

The Able-Bodied Slave

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The article takes up the “abled-bodied slave” as a concept for engaging with the emergence and epistemological significance of “disabled slaves” in disability studies. Black feminist contributions to poststructural frameworks point to the ways the racial-sexual terror of captivity have shaped the troubled making of difference, and of the means by which the latter is theorized. Putting into motion these interventions—namely, those by Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, and Barbara Christian—within the growing literature on blackness in disability studies, the article charts the epistemic landscape from which disability and able-bodiedness are read into slavery archives and other texts, positing that what disability and access means for the slave may undo accepted ways of seeing disability and reach for a disability theory internal to black thought.

Introduction

What is an “abled-bodied slave”? What is a “disabled slave”? The binary implied in these questions is deceptively simple but worth pondering in light of emerging scholarship in disability studies suggesting exactly that: the discernment of ability and disability in US slavery, the paramount concern being the identification and analysis of what is named to be “disabled slaves” (Boster 1; Downs para. 3; Gordon-Smith 112). Such a distinction is curious because, as those works also attest, slavery was an inherently disabling institution producing conditions of mental and physical injury as well as ideological notions of inferiority. Under this context of domination, what is a slave if not already a figure of disability? But perhaps this question ignores the body and corporeal differences between slaves, differences that determined the place, function, and monetary value of each captive body in the slave economy. In this case, physical, sensorial, and cognitive impairments constituted disability, and slaves who were not (yet) impaired were able-bodied. But if impairment is also culturally mediated, as the vast interdisciplinary scholarship of disability studies has demonstrated, then slavery may actually complicate attempts to impute or *read* disability and impairment in antebellum discourses about what constituted a fit and unfit slave. The very meaning of captivity is the absolute

accessibility of the slave body, its capacities belonging to and being for the master (Patterson 4; Spillers, "Mama's Baby" 206). And this is key: to differentiate between "disabled" and "abled-bodied" slaves (even if the latter remains unsaid) is to square ability with a will-less subject.

This might be an exercise in semantics, but naming is a powerful tool. In a call-for-papers for the 2015 meeting of the Modern Language Association, a panel posited what the representations of "disabled slaves in American literature [can] tell us about disability, race, and slavery in the long 19th-century," an inquiry that uniquely positions disabled slaves in the making of new interpretative frameworks (para. 1). Dea H. Boster's work on disability in the antebellum South "reclaim[s] a history of disability in African American slavery from the primary record and [...] analyze[s] how concepts of race, disability, and power confluence in the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century" (3). For Jim Downs, studying the "experience of disabled freed slaves forces us to reconsider our understanding of the process of emancipation," a history that "has been, in essence, a history of able-bodied freed slaves" (paras. 4-7). Understood as projects of recovery, these works excavate disability from slavery archives and literary texts, a practice of reading against the grain to salvage repressed histories and stories of disability.

An invaluable approach in disability studies and other field-formations, reading against the grain mines the archive and other source materials for alternative meanings, bringing into relief the role difference has played and continues to play in knowledge production and the production of subjects. Recognizing the ways subjugation manifests in archives and texts, or revealing how dominant narratives marginalize or make invisible certain stories and voices, forms the defining and still very necessary task for disability studies and other scholarship centering the constituted and constitutive nature of difference. In a social climate that persists in silencing difference through sometimes violent means, naming lived experiences of subjection and resistance, and marking what are otherwise unmarked subject positions, is constant work. Within disability studies, meticulous and ongoing engagement with the intersections of disability, gender, sexuality, class, and race has generated important questions, frameworks, and directions for research across theoretical and disciplinary approaches.¹ These engagements make for much-needed alternative or counter-narratives against ableism, heterosexism, capitalism, and racism.

1. See, for example, works by Campbell, Chen, Erevelles, and Kafer, and the special issue edited by James and Wu.

However, because naming is powerful, it is also political—something such works make explicit, and which Chris Bell had also amplified in his charge that disability studies be properly termed “White Disability Studies.” This appellation, which Bell wryly called a “modest proposal” (275) for change, announced what was at the time a dearth of race critique in disability studies. Bell had underscored the whiteness of disability studies over a decade ago, and expanding work on multiple social identities has since situated race as a proper object or area of concern within the field. One is almost tempted to call this a crisis averted or maybe even a crisis resolved, if Bell’s proposed sobriquet for disability studies can be considered a crisis at all. Though tongue-in-cheek, the seriousness behind Bell’s “modest” proposal lay precisely in its admission of an open secret, a sardonic but unflinching acknowledgment that expected neither a “crisis of conscience” (281) nor a “sea-change” (278) in the field. Bell did not simply lament the lack of race scholarship in disability studies, but took aim at the epistemological whiteness of the field, deeming “it far more instructive to acknowledge that we are *positioned* in the realm of ‘White Disability Studies’ and [to] continue along with the truth of this *positioning* in mind” (281, emphasis added). Terms taken up within the field—“disability studies,” “White Disability Studies,” “disabled slaves”—then always say something about this positioning.

Granted, the able-bodied slave is not a widespread topic within the disability studies canon. It is a rather recent formation, sometimes named, sometimes not, seldom theorized but haunting any invocation of the disabled slave. Distinguishing the latter is likely motivated by an impetus to locate contexts of disability that have been under-examined in disability studies. However, this impetus is freighted with disability’s prior omissions, which shape the meaning of disability and in turn how it is now marshaled to name its own absences and caesuras. To fill a conceptual gap one can ask, *What is the relationship between disability and blackness?* But in addition to attempting an answer to this question, “we” might also delineate the normative conditions in which an answer could be formed and a relation identified. Or put another way, the answer is already there in the inverted form of the question, in the *truth* of the positioning that calls for such a question in the first place. This preempts a greater rendering of either term “able-bodied slave” or “disabled slave,” but it can locate their positioning and the power and problem inherent to their naming.

Disability at Its Margins

Prior to Bell's "introductions" to white disability studies, Ayesha Vernon had remarked on its propensity to silo the subject of race, as well as gender, class, sexuality, and age, away from general theorizations about disability (385). Against this leaning, Vernon addressed the experiences of black women and black disabled people to argue the limitations of exclusionary disability movements and of contemporaneous models of disability. More recently, Jennifer James's contribution to a curated roundtable on "cripistemologies" noted the disappearance of race from the dialogue, asking, "Has 'racialized' knowledge—in my case, blackness—been unconsciously foreclosed as an impossible or undesirable or simply *unthought* way to know?" (qtd. in Johnson and McRuer 156, original emphasis). And against this silencing of race in a collective discussion on crip ways of knowing, James calls for a return to intersectionality and standpoint epistemology for rethinking "thick," "inherently inconsistent and irreconcilable" identities (165). What Vernon and James in disparate times make clear is the necessity of addressing black experiences of disability and how those experiences, when read through the lens of a black feminist tradition, can contribute to and further complicate current understandings of disability. Such moves are not themselves a departure from the aims of disability studies, which include naming and troubling the meaning of disability. Yet, as Vernon and James also show, black stories and black feminist theory are rarely sources for reimagining disability *in its broadest sense*.

This is not to say that scholarship on disabled black subjects and on black thought in disability studies have not been growing. They have, and such writings crucially resituate questions about disability alongside those about blackness—as subject-positions, as normalized categories, as sites of subjection and self-making, as sources for critical theory, and so on.² This aim can also be found in the explicit naming of a black disability studies, as described in a 2015 collection of writings by Jane Dunhamn, Jerome Harris, Shancia Jarrett, Leroy Moore, Akemi Nishida, Margaret Price, Britney Robinson, and Sami Schalk, writings that grew from the meetings and efforts of the National Black Disability Coalition. Collectively these writings argue that black DS demonstrates a *paradigmatic* change to disability thinking, and so caution against a framework of inclusion when situating it within both disability studies and black studies, noting how the work and experiences of black

2. For example, see the edited volume by Bell and the special issue edited by Pickens, as well as works by Mendes, Metzl, Schalk, and Samuels.

people with disabilities are differentially invisibilized within disabled and black communities alike. By introducing a line of inquiry into (as well as a working syllabus on) the “intersections of race and disability from a critical social justice perspective” (para. 41), the writers call for a pedagogy led by disabled black scholars and activists, and which addresses the inherent ableism of racism, the ways in which racism predisposes black people to become disabled, and how black disability can be better appreciated as a source for critical/creative practice and social action. Bringing to the foreground the epistemological stakes of intersectional work, these kinds of scholarship reveal not only the constrained means of naming a new problem for thought but also the ways in which this problem can be articulated or encountered.³ So, clearly, black disability studies reaches for something far beyond filling a prior void in disability frameworks.

The meaning of disability has always been contested and in disability studies is more recently grounded in discussions about the role of embodiment and corporeality following the social model. In opposition to the medical model, which circumscribes disability around physical impairments and their possible treatments, the social model seeks a more political definition calling attention to cultural expectations of normalcy and to institutional barriers to access. Distinguishing disability from impairment, the social model shifts from prior discourses reducing disability to biology, illness, and individual bodies, and instead illustrates how disability becomes an effect of social norms. The model’s abstractions, however, might have gone too far afield from the body as evidenced by growing dissatisfaction with the model in disability studies, a dissatisfaction that is driving a renewed focus on embodiment and a move away from dichotomies made between disability and impairment.⁴ This is in conversation with feminist writings about the body seeking to intervene in false binaries made between sex and gender, or nature and culture. Situated among these other poststructuralist contributions to subject-formation (which is a de-centering of the subject), disability after the social model underlies concerns with ontology, epistemology, history, and ethics.

Each of these theoretical turns—the medical model, the social model, the postsocial model (perhaps?)—can analyze the making of disability in slavery, but black feminist writings have, in contrast, gestured to the *unmaking* of disability as the essence of captivity. The groundbreaking work of English scholar Saidiya Hartman charts in slavery archives the disavowal of captive

3. See Crenshaw and Chandler on intersectionality and the problem of thought, respectively.

4. On these discussions see, for example, works by Shakespeare and Watson, Shildkrat, and Siebers.

claims of pain, the everyday violence of whippings, beatings, plantation work, and auctions shrouded in coerced performances of song, dance, excess enjoyment, and general contentment. Notions of the robust, happy slave, or the slave's predisposition for servility and good cheer, worked to deny slave pain by foreclosing its possibilities of recognition in forced displays of high spirits and joyful complacency. Made to simulate comfort under all manner of work and violence, the slave embodied what Hartman terms the "pleasure of terror" and the "terror of pleasure," or the enjoyment produced in the injurious constitution of the subject (*Scenes of Subjection*).

Fashioned as able participants in their own dissolution, slaves then figured a perfect and forgone surrender to all the wants, desires, and demands of masters. Significantly, Hartman's work shows the slave's closer proximity to objects than to human beings. The slave's seemingly more-than-human abilities, like the sheer capacity for joy and submission, followed precisely from this status of objecthood in which pain simply did not exist, with the capacities and incapacities of the slave body appearing as the richness of conceivable uses to which any commodity or household good could be put. Hence losing any thread of metaphor or figure of speech, objecthood and objectification pointed to black bodies that were not "like" objects, but that came to "be" things in the world. On the trans-Atlantic slave trade, Hartman notes at length the valuation of slaves as commodities:

Gold dust; copper basins; brass bracelets, bars, and pots; colored textiles; linen and Indian cloth; barrel-shaped coral beads; strings of glass beads; red beads fashioned from bones; enamel beads; felt caps; and horsetails—all these determined the worth of slaves and provided the measure of their existence. The Portuguese referred to them as *braços*, arms or units. The Spanish called them *pieza de India*, which roughly translated into an "Indian piece." A *pieza* was a "mercantile unit of human flesh," which often comprised more than one human being. A male slave in the prime of his life was the standard against which other slaves were measured. Slaves possessing limited physical abilities or who were elderly constituted a fraction of a *pieza*. Two boys or a mother and her child might equal one *pieza*. The Dutch called them *leverbaar*, that is, a healthy or deliverable male or female slave. (*Lose Your Mother* 68–69)

As ideal units of flesh, healthy male slaves for the Spanish—as well as healthy female slaves for the Dutch—became devices for quantifying the manifold uses of other slaves, while the "limited physical abilities" of some slaves signaled their depreciated value in the marketplace. Calculating the instrumental value of Africans through the bodies of slaves, or "mercantile units of flesh," staged a proscription of social identities and a severing of social ties, inuring new

slaves to their status as objects in contradistinction to the human subjects who trafficked them. This thingliness, this bar against any sense of the *human* being, allowed for seemingly contradictory interpretations of hyper-ability and inferiority, contradictions held together by their common origin in a captive being who could be *any* thing for the master. The slave was thus paradoxically both more-than-human and less-than-human, bearing infinite possibilities as accumulated, fungible objects—as bodies *more thing than thing*. Moreover, made to correspond or set on an equal plane, slaves and commodities as interchangeable quantities showed how gauging slave value through objects ran the other way around, that is, the appraisal of objective value through slave flesh. Transposed, captive bodies could set the worth and provide the measure of existence of gold dust, copper basins, brass bracelets, colored textiles, and beads. Objecthood redounded on the figure of the slave, who was made to objectify things in addition to human beings.

In this light, what does it mean to say that a slave is disabled or able-bodied? Hartman's interventions suggest that such terms for naming pain and injury become nebulous in a space where the regularity of brutality upends even the recognition of coercion and cruelty when they are done to slaves. So too does the meaning of impairment when it becomes not a quality of a human body but the diminished value and capacity of a commodity. How does one begin to name the suffering of slaves when such meanings were inaccessible to them, this inaccessibility determining precisely who was considered a human subject? The point here is not to say whether some or all slaves were or were not disabled, or even to posit who should fall under the sign of disability writ large. Rather, it is to pursue a decidedly disability studies tradition of highlighting and questioning the normative contexts of naming disability, here reflecting on what the slave is or what the slave does or does not do for theory-making.

In this sense, “disabled slave” is telling of the familiar problem to which Vernon and James refer. Disability can qualify blackness—the slave can become an object for disability critique—but this qualification does not perforce a disruption of meanings and terms. Can we know disability when we see it? More importantly, how is the “we” positioned to do the “seeing” of disability in slavery archives? Locating the intersections of disability and blackness is vital work, but it also implicates an examination of the political space and epistemic landscape from which the relationship between blackness and disability is posed. One of the most crucial contributions of disability studies to theories about the body is precisely an interrogation of the presumed immutability of impairment and disability, and it is in this vein that slavery, both its history and

its afterlife, continues to unfix disability as a recognizable and therefore attributable concept in the archive. If mapping the intersections of blackness and disability demands more than the additive work of inclusionary politics, then one must take seriously the *limits* of seeing and naming disability in subjects who have been at the margins of its theorizations and field-building. And it is here at the horizon of disability thinking, at “the impossible, undesirable, and unthought way to know,” that the work of undoing the whiteness of disability can begin, engendering not only a theory of disability’s relation to blackness but a theory of disability that is *already* a theory of blackness. *That* is what black disability studies, and other scholarship explicitly and implicitly writing to that end, offers.

The Missing Word

Asking after the meaning of “able-bodied slave” is not to calcify the definitions of either “slave” or “(dis)ability,” but to ask after the epistemological significance of such namings, and how these moves dovetail into a theoretical moment wherein disability is, rightly so, increasingly taken up in the humanities and social sciences. Claiming disability in slavery may be a project of redress, of finally bestowing recognition where there once was none. Nevertheless, as Hartman cautions, such restorative readings are not only incomplete (as all interpretations necessarily are), but they also enact their own politics of domination (as all interpretations necessarily do). Given disability’s history in white disability studies, its formation as an analytical category in a field that has historically overlooked black theory and black life (and death), its deployment in describing slave bodies and examining slave histories becomes inevitably heavy with incongruities. What is needed, however, is not the elimination of a disability analytic in the study of slavery, but a contemplation of how slavery produces a meaning of disability.

This is also not to advocate for a more authentic exegesis of archives and other texts as if such a thing is possible or even desirable. Every reading is partial, contingent, and loaded with its own interpretive violence. But neither is it to champion a free play of interpretation, which would reinstate in critical writing the manifold uses of the slave. With archives, the difference or distance between conditions under which materials are produced, collected, organized, and then utilized for theory-building is of profound analytical concern, with each stage in the process constituting a form of interpretation, not least of which is the determination of what counts as evidence or what counts as archive

(Trouillot 31–69). Any history and theory of slavery, including a disability analysis, is situated in interpretations and interpretive chasms between “then” and “now,” and is therefore as much a narrative of present interests as it is an account of past events. Charting the intersections of disability and blackness is inextricable from the politics, practices, and assumptions surrounding all knowledge projects. Whatever the terms “able-bodied slave” and “disabled slave” might or can be, their meanings emerge not only from the past but in the stakes of naming disability in the present moment.

For instance, often given as evidence of disabled slaves, images and accounts of slaves with physical and sensorial impairments invite a ready identification with disability, but the immediateness of that naming should be unpacked or further explored. From obliterated social identities and kinship ties in records of inventory and sale, to master and slave accounts of the customary uses of brute force, it is a wonder that an able-bodied slave may be presumed at all—notwithstanding the invisible disabilities that are elided in this dependence on the visual and openly (or forcibly) disclosed, an acknowledged oversight in disability studies generally and yet another example of silencing in the archives, from which we will never know the extent of hidden traumas slavery had wrought.⁵ And significantly, though conferring a recognition of disabled subjectivity, such readings risk reinscribing the brutalization of their subjects by inviting a gaze in which, to borrow from Cassandra Jackson, the readability of identity and suffering is intertwined with voyeurism, shock value, and sentimentality. This reproduces the disabled body as a body of spectacle,⁶ and similarly misrecognizes the violence of slavery as events or occurrences preserved in the historical record rather than as the very foundations of the master archive. By presenting itself as indisputable proof of disability and impairment, by lending its contents to present regimes of seeing pain and illness, spectacle obscures slavery’s structuring effects on history and cultural memory, giving conceptual and perceptual parameters to the limitless and incomprehensible violence of captivity.⁷

Literary scholar Hortense Spillers calls this problem of naming the “missing word—the interstices—both as that which allows us to speak about and that which enables us to speak at all” (*Interstices* 156). This is, in essence, grammar. To write that missing word in disability studies is to ask about the grammar through which the field speaks its subject, a grammar that Chris Bell

5. See Price on mental disabilities.

6. See Garland-Thomson on the gaze and disability.

7. On violence and visibility see, for example, Wilderson, and Martinot and Sexton.

identified as whiteness and that, *pace* Hartman, is intimately tied to the slave's position of unthought (Hartman and Wilderson 1). But writing that missing word also reaches for a new order of meaning from within slavery's violent erasures or, to Spillers, a speaking "into the void left behind by its absence" (168). One direction I see is in the intersecting points of discursive challenges and opportunities shared between the interstice and crip theory. "Crip," Alison Kafer writes, is a contestatory but expansive term whose aegis is flexible and incomplete precisely because it is rooted in both the exclusionary risks and generative demands of identity politics.⁸ So if the images and documents of slavery archives defy attempts to locate disabled subjects, if they in fact *dislocate* disability rather than remembering it, then working with the interstice implicates how slavery may in fact *crip* disability theory. Crippling disability does not move away from building an understanding of disability in captivity, and it may not even do away with the terms "able-bodied slave" and "disabled slave," both of which can be read as the dual embodiment of a captive being for whom ontological resistance remains in question.⁹ What it does is return to the peripheries of disability to ask from a disability studies framework *what access means for the slave*. Did access allow the slave to better meet the expectations of the master or to remain usable in some capacity? Did it define immediate sources of comfort or relief from work and brutality? Did it enable escape or help maintain a fugitive status? Did it emerge in abolitionist rhetoric and follow from Emancipation? Or, more radically, did it signal the ephemeral nature of resistance and a freedom that has yet to come? Is slavery a disability without the possibility of access, or do the infinite possibilities of accessing the slave body bar it from entry into disabled subjectivity?

And what would this mean, on the level of methodology, for a disability analysis to reach for and engage with a subject/object whose ontological condition is one of terrifyingly absolute accessibility? Does this not demand in a very serious way that *care* be put back in "careful" readings of texts and archival materials? And what would *that* cripistemology look like? Addressing these questions in a substantial manner is altogether beyond the scope of this article, but they do reach for interpretive possibilities apart from identity's trap of visibility.¹⁰ As Spillers shows, the interstice does not readily provide answers (after all, how does one speak grammar?); but it does take seriously an

8. See also McRuer and Hamraie. In fact, McRuer, who first introduced and elaborated on "crip theory," himself recognized the inescapable link between race and disability embedded in the concept, "crip."

9. See Fanon on ontological resistance.

10. I borrow "trap of visibility" from Michel Foucault.

encounter with absence as a mode of mapping the different orders of meaning governing what can be said or seen.

The Race for Disability Theory

Slavery, when rendered spectacular, invites a belief or impression of its bygone conclusion, of an assumption that the US is no longer a slave society though it remains a nation and an idea still plagued by antiblack racism. But if the slave is still with us, if slavery's violence is not dead and gone but resuscitated again and again to haunt (and take) black life, then it behooves us to examine how blackness and disability are lived and understood from within, in Hartman's words, the "afterlife of slavery": "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment" (*Lose Your Mother* 6). Disability theory, too, is coeval with the afterlife of slavery.

Others have termed this afterlife "neoslavery," which emerges from abolitionist critiques of imprisonment. Prison studies, spearheaded by the work of black feminist scholars, have long examined the roots of incarceration in the nation's history of chattel slavery, whose practices of forced servitude and loss of civic personhood have maintained their legal status via, most notably, the same juridical codes terminating the private ownership of people (Davis, "Racialized Punishment" 99; James 127). With the Thirteenth Amendment's caveat on criminal conduct, punishment for minor transgressions ensured mass black captivity in jails and penitentiaries immediately following the formal abolition of slavery (Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*), this introduction of black bodies into previously white spaces of confinement transforming the latter's penal culture of social rehabilitation into one of social death.¹¹ Imprisoned radical intellectuals such as Angela Davis, George Jackson, and Assata Shakur have also examined the structural continuities between slavery and incarceration, this entrenched logic of race-making in the US from slavery to the prison industrial complex yoking blackness to cultural perceptions of abnormality and derelict human-ness, and recreating the slave's alienation from kin and routine subjection to brute force.

It is important to note that many prison scholars emphasize the systemic and distributed nature of imprisonment, whose workings stretch beyond physical

11. For more on the history of US prisons, see Childs, Gilmore, James, and Alexander. See the edited volume by Ben-Moshe, Chapman, and Carey for disability and imprisonment, though here the definition of imprisonment is expanded to include other forms of confinement.

structures of human warehousing to external spaces of policing, surveilling, containing, and limiting black life that Hartman catalogues. Abolishing neoslavery hence entails addressing a continuum of social issues, including but not limited to the demilitarization of schools; universal access to quality health care, education, food, and housing; an extensive overhauling of a traditionally uneven criminal justice system; and the decriminalization of entire groups of people: sex workers, drug users, poor and homeless people, undocumented immigrants, and those with mental, cognitive, or developmental disabilities (Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*). Abolition's necessarily broad objectives speak directly to the structuring logic of captivity in civil society and, moreover, to shared stakes across different political movements. In this regard, prison abolition already contains within it an intersectional disability theory and praxis figuring a relationship between blackness and disability that approaches a notion of access for the neoslave. The extensive scholarship on imprisonment and abolition is deeply pertinent to what political demands disability makes today.

These works illuminate the disabling racial order under which blackness is defined and lived, and which give form and intention to black strategies of resistance, survival, and self-fashioning. Bringing their interventions to bear on theories and objects in disability studies center other(ed) ways of thinking about disability and access, promoting not only a greater awareness of black issues within the disability studies canon, but also locating and further fleshing out the disability theory intrinsic to black thought. Reaching for this theory, or theories, as the current article has attempted, constitutes a move in that direction, but a move that is neither innocent nor sure of its destination quite yet. Still, it remains that a reflexive accounting of where and how intellectual work is positioned in and against white disability studies is pivotal to charting black disability as a subject position and a criptistemology.

Such an accounting also complicates stabilizing notions of disability that have been deployed to suture fundamentally different standpoints between and within groups. For instance, historical, experiential, and ontological specificities are explained (away) through disability very broadly defined as cultural constructions of physical, intellectual, and moral *inferiorities* projected onto the variegated Others of a moneyed, white, cis-male, able-bodied, heterosexual subject (Baynton 17–33; Mitchell and Snyder 851). Forming the source or core pretext for domination, these constructions of disability ostensibly drive marginalizations based on race, class, gender, and sexuality. Put simply, in this view, inferiority, however construed, is always tied to disability, which therefore undergirds many, if not all, forms of social hierarchy. This schema is reversed

in Lennard J. Davis's concept of "dismodernism," wherein the postmodern destabilization of the subject signals a breakdown of identity groups aside from disability. Such groups, Davis insists, "have reached the limits of their own [political] projects" ("End of Identity" 239) and whose logical conclusions lay in "a dismodernist approach to disability as a neoidentity" linking other identities (233). This progressivist rendering of identity is also present in Davis's earlier observation, "Given that people with disabilities compose 15% of the population [...] and that the likelihood that many of the nondisabled today will become the disabled of tomorrow, it is strange that most people are more willing to identify with the struggles of African Americans or gays and lesbians, each of whom comprise a smaller percentage of the population" (*Bending Over Backwards* 36). Taken together, these accounts designate disability as both the beginning and end of identity, forming a causal relationship with other forms of oppression or the culmination of "antiquated models" of subject-formation, in either case being everywhere a marker of bodies and a potential resource for solidarity and theory beyond difference.

Both arguments—that the subjection and futurity of all rest on (the uses of) disability—suggest provocative directions for disability studies theory and praxis. Acquiring a critical disability perspective is undoubtedly indispensable to any liberatory politics. Yet, stretching the conceptual lineaments of disability in this way not only formulates it as a master narrative (founding every oppression and joining all identities), it also brackets out what disability has come to mean within a field whose own prior exclusions give the lie to a universal application of disability frameworks. Operating through similarity or analogy, this disembodied, generalizable idea of disability-as-inferiority finds its coalition of subjects within a "majority" minority that can only emerge through the break down and consolidation of difference: Inclusion is an occupying force. Such moves ingrain rather than remedy the erasure of difference that Bell had identified in white disability studies, offering a uniform and exhaustive definition of disability that overlooks and precludes intellectual projects not seeking theory and solidarity through sameness, including the field of disability studies itself.

Implicated in this conflation of differences is, among other things, an unwillingness to see or acknowledge the disability thinking internal to black thought, or an assumption that disability formalized elsewhere can be imputed into a race critique without undergoing much change. This inverts Bell's objections in disability studies and establishes a false system of equivalence in which the whiteness of the field is made to correspond to the able-bodiedness of black scholarship. To be sure, black theory and black

spaces can be ableist—black disability studies has argued as much, though I doubt it is concerned with saving white disability studies from itself either. Still, the premise that black thought cannot at all or by itself *authorize* a theory of disability and able-bodiedness (with disability positioned as a kind of corrective), deserves interrogation. *Is “disability” missing or lacking from black studies, or does this invisibility require a different structure of looking?*

Black feminist literature scholar Barbara Christian has criticized the “academic hegemony” of discrediting and devaluing black writers and black works, calling its steadfast rush toward newer, ever more innovative theoretical developments a “race for theory” (68–69). In this dogged, ableist pursuit for novel ideas and texts, black studies and black feminist theory remain embattled projects, construed as falling behind or even anathema to cutting-edge theory- and field-building. Identifying the relationship between blackness and disability requires a reflexive questioning of the ways the expansion and evolution of disability thinking have dovetailed into this race for theory within the afterlife of slavery. If disability thinking seems absent from black studies, if in this intellectual space disability and impairment are difficult to see, then it may have more to do with the racial optics of white disability studies than it does the able-bodiedness of black thought. Under what conditions is black scholarship called upon to make itself knowable to white disability studies? Where does the burden of legibility lie?¹²

The “disabled slave” and “able-bodied slave” interpellate blackness within these tensions, sitting somewhere between affirmation and displacement. Advocating either for their elimination or continued usage is hence beside the point. Pace Christian, this article has instead attempted to name their conditions of articulation, as well as to prod at their gaps in meaning, *those interstices*, that threaten (or promise?) their undoing. Disability theory can come from black thought; it is already there, though it entails crippling present disability frameworks to bring it into greater relief. Still lacking the grammar with which to sketch out this theory, the current article has settled on performing or enacting it ahead of itself—(crip) epistemology over big-“T” (crip) theory until the “hieroglyphs” and “written figures” of black thought can

12. Initial engagement with the field of disability studies frequently entails learning about medical and scientific accounts of disability. This is the medical model that the social model rightly interrogates. But what has always struck me is how disability studies can readily concede a disability framework in medicine and the sciences, *however problematic that framework is*, before it can do so in black studies. Whereas disability is taken to be already present as a discourse in the sciences that should be critiqued and reclaimed, its ascribed absence in black studies means its presence in the latter must first be qualified (read: its presence must be *argued*).

be read as a new language of disability. For Christian, the precarious of working without such languages while simultaneously working towards them defines the core of critique: “a tuned sensitivity to that which is alive and therefore cannot be known until it is known” (22).

Disability thinking is immanent to black studies. Elaborating it is central to naming the relationship between blackness and disability, but a naming that is not additive to a larger project of disability theory—black studies and black feminist theory cannot be reduced to epistemological accomplices in the broader field of disability studies. A location for disability (un)thinking, a place or positioning where disability, impairment, and access can be rethought, blackness has always been, as Christian maintained, a race *for* theory.

Conclusion

The “able-bodied slave” remains an elusive concept, but a more thorough explication does not guarantee a greater rendering of the intersections of blackness and disability. It does, however, generate questions about existing frameworks enabling certain kinds of naming while constraining others. The terms “disabled slave” and “able-bodied slave” both surface in a time of disability thinking wherein race is garnering more and more focus following the unmasking of white disability studies. Bell’s essay continues to foster inquiry into the ways disabled black subjects can be theorized through a disability studies lens, and how black studies is and is not marshaled for these ends.

Black feminist writings suggest that the naming of disability in blackness is fraught and contradictory, running up against neo/slavery’s negation of black pain, identity’s problematic reliance on spectacle, and the continued devaluation of black scholarship in academic spaces (and none of these formations are separable). The article has not provided a definitive way out of it, returning to black feminist theory only in order to map its contours. But situated within these limits of thinking and seeing disability, blackness proffers something other than a rearticulation of existing frameworks, instead locating a point before which disability begins and after which it ends, reimagining a subject position for which disability has arrived both too early and too late.

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looks to re-evaluate the reputation of the author who has been the subject of extensive retrospective pathologizing.

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