

## Lewis Clarke and the "Color" of Disability: The Past and Future of Black Disability Studies [1](#)

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### Abstract

*This article analyzes Lewis Clarke's 1845 slave narrative, the Narrative of the Sufferings of Lewis Clarke, for what it can offer contemporary theorizing at the intersection of disability and race. Clarke's text, I suggest, "crips" the genre of the slave narrative, replacing abolitionist spectacle with the knowledge gained from a number of temporary or otherwise ambiguous disability positions. In doing so, Clarke's Narrative both expands the parameters of disability as often conceived within disability studies and offers a reconfiguration of the meaning of disability for critical race studies.*

The 1845 *Narrative of the Sufferings of Lewis Clarke, During a Captivity of More than Twenty-Five Years, Among the Algerines of Kentucky, One of the So Called Christian States of North America*, begins in a manner familiar to readers of the genre of the slave narrative: with an authenticating statement by a white editor or amanuensis, who details the impact on his own body of witnessing the fugitive author in the flesh. "I first became acquainted with Lewis Clarke in December, 1842," writes the abolitionist Reverend J.C. Lovejoy, stating, "I well remember the deep impression made upon my mind on hearing his Narrative from his own lips" (v). If his own "impressions" were not enough, Lovejoy offers as further evidence of Clarke's truthfulness, aptitude, and authority to narrate his impact on a considerably larger crowd. He continues, "I well remember too the wave on wave of deep feeling excited in an audience of more than a thousand persons, at Hallowell, Me., as they listened to his story and looked upon his energetic and manly countenance, and wondered if the dark cloud of slavery could cover up—hide from the world, and degrade to the condition of brutes, such immortal minds" (v). William Lloyd Garrison would repeat this formula in his introductory remarks to Frederick Douglass's widely successful *Narrative* one month later, providing his account of witnessing Douglass rise to speak at an anti-slavery meeting in New Bedford and being struck by one "in physical proportion and stature commanding and exact—in intellect richly endowed—in natural eloquence a prodigy" (3). Together, Lovejoy and Garrison's remarks install a common trope of abolitionist literature: the plot of the successful journey from oppressed, benighted, and enervated slave to self-possessed, energetic, and healthful freeperson—someone so self-possessed, in fact, that they are capable of marking, or "impressing," the sensory organs of others. [2](#)

As with most master narratives, however, this plot is deceptively simple. In order to appeal to white readers unaccustomed to being addressed by former slaves, Garrison and Lovejoy's prefatory remarks install a binary understanding of disability and able-bodiedness at the heart of the trajectory from slavery to freedom. This model makes, perhaps, some sense in the case of Douglass, who charts his dawning awareness of his right to independence in part through the oft-cited fight scene with the overseer Edward Covey, a passage that equates physical strength with freedom of thought. [3](#) However, such a binary—disabled slave/ able-bodied freeperson—is particularly insufficient to capture the treatment of embodiment in Clarke's *Narrative*, a text that probes the very parameters of disability at every turn.

At one moment in his narrative, for example, Clarke describes one of the many disability "disguises" that enable his escape: tying two pocket handkerchiefs over his forehead and chin to simulate a poultice, Clarke aims, with the assistance of his light skin, to pass for an invalid master. Clarke's disguise is successful, fooling a young enslaved boy whom he encounters along the road in the task of driving cows: "He was quite disposed to condole with me, and said, in a very sympathetic manner, 'Massa sick.' 'Yes, boy,' I said, 'Massa sick,—drive along your cows'" (48). And yet, as Clarke makes clear, this disguise is necessitated in large part due to his actual physical weakness. Finding himself "sore all over and lame from having walked so far," Clarke makes the creative choice to camouflage one disability with another in order to continue his journey North (48). In doing so, he considerably disrupts the distinction between disability and able-bodiedness that generally inheres in the concept of a disability disguise (48). <sup>4</sup> Clarke's anecdote thus casts disabling injury as an attendant condition of fugitivity, while also placing pressure on the very boundaries of disability as frequently conceived of in disability studies. This is disability that at once *is* and *is not*—disability in shades of grey.

This article looks to Lewis Clarke's 1845 *Narrative* for what it can offer contemporary theorizing at the intersection of disability studies and critical race studies. A decade out from Chris Bell's crucial question, "Is Disability Studies Actually White Disability Studies?," work at the intersection of black studies and disability theory has positioned itself to address a range of historical and contemporary issues, from connections between so-called unsightly beggar ordinances and racial segregation laws, to the linkage of race and disability in the eugenics movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to current examples of police brutality against autistic people of color. <sup>5</sup> As scholars such as Nirmala Erevelles, Andrea Minear, and Alison Kafer have reminded us, however, intersectional analyses are not necessarily a simple panacea for our theory ills. Rather, they carry with them the possibility that in studying the intersection of two identities, we end up stabilizing the meaning of each one in the process. <sup>6</sup> Within disability studies, as well, a burgeoning body of work has begun to question whether the dominant terms of the field—namely, the social model of disability and the understanding of disability as minority identity category—have reified the meaning of disability in ways that are detrimental to the field's broader academic and activist goals. The social model of disability, while doing the hugely important work of de-essentializing the category of disability, still tends to leave that category intact. In other words, the social model assumes that one can draw a coherent boundary between "disabled" and "nondisabled" people. As Tom Shakespeare has suggested, the social model as currently conceived also leaves little room for theorizing the effects of painful or progressively worsening conditions, which may not be fully ameliorated by a shift in accommodations and resources (217-18). Following Shakespeare, Robert McRuer, Jasbir Puar, and Alison Kafer have all put pressure on the coherent notion of disability "identity," asking whether we might use the critical tools of disability studies to theorize, instead, a range of ambiguous bodily positions: the child of Deaf parents who does not himself "have" a disability but considers himself culturally disabled; the person, in Kafer's terms, with "asthma," "hearing loss," a "bum knee," who does not claim disability identity; the Guantanamo inmate suffering psychological damage from incarceration; populations living in "sick" neighborhoods and "toxic" homes, targeted for slow death while other queer and disabled neoliberal subjects are more easily targeted for life. <sup>7</sup>

Clarke's *Narrative*, I suggest, anticipates these recent trends in the field of disability studies, and in doing so materially revises key commonplaces from the field of black studies, as well. For Clarke's story provides us with a number of depictions of embodiment that, first, cannot be easily assimilated into the categories of either "disability" or "able-bodiedness"; second, that confound questions of agency and action in disabling injury; and, finally, that blur the boundaries between "actual" difference and various forms of disability performance and disguise. Importantly, it is precisely through these ambiguous disability depictions that Clarke's narrative also speaks to important paradigms within black studies for thinking about what Jennifer James and Cynthia Wu have termed the "nearly reflexive ascription of disability to enslaved bodies in antebellum abolitionist literature," and the attending problems of spectacle, voyeurism, and self-serving white sympathy that arise (7). In place of the typical abolitionist trajectory from disabled slave to able-bodied freeperson, Clarke's narrative, this article argues, "crips" the genre of abolitionist

spectacle and of the slave narrative itself. Drawing upon the knowledge gained from a number of temporary or otherwise ambiguous disability positions, Clarke posits the injured or temporarily ill body as a site of resistance under slavery, and in doing so inventively reverses the terms of the nineteenth-century discourse of abolition.

## I. Spectacle and Resistance in the "Sufferings" of Lewis Clarke

Lewis Clarke was a well-known and respected lecturer in his day. Abolitionist news sources praised Clarke as "a remarkable young man for ability, good sense, social qualities, and public speaking," and described his narrative, similarly, as a "remarkable book" (Gara 201, "Lewis"). In her 1853 *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe claimed Clarke, along with Frederick Douglass, as a model for the character of George Harris; Clarke was referred to as the "prototype" of Harris for decades to follow ("Chronology"). The honors paid to Clarke at the time of his death further indicate his status in the nineteenth-century United States. Clarke's body was laid out in the Lexington City Auditorium, where, Lexington's *Morning Herald* predicted, "it is expected that hundreds both white and black, who feel an interest in [his] career," will come to pay their respects (5). It was the first time in the history of the Commonwealth that such a distinction had been conferred upon an African American (Gayton xxv.)

However, Clarke's narrative—which describes his life as a slave in Kentucky, his escape to Canada, and his return and second escape with his brother Cyrus—never received the canonical prominence and lasting renown of Douglass's. [8](#) On the one hand, there are some obvious reasons for this discrepancy: Clarke's narrative, unlike Douglass's, was not "written by himself," but rather was dictated to the white abolitionist Reverend J.C. Lovejoy. [9](#) The questions of narrative authority that to some degree dog all slave narratives are thus amplified in Clarke's case, posing for us the interpretive challenge of analyzing a text heavily mediated by a white abolitionist. Yet it's a challenge worth taking up, for the interesting and quite different way from Douglass that Clarke treats embodiment—one which offers him another route for commenting on and resisting the terms of both slavery *and* dominant abolitionist praxis. While recognizing Lovejoy as a necessary mouthpiece—a prosthesis of sorts—for Clarke and thus acknowledging the impossibility of ever fully disentangling their narrative voices, this article nonetheless takes seriously the information about plantation life that we can glean from the text. In the moments that the text seems to stray from expected abolitionist pronouncements, in particular, glimpses of Clarke's and his fellow bondspeople's agency and creativity make themselves felt.

In early portions of his text, Clarke describes plantation injury in ways that seem largely consonant with the depiction of torture and pain in the broader genre of the slave narrative. Indeed, the most surprising elements of these sections may be not Clarke's description of pain, but rather the anecdotes' reversal of expected gender roles. [10](#) Having fallen into the hands of his master's sister, Mrs. Betsey Banton, a young Clarke becomes subject to her inventive acts of despotism. Among the titular "sufferings" that Clarke enumerates are beatings with an alarming array of Mrs. Banton's improvised weapons: "Her instruments of torture were ordinarily the raw hide, or a bunch of hickory-sprouts seasoned in the fire and tied together. But if these were not at hand, nothing came amiss. She could relish a beating with a chair, the broom, tongs, shovel, shears, knife-handle, the heavy heel of her slipper...her invention was wonderfully quick, and some way of inflicting the requisite torture was soon found out" (18). At another moment, Clarke describes Mrs. Banton's torturous methods of keeping him awake while forced to spin hemp, flax, and tow on a foot wheel late into the night: "On these occasions Mrs. B. had her peculiar contrivances for keeping us awake," Clarke explains. "She would sometimes sit by the hour with a dipper of vinegar and salt, and throw it in my eyes to keep them open. My hair was pulled till there was no longer any pain from that source. And I can now suffer myself to be lifted by the hair of the head, without experiencing the least pain" (22) If Mrs. Banton combines the trappings of femininity and domesticity (her slipper, a ladle used as an eye dropper) with the violence more frequently associated with a masculine subject position, Clarke's beatings place him in an effeminized—and thus particularly degraded—condition. While Douglass opens his 1845 *Narrative* with the trauma of bearing witness to his

Aunt Hester's whipping, Clarke, in these passages, occupies a position reminiscent of the victimized Aunt Hester herself.

Such scenes of the pained slave body have, for good reason, given pause to scholars in the field of black studies. Saidiya Hartman begins her seminal 1997 *Scenes of Subjection* by stating, "I have chosen not to reproduce Douglass's account of the beating of Aunt Hester in order to call attention to the ease with which such scenes are usually reiterated, the casualness with which they are circulated, and the consequences of this routine display of the slave's ravaged body. Rather than inciting indignation, too often they immure us to pain by virtue of their familiarity" (3). As Hartman goes on to argue, this routine depiction of slave pain in the writing of white and black abolitionists alike threatened to do violence to the very notion of black subjectivity, either divorcing blackness from sentience altogether in the minds of readers who may have become inured to such images, or, paradoxically, linking blackness inescapably to suffering.

As Ellen Samuels has suggested, however, the scholarly move to counter pathologizing images of black bodies with an emphasis on "wholeness, uprightness, good health, and independence" belies the very real ways that fugitive slaves often needed to court real or performed disability in order to attain freedom (18). Such methodologies also tend to ascribe a static condition to the category of disability itself, assuming that it always attenuates a subject's agency and does so along predictable lines of ascribing an excess or dearth of feeling to black bodies. Returning to nineteenth-century African American writing with a disability framework—particularly one that recognizes less obvious invocations of disability—in mind, one can uncover the rich and variously textured ways that black authors invoked notions of disability in their cultural productions.

Indeed, through his careful treatment of disability, Clarke's narrative makes it difficult for readers to sustain the sorts of othering or self-serving responses that Hartman outlines. In addition to the more routine scenes of torture, Clarke's text takes pains to show us moments in which Mistress Banton *produces* racial distinction through physical injury. After an embarrassing situation in which a visitor believed Clarke's sister to be white, Clarke takes the brunt of the mistress's rage. In a line of free indirect discourse of Mrs. B's perspective, the text states, "She would fix me so that nobody should ever think I was white" (21). The text continues, "Accordingly in a burning hot day, she made me take off every rag of clothes, go out into the garden and pick herbs for hours—in order to burn me black. When I went out she threw cold water on me so that the sun might take effect upon me" (21). This passage, rather than linking some "essence" of blackness with suffering, destabilizes the idea of race altogether. The master class inflicts disabling injury in an attempt to "fix" race—to produce a stable and visible black identity. And while this action has severe consequences for Clarke's body—consequences that we should not downplay for an instant—Clarke's ironizing of Mrs. B's voice represents her victory as temporary, an attempt doomed to repetition. [11](#)

In fact, Mrs. Banton herself appears "disabled," in a manner, due to her own proclivities for violence. "During the ten years that I lived with Mrs. Banton, I do not think there were as many days, when she was at home, that I, or some other slave, did not receive some kind of beating or abuse at her hands," Clarke states. "It seemed as though she could not live nor sleep, unless some poor back was smarting, some head beating with pain, or some eye filled with tears, around her" (17). The use of phrase "live or sleep" where one might expect simple moral condemnation is striking. Mrs. Banton's bloodlust is represented not as the perversion of Christian charity or sympathy, but as physical need: the dis-abling of others is required to prop her up, to allow her to do the business of living. In this way, Clarke's text uses depictions of black pain in order to reverse commonplace notions about white independence and black dependence.

In later sections of the narrative, Clarke's depiction of plantation injury more directly complicates black studies paradigms for thinking about the representation of pain in the literature of slavery. In one particularly suggestive example, Clarke reveals his fellow bondspeople's frequent practice of drawing upon their own disabling injury as a form of covert resistance—a practice that radically disrupts commonplace understandings of the meaning of disability for enslaved people. Clarke's reflection on plantation practices comes, notably, at the moment he has reached Canadian soil, suggesting a correspondence between his newly-freed

state and his capacity to testify to covert practices of enslaved insurrection. Having arrived in Canada after crossing Lake Erie from Ohio, Clarke narrates:

Good heaven! what a sensation, when it first visits the bosom of a full grown man—one, born to bondage—one, who had been taught from early infancy, that this was his inevitable lot for life. Not till then, did I dare to cherish for a moment the feeling that one of the limbs of my body, was my own. *The slaves often say, when cut in the hand or foot, 'plague on the old foot, or the old hand, it is master's—let him take care of it—Nigger don't care if he never get well.'* My hands, my feet, were now my own. But what to do with them was the next question. (38-39, emphasis mine)

What might be most apparent on a first reading of this passage is the way that the depiction of "freedom" is couched in the language of possessive individualism. As Jennifer Rae Greeson has shown, this move, not uncommon in the literature of slavery, defines the individual as the owner of the self, and in doing so threatens to reproduce the ideological underpinnings of Atlantic slave capitalism by casting the self as a "possessable object" (918). The very meaning of "possession," however, looks differently when we consider the disability implications of the passage, which considerably shift expectations about how one might make use of this self-owned body. Whereas possessive individualism premises selfhood on the individual's ability to own, and thereby direct the labor of, his or her own body, Clarke's text points us toward the knowledge that bodies can be used for other purposes: they can be used, through disability, to signify.

Indeed, the passage memorializes a rather remarkable way in which enslaved people on Clarke's plantation made use of physical vulnerability to comment on the possession of their bodies under law. In refusing to seek treatment for physical injuries, Clarke's fellow bondspeople are enacting what E. Patrick Johnson might call an "embodied performance of resistance," a strategy that—alongside others such as lying to their masters, breaking tools, and skimping on chores—evinces the "will to be treated as a human" through small-scale refusals of the institutionalized hierarchies of slavery (453). In their rejection of *cure*, in particular, the enslaved people on Clarke's plantation offer a crip retelling of the ubiquitous "care" narrative offered by proponents of slavery, wherein slavery is a supposedly paternalistic institution providing protection to dependents. In doing so, they re-signify their own captive bodies, showing that they cannot, in fact, be fully controlled by the whip, the brand, or the shovel: those instruments of threat and torture which are also modes of writing the slave body.

## II. "All was confusion": Fugitivity and the Paradoxical Disability "Con"

The imaginative mode of struggle undertaken by Clarke's fellow bondspeople is one that renders the distinction between "ability" and "disability" nonsensical, and obscures the expected positions of "actor" and "acted upon" in abolitionist depictions of slave injury. Such details from Clarke's narrative prevent readers from seeing disability under slavery as fixed and stable—namely, an immutable condition that reliably detracts from the subject's agency. These narrative elements also destabilize the parameters of disability as often elaborated within the field of disability studies, providing readers with images of bodies that exist in an ambiguous relation to the category of disability: at once disabled and yet enabled, in some small way, by the very condition that impairs them.

This pattern recurs in other sections of Clarke's narrative, where Clarke's performances of disability during his escape call the very category further into question. Throughout his escape, Clarke adopts a number of disability disguises: in one moment he wraps his head in handkerchiefs meant to indicate a poultice, while at another he feigns deafness when he's forgotten the false name he's given a tavern owner (48, 37). In yet another moment, Clarke avoids revealing his illiteracy—and thus his status as a fugitive—by claiming that his eyes "were not in a fit condition to read much" when handed a newspaper (36). These performances work, in combination with Clarke's light skin, to disguise him as a traveling invalid gentlemen. Clarke is not alone in describing elements of disability costuming that enable an escape from slavery. In particular, his disguises prefigure those adopted by Ellen Craft, and examined by Ellen Samuels in her study of the Craft's narrative

*Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*. However, whereas the Crafts emphasize disability as an identity that can be neatly discarded at the end of their journey, and thus distanced from their presentation of their "true" selves, Clarke's narrative troubles any easy distinctions between the positions of able-bodiedness and disability. <sup>12</sup> Indeed, the difference between "disability" and "disability disguise" breaks down in Clarke's narrative, as he experiences actual physical effects from his dissimulation. The narrative states:

A thought of a pair of spectacles, to hide my face, struck me. I went across the way, and began to barter for a pair of double eyed green spectacles. When I got them on, they blind-folded me, if they did not others. Every thing seemed right up in my eyes. I hobbled back to the tavern, and called for supper. This I did to avoid notice, for I felt like any thing but eating. At tea I had not learned to measure distances with my new eyes, and the first pass I made with my knife and fork at my plate, went right into my cup. This confused me still more, and, after drinking one cup of tea, I left the table, and got off to bed as soon as possible. But not a wink of sleep that night. All was confusion, dreams, anxiety and trembling. (35)

In Clarke's account, all distinctions between feigned and "actual" bodily identity become meaningless. The disguise becomes, temporarily, part of himself—part of Clarke's phenomenological reality—providing him with a set of "new eyes" to which he is not accustomed. The account thus begs the question of where, exactly, the "disability" in this passage is located. Disability is clearly *not* a static quality that only some bodies can be said to "have." Nor does it seem quite right, however, to attribute disability to the glasses alone—especially when we consider Clarke's references earlier in the narrative to having vinegar and salt thrown in his eyes, a practice which may have made him particularly susceptible to the effects of the spectacles. If "disability" in Clarke's narrative is a shifting, mutable condition that is a product of the interaction between his body and its particular material, social, and ideological environment, it seems we must also go further and declare that Clarke is at once disabled and not: impaired by a temporary, removable disguise that is nevertheless necessary to endure in order to secure freedom. This is not a definition of disability that would pass muster today under the ADA, nor, in fact, is it consonant with disability advocates' hard-won assertion that disability is an identity one can adopt with pride. And yet, this paradoxical understanding of disability is necessary to reflect the embodied realities produced by slavery. The perils and contingencies facing the fugitive break down the distinction between "real" and fraudulent disability, so that the "confusion" cited at the end of the passage radiates outward from Clarke's specific case to capture questions of identity and categorization, as well.

The nuanced way in which disability appears in this passage has consequences, furthermore, for the commentary it makes on questions of race and slavery. On the surface, the description of the disabling spectacles may seem to offer less overt resistance to the institution of slavery than the earlier example, in which the slaves' prolonging of injury jams up the operation of business as usual on the plantation. However, with its complicated view of questions of "truth" and "authenticity" in relation to bodily suffering, this passage offers a subtle but far-reaching deconstruction of the visual politics of abolitionism. As Dwight McBride has written of fugitive slaves such as Clarke lecturing in conjunction with their narratives, live performance offered the ex-slave's body as "the 'real' evidence, the 'real' fulfillment of what has been told before" about the evils of the system (5). In her *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for example, Stowe refers to the tortures that Clarke faced, "some of which have left inefaceable marks on his person" (20). In this way, the fugitive's very subjectivity could come to be collapsed, through his body, with the institution from which he had escaped. Clarke's narrative, however, offers no such promise of transparent access to the enslaved person's body. He complicates abolition's investment in a disability binary (from injured slave to healed but marked freeperson,) offering instead a body that resists confident categorization. In doing so, Clarke manages the quite nuanced feat of testifying to injury without either denying the phenomenological realities experienced by enslaved subjects or collapsing blackness with suffering in the eye of the beholder.

Such a challenge to the primacy of visual interpretation in abolitionism recurs in the passage, previously discussed, in which Clarke reaches freedom. Describing the moment when he first steps foot on Ohio soil, Clarke says, "I trembled all over with deep emotion, and I could feel my hair rise up on my head" (35). The passage flatly contradicts Clarke's earlier assertion that he "can now suffer [himself] to be lifted by the hair of the head, without experiencing the least pain," after his hair "was pulled till there was no longer any pain from that source" (22). One possible interpretation is that Clarke's sensation is deadened when pressure is applied from an outside source, but that he still has the ability to feel sensory impressions arising from changes within his own central nervous system. Another interpretation, however, is that this sentence constitutes merely a rote figure of speech, one offered by Lovejoy or by Clarke himself, that doesn't fully capture the specifics of Clarke's situation. The phrase is much more conventional, after all, than either the startling images of enslaved people refusing cure or that of Clarke being lifted by the hair on his head, statements which in their uniqueness gain credibility. The latter interpretation seems even more credible when we consider that the lack of sensation that Clarke endures is, importantly, invisible. Unlike marks or scars from whipping or branding, the quality of un-feeling cannot be easily displayed on the lecture circuit for the consumption of white viewers. This aspect of Clarke's embodied reality, one that further disrupts the imagined trajectory from disabled slave to enabled freeperson, is one that we as readers can know about *only through* Clarke's telling. This is not a wound that can speak for itself, but one that must be offered and contextualized by its bearer. <sup>13</sup> The juxtaposition of Clarke's unusual embodied reality with the generalized, idiomatic invocation of the slave body at the threshold of freedom calls attention to the insufficiency of conventional aspects of the slave narrative for capturing Clarke's particular situation of dis/ability.

Clarke's narrative thus offers an alternative genealogy for how nineteenth-century black authors engaged questions of disability. While much work has been done on how dominant culture has made use of disability to delegitimize the claims to personhood of non-white (as well as non-male, non-Western, or classed) subjects, Clarke's 1845 *Narrative* is indicative of an exciting counterpublic archive. Rather than necessarily describing disability in ways that prove detrimental to the project of black personhood, subjectivity, and freedom, Clarke's *Narrative* links these identities quite cannily, mining their intersection as a site of resistance against slavery *and* against the limited terms of nineteenth-century abolitionist discourse. His example encourages us to look for ways other African American lecturers and writers, as well as writers of color more broadly, have linked these identities for their own political and aesthetic aims. What might we make of Harriet Wilson's assertion in the preface to *Our Nig*, for example, that she writes because she is "disabled by failing health" (3)? Far from detracting from her ability to represent herself, disability authorizes the entirety of Wilson's tale of indenture and its scathing critique of Northern white racism. Or how might we read Solomon Northup's description of his bout with smallpox—the marks from which, he suggests, may have "depreciated [his] value" by \$500—from a disability studies perspective (51)? Northup tells us that the physician who first examined him was unable to determine the cause of his complaint, until, Northup says, "I gave it as my opinion that it was an attack of small pox—mentioning the fact of Robert's [a fellow kidnapped black man sold into slavery] death as the reason of my belief" (50). *Twelve Years a Slave* thus evinces Northup's experiential knowledge as superior in some respects to that of medical authority, marking another instance in which a black author has gained narrative authority not despite, but rather through, disability.

In this way, the work of literary analysis provides continued fodder for a flexible and evolving black disability studies—one which explores how black authors brought disabled ways of knowing to key genres such as the slave narrative, but which also recognizes that the subject positions of "disabled" and "nondisabled" are not always and uniformly discrete. Indeed, a black disability studies attuned to those less conclusive depictions of disability opens up more fully the broad historical contours that shaped understandings of embodiment, as well as the question of where the social meets the personal—how Clarke, Wilson, or Northup may have felt their own embodiment, in addition to how their bodies were perceived in the social field. This is a black disability studies that offers us what Eric Lott, quoting Richard Johnson, terms "the chief concern and special ability of cultural studies," namely, "an understanding of 'historical forms of consciousness and subjectivity'"

(11). Clarke's *Narrative* shows that bridging the insights of critical race and disability theory reveals both new forms of compulsion *and* new assertions of subjectivity for enslaved and recently emancipated peoples.

Following Bell's crucial, provocative question, "Is Disability Studies Actually White Disability Studies?," I conclude with some of my own lingering questions, inspired by the work of earlier scholars who forged a bridge between critical race and disability studies and by the nineteenth-century authors who spur me to continue to reconsider the relation between the two. How do the contexts in which bodies navigate—the scene of fugitivity, for example—determine the particular relation between disability and race? Are there contexts in which the very idea of "context" falls short? What might we learn from nineteenth century authors, like Clarke, who seem unencumbered by a distinction between "real" and "constructed" disability, a sticking point in current critiques of the social model's inability to deal with the painful elements of impairment? How can disability studies, in the twenty-first century, account, as Clarke does, for the social effects of impairment without assuming that the line between "disability" and "ability" is clear? As my formulation of these questions is meant to suggest, a text from 1845 may just help to lead the way. The future of a critical race disability studies has much still to learn from the past.

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## Endnotes

1. I am grateful to the audiences at the American Studies Association Annual Meeting, the American Antiquarian Society, and Beloit College who heard portions of this work in progress. This article is dedicated to Christopher Krentz, who has shown amazing generosity and grace in mentoring me in the field of disability studies.  
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2. In contrast to the ability of Clarke and his brother Milton, Lovejoy describes the other Clarke brother, Cyrus, as such: "Cyrus is fully equal to either of the brothers in sprightliness of mind—is withal a great wit, and would make an admirable lecturer, but for an unfortunate impediment in his speech" (vii). This quote suggests the importance of visible ability—physical and mental—on the abolitionist lecture circuit.  
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3. Of course, Douglass also represents literacy as "the pathway from slavery to freedom" (32). These two trajectories—the physical and the intellectual—are brought together at one moment in the *Narrative* in a striking image. Describing his mistreatment at Colonel Lloyd's plantation, where Douglass often crawled into a bag used for carrying corn to the mill to stay warm at night, he writes, "My feet have been so cracked with the frost, that the pen with which I am writing might be laid in the gashes" (28). Rejecting the pose of the disembodied narrator, Douglass instead draws on his embodied experience to authorize his narration. This (brilliant) move strikes me as, still, distinct from the more ambiguous treatment of physical injury in Clarke's text, which provides insight into other ways that formerly enslaved people felt and performed their embodiment.  
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4. Tobin Siebers's concept of "disability as masquerade," or, the strategic disclosure of disability for personal and political ends, is to the point here. In contrast to disability passing, where the subject aims to hide his or her disability, the subject of disability masquerade "disguise[s] one kind of disability with another or display[s] their disability by exaggerating it" (100). Ellen Samuels's description of how fugitive slave Ellen Craft, who escaped slavery by performing as a white, invalid gentleman, disguises "the disability of illiteracy" with an arm in a sling also comes to mind (16, 25). Samuels's work will be discussed further later in this article. Clarke's text, I suggest, invokes some of these models for thinking about disability while also complicating them, making his text an apt one for exploring even more recent work in the field of disability studies which has begun to unravel the very certainty with which we can invoke the term "disability" itself.  
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5. See Chris Bell, "Is Disability Studies Actually White Disability Studies?," in *The Disability Studies Reader, Third Edition* (2010), first published in *The Disability Studies Reader, Second Edition* (2006) as "Introducing White Disability Studies: A Modest Proposal"; Susan Schweik, *The Ugly Laws*:

*Disability in Public* (2009); and Ellen Samuels, *Fantasies of Identification: Disability, Gender, Race* (2014). Schweik and Samuels also discuss disability in relation to blackness in articles such as Schweik's "Disability Politics and American Literary History: Some Suggestions" (Spring/Summer 2008) and "Lomax's Matrix: Disability, Solidarity, and the Black Power of 504" (2011); and Samuels's "'A Complication of Complaints': Untangling Disability, Race, and Gender in William and Ellen Craft's 'Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom'" (Fall 2006) and "Examining Millie and Christine McKoy: Where Enslavement and Enfreakment Meet" (Autumn 2011). Lydia Brown discussed brutality against autistic people of color in a talk at the University of Virginia on April 6, 2015, entitled "Beyond the Imagined Normal: Reimagining Disability in an Ableist World." In the past few years, several review articles and introductions to special journal issues have also increasingly addressed the intersection of disability and race studies. See Jennifer C. James and Cynthia Wu, "Editors' Introduction: Race, Ethnicity, Disability, and Literature: Intersections and Interventions" (Fall 2006); Andrea Stone, "The Black Atlantic Revisited, The Body Reconsidered: On Lingerings, Liminality, Lies, and Disability" (Winter 2012); Rachel Adams, "Disability Studies Now" (Summer 2013); Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Disability Studies: A Field Emerged" (December 2013); Liat Ben-Moshe and Sandy Magaña, "An Introduction to Race, Gender, and Disability: Intersectionality, Disability Studies, and Families of Color," (Fall 2014). For a book-length collection that addresses this intersection, see Christopher Bell, ed., *Blackness and Disability: Critical Examinations and Cultural Interventions* (2011).

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6. Nirmala Erevelles and Andrea Minear, "Unspeakable Offenses: Untangling Race and Disability in Discourses of Intersectionality" (358); Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (17). In "Rehabilitating Analogy," Todd Carmody questions the entrenchment of intersectional analyses in disability studies and in cultural studies more broadly. In place of the intersection, Carmody offers a renovated methodology of analogy that "compare[s] the cultural grammars of race and disability" to unearth "the syntactical patterns and structural contours by which each is made socially legible" (433). While I do make use of intersectional analyses, my work is also interested in those cultural locations where we can trace homologies between, for example, the reception of a slave narrator and the exhibition of disability on the freak show stage, with attention to how those stagings transform the parameters of both "disability" and "blackness."

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7. Tom Shakespeare, "The Social Model of Disability"; Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 13-14; Robert McRuer, "Disability Nationalism in Crip Times"; Jasbir Puar, "Prognosis Time: Toward a Geopolitics of Affect, Debility, and Capacity," and "The Cost of Getting Better: Ability and Debility."

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8. In a purely anecdotal, but telling, example, I taught both texts in a seminar on slavery and embodiment at Macalester College in Fall 2015. While almost all students were familiar to some degree with Douglass's narrative, not one had been exposed to Clarke. Carver Clark Gayton, Clarke's great grandson who wrote the introduction to the 2012 University of Washington edition of Clarke's *Narrative*, writes that that he decided to initiate the new edition because "neither my immediate family nor the general public is aware of [Clarke's] significant contributions to the abolitionist movement" (xxv.)

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9. Intriguingly, Gayton points to an 1890 Washington Post article that quotes Clarke as saying that he is "getting a book out on his life"; however, "[e]xtensive investigation has not determined whether his planned book was ever actually published" (viii). See "Once a Famous Slave." While not "written by himself," Clarke's 1845 dictated *Narrative* was published one month before Douglass's, making it the first book ever copyrighted by an ex-slave (Gayton

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10. This deconstruction of the white female character as a figure of sentimental piety occurs in Harriet Wilson's 1859 *Our Nig*, as well. As will be discussed later in this article, I read Clarke and Wilson as having much in common in terms of the way they treat disability in relation to race.

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11. A similar moment occurs in Harriet Wilson's semi-autobiographical *Our Nig*, generally considered the first-known novel by an African American woman and, as Jennifer James and Cynthia Wu have suggested, "arguably the first example of black autopathography" (7). In one section of the novel, Wilson describes how the violent Mrs. Belmont, who has informally indentured Wilson's protagonist and alter-ego Frado, requires that she burn herself to distinguish her skin from the Bellmonts' white daughter Mary: "At home, no matter how powerful the heat when sent to rake hay or guard the grazing herd, she was never permitted to shield her skin from the sun. She was not many shades darker than Mary now; what a calamity it would be ever to hear the contrast spoken of" (22). As James and Wu conclude of the text, "*Our Nig* suggests that the production of black subjectivity and the production of the disabled body are coterminous" (7). While such a linkage of race and disability has the potential to further Hartman's sense that blackness is yoked with suffering in abolitionist literature in problematic ways, it also points to the instability of these very categories.

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12. Samuels suggests that disability in *Running* serves as a sort of "supplement"—that which remains fixed and stable, *unlike* the categories of race, gender, and class, which the Crafts' performances show to be fluid and unpredictable (19). She notes, for example, the ways that Ellen's disability disguises are removed or downplayed in the engraving of her masquerading as a white, invalid gentleman that was often sold alongside of the narrative (21). I'm persuaded by Samuels's argument and find Clarke's text useful for pointing to the heterogeneous invocations of disability in narratives by former slaves. Samuels cites Clarke and James W.C. Pennington, who feigns smallpox during his escape, as other examples of fugitive slaves who "faked disabilities during their escapes" (42n3).

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13. My analysis here draws upon Sally Gomaa's discussion of pain in Wilson's *Our Nig* and in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Taking up "the abolitionist treatment of pain as visual and of the slave's body as spectacle," Gomaa outlines the problems this poses for enslaved narrators. She writes of Jacobs that "[h]er readers may be voyeuristically interested in viewing her wounds, but they are not ready to hear her articulation of them" (374).

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