succinct definition, that physical contact and exchanges as well as inflictions of touch producing sensations like heat, pain, and pleasure all constitute tactility.⁴

Full titles of enslaved persons narratives are within the Footnotes and Bibliography.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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¹ Simon P. Newman, ‘A Note on Language’ in *Freedom Seekers: Escaping from Slavery in Restoration London* (London: University of London Press, 2022) p. xi.

² Ibid, xi.

³ Ibid, xiii.

⁴ Constance Classen, *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of touch*, ed by Mark Smith, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017) p. xiv.

INTRODUCTION

‘A runaway slave is a man trying to catch his manhood.’⁵

In 1850 Frederick Douglass’ abolitionist newspaper, *The North Star*, professed the motivation of runaway enslaved men being ‘to catch his manhood’.⁶ The article features as a reactionary piece to the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law that stated fugitives, including in free states, must be returned to their enslavers if discovered.⁷ It professed that manhood was perpetually unobtainable in enslavement, hence the credible incentive of male fugitives to seek their masculine identity. The masculinity described is non-homogenous and this study does not wish to diminish the diversity of masculine experience. However, Historians, such as David Doddington, have conceptualised masculinity as the overarching societal male ideals and the compartmentalisation or omission of expressing these ideals.⁸ This study will explore masculinity around these ideals while acknowledging the diversity of experience of masculinity.

Post-Emancipation masculinity was multifaceted, combining self-made manhood emerging from the Antebellum period with longstanding ideals of mastery and honour. Coined as early as 1828, the ‘self-made man’ outlined masculine success as attributed to personal hard work rather than outsider assistance.⁹ The ideal was initially limited to White men but, following emancipation, formerly enslaved men began accessing resources and methods towards a self-made manhood from simply earning a wage to owning property. However, as Historian Craig Thompson Friend highlights, self-made Black masculinity emasculated White southern men as it threatened their dominion on displays of successful masculinity.¹⁰ Thus resulted in White southern men reinforcing ‘Old South Manhood’ and ideals of White supremacy, honour, reputation, and mastery.¹¹ This study strongly disagrees that it is the duty

⁵ Quote from ‘The American New -Slave Law’, *The North Star*, 31 October 1850. [The North Star, 1850.](#)

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ United States Congress, ‘Fugitive Slave Law of 1850’, p. 21 [Fugitive Slave Law 1850.](#)

⁸ See David Doddington, *Contesting Slave Masculinity in the American South*, (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018) p.1 and Sergio Lussana, ‘To See Who Was Best on the Plantation: Enslaved Fighting Contests and Masculinity in the Antebellum Plantation South’, *The Journal of Southern History*, 76.4 (2010). pp. 901-903

⁹ ‘A Self Made Man’, *Delaware Journal*, (Wilmington, 10 October 1828). [The Self-Made Man.](#) See Thomas A. Foster, *Rethinking Rufus, Sexual Violations of Enslaved Men*, ed. by Diana Ramey Berry and Jennifer L. Morgan, *Gender and Slavery*, 2 (Georgia, Georgia University Press, 2019) p. 5.

¹⁰ Craig Thompson Friend, ‘From Southern Manhood to Southern Masculinities: An Introduction’ in *Southern Masculinity: perspectives on Manhood in the South since Reconstruction* ed by. Craig Thompson Friend (USA: University of Georgia Press, 2009). p. xiii.

¹¹ Ibid. p. xiii.

of the oppressed group to ‘disprove’ racial stereotypes, but recognises it remains adjacent to reclamation. As the *North Star* article emphasised, the ability to reclaim perpetuations of Black masculinity by ‘being a man’ they could deny slavery’s degradations of ‘being a beast’.¹² With increased access to means of masculine expression, formerly enslaved men resisted and reclaimed their masculinity to be an agent of self-service.

The *North Star* advocates manhood to be caught, as if runaways could metaphorically clasp and reclaim it in their hands.¹³ The truth in this statement transcends metaphoric meaning, this study will reveal the literal tactile expressions of formerly enslaved men that aided in clasping and reclaiming their manhood. Scientific racism oppressed tactility and, as Mark Smith evidenced, forged a falsehood that Black persons’ sensory experiences were subpar to White persons.¹⁴ This study will supplement Smith’s argument by arguing that, where sensory experiences are oppressed and restricted, they can also be reclaimed. The study acknowledges that the experience of enslavement was diverse therefore only highlights a range of potential experiences of sensory oppression within enslavement. Therefore, alongside Smith’s trailblazing work, this study is one of the first to delve into the sensorium as a potential agent to reclaiming masculine identity in the context of American Slavery. It will argue that a control and vilification of tactility occurred within enslavement, thus a reclamation of Black masculinity followed emancipation with an integral tactile dimension. The ability to partake in self-serving and masculine affirming tactile expressions, such as labouring to support oneself, engaging in platonic tactile exchanges of brotherhood, and in free engagement with romantic and affectionate tactility aided this development. Through these examples of reclaiming tactility, the study will conclude in argument that tactile self-expressions of manhood enabled a sensorial reclamation of masculinity once restrained in enslavement.

SENSORY AND TACTILE HISTORIOGRAPHY

Sensory historiography is expanding, yet the sensory hierarchy continues to cause disproportionate scholarship on each sense. Sensory historian, Mark Smith, has outlined sensory history as the ‘ways of knowing and understanding’ historical society by analysing a

¹² ‘The American New -Slave Law’, *The North Star*, (1850).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Mark. M. Smith, *How Race is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

contextualised sensorium.¹⁵ Sensory Historian Constance Classen corroborated this view and argued that the sensory scholarship has the potential to surpass analysis of sensory experiences in order to include the meaning and feelings underpinning them.¹⁶ Rob Bodice, Historian of emotion, has recently added to this discourse on the entanglement of the senses and emotion, arguing that sensory and emotional disciplines are interdisciplinary as they both contribute to substantiating the dimensions of an ‘experience’.¹⁷ Despite the growth of sensory historiography and its methodological approaches, the sense of touch remains deeply understudied. Sensory Historians, such as Martin Jay and Mark Smith, have attributed this to the ‘hierarchy of the senses’.¹⁸ Jay outlined that the hierarchy stemmed back to Ancient Greek prioritisation of vision and sight, resulting in an underdeveloped acknowledgement of tactile, aural, and olfactory histories.¹⁹

To combat the hierarchy and touch’s understudy, Classen’s *History of Touch* has provided an extensive historiographical review arguing the significance of touch.²⁰ Classen’s *Book of Touch* recognises the strains of the field relevant to this study, as she argued that touch has often been neglected from discussions of masculinity in particular, due to prevailing modern taboos that displays of tactile affection equate to homosexuality.²¹ Classen dismantled these taboos in her own work by revealing haptic experiences between men to be present throughout various cultures as significant sensory-based forms of male bonding and affection.²² Classen’s evidence of expressions of masculinity ranged from a handshake after a boxing match, to hugging and holding hands as a form of platonic affection.²³ As well as exploring the gendered dynamics of touch, tactile historiography is beginning to explore its racial and oppressive abuses. Classen noted the racial connotations of senses, where European men were described as enlightened by vision-based understandings while African men were perceived in the West as reliant on primitive skin contact.²⁴ In equating tactility to the falsehood of racial primitivity, tactility remains connoted as an inferior sense. Smiths’ 2006 *Making of Race*

¹⁵ Mark M. Smith, ‘Introduction: Of sense and Non-Sense’ in *Sensory History*, (Oxford: Berg Publishers/Bloomsbury Publishing, 2007) p. 3.

¹⁶ Classen, *The Deepest Sense*, p. xii.

¹⁷ Rob, Bodice, and Mark Smith, ‘Emotion, Sense, Experience’, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020) p. 2,17.

¹⁸ Martin Jay, ‘In the Realm of the Senses: An Introduction’ in *The American Historical Review*, 116.2, (2011), p. 310 and Mark M. Smith, *A Sensory History Manifesto*, (USA: Penn State University Press, 2021) p. 35.

¹⁹ Jay, p. 310.

²⁰ Classen, *Deepest Sense*.

²¹ Constance Classen, *The Book Of Touch*, ed by Constance Classen, (Oxford: Berg, 2005), p. 156.

²² Ibid. p. 155.

²³ Ibid. p. 155.

²⁴ Classen, *The Deepest Sense*, p. xi.

highlighted sensory othering as a method of scientific racism, arguing that the racist rhetoric included viewing Black skin as inherently sensorially inferior to justify its exploitation.²⁵ Nicole Nyffenegger explored the similar concept of an ‘illicit touch’, arguing that tattooing was a tactile means of degradation to Jewish individuality under Nazi rule.²⁶ Within the same works, *Touch*, Naomi Segal explored forbidden touch to supplement contextual understandings of tactile desire and consent.²⁷ Tactile Historiography has promising developments in how the sense of touch can be manipulated and unwanted to portray racial and gendered agendas. The historiography, however, remains lacking in taking the scholarship further to acknowledge how the oppression of tactility is resisted and reclaimed.

ENSLAVED AND POST-EMANCIPATION MASCULINITY HISTORIOGRAPHY

Historiography on enslaved masculinity has developed to include resistance, homosocial relations, reputation, and violations of the enslaved body. Historian Eugene Genovese initially framed success in resistance as being quintessentially masculine, as he argued their physical strength made fugitivity feasible.²⁸ More recently historians, such as John Blassingame, contested Genovese, arguing that everyday resistance was enacted by both men and women and informed ideals of gender identity.²⁹ Sergio Lussana used this broadened understanding of everyday resistance to encapsulate homosocial relations into enslaved masculinity.³⁰ He argued that enslaved men resisted enslavement in brotherhood by discussing fugitive techniques, partaking in recreational drinking, gambling, and hunting together.³¹ Through analysis of enslaved narratives, such as Henry Bibb’s, he evidences the resistive power and reclamation of masculinity within homosocial bonding.³² In doing so Lussana conceptualised the importance of masculine ideals of honour and respect away from the focused historiographical masculine ideal of being protector and provider to family units.³³ David Doddington nuanced this further

²⁵ Mark. M. Smith, *How Race is Made*, p. 11.

²⁶ Nicole Nyffenegger, ‘The Illicit Touch: Theorising Narratives of Abused Human Skin (2020) p. 195, 215.

²⁷ Naomi Segal, ‘Touching and Not Touching: The Indirections of Desire’, in *Touch*, (2020) p. 30.

²⁸ Eugene D. Genovese, ‘The Valley of the shadow’, in *Roll Jordan Roll*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), p. 649.

²⁹ John Blassingame, ‘Reviewed Work: *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* by Eugene D. Genovese’ in *Journal of Social History*, 9. 3 (1976), p. 405.

³⁰ Sergio Lussana, *My Brother Slaves* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2016).

³¹ Sergio Lussana, ‘Enslaved Men and Leisure’ in *My Brother Slaves* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2016) p. 45-50.

³² Lussana, ‘*To See Who Was Best on the Plantation*’, p. 903, 904.

³³ *Ibid*, p. 906, 903.

by arguing that enslaved men did not just express their manhood for means of resistance, but also to partake in reputational male hierarchies.³⁴ Therefore historiography on enslaved masculinity has developed and highlighted a masculine identity and personhood forming through resistance ranging from fugitivity to homosocial bonding.

The violations of the enslaved male body, however, have become the recent focal point of historiography. Thomas Foster's, *Rethinking Rufus*, rightly argues that sexual assault includes acts other than rape and that the lack of explicit mentioning within primary sources is not from a lack of existence, but due to the persistent taboo amongst men to not discuss sexual assault.³⁵ Foster evidenced this as the enslaved male body was judged and groped by White enslavers, hypersexualised by White women, and exploited for reproduction.³⁶ Doddington does not deny Foster's findings and the coercion of enslaved men, but does argue that some enslaved men may not have perceived this wholly as violations, due to a 'belief in masculine dominance' over women.³⁷ Therefore current historiography on masculinity must recognise toxic masculine ideals of female domination while not detracting from the violations of the enslaved male body.

Due to the impacts of enslavement on limiting expressions of Black masculinity, historiography of post-emancipation masculinity reveals formerly enslaved men engaging with public masculine ideals despite anti-Black racism. Craig Thompson Friend's collated works explored Black masculinity of the Reconstruction period, arguing that emancipation was pivotal for granting Black persons some access to personal and communal forms of masculine expression such as economic and political notoriety.³⁸ Black Masculinity however, as argued by historians such as Pierra W Orelus, and Peter Caster and Timothy Buckner, remained fundamentally shaped by enslavement as Black men wrestled with pursuing means of mobility with underlying racial threats as they permeated White masculine spaces.³⁹ Joe Creech confirmed the significance of Black masculinity as emasculating White men, as the increased rates of lynching's and the rise of white supremacy groups illustrated White men reverting to

³⁴ Doddington, p. 9, 8, 90.

³⁵ Foster, p. 4.

³⁶ Ibid, p. 12, 15, 47.

³⁷ Doddington, p. 142.

³⁸ Friend. p. vii and 2.

³⁹ Pierre W. Orelus, 'Chapter 2: Black Masculinity under White Supremacy: Exploring the Intersection between Black Masculinity, Slavery, Racism, Heterosexism, and Social Class' in *Counterpoints*, 351 (2010) p. 65 and Peter Caster and Timothy Buckner, *Fathers, Preachers, Rebels, Men: Black masculinity in U.S history and literature, 1820 – 1945* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011) p. 56.

the façade of religious justifications for oppression.⁴⁰ Much like Creech, Historian Kris DuRocher corroborated lynching as a visceral measure of White men to threaten Black persons.⁴¹ Henry Gates acknowledged similar societal tensions in his recognition of the emergence of the ‘New Negro’ categorisation as an attempt to confine Black masculinity.⁴² Caster and Buckner have recognised this as performative masculinity, where public displays such as public duels remained vital to masculine expression of physical domination.⁴³ The historiography on the formations of post-emancipation Black masculine ideals therefore has acknowledged Black masculinity aligning with self-made manhood, while also highlighting the reactionary measures taken by White men to undermine this manhood.

This study aims to integrate the emerging sensory history of touch into the vast historiography on masculinity, revealing how the meaning behind sensory experiences informed expressions and spaces for reclamations of manhood. Gates denotes the period after emancipation as ‘quasi-freedom’ where formerly enslaved persons had more freedom, but not equality.⁴⁴ By tracing the tactile choices of formerly enslaved men, the study can continue to nuance historiographical discussions of reclamation in a time of fragile liberties. Situated in the project is the theoretical basis of perceiving the body as a site of reclamation, as established by Historian Stephanie Camp.⁴⁵ In this three-point principle, Camp argued that the female enslaved body was a site of exploitation, a site of subjective exploitation, and a site of reclamation.⁴⁶ Camp claimed that this principle is limited to the female enslaved body, however after acknowledging the violations and sensory exploitation of formerly enslaved men, this study believes this principle of a reclaimed body to be relevant. Mark Smith has pioneered racialised sensory historiography and this study aims to broaden focus to post-emancipation tactility.⁴⁷ Thus this study will combine the dual historiography of masculinity and tactility, arguing that sensory experience and the implied connotations enabled expressions of masculine bodily reclamation following enslavement.

⁴⁰ Creech, Joe, ‘The Price of Eternal Honor: Independent White Christian Manhood in the Late Nineteenth-Century South’ in *Southern Masculinity*, ed by. Craig Thompson Friend (USA: University of Georgia Press, 2009) p. 39.

⁴¹ Kris DuRocher, ‘Violent Masculinity: Learning Ritual and Performance in Southern Lynchings’ in *Southern Masculinity*, ed by. Craig Thompson Friend (USA: University of Georgia Press, 2009) p. 47-49.

⁴² Henry Louis Gates Jr. *Stony The Road*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2019) p. 14, 4.

⁴³ Caster and Buckner, p. 42.

⁴⁴ Gates. p. 15.

⁴⁵ Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved women and everyday resistance the Plantation South*, (USA: University of North Carolina Press, 2004). p. 3-10.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 10.

⁴⁷ See Smith, *How Race is Made*.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this study will contain a textual and pictorial source base such as formerly enslaved persons narratives, WPA Interviews, newspapers, and 1930's photography of formerly enslaved persons provided by the Library of Congress. This source base spans from early 1840 fugitive slave narratives to 1930's efforts to document the lived experiences of formerly enslaved persons. Narratives of formerly enslaved men will include, but are not limited to, Frederick Douglass, Henry Bibb, Josiah Henson, and John Brown. The study will therefore cover late Antebellum, Post-emancipation, Reconstruction, and the Gilded Age Eras of American History where latter sources provide a retrospective insight into lived experiences.

However, the racial dynamics of WPA Interviews and the accompanying photography projects conducted in the 1930s limit this source type. Around the conduction of these interviews and photographs, racial discrimination and lynching was increasingly prevalent in America. The White interviewers lacked oral history training and hence abilities to professionally accommodate to the sensitive subject matter, it is questioned how comfortable or fearful formerly enslaved interviewees felt in recalling their lived experiences at the time.⁴⁸ A similar sentiment is important in enslaved narratives such as Frederick Douglass' who originally chose not to share his method of running away until he deemed it safe for himself and other enslaved persons. Thus, the traumas and residuals threats of slavery and racism experienced by formerly enslaved persons underpin the source basis.

Camp highlighted that due to the limited source base, methodology needs to be 'innovative'.⁴⁹ This study uses innovative sensory methodology, where oppression and reclamation are considered in the sensorial realms to move past the sources' words or visuals to conceptualise the haptic emotional experience at their cores. Mark Smith acknowledged the infancy of tactile methodology in understanding race, therefore his methodological framework grounds this study.⁵⁰ A key methodology Smith implements is 'sensory othering', where the senses have been appropriated by oppressors to alienate and segregate Black sensory experience to be inferior to that of their White counterparts.⁵¹ Key words searches for explicit terms included 'touch', 'hands', 'hug', and 'fought' while verbs like 'jumped', 'climbed', and 'tipped' inferred a tactile exchange. With key word searches, the study could methodologically

⁴⁸ Camp, p. 8.

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 2.

⁵⁰ Smith, *How Race was Made*, p. 2. 9.

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 11.

examine the semantics of touch and where tactility inferred a perpetuated sensory othering or a means of reclamation. Classen argued that tactile methodology requires inference as feelings and emotion are rarely textually expressed, so this study has implemented rational inferences of tactile experiences.⁵² For example, in photographs where a hat is removed there is a plausible inference that a tactile removal occurred.

Through analysis of tactile experiences, both described or inferred, the study will use a sensory methodology that incorporates meaning and ‘othering’ of sensorial expression into reclamation discourse.

STRUCTURE

This study contains three chapters: internal, platonic, and romantic tactile reclamations of masculinity. The argument is situated in the vilification of tactility within slavery before evidencing the tactile reclamations informing Black masculinity.

Chapter One explores reclaiming tactile self-expressions of manhood. Motivated by liberty and ‘self-made manhood’, it highlights the physical strains of fugitivity, accessing political touch and handshakes, and reaping economic benefits of manual labour.

Chapter Two investigates homosocial relations and how formerly enslaved men reclaimed their tactility to express brotherhood affection and respect. Here, touch is a reclaimed site of platonic pleasure and support through boxing, slavery remembrance congregations and networks challenging gender boundaries.

Chapter three will argue that the ability for physical proximity to romantic tactile expressions allowed formerly enslaved men to reclaim their right to marriage and to fulfil the tactile elements of fatherhood.

The study concludes that reclamations of masculinity for formerly enslaved men included substantial and vital tactile expressions once controlled and vilified within enslavement.

⁵² Classen, *The Deepest Sense*, p. xvi.

CHAPTER 1: RECLAIMING TACTILE SELF-MADE MANHOOD

The importance of liberty and freedom to masculine identity cannot be understated and this chapter places reclaimed autonomy at the centre of tactile expression. While enslaved, the hands of enslaved persons were exploited for manual labour to create the enslaver's workforce. Therefore, a reclamation of 'Self-made manhood' was rooted in reclaiming and reframing tactility to be self-serving.

The ability for tactile self-expression was fundamentally restricted within enslavement as tactile strengths and labouring abilities were exploited for the economic benefit of the enslaver. The inability for enslaved persons to feel their own property or to hold a living wage in their hands despite tactile labour, rendered 'self-made' manhood unattainable. Enslaver justifications for tactile exploitation were rooted in scientific racism where Black skin was argued to be biologically thicker and more numb to feeling.⁵³ White persons, as Smith outlined, perpetuated this falsehood to warrant harsh labour conditions, clothes to be cheap and rough offcuts, shoes to be unnecessary and for tools to be heavy.⁵⁴ Henry Clay Bruce noted this within his *Narrative*, sarcastically stating that he obtained 'perfect knowledge' of harsh manual labour within enslavement.⁵⁵ For Austin Steward, also enslaved, he stated the rhetoric of 'negro inferiority' undermined his manhood and was perpetuated by tactile exploitations that meant to 'labour for nothing all [his] life for the benefit of others'.⁵⁶ For enslaved men with an inability to even subscribe to using tactility for economic success, they witnessed their tactile sufferings and exploits being biologically justified.

Vilification of touch also involved prohibiting tactile experiences that promoted liberational mobility like tactile learning. Anti-literacy law entrenched that enslaved persons were prohibited from acquiring literacy skills and, although some secretly taught themselves, the tactile experiences of flicking through a book or holding a pen were violently punished.⁵⁷ They were able to uphold forced ignorance by denying tactile experiences that could aid

⁵³ Smith, *How Race was Made*, p. 15

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 23.

⁵⁵ Henry Clay Bruce, *The New Man, Twenty-Nine Years a Slave. Twenty years a Free Man*, (PA: P. Anstadt & Sons, 1895), p. 113. [Henry Bruce](#)

⁵⁶ Austin Steward, *Twenty- Two Years a slave and Forty Years a Freeman; Embracing a correspondence of several years while president of Wilberforce colony, London, Canada West* (NY: William Alling, Exchange Street, 1857), p. 21 and 107. [Austin Steward](#)

⁵⁷ See General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia, 'An act [...] concerning slaves, free negroes, and mulattoes, and for other purposes' (1832) pp. 20-22 [Virginia Legislation](#), South Carolina Council Chamber, 'An Act Concerning the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes and Other Slaves' (1740) pp. 397-417. [SC Legislation](#)

intellectual mobility. Enslavers had configured the tactility of enslaved men to be under their subjugation and therefore a bodily reclamation to be harnessed by formerly enslaved men was access to tactile experience with self-developmental possibilities.

Running away, fugitivity, was physically demanding and required great tactile strength. For formerly enslaved men the physical strengths once prized by enslavers, were now underpinning their tactile advantages to escape. Masculinity was deeply intertwined with this pursuit, as enslaved men ran for the freedom of autonomy and mobility where their ability to reclaim suitable dexterity was founded in previous tactile encounters and familiarity of the vegetated areas surrounding the plantations. Camp notes the ‘rival geography’, where areas of dangerous landscapes such as swamps facilitated semi-hidden pockets of autonomy.⁵⁸ Lussana argued as enslaved men engaged in homosocial activities outside plantation boundaries like hunting, they were not only undermining the tactile restrictions of enslavers but also challenging spatial boundaries.⁵⁹ Having accumulated tactile familiarity and strengths in this landscape, enslaved men reclaimed their tactile muscular strength for chances for liberation.

With heightened knowledge of the landscape, runaways would run great distances, climb over fences, and pull themselves through dense vegetation. The physical and tactile strains of fugitivity were expressed within Isaac Mason’s *Life* who accredited that his ‘safety depended upon [...] agile movements’ and his ‘agile feet did [him] good service’.⁶⁰ Mason acknowledged tactile sensations and strains at the forefront of his fugitivity where his tactile agility was an inadvertent resilience harboured under harsh labouring enslavement that later facilitated his ‘true manhood’.⁶¹ In seeking freedom for his family, Henry Bibb similarly attempted running away from enslavement only to be faced with the immense physical strains.⁶² Bibb describes the moment of his hands and feet being tied together by slave catchers as being when his ‘power to help’ his family had been revoked from him.⁶³ In Bibb’s case, he reclaimed his tactile strengths to aid his runaway attempt and when these tactile forces were restrained, Bibb attributes this to being his loss of power and autonomy. The importance of tactile autonomy in protecting his family, as his ambition for fatherhood yearned to do, reveals how tactility was integral to achieving a liberated manhood. The importance of a reclaimed tactile sense to fugitivity was paramount, the act itself required dexterous abilities to create

⁵⁸ Camp, p. 7.

⁵⁹ Lussana, *My Brother Slaves*, p. 71.

⁶⁰ Isaac Mason, *Life of Isaac Mason As a Slave*, (Worcester, 1893), p. 30. [Isaac Mason](#).

⁶¹ *Ibid*, p. 31.

⁶² Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (New York, 1849) p. 47. [Henry Bibb](#).

⁶³ *Ibid*, p. 90.

physical distance. Their bodily strength that once benefitted enslavers was being reclaimed to facilitate their physical freedom, in the hopes of providing new opportunities for self-prosperous tactile autonomy.

Formerly enslaved men reclaimed their dexterity to create tangible fruits of labour which allowed them to subscribe to ideals of self-made manhood. The notions of stronger Black skin, by some degree, was a real consequence of harsh labour within slavery and therefore many formerly enslaved men found reclamation in harnessing their former exploitation. Their hands, strengthened by rigorous hard labour rather than biological reasonings, became a tactile space for economic prosperity as they had refined their tradesmen skills. For Sam Polite, in his *WPA Interview*, 'slavery done uh good t'ing for [him]' that he 'wouldn't know how to wuk' otherwise.⁶⁴ For Polite it evidently did not diminish the harsh labouring conditions of slavery, but he reclaimed the tactile strengths to serve himself later in life. George King similarly noted in his *WPA interview* that although Black persons continued to face racism in post emancipation society, they were at least now 'equal to work and earn our own living and not depend on him for no more meats and clothes'.⁶⁵ For King, the significance of being able to be somewhat equal was founded in self-dependency and an ability to dictate his tactile experience of clothing.

Frederick Douglass most explicitly noted the texture of his skin after enslavement, that his 'hands seem to be furnished with something of a leather coating, and [he] had marked out [himself] a life of rough labor, suited to the hardness of [his] hands'.⁶⁶ Later in his *Narrative*, those same hands 'clasped' his first wage that was 'supporting' his family and 'rearing [his] children'.⁶⁷ Douglass framed his *Narrative* around his determination for liberty as a journey of a 'slave made a man', hence making his journey to the sensations of his skin integral to his informed masculinity.⁶⁸ Douglass presents to the reader a reclamation of the scientific racism that once justified his tactile exploitations as this 'suited' his skin, to now be providing for his family. Douglass, Polite and King all note a labour-based tactile reclamation, that was self-

⁶⁴ Works Project Administration, 'Sam Polite', in *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves: Volume XIV, South Carolina Narratives', Part 3* (1936-1938), [WPA, Sam Polite](#).

⁶⁵ Works Project Administration, 'George King' in *Emancipation through Union occupation and Victory: Selections from the WPA interviews of formerly enslaved African Americans, 1936-1938*, (1936-1938). [WPA, George King](#).

⁶⁶ Douglass, Frederick. *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself. His Early Life as a Slave, His Escape from Bondage, and His Complete History to the Present Time*, (Boston: De Wolfe & Fiske Co. 1892) p. 267, 268. [Complete Douglass](#).

⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 259 and 267.

⁶⁸ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845) p. 66. [Douglass Narrative](#).

serving and, in this way, allowed an expression of masculinity that contributed their alignment of a 'self-made manhood'. The *Portland Press*, 1870, reported the achievement of Montgomery, a 'former slave of the Davis family', who 'received a prize for the best long-stapled cotton' delivered to New Orleans.⁶⁹ For Montgomery, a skill likely learnt and exploited within enslavement had now been reclaimed to bring him public acknowledgements to his dexterous successes as a self-made man. Formerly enslaved men in both private and public realms seized their hands, that were once exploited by enslavers, for tactile reclamations that allowed them to subscribe to ideals of self-made manhood and to prove their success with tactile evidence.

The reconfiguration of tactile experiences also presented reclamation venturing into political and educational haptics. Historian Mark Smith noted the potential for 'political touch', where haptic exchanges such as handshakes and clapping hold deeper political meanings of allegiance and respect.⁷⁰ Smith places this within the context of Abraham Lincoln, arguing that his skin was portrayed as tough and diseased as if that reflected his personality.⁷¹ However this all changed, Smith argued as his handshakes lessened the correlations of touch and disease and acted to the public as a display of Lincoln's ideals of respect and connection to voters.⁷² Lincoln's hands were such a prevalent dimension of his public performance that even *Frederick Douglass' Paper* references Lincoln's 'warm shake of a hand' to portray his compassionate nature.⁷³ Therefore in the height of emancipation, the hands of the most important politician were perceived as reflective of his internal qualities. In the case of Paul Jenkins, speaking on his father's political career in his *WPA narrative*, he described a scene of White and Black men clapping as his father spoke and later carrying him around the town.⁷⁴ The tactile expressions of clapping provided reassurance to Paul Jenkins' father that his political message was resonating. In this memory handshakes too wouldn't seem an out of place tactile experience to express political support to Jenkins' father and an alignment with his inner qualities. The possibility for Black masculine touch to connote political power highlights a reclamation for formerly enslaved men as their tactility transgressed enforced White boundaries of Black

⁶⁹ 'Current Notes', *The Portland Daily Press*, 19 October 1870. [Portland Press](#).

⁷⁰ Smith, 'A Sensory History Manifesto', p. 51.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 51.

⁷² *Ibid*, 52.

⁷³ 'Abraham Lincoln As He Is', *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, 8 June 1860, [Douglass Paper](#).

⁷⁴ Works Project Administration, 'Paul Jenkins', in *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves: Volume XIV, South Carolina Narratives, Part 3* (1936-1938). [WPA, Paul Jenkins](#).

political power. Masculine ideals of success and mutual respect could now also be displayed by formerly enslaved men through engagement with politically charged haptic exchanges.

The need for a physical matter of a book or pen in hand had been prohibited from many enslaved men hence, in a will for knowledge and self-prosperity, formerly enslaved man used tactility to foster their literacy skills. For Austin Steward, he recalled his enslaver whipping him and burning his books when he found him reading.⁷⁵ Classen highlighted similar incidences where tactility is used to inflict pain as a deterrent, like a parent disciplining a child.⁷⁶ For Steward the material culture of a book had been connoted to physical violence from his oppressor, consequently a poignant aspect of his reclamation came with his ‘money of [his] own earning in [his pocket] and ‘books under [his] arm’.⁷⁷ For Steward the tactile experience of owning and holding his own physical book, without any physical repercussion, was integral to his reclamation of self-made manhood. He accessed educational tactile spheres and reclaimed an activity that once was disciplined against him. Formerly enslaved men therefore pursued education tactile experiences that could enhance their mental freedom.

This chapter has argued that formerly enslaved men harnessed tactility for a variety of purposes including aiding in the physical strains of fugitivity, in manual labouring professions and in exploring tactile interactions once prohibited. Formerly enslaved men also transgressed the connoted uses of their hands away from manual labour and into educated and political spheres to access differing avenues of expressive societal masculine success to reaffirm their self-made manhood.

⁷⁵Steward, p. 82.

⁷⁶ Classen, *The Deepest Sense*, p. 61.

⁷⁷ Steward, p. 82 and 114.

CHAPTER 2: RECLAIMING HOMOSOCIAL TACTILITY

Formerly enslaved men found tactile reclamations of masculinity throughout ideals of brotherhood and platonic male friendships essential to notions of masculine camaraderie. This chapter argues that expressions of homosocial bonds often had a haptic element as enslaved men boxed, gambled, and hunted together. Although homosocial networks were present in enslavement, these activities continued in freedom as formerly enslaved men continued to reclaim their access to tactile masculine spaces.

Friendships and homosocial relations amongst enslaved men were undisputedly present in slave communities, however their tactile exchanges were inherently restricted due to enslaver patrol. Doddington argued the complexities of enslaved homosocial relations and that honour and reputation, much like White masculine ideals, were innate to homosocial hierarchies.⁷⁸ Lussana has supplemented the ranges of homosocial interactions within plantations, arguing that the presence of activities such as gambling, drinking, and wrestling revealed resistive homosocial bonding.⁷⁹ Douglass expressed the sincerity of his homosocial bonds in enslavement with references to other enslaved men within his plantation as being his ‘brothers’.⁸⁰ The *Narratives* of both William Hayden and Henry Bibb also recognise the presence of homosocial activities on plantations as Hayden recalled young boys wrestling with one another and Bibb described a vibrant sabbath day scene of boxing, dancing, and singing.⁸¹ These activities highlight everyday resistive tactile exchanges between enslaved men upon plantations but, much like Doddington emphasises, this did not mean enslaved persons had complete freedom in tactile autonomy.⁸² For example, many of these fights were overseen by enslavers for their amusement or to bet on the winner.⁸³ Furthermore, congregations of enslaved persons remained legislatively patrolled through laws that prohibited meetings and drinking amongst enslaved persons.⁸⁴ The homosocial tactility in these formations reveal an aspect to resistance where enslaved men found outlets for expressing masculine brotherhood, however the fear of enslaved rebellion limited tactile possibilities, especially publicly. This study does not diminish the significance of homosocial relations upon plantations however, it

⁷⁸ Doddington, p. 199, 202.

⁷⁹ Lussana, *To See Who Was Best on the Plantation*, p. 906.

⁸⁰ Douglass, p. 189.

⁸¹ William, Hayden, *Narrative of William Hayden, Containing a Faithful Account of His Travels for a Number of Years, Whilst a Slave, in the South. Written by Himself*. (Ohio, 1846) p. 20, [William Hayden](#). Bibb, p. 23,24.

⁸² Doddington, p. 9.

⁸³ Lussana, *To See Who Was Best of the Plantation*, p. 901.

⁸⁴ See General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia, ‘An act reducing into one the several acts concerning slaves, free negroes, and mulattoes, and for other purposes’ (Virginia: 1832) pp. 20-22.

reveals how a range of tactile homosocial expressions were restrained and could be reclaimed post-Emancipation.

Formerly enslaved men formed and maintained vibrant friendships after enslavement that embraced tactile homosocial exchanges as a means of reclaiming expressions of communal manhood. In freedom, formerly enslaved men were able to be physically proximate to one another, therefore the possibilities for tactile exchanges such as shaking hands or hugging increased. Classen highlighted that there is a difficulty in recognising historic platonic male affection and it is the product of the continuing Western taboo that physical affection amongst men equates to homosexuality.⁸⁵ The tenuous fear that platonic expressions of male affection equate to a diminishing of manhood does however reveal how tactile expressions shape public displays of manhood. Classen, in resolving this issue, argued that by recognising and normalising the tactile emotional exchanges between men as displays of support and comfort it can be dismantled.⁸⁶

As male toughness continues to pervade social ideals of masculinity, the tactile aspects of friendships between formerly enslaved men require inferences informed by setting and context. In 1935, *The Henderson Daily Dispatch*, reported the annual ‘Old Slave Day’ event of Southern Pines, North Carolina, which brought together ‘over 100 slaves of the antebellum days’ to recall memories and sufferings of enslavement.⁸⁷ A photograph entitled ‘Attendants at Old Slave Day’ shows six of these formerly enslaved men sat together at the event in 1837.⁸⁸ The purpose of the event was slavery remembrance and this photograph exudes a sense of solidarity and brotherhood in this moment. As the men sit physically proximate to one another, with one man feeling comfortable enough to place his arm over the knee of his friend, the men show a platonic familiarity and closeness to one another.⁸⁹ The choice and act of removing their hats equates to the fact hat-removal is a masculine coded expression of a respectful greeting.⁹⁰ The fact the formerly enslaved men chose to remove their hats for the photograph sets a respectful tone for the image, much like the expected tone of the Old Slave Day event. The presented tactile familiarity and likelihood of tactile exchanges, such as handshakes and hugs, occurring at this emotional event shows a space for formerly enslaved men to affirm their brotherhood through with tactile affirmations of support.

⁸⁵ Classen, *Book of Touch*, p. 156.

⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 155.

⁸⁷ ‘Blossom Festival At Southern Pines’, *Henderson Daily Dispatch*, (Henderson, 03 April 1935) [Old Slave Day](#).

⁸⁸ ‘Attendants at Old Slave Day, Southern Pines’, (North Carolina, 1937). [Attendants](#)

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ ‘Relics of Feudal Days’, *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, (New Orleans, 23 March 1857) [Feudal Days](#).

Steward, once free, also spoke of similar congregations of formerly enslaved men in his narrative where he formed and reunited friendships.⁹¹ At the conferences, led by Frederick Douglass, there was a 'reunion of old and tried friends' as formerly enslaved persons orated, dined, drank, and sang with one another.⁹² Much like the Old Slave Day event, Stewards attendance at congregations had the possibilities for many tactile interactions. Formerly enslaved men likely would be clapping one another's speeches or hugging and shaking hands as they reunited and reinstated their communal supportive brotherhood. The power to reclaim access to homosocial networks of manhood was aided by tactile expressions, as formerly enslaved men could now freely use tactility to display support, comfort, and admiration for one another.

Formerly enslaved men also partook in Boxing and its accompanying tactile requirements. The sport of Boxing allowed a space for tactility through recreational fighting that contributed to reclamations of manhood by affirming physical strengths within professional and respected spaces. Historian Karen Taylor argued that after 1865, American southern newspapers placed a heightened emphasis on defining positive and negative ideals of manhood and, as self-made manhood flourished, White supremacy was reinforced into these ideals to emasculate Black men.⁹³ Two positive ideals Taylor specifically notes to feature in newspaper articles is that of 'courage and respect'.⁹⁴ Boxing encapsulated both courage and respect as the tactile fighting was inevitably dangerous, hence a need for mutual respect and adherence to sporting etiquette. In New Orleans the *Daily Crescent*, published a 1857 article entitled 'Relics of Feudal Days' which recalled an inexperienced White boxer who was 'put up against a negro boxer' and shook his hand so violently to 'crush the black man's hand'.⁹⁵ Whether the White boxer shook violently as an emphasis of respect or out of aggression is unknown, however the focus is on the exaggerated tactile interaction to set the tense scene. The writer later equates the handshake to other tactile expressions of etiquette amongst men, where deliberate tactile expression of respect is likened to feudal disarmament.⁹⁶ The handshake in a boxing match is equated to a visual assurance of disarmament and highlights tactility meaning respect and non-volatility.

⁹¹ Steward, p. 315.

⁹² Ibid. p. 315.

⁹³ Karen Taylor, 'Reconstructing Men in Savannah, Georgia, 1865-1876' in *Southern Masculinity*, ed by. Craig Thompson Friend (USA: University of Georgia Press, 2009) p. 6, 9.

⁹⁴ Ibid. p. 6.

⁹⁵ 'Relics of Feudal Days', (1857).

⁹⁶ Ibid.

Mississippi newspaper, *Sword and Shield*, reported in 1886 that two ‘negro roustabouts got into a boxing match’ and due to being unskilled, it proved fatal.⁹⁷ By denoting them as ‘roustabouts’ the newspaper ensures to separate the Black men from skilled boxers and makes it clear to perpetuate to the reader that the fatal injuries were not accidental, but due to inexperience. Although it is unknown if these men were formerly enslaved, Mississippi was a former slaveholding state and evidently still was perpetuating a narrative of Black male aggression. The actual skill level of these boxers is unknown however the fact it is even referred to as a ‘boxing’ match indicates that the scene of the fight must have reflected some features of boxing match, potentially including a handshake.⁹⁸ By denying the validity of the boxing match, it further reveals post-emancipation society refuting Black male tactility through sport as an expression of respectable manhood. Walt Underwood’s Boxing manual entitled ‘Guide to the Manly Art of Self Defense’, published by American Sports Publishing in 1917, provided detailed explanations to the established regulations of the sport.⁹⁹ The *Guide* for the ‘manly art’ professed that matches between Black and White men, known as ‘mixed bouts’, were prohibited.¹⁰⁰ The *Guide* centres around boxing being ‘manly’ hence reinforcing the connection of strength prowess and masculine identity. The prohibition of fights between Black and White men distinguished Black tactile expressions, even within regulated sport, as inherently different and incomparable.

However a resistive reading of these sources discloses that Black men were engaging in Boxing and reclaiming access to this tactile expression of masculinity. This was particularly significant as boxing had been used to affirm masculinity in physical strength and tactile dominance to resist enslaver domination.¹⁰¹ In 1878 a Minnesota Newspaper, *City Globules*, mentions Wesley Guild a ‘champion colored Boxer’ who had come to give Boxing lessons to ‘colored boys of St Paul’.¹⁰² The records of Wesley Guild end with this article, yet Guild was evidently proficient in his tactile abilities as he taught sparring lessons in the area.¹⁰³ The recognition of Guild’s tactile prowess and boxing achievements in the ‘manly’ art reveals a reclamation of his manhood against the prohibitions placed by White persons. Evidence of

⁹⁷ ‘State News’, *Sword and Shield*, (Mississippi, 18 September 1886), [Sword and Shield](#).

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Walt Underwood, *A Guide to the Manly Art of Self Defense*, (New York: American Sports Publishing, 1917). [Underwood Guide](#).

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. p. 83.

¹⁰¹ Lussana, *To See Who Was the Best*, p. 914.

¹⁰² ‘City Globules’, *Daily Globe*, 01 July 1878, [Wesley Guild](#).

¹⁰³ Ibid.

formerly enslaved men engaging in boxing is limited yet this study reveals a platform for tactile masculine expression.

To adorn clothing requires a tactile choice and for some formerly enslaved men an expression of their reclaimed manhood manifested in their ability to embrace femininity. William Dorsey Swann, as *The Washington Critic* in 1888 ‘A Drag Party Raided’ claimed Swann stated, was the ‘queen’ who was charged for hosting a ‘drag party’ of Black men wearing ‘handsome silks and satins’ in ‘complete feminine costume’.¹⁰⁴ Foster correctly stated that heterosexuality is assumed when there is lacking historical evidence of homosexual activities.¹⁰⁵ However, the discoveries of Historian Channing Gerard Joseph have given insight into what Josephs coins ‘the first drag queen’ of William Dorsey Swann who he discovered to be formerly enslaved.¹⁰⁶ Swann’s ‘party of colored men that ‘gave a ball’ were charged with ‘vagrancy’, suggesting that this event was deemed immoral or distasteful.¹⁰⁷ Swann’s drag ball emphasises the non-homogeneity of ideals of manhood and how reclamation of manhood involves diverse tactile experiences. The Ball contained tactile expressions in the act of choosing to wear ‘feminine’ outfits but also likely involved these formerly enslaved men dancing with one another. Although it is impossible and counterproductive to attempt to label Swann’s sexual orientation, Swann reveals a way in which the tactility involved in choosing to wear gender-connoted garments had elements of reclamation in digressing from the stereotyped ideals of Black masculinity itself. By challenging the boundaries of masculinity through embracing of visual femininity, Swann highlights an undercover, and potentially non-heteronormative, tactile homosocial space.

This chapter has highlighted the difficulties in recognising tactile exchanges within homosocial spheres, however the prevalence of brotherhood-affirming activities like shaking hands or tipping hats reveals the perseverance of tactility. Through the reclaimed space for masculine activities and expressions as simple as having the physical proximity to hug one another, tactility continues to present as vital to recognising homosocial bonds.

¹⁰⁴ ‘A Drag Party Raided’, *The Washington Critic*, 13 April 1888. [Washington Critic](#).

¹⁰⁵ Foster, p. 85,86.

¹⁰⁶ Upcoming Book of Channing Gerard Joseph, ‘House of Swann: Where Slaves Became Queens’, (UK: Macmillan).

¹⁰⁷ ‘Colored Men in Female Attire’, *Evening Star*, 13 April 1888. [Evening Star](#).

CHAPTER 3: RECLAIMING ROMANTIC AND AFFECTIONATE TACTILE EXCHANGES

The vilification of romantic intimacy within enslavement forced relationships and fatherhood to be inherently restricted. Formerly enslaved men therefore sought tactile freedom, not only for themselves, but also for their families. They reclaimed their fatherhood position through participation in marriage, controlling their proximity to their families, and providing for their children all with emotional tactile exchanges and affectional support.

Touch had been vilified for enslaved men as the male enslaved body was exploited by enslavers for reproduction. By limiting the ability of enslaved men to express their own tactile intimacies and by weaponizing reproduction, enslaved masculinity was distorted through coercion. Foster has extensively argued that enslaved male bodies, although not in the same manner as female enslaved bodies, were sexually violated.¹⁰⁸ Foster highlighted that enslaved men were groped and sexually assaulted by enslavers as they compared and judged their beneficial bodily assets.¹⁰⁹ Douglass noted enslaved men with desirable reproductive abilities in his *Narrative*, stating that they were known as ‘breeders’.¹¹⁰ Enslaver justifications for this sexual exploitation and reduction of the male enslaved person to a ‘breeder’ was rooted in the enslaver beliefs that Black men were biologically predisposed to lust and sexual aggression.¹¹¹ Doddington corroborates the prevalence of this, arguing enslaved men even internalised their sexual tactile value into homosocial hierarchies.¹¹² Doddington correctly highlights that it is crucial to acknowledge that enslaved men were coerced to rape enslaved women, yet some enslaved men had ideals of manhood rooted in the domination of women, so these haptic experiences remain of complex impact.¹¹³ However, as Foster counterargues, the violations of enslaved men were not documented as often by formerly enslaved men within their narratives for the same reasons of ‘male emotional toughness’.¹¹⁴ By invalidating the ability for enslaved men to express sincere tactile intimacy, enslavers upheld their own façade of tactile exploitation, rooted once again in the supposed predispositions of Black sensory experience.

Marriages between enslaved persons reveal a potential aspect for reclaiming sexual tactility however these marriages remained within the constraints of enslavers and often lacked

¹⁰⁸ Foster, p.2.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. p. 12, 19-21.

¹¹⁰ Douglass, p. 151.

¹¹¹ Foster, p. 30.

¹¹² Doddington, p. 130-134.

¹¹³ Ibid, p. 130.

¹¹⁴ Foster, p. 48.

physical proximity for tactile experiences such as kissing and sexual intercourse. Some enslavers permitted enslaved marriages to pacify attempts of rebellion but in many cases, slave marriages and cross plantation relationships were not permitted. John Brown's 1855 *Narrative* recalled that a friend on his plantation, Jem Mallet, had been sneaking out to visit his wife and was severely beaten by his enslaver when caught.¹¹⁵ Brown states that Mallet was forced to find a new wife and was moved away from his children.¹¹⁶ For Mallet, his longing for proximity and tactile exchanges with his wife and children had not only been prohibited as tactile attempts alone but also were vilified with tactile violence as a punishment. Historians Susan Mary Grant and David Bowe have corroborated such stories where fathers in enslaved communities felt deeply restricted in their abilities to provide for their families.¹¹⁷ For enslaved men, their tactile exchanges with their loved ones were continually policed at enslaver's command, making it inevitably difficult to provide their families with physical and emotional displays of support and hence motivated their attempts for liberty.

Reasoning for embarking upon the tactile strains of running away for formerly enslaved men was often rooted in the hopes of fulfilling ideals of providing for their families. This included being physically proximate to provide them with tactile exchanges and support. For many enslaved men their self determination to be providers aided by their dexterity, made their tactile mobility, by extension, also the mobility of their wife and children. Bibb's *Letter to his Former Master* highlighted the vilification of touch as motivating his escape, as seeing their oppressor whip his family was the 'kind of treatment [that] drove [him] from home and family to see a better home for them'.¹¹⁸ Bibb attempted to escape with his family, carrying his child through a river and fighting off wolves on the way.¹¹⁹ His masculine identity was so deeply engrained in providing for his family that the additional tactile strains and risks were necessary to this reclamation. Josiah Henson was similarly motivated by a duty of fatherhood, he carried his children in a knapsack when they successfully ran away to Canada, taking on a substantial tactile strain.¹²⁰ The short-term tactile strains of fugitivity were soon overshadowed for Henson by the possibilities of freedom and freedom of tactile experience. Henson explicitly mentions

¹¹⁵ John Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia: A Narrative of the Life, Sufferings, and Escape of John Brown, A Fugitive Slave, Now in England*, ed by L. A. Chamerovzow, (London: W. M Watts, 1855), p. 63. [John Brown](#)

¹¹⁶ Brown, p. 63.

¹¹⁷ Susan-Mary Grant and David Bowe, "'My Daddy...He was a Good Man': Gendered Genealogies and Memories of Enslaved Fatherhood in America's Antebellum South', *Genealogy*, 4.43 (2020), p. 7.

¹¹⁸ Henry Bibb, *I Subscribed Myself a Friend to the Oppressed': Henry Bibb Writes to his Former Master*, (1844). [Letter to Former Master](#)

¹¹⁹ Bibb, p. 130,132.

¹²⁰ Josiah Henson, *The Life of Josiah Henson, formerly a Slave, Now an inhabitant of Canada as Narrated by Himself* (Boston: Arthur D. Phelps, 1849) p. 49, 50. [Josiah Henson](#).

how the moment they escaped he ‘hugged and kissed [his] wife and children all round, with a vivacity which made them laugh as well as [himself].’¹²¹ In Henson’s first moment of freedom, he goes to share his relief and happiness with his family displayed through public tactile expression. For Bibb and Henson, the additional tactile strains that came with running away with their family was overridden by their determination to fulfil their masculine ideal of being a provider of liberty and safety. Their reclamations of manhood through their ideals of providing fatherhood did not only have tactile strains but also had hopes of providing latter freedom, freedom of tactile expressions and proximity of affection outside of slavery.

In running away with their families, formerly enslaved men continued to solidify their reclamation of their roles as father by ensuring this physical proximity even into freedom. The ability for physical proximity is crucial to the sense of touch, as Segal argues, it is the sense that is most reliant upon proximate conditions.¹²² Story Matkin-Rawn emphasises the importance of physical proximity within the context of the Great Migration, arguing that many African American families moved during the 1910s to place more distance between themselves and their former enslavers to ensure their children would not be taken back.¹²³ There was also the possibility to reunite with other family members to reclaim tactile experiences with persons they had been once separated from. Robert Glenn’s *WPA Narrative* tells the emotive story of being reunited with his mother where he ‘shook [his] mothers hand and held it a little too long’ she then recognised him and they ‘broke down and began to cry’.¹²⁴ Glenn recognised a tactile meeting within this reunion, it was more than just visually reconnecting with his mother but the ability to hold her hand that left a poignant memory and emotional response. Freedom consequently provided formerly enslaved men with an opportunity to decide familial proximity and its accompanying haptic experiences including joy and relief.

The reclamation of the masculine body for formerly enslaved men also occurred in symbolic touch of marriage. Alfred Waud’s 1866 illustration entitled ‘Marriage of a colored soldier [...] by Chaplain Warren of the Freedmen’s Bureau’ places one tactile image at the centre of the illustration, the holding hands of the bride and groom.¹²⁵ The wedding process itself uses symbolic tactility as the handhold portrays a deeper metaphorical, and legislative,

¹²¹ Henson, p. 59.

¹²² Segal, p. 30.

¹²³ Story Matkin-Rawn, ‘“The Great Negro State of the Country”: Arkansas’s Reconstruction and the Other Great Migration’ in *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, 72.1 (2013) p. 9.

¹²⁴ Works Project Administration, ‘Robert Glenn Extract’ in *The Enslaved Family: Selections from the WPA interviews of formerly enslaved African Americans* (1936-1938). [WPA, Robert Glenn](#)

¹²⁵ Alfred, R. Waud, ‘The Marriage of a colored soldier at Vicksburg by Chaplain Warren of the Freedmen’s Bureau’, *Harpers Weekly*, (1866). [Waud, Marriage](#)

joining of two persons. With the Chaplain being from the ‘freedmen’s bureau’, established to aid freedmen, it is likely this man was formerly enslaved and now was having a formal wedding ceremony conducted.¹²⁶ Although slave marriages were occasionally permitted they were often void of legislative meaning and, as Lussana corroborated, were often prohibited by enslavers who feared it encouraged cross plantation communication and rebellion.¹²⁷ Public displays of affection within enslavement carried significant risk as enslavers may oversee these tactile exchanges and potentially inflict punishments. The formerly enslaved man in this illustration can freely access, display and reclaim the tactile symbolism behind holding hands at a wedding that was once unobtainable. The reclamations of the tactile symbolisms of marriage were further reinforced by the findings of Jo Ann Manfra and Robert Dykstra.¹²⁸ Manfra and Dykstra highlight the prevalence of the Black step-family, they argued that many formerly enslaved persons ended marriages that had occurred within enslavement and that remarrying was common option.¹²⁹ In engaging with the symbolic tactility in the act of the marriage ceremony, and even multiple weddings formerly enslaved men reclaimed a masculine affirming experience once limited in gravitas within enslavement.

Formerly enslaved men, having partaken in the tactile rituals of marriage, crucially now had the choice behind their tactile sense and reclaimed its purpose to provide them with the opportunity to grow and care for a family. As Foster supplements, the expectation in slavery to reproduce was gone and formerly enslaved men now dictated their choice of both intercourse for pleasure as well as reproduction.¹³⁰ In 1866 Clinton B. Fisk, Senior Officer of the Freedmen’s Bureau, published a series of ‘lectures’ entitled ‘Plain Counsels for Freedmen’ to formerly enslaved men where he stated that within enslavement ‘[their] children were not [theirs] but were the property of [their] slaveholder’.¹³¹ Even when enslaved men owned some property, Fisk acknowledged that they ‘could not will it to [their] children’ so he encourages them as freedmen to reclaim these abilities post-emancipation.¹³² Fisk’s work contains an illustration entitled ‘A Happy Family’, depicting an African American family gathered listening to the grandfather reading.¹³³ The grandfather depicted, is reaching out his hand to the

¹²⁶ Matkin-Rawn, p. 10.

¹²⁷ Lussana, *My Brother Slaves*, p. 123.

¹²⁸ Manfra, Jo Ann, and Robert R. Dykstra. ‘Serial Marriage and the Origins of the Black Stepfamily: The Rowanty Evidence’, in *The Journal of American History*, 72.1 (1985).

¹²⁹ Ibid. p. 19.

¹³⁰ Foster. p. 111.

¹³¹ Clinton Bowen Fisk, ‘Plain Counsels for Freedmen: in sixteen brief lectures’ (Library of Congress, 1866) p.8.

¹³² Ibid, p. 8.

¹³³ Pierce, C. ‘A Happy Family’ (1866). [Pierce, C.](#)

grandchild in an invitation to a tactile exchange.¹³⁴ The illustration encouraged tactile affection and proximity for an idyllic family unit for, and to, formerly enslaved men with a masculinity that showed softness and affection.

The importance of sincere masculine fatherhood, illustrated by tactile exchanges, extended into photography with Charley Williams *WPA narrative*'s use of a preceding image of Williams with his grandchild on his knee.¹³⁵ The photograph shows Charley's hands delicately placed around his granddaughter, supporting her back so she doesn't fall and gives the viewer an insight into his role as a caring grandfather.¹³⁶ The photograph portrays a powerful message that not only had Williams survived the sufferings of slavery, but also has a connected and defiant lineage proceeding him. Williams' gentle and affectionate nature is reflected in this snapshot of a tactile interaction and as a result shows his reclaimed influence on portraying his masculine identity as caring and fatherly.

Longing to fulfil their duty of fatherhood, this chapter explored how formerly enslaved men reclaimed their choice of romantic and affectional touch. They reclaimed enslaver notions that sexual tactility only served practical reproductive benefits and accessed a plethora of potential exchanges of affection and compassion to loved ones. In this dimension, formerly enslaved men explored the realms of tactile meaning to reclaim their access and displays of fatherhood.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Works Project Administration, 'Charley Williams and Granddaughter, Age 94' (1936-1938). [Charley Williams](#)

¹³⁶ Ibid.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has argued that tactile experiences are paramount to understanding reclamations of masculinity for formerly enslaved men. The study has situated this within a deeper analysis of the vilification of touch that occurred within enslavement. Enslaved men had their hands overworked and exploited, their bodies compared and groped and were withheld access to tactile experiences as slight as writing with a pen. The study took a three-chapter approach to place their masculinity as internally, platonically, and romantically informed.

Firstly, it explored the reclamation of masculinity as a quest for achieving self-made manhood, where tactility could now be self-serving and prosperous as a means of economic or political progression. Formerly enslaved men, wanting to achieve a self-made manhood, used their tactile strengths and abilities to forge routes to success. They endeavoured to use their skin to excel in manual labour but also to engage in political spheres where tactility was a performative display of respect and understanding. The study continued into highlighting the role of platonic expressions of tactility in informing a code of brotherhood amongst formerly enslaved men. As they boxed with one another and attended remembrance slavery events, formerly enslaved men were able to frame their manhood with comradery where the boundaries of enslavement had restricted their homosocial abilities. Formerly enslaved men, like William Dorsey Swann, revealed historic tactile experiences transgressing further out of the confinements of masculine ideals. Lastly, the study tackled the reclamation of romantic tactility as formerly enslaved men configured elements of their manhood around the duty of fatherhood. With the ability to dictate their physical proximity to their families, formerly enslaved men were able to reclaim the tactile dimensions of fatherhood. They could perform the tactile symbolisms of marriage with legal meaning and could provide for their children with tangible affirmations of closeness with haptic expressions.

The study maintained a use of newspapers, photographs, and the narratives of formerly enslaved men as key to the methodology to extrapolate instances where tactility had proved pivotal in lived experiences. In doing so, the focus of this study was always with recognising the reclamations of agency and autonomy displayed by formerly enslaved men. The study has built upon the work of Mark Smith in contributing to the sensory aspects underpinning scientific racism and how this as a result can become a space of resistance and reclamation. This is by no means a complete study of the history of touch or even the senses more broadly relating to slavery. The same approach could investigate the tactile reclamations of enslaved

women or to investigate the smells or sounds of enslavement as well as the latter effects this had on lived experiences after emancipation. For example, works could include, an aural history displaying the continuation of music created by enslaved persons into post-emancipation society and how the apt messages of resistance continued to resonate both audibly and internally.

The study has presented the importance of recognising the historical sensorium, it can be appropriated and vilified by oppressors but also be a beacon of bodily resistance and reclamation.

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