

3-25-2016

# Selling the American Body: The Construction of American Identity Through the Slave Trade

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Selling the American Body:  
The Construction of American Identity Through the Slave Trade

by

Max W. Plumpton

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirement for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of Communication  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

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Date of Approval:  
March 23, 2016

Keywords: Frontier Myth, Freakery, Performance, Embodiment

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## Abstract

In this thesis I argue that the early conceptualization of American identity was achieved through the dehumanization of blacks at slave auctions, and that the subjugation of this group informed more areas of the collective, normalized, American identity than just race. I contend that blacks were deprived of qualities that are considered inherently human (and American) and reduced to the facts of their bodies. To do this, I analyze newspaper advertisements for slave auctions, abolitionist editorials, and postings for runaway slaves. I also look at primary accounts of slave auctions that speak to the performative nature of the setting. I analyze the former set of texts to see how black bodies, in the context of their sale at auction, are discursively constructed in print media. In regard to the latter set of texts I discuss how slaves auctions mimicked theatrical settings, and how this staging and spectacularization of black bodies influenced the creation of a collective national identity. I argue that the emphasis on the slave's body in newspapers and the spectacle of it on the auction block function to dehumanize blacks in such a significant manner that they become distinct from their free, white counterparts in ways that go beyond racial difference. This thesis expands on scholarship that considers the influence the institution of slavery had the normalizing of whiteness in America by positing that characteristics fundamental to American identity, such as individualism and creativity, were also established through the dehumanization of the blacks.

## Chapter One Introduction: American Bodies

In the summer of 1835 two entrepreneurial promoters purchased an elderly black slave from an owner in Kentucky. Blind, toothless, and wheelchair bound this slave, Joice Heth, was different from the majority of bodies that passed across stages in slave markets. The only thing that made Heth noteworthy, aside from her extraordinarily aged appearance, was her claim that she was George Washington's nursemaid (McMillan, 2012). While the two men who originally bought Heth failed to capitalize on this narrative, well-known showman P.T. Barnum turned Heth into oddity that commanded that attention of gawking audiences throughout the northeastern United States by claiming that she was 161-years-old. A combination of somatic deviance and fantastic narrative enabled Barnum to sell Heth simultaneously as a nostalgic manifestation of national history and a grotesque reminder of the audience's temporal ablebodiness.

As Uri McMillan (2012) argues, Heth's fraudulently billed age and connection to an infantile George Washington allowed her spectators to collectively participate in a type of romanticized national memory-making. While creating this shared sense of history, Rosemarie Garland Thomson (1997) also argues that Heth helped spectators visually conceptualize what it looked like to be an American by juxtaposing themselves against her. "This black, disabled woman commodified as a freakish amusement testifies to America's need to ratify a dominant, normative identity by ritually displaying in public those perceived as the embodiment of what collective America took itself *not* to be" (p. 59). These performance and disability studies critiques -- of staging and narrating Heth's body and social location as a black (former) slave --

also open the site of slave auctions to further critiques in terms of the ways that America began to form a collective national identity. While current critiques of slavery already account for the influence racialized Othering had on establishing whiteness as part of the criteria for social affirmation, this thesis proposes that slave bodies helped to establish American national identity in multifaceted ways.

The primary goal of this thesis is to establish the wholeness of dehumanization that blacks were subjected to within the institution of slavery, and how such dehumanization created an Other against which the American citizen could define himself/herself. That is, the demarcation between slaves and citizens was founded on more than racial difference. Among the many contradictions slavery presented to American values, slaves were responsible for the physical labor that expanded the country. However, this was a trait which was embedded in the concept of what it meant to be an American. My central argument here is that, in order to rationalize this inconsistency, blacks were stripped of their individuality along with other characteristics considered quintessentially American and ultimately reduced to the facts of their bodies. I established this reduction interrogating how black bodies were presented at slave auctions. First, I analyze several auction advertisements, abolitionist editorials, and postings for runaway to see the body (or conscience) was narrated. I then go on to discuss the performative nature of slave auctions and the relevance of theories regarding freak shows. These theories explicate the influence the spectacularization of bodies had on the creation of collective imagination and national identity.

Scenes at slave markets created a public forum in which whites could participate in cultural performances that not only distinguished them from their African American counterparts but also dictated the formation of identity politics in the United States over the following two

centuries. This thesis project uses disability and performance theory, along with new historical accounts, to read slave markets as a site where moral valuations of race and ability were first cemented into the American consciousness. Jason Stupp writes of the auction spectatorship that, “The otherwise poor, non-propertied whites valued this affirmation of their racial superiority” (2011, 65). But they also valued privilege of that perceived superiority which allowed them to not be reduced to solely corporeal components. Equally as important as physical ability in the formative stages of the country, Americans also (were expected to) exhibit individualistic ambition, creative awareness, and spiritual identification – all of which were systematically denied to those kept in bondage. While this denial of consciousness is often read as a method to elicit subordination (and it certainly was), I argue that, like the audiences who viewed *Heth*, white Americans used the theater of the auction place to instruct themselves how to be American.

These visual enforcement practices that reaffirm “the able-bodied, white, male figure upon which the developing notion of the American normate was predicated” (Garland Thomson, 1997, p. 59) are disconcertingly still present in modern arenas of racialized hyperembodiment. Thomas P. Oates (2007) points to the NFL draft and the combine as the first steps in a career-long commodification of mostly black bodies by its viewership. In that separation between actor and viewer we are informed both of what it means to be exceptional and what it means to be average. These players become more than athletes; they constitute a physical ideal; with bodies so distinct from the mainstream they are viewed as sensationalized products worthy of commodification. “In addition to these rather straightforward attempts to commodify the mostly black bodies of prospects, the draft further domesticates blacks by positioning them as objects of the desiring gaze” (Oates, 2007, p. 79). While this type of objectification of male, mostly black

athletic is indeed dehumanizing, it is not without elements of appreciation and admiration. They represent the possibility of perfection – close enough to imagine while still being so outstanding that we can rationalize our flaws. They are who we envy but not necessarily who we strive to be.

The viewing practices that take place in the months surrounding the draft and combine – the “intense period of inspection” and “strange ritual” (Oates, 2007, p. 74) – are reminiscent of another type of event commonplace in the early formation of this country. Walter Johnson (1999) discusses the scenes taking place at 19<sup>th</sup> century slave auctions in an almost parallel manner to those of the draft. The description of slaves at auction emphasized their physical capabilities to perform duties as if they were tools for their prospective buyers to use. However, in this objectification, an admiration similar to that present in the theatrics surrounding the draft also developed. Slaves were stripped naked for better viewing, poked and prodded for a tactile assessment of their strength, and measured to showcase physical superiority. Dehumanizing as these practices were, they are also an indication of Oates’ “desiring gaze.” They were an acknowledgement of a physical ability necessary to expand the new nations borders. This affirmation, though, was and is still a way of bolstering white superiority, “by asserting the cultural power to look, judge, and admire” (Oates, 2007, p. 82). The power embedded in these looking practices is indicative of how white Americans were able to admit and admire the physical aptitude of African Americans while still maintaining assumptions about race which placed them more advantageously on the hierarchy.

I contend that normality is a category that developed as a result of works proposed mainly by a eugenicist statistician in the early- to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. In Lennard Davis’ (2013) historical account of the subject, when mathematic principles were applied to human sociality, standard deviation dictated that falling within the average range of



measurable characteristics was considered preferable. This viewpoint, of course, establishes exceptionality as a category external to a normative social group. Davis asserts that, from a perspective of governmental control, this category of people was used as an example, which the homogenous middle should strive towards. While many scholars have tackled the unattainable nature of the ideal body, and the adverse affects these standards can have on people, possibly more insidious is the implicit third category spectacles like this create. Not only does an expansive normative population need an ideal to work towards, it also needs a damaged, imperfect subject to move away from. In regards to the ability/disability dynamic this become particularly unsettling. As much as we look on in awe of extraordinary ability, fear of becoming disabled forces us to cling to our status as corporeally *normal*. “We Other those with physical and mental disabilities in order to shore up our own very temporal sense of able-bodiness” (Cindy Lacom, 2011, p. 161). Conceptualizing both ends on the spectrum creates a sense of security in normality in knowing our ability elevates us above the other.

The work on freakery within disability studies scholarship connects these two ends of the spectrum to each other as ultimately undesirable categories. As it is mobilized in contemporary society the outcast status of the extraordinary is concealed behind a veil of money and fame, as is the case with professional athletes. But the institution of slavery demonstrated the requirement to control and devalue these types of bodies.

The Ancient Greek notion that transcendence between human and Gods is in some sense achievable shifted over a long period of time to one where normality and typicality become optimal, presenting a provocative historical puzzle. Some disability studies scholars, such as Rosemarie Garland Thomson, Sharon Snyder, and David Mitchell, address this question in relation to early American history. As the country was in its formative stages after the

Revolutionary War, the concept of expanding the national frontier was as important as the more common narratives about democracy. The Transcendentalist writings of authors such as Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson garnered mass appeal as they championed rugged survivalists, living minimally and building their land with their own strong, capable hands. Most disability theorists cite these accounts of the hard-working American as the root of disability stigma in the New World. However, these scholars also typically start their interpretation of history, as it relates to disability, around the 1830s during the rise of the Industrial Revolution. This thesis suggests that by looking further back in American history to a time when the charge for territorial expansion was precipitated by the forced labor of African Americans, we might be better able to locate the contexts in which the white, able-bodied national identity was constructed.

While disability studies has largely ignored this period of time and only discussed slavery in passing, historians are now working to reconceptualize how the institution of slavery played a major role in the rapid ascension of the American economy (Baptist, 2014). Slavery has always played a significant role in American history. However, it is usually portrayed as an antiquated institution that the morals and progress in America no longer had room for. Scholars such as Edward Baptist and Seth Rockman (2009) have begun to dispel this historical simplification. The conversation about slavery is beginning to move to an understanding that slavery was the cornerstone of American economic success and played a major role in the capitalist evolution of the country.

In addition to the influence it had on the coming conditions of a more industrialized country, slavery also played a large role in developing and sustaining the much-romanticized myth of the frontier. This American ethos that Emerson and Thoreau wrote about started long

before American cities began to sprout melancholic factory buildings forcing citizens fantasize about a nostalgic, puritanical past of which they were never a part. This myth was present at the formation of the country and has continued throughout its history.

In forming a cohesive identity any assemblage needs a story or concept purpose greater than the individuals within it. The creation of myths allows people to strive towards destiny, which makes their daily toils worthwhile. For Americans, this mythic belief was reiterated in the form of the humble frontiersman who allowed them to remain attached to their puritanical roots and rationalize their severance from Britain as part of a larger noble cause (Dorsey, 2013). In discussing how Theodore Roosevelt would later utilize this parable, Leroy Dorsey writes, “Myths can represent foundational narratives that frame a culture’s identity... The Frontier Myth simplified the complexity of nation building by offering otherworldly edicts” (pp. 430-431). By believing that the country was founded to satisfy a predestined future it allowed citizens to persevere through the daily difficulties they faced. However, it is important to note the majority of the population was not out on the Western frontier, yet the Frontier Myth was widespread. The myth became a justification for myriad elements of American life – one of which was slavery.

Another myth came with specific criteria for how the nation’s citizenry should act and appear. In 1893, in a presentation to the American Historical Society, Frederick Jackson Turner stated that the fundamental characteristics of Americans included, “That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical inventive turn of mind ... that that masterful grasp of material things ... that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil.... These are the traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier” (as quoted in Dorsey, 2013, p. 432). The spirit of the frontiersman was composed

of both physicality and individualistic, creative thought. Again, though, we must acknowledge that those adopting this myth remained, for the most part, in the already-established regions of the country. The rugged individualistic attitude is what they internalized as the underlying feature of American culture while using the enslaved black bodies at the farthest reaches of the country as a representation of their physical strength.

The growth of the country was not achieved merely by humble farmers but rather by the shackled hands of the slaves they owned. This project, though, is not solely another revision of American history which posits that the new country's expansion was achieved only by marshaling enslaved bodies as a mechanized force. Nor is it a project that focuses on how disability functioned in early American bondage. It is both of these, but more than that: This is a reading of slavery, black bodies, and the way they were made into spectacle, which uses disability theory to suggest that the archetypal American body and philosophy was constructed, partly, in reference to slavery as it fits within or outside of the Frontier Myth.

One of the areas where disability studies and critical race theory seamlessly intersect is the understanding that national identity is formulated within the boundaries distinguished by visible difference. This thesis seeks to put these two areas of research into conversation with each other. Disability studies scholars maintain the creation of normative body – and subsequently the creation of the disabled body – worked in service of American capitalism. This project attempts to account for the ways in which new histories of slavery inform the historical construction of disability, and how an amalgamation of the two served to define the American body by establishing what it was not. Slave auctions are historical sites that clearly exemplify this connection. The slave trade in America commodified human bodies which, in a literal sense, attached value to certain bodies and devalued others. In the chapters to come I seek to answer the

question of how ability was constituted and elaborated through slave markets in the antebellum period, and how this consequently contributed to the marginalization of nonstandard bodies. As Dea H. Boster (2013) observes, sellers and buyers at slave markets developed a vocabulary by which they could identify the slaves that were most likely to provide a satisfactory return on the money invested in them. I look at newspaper advertisements for slave auctions, abolitionist editorials, and runaway slave postings between 1793 and 1860. First I analyze the advertisements to see what kind of language was used to describe favorable slaves and entice buyers to attend auctions. Second, I consider how the emphasis of abolitionist writings imply slavery reduced African Americans to the facts of their bodies. Third I look at how the highlighting of disfigurement in postings for runaways slaves reveals whites perceptions of black bodies out of bondage as freakish and dangerous.

The way blacks were narrated in newspapers and on the auction block is significant beyond the historical picture it paints. Language has material consequences and the power to mobilize actual bodies in society. When newspapers printed ads that labeled slaves as “prime” or “likely” they functioned as more than simple descriptions. The language whites used to distinguish themselves from blacks created reductive discursive realities. Further, those who read these papers were invited to confirm their own white American identity through the construction of a subjugated black body. “Such identifications are rhetorical,” writes Maurice Charland (1987, p. 133), “for they are discursive effects that induce human cooperation.” Americans were continually looking for examples of what it meant to be American and what it meant not to be. When these discourses that reduced blacks mere embodiment were written or spoken, they were internalized and made material by the white audiences receiving them.

Slave auctions were performative events where bodies were displayed, handled, and

narrated in order to persuade slavers to spend the most money. The implications of these performances, however, extend outside the physical scene of the auction and contribute to how race relations and corporeal standardization developed in the United States. Kirk W. Fuoss (1999) discusses the performative nature of lynchings in the Jim Crow era. So, too, was the case for slave markets; from advertisement to audience, auctions had many of the elements associated with theater. Auctioneers even held rehearsals with slaves so they could better perform when it came time to get on stage (Johnson, 1999; Boster, 2014). Moreover, Fuoss describes the performance complex – or the chain of performative acts that occur before, during, and after an event – and how it allows participants to justify, internalize, and naturalize race-based violence. He specifically talks about these collective performances as being community-building moment for the whites who took part in them. Those who participated in, witnessed, or even simply read about these violent spectacles became linked to one another along racial lines through the performative complex of lynching. Extending this theory to the site of slave auctions, and the institution of slavery generally (i.e. the performances that surround auctions), the pageantry of the marketplace shaped the concept of what the American body and identity would become. Walter Johnson (1999) writes that, “slaves’ bodies were shaped to their slavery” (p. 20) and with them the white public shaped themselves in answer to it. The language used at auctions and the language used to describe these scenes in other public forums became instructive for both whites and blacks in crafting a social identity.

The spectacle of the marketplace became even more prominent after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. With the country’s newly acquired land and access to waterways that increased shipping opportunities, the demand for able bodies in this territory was greater than it ever had been before. As a result the government offered monetary credits to businesspersons

willing to go settle and farm the new land. However, with the expectation of increased productivity the type of slaves needed to work the land became more specific. So, African Americans of a certain age and build were marched down from Maryland and Virginia with chains around their necks, hands, and ankles. Paraded through the country, their situation could only be seen as miserable and entirely unenviable (Baptist, 2014). However, once they reached the town squares and tavern halls they became objects of extreme worth. Slaves were coerced into presenting themselves as prime physical specimens worthy of both viewing and, more importantly, buying. “Their growth tracked against their value; outside the market as well as inside it” (Johnson, 1999, p. 20).

Rosemarie Garland Thomson (1997) introduces the concept of freakery through the traveling freak shows that took place in early America. Worth noting first about her work is the way in which she uses the word “extraordinary.” It signifies anyone whose body does not fit within normative standards of American society. While she most frequently uses examples of disability she explicitly notes that those with hyper-ability were seen as freakishly as those with disabilities and deformities. The function of freak shows was to remind the audience of what they were not, of the comforts and privileges of normalcy. Garland Thomson highlights the contradiction of the freak shows and how audiences were both fascinated and disgusted by the spectacles presented to them. Garland Thomson’s concept of freakery illuminates how ultimately undesirable bodies are instantly transformed into bodies of great worth in slave auctions. The contradictions presented in this practice were necessary for free, white Americans to develop a kind of national identity that has become married to merits of capitalism while still remaining couched in the romance of the frontier.

It is worth noting again that with the rise in prices paid for able-bodied slave hands the

worth of less abled bodies or disabled bodies decreased. Through the work done at the slave auctions, a stigma began to form around nonstandard bodies in America from a monetary perspective. Dea Boster (2013) discusses the politics of representation at slave auctions, how disabled slave bodies were narrated by auctioneers in a way that downplayed or revalued their disabling qualities. Indeed, “sellers had to acknowledge the agency of slaves in market encounters and required some participation on the part of the slaves (to perform, tell preplanned stories, or hide ailments from prospective buyers)” (p. 7).

The precarious and coerced cooperation between slaves and traders directly reflects the performative nature of these events and the internalization of roles among race identification and able-bodiness. Further examples of this acknowledgement of acting at auctions appear in Johnson (1999) as he discusses how plantation owners, in order to entice more honest performances, violently punished slaves who did not fulfill the promise of ability and skill they displayed at the time of sale. Baptiste (2014), too, describes how female slaves were instructed to perform overtly sexualized roles in the marketplace. Auction place performances became generalizable representations of how slaves were expected to act at all times. Through the repetition of these acts on the auction block and the subsequent corporeal enforcement of them, black personhood was reduced to physical ability.

Michel Foucault’s discussion of torture and discipline appropriately addresses the rationale behind such actions. “The body of the condemned man the place where the vengeance of the sovereign was applied,” he writes, “the anchoring point for a manifestation of power, an opportunity of affirming the dissymmetry of forces” (1977, p. 55). Bodies were marked, disabled and made less worthy. Part of ability in the contradiction that was the institution slavery also required docility. This lack individualism and agency that was characteristic of the American



ethos was unilaterally denied to those in bondage. Literacy, spirituality, creativity, and any other sort of agency were withheld from African Americans and beaten out of those who tried to attain them. Kept as marker of status and privilege for whites, this domineering denial also exposes the fallacy extreme ablebodiness as a guiding attribute of American personae. Instead, by placing African Americans' worth solely in their bodies, one end of the spectrum on which national identity was constructed and informed the dominant population of what they need not be.

It is through this creation of ability and the control of laboring bodies that factory owners and shipping dock foremen learned how to best exploit the people they hired. Seth Rockman (2009) lays out the influence that practices in slave labor had on the organizing of workers during the Industrial Revolution. Not only did slavery directly affect wage laborers as a result of slaves being hired out by their owners to do these jobs at a lesser price, but the standards for ability carried over as well. As workers came to outnumber the jobs they sought to fill, those selecting the lucky few who would be hired employed the same metric used to judge slaves at auction. If you were not as able as the others with whom you were in competition, you would be left outside the factory without money to survive. And while physical discipline was practiced with less intensity on wage laborers, the same basic methods of control were used. As laborers were constantly in competition with one another they felt alienated from one another. The expectation to produce more than your fellow workers overshadowed the unjust conditions to which they were subjected. And so, the dehumanization that created a well-oiled machine that extended the frontier remained in the industrialized cities it left behind.

The connection between the practices in slavery and those used during the Industrial Revolution link disability scholars to the historians focusing on an earlier time period. Disability theory may or may not change with this revision to its history, it is still well worth investigation.

As Sari Altschuler stresses, “Scholars must historicize disability. Such work will do much more than complicate prior thinking—it will show how historically contingent the representation and treatment of disabled bodies has been in US culture” (2014, p. 268). The path traveled by the construction of disability as social category over American history is always dictated by the events that came before it. To understand how ability and disability functioned during the Industrial Revolution we must first look at how they were negotiated in earlier contexts.

In the chapters that follow I am primarily concerned with establishing how the devaluing of blacks through that slave trade functioned as ways creating an American identity and allowed for a romanticization of the Frontier Myth. Different from other scholars who have addressed this topic, I argue that, while race was the initial point of demarcation in the social hierarchy, the dehumanization of blacks associated with slavery was completed in the discursive erasure of personality and subjugation to physicality. In chapter two, I use auction advertisements, abolitionist editorials, and runaway slave postings to exemplify this reduction to the body. And in chapter three, I employ performance theory and freakery to establish how slaves were made into spectacle and became completely unrelatable to white audiences. Freakery allows for a reading of the slave trade that specifically addresses its influence on the formation of a national identity. In doing this, I also extend disability theory to sites of analysis that are not traditionally associated with the field of disability study. While the field would be wise to maintain its dedication to the lived experiences of people with disabilities, expanding the application of disability theory in the way I suggest may combat a troubling trend in disability studies to offer recognition to aggrieved subjects through mere victimization. Claims that situate disability as the underlying cause of all human disqualification allow us to read disability everywhere. Proposing such a claim, however, essentializes disability and undermines the work to establish it as a

constructed category. So perhaps we should extend our theory to other sites of analysis where it might be useful, rather than reinforcing the use of disability as metaphor for all social marginalization. I agree with both Altschuler and Boster's attempts to create a more complete picture of disability, even when it challenges the marginalization narrative expressed across much of the field. It is also important to interrogate ablebodiedness and hyperability in a more substantial way. Boster's reiteration of the social model of disability implicitly communicates this need: "Disability arises not from the disabling conditions themselves but from the complicated web of personal experiences, cultural assumptions, attitudes, discourses, and reactions to those conditions" (p. 8). Indeed, the focal point of our field is but a single part in a dynamic constellation of sociality, each aspect of which requires equal and nuanced interrogation.

## Chapter Two: Prime Bodies

On April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1792 the *New York Daily Gazette* ran an advertisement for a piece of property that would be sold at public auction on the 5<sup>th</sup> of May. The printing included a description of the land located in Dutchess County: 1,866 acres, three-quarters of a mile from the Hudson River, well timbered, with a good road into town. Also mentioned in the account was a brief comment, placed casually within a list of several other features, that the land was “fit for slaves.” Without further explanation the observation hangs there; an implicit instruction for where slave bodies in early American society should be located. The land described in the advertisement, despite its location near the East coast, is a depiction of the frontier style living that was so heavily romanticized in literature of the time. It is not the rugged individualist who maintains and cultivates this mythic setting, however, but rather the human chattel dragged in whichever direction their owner’s fantasy took them.

There were myriad ways in which the nation came to understand the social and somatic position of black bodies in the Early American and Antebellum eras. This chapter focuses on how print media influenced collective American imagination by narrating the bodies of those kept in bondage. Advertisements for slave auctions framed black bodies as machine-like objects whose ability to address the needs of plantation and frontier lifestyle ultimately created the conditions for them to be considered “valuable.” However, the always-present intentional contradiction in these billings for auctions was the slavers’ stipulation of obedience in the slaves they bought. While Americans idealized individualistic attitudes of the transcendental frontiersman, these same qualities were considered detrimental when seen in prospective slaves.

This line of thinking was even medicalized by pro-slavery doctors and scientists as discussions of abolition became more common. They argued, “African Americans, because of their inherent physical and mental weaknesses were prone to become disabled under the conditions of freedom and equality” (Baynton, 2013, p. 20). The scientists making these claims sought to discredit the abolitionist objections of inhumane treatment and debilitating working conditions in slavery by claiming blacks were naturally suited to the hard labor and corporeal control of slavery. And yet the very qualities that are highlighted as attributes in the advertisements examined here are brought into question by this very logic. The descriptions of physical capability in auction billings were also a silent acknowledgement that slaves’ bodies were more suited to the conditions of the frontier lifestyle that permeated the American imagination at that time. The assertion by pro-slavery scientists that African Americans would be unable to function in free society then becomes an inconsistency that white society needed to deal with. The reduction of African Americans to solely embodied state is method of dehumanization in service of supremacist attitudes that allowed whites to resolve their discomfort of black ability.

The layers of racially charged inconsistency between American beliefs, the selling of slaves, and justifications for that institution are manifold and intricately woven together, and to parse them out would require a more in depth discussion of the process by which attitudes are internalized than takes place here. The goal of this chapter, is to identify moments in public discourse where slave bodies were framed as optimal physical specimens while simultaneously being disqualified from the American society that values this conceptualization of body. By degrading black personhood to a singularly somatic level, Americans could rationalize the qualification of whiteness for citizenship. However, this focus on the body also functions to exclude African Americans from the Frontier Myth as it is an erasure of the nonphysical

elements tied to the myth, and consequentially to American identity.

*'Every good quality necessary to constitute a good slave'*

“Imported STUD HORSE,” read a subtitle for a public auctions billing in the *Charleston City Gazette* (1800). The horse’s name was Royal Slave and the even the sparse language in the short ad paints him as thoroughbred with the potential of returning his potential buyers bid and much more. The obvious and disconcerting connection between the horse’s name and the parallel between its description and those for human beings sold in vain becomes a representative metaphor for the zoomorphism that became commonplace as rows of shackled slaves were driven down southwestern roads as though they were cattle. The treatment of slaves as though they cattle and animals was one of the most regularly practiced methods of dehumanization in slavery. This direct association between animal and slave is indicative of the ways that slavers viewed their human chattel. However, I also start with this billing because its aesthetic similarities to the rest of the advertisements analyzed here become representative of my central thesis. In literature the horse often symbolizes majesty and freedom and is certainly as much a staple of the American frontier as those two qualities. The racehorse, however, is associated with control, training, and profit. So, too, is this true of how of how the ability of slaves was turned into social limitation.

The advertisements for slave auctions discussed here were written during the Early American period, 1787-1809, and were taken primarily from the *Charleston City Gazette*. In total, I examined 36 different postings looking for descriptions of the physical attribute of the slaves being sold. Some of the ads were repeated in the days leading up to the event; I cite the original postings in these situations.

Early on in this time period the length of description in billings was often more sparse.

This is likely attributable to the nature of the slave trade at this time. The Louisiana Purchase would not occur for another 15 years and most slaves were slated to work already established plantations and farms along the eastern coast. Similar to cities in the northeast, having slaves of prime laboring age was less of a concern at this time as immediate expansion was slowed by French control of the Midwest tributaries. This time also saw slaves bought in larger groups, as legislation prohibiting the importation slaves would not occur for nearly another twenty years.

The value of slaves was still primarily located within their corporeal capabilities. The most commonly used language in these advertisements was “a likely negro fellow” and “prime field slave,” both referring to the potential for physical labor. There is often more specific language used for slaves who were skilled in a particular trade or deemed fit for in house servitude. House servants were often either young women or older men. The former were often described in terms of attractiveness and descriptions of the latter focus on previous tasks they performed on plantations. However, overwhelmingly, these ads were focused on the selling of slaves meant for fieldwork. When these people were described these was a clear emphasis on strength and size. One billing from *The Charleston Morning Post* (1787) described a slave as “very strong able NEGRO FELLOW” who “can make a tight cask as well and expeditiously as any of his color in the city.” Another post from the *Charleston City Gazette* in the same year read of slave named London that he was “5 feet 5 inches, thirty years of age, dark complexion, well limb’d.” The first post specifically notes strength and ability while the latter emphasizes the average height of period (Engerman and Gallman, 2000), the preferred working age (Baptiste, 2014), and very specifically that London was “well limb’d.” This excerpt shows a clear focus on established slaves as possessing supremely able bodies.

In the years following, slave ads became more descriptive because of various

developments in the slave trade and the expansion of the country's borders. With the Louisiana Purchase the United States gained access to the waterways that would allow them to produce items for international trade further inland. Additionally, one of the major barriers preventing the country from expanding westward was now gone, and the government encouraged businessmen and farmers alike to cultivate the new land as quickly as possible. This meant the new generation of slavers placed the utmost importance on purchasing slaves who were able to work immediately. In addition to this, the 1807 Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves limited the amount of slaves available for purchase. From this point on, the majority of slaves sold to Southwestern buyers came from slavers in the Northeast who had been raising the children of slaves from previous generations for years. This reduced influx of slaves combined with the expectation that those born into slavery would be better suited to the lifestyle raised costs to around \$800 for an ideal fieldworker. Therefore, the advertising of slaves at this time had to address the concerns of top-paying buyers. Also around this time another element was added and emphasized in these postings. With the increased discussion about abolition, more frequent slave revolts, and safe havens for runaways in the North becoming relatively more accessible, adverts for slaves began to discuss their character.

During this time phrases such as "very honest," "no run away" and "sold for no fault" of their own began to appear in almost every advertisement that analyzed. These instances are where we start to see a divergence from the romanticized concept of frontier life. The "rugged individualism" that Theodore Roosevelt would tout a century later only extended to slave bodies as far as physical capabilities were concerned. This implicit claim indeed supported pro-slavery scientists who claimed African descendants were not fit for the complications of freedom (Baynton, 2013), which in turn allowed supposedly abolitionist Northern politicians to



rationalize their continued ambivalence towards the institution of slavery (Baptiste, 2014).

The development of the country also affected the way Americans might have internalized the Frontier Myth. Most of the citizens in a country on the verge of industrial revolution did not, in fact, want to renounce their possessions and set out for the wild unknown. However, the way the frontier was imagined became representative metaphor for the capitalist values that already rooted in the fabric of the nation and poised to evolve in the coming decades. Taking the “individualism” aspect away from slaves allowed the myth of the frontier to stay in tact while the practice of such a lifestyle was left to those restricted to a lower level of sociality.

The value of slaves, as compared to what was valued by Americans generally, was always situated in their physicality. For white, American-born citizens it was just the opposite; resolve and determination were the substance for the American way of life, but the foundation of the frontier in reality was placed solely in the body – bodies that American populace did not want. And so, in practice and in print, these bonded bodies were stripped of the moralistic qualities their labor was said to bring about. They were made to share commas with the cattle being sold next to them on the auction block: “A SMALL STOCK of CATTLE and PROVISIONS; and upwards of FORTY NEGRO SLAVES” (*Charleston City Gazette*, 1797); “one Cow and female Slave” (*Alexandria Advertiser*, 1802). With each step further into the life of a slave the more they were made to internalize their dehumanization and were separated from the world around them, marking the borderline of citizenship. The more their strength and persistence in work were rewarded; the more individualism and moral resolve were punished. Replaced by docility and obedience until they possessed “every good quality necessary to constitute a good slave” (*Charleston City Gazette*, 1804).

Interestingly, as slavery produced disquiet in New England, abolitionists sought to

address traders' somatic essentializing of black persons by turning the discussion of human bondage toward morality and religion. The moral and religious characteristics which were ultimately denied to slaves in how their worth was described at the auction block and subsequently in the daily degradation to come was now of central concern.

*'An enlightened age and christian nation'*

With freed slaves and absolved runaways becoming somewhat more common in the North, abolitionists used their stories as a rhetorical tool to convince and invigorate a broader public to rally around their cause. And so the genre of the slave narrative was born. One of the most common themes in these narratives was embracing of Christian religion, and attributing their freedom to their faith God. Aside from the discomfiting and unnoted parallels between the servitude of their past life and current religion, this acceptance and promotion of Christian values offered freed slaves a level of respectability and credibility that their experiences alone did not. This is because the abolitionist argument against slavery was heavily rooted in religious discourse.

In the previous section of this chapter I demonstrated how the discourse of auction advertisements dehumanized blacks by reducing them to the facts of their bodies. I move my discussion here from auction advertisements to abolitionist editorials. Fewer and often far between, I have collected eight texts, spanning from 1817-1854, that are examples of how abolitionists sought to counteract the simplification of black personhood displayed in print media.

With its clause protecting the freedom of religion, the First Amendment of the US Constitution directly addressed the limitations imposed by the British government. Christianity was fundamental to the ideological formation of the new nation – a religion divorced

from King and Country in service solely of God. This central principle worked decades later to rebut the economic benefits of slavery. “How little does it become the Americans *to cast the first stone,*” an editorial in the *Albany Advertiser* (1817) reads, “until they have purged themselves of a sin, which cries to heaven for vengeance upon its guilty authors.” Reframing the debate about slavery as an ultimately moral one (with the consequence of Divine retribution) discredited the pragmatics of slavery, but more importantly departed from the corporeal reckoning within which slaves were almost exclusively located. Fearing the sense of self that religion might provide their perceived property, in addition to the empowerment literacy might offer, most masters denied their slaves the opportunity to practice religion. Further, as religion has often been viewed as a communal practice, the prospect of slaves organizing together was also of great concern. Denying them the ability to read and practice religion was essential to keeping their labor both atomized and distinct from White society.

When abolitionists extended this spiritual, nonphysical interpretation of those being kept in captivity and forced to work under extreme duress, it urged White Americans, or at least ambivalent Northerners, to reconsider the conditions of slavery within the ethical framework of their own lives. A letter sent into the *Hampden Federalist* (1819) reiterates one writer’s experience of watching a slave family being sold at a public auction in New Orleans. The father and husband was the first to be sold, then his wife to a different owner, next their two children, both to separate buyers as well. Reflecting on the scene, he writes, “This you see husband and wife, parents and children, torn from each other, and every ligament of their social and domestic happiness sundered and destroyed forever by this remnant of barbarism and cruelty, which still lingers in the Christian world.” And another piece of imagery from the previously discussed article in the *Albany Advertiser* tells of:

a family of free Negroes of this description (husband, wife and three children) [who] were kidnapped by two BLOODY THIEVES from Georgia. All that is pretended to be known of ‘honest Tom,’ as he called, is, that he once lived under the brow of the yonder Blue Ridge, enjoying with his family the sweets of LIBERTY, innocent and happy, and that his cottage is now deserted and desolate.

Both excerpts reveal the devastation to families – highly valued by Christians – caused by slavery. The second quote especially presents evocative imagery. Beyond the family, the author includes sketches a picture of a “cottage...under the brow of the Blue Ridge” mountain which he immediately connects to the “sweets of LIBERTY,” innocence, and happiness. There are a variety of ways to read this passage, but it seems to lament the way that the moral terrain of the frontier was denied to slaves, and, in fact, the immoralities of slavery that were preventing this lifestyle. We simultaneously see how this institution kept black people on the frontier but out of the romantic vision of the myth, and how abolitionist rhetoric uses that same myth as an appeal to Americans.

As we see the frontier myth evoked in these writings, it is important to note the other moral framework at play in these editorials and letters – the Constitutional ethics set up less than a half-century previous. The authors of these writings make adopt the rhetoric of “inalienable rights” and the understood truth that “all men are created equal.” These sentiments were internalized as the canons of an American identity that necessitated a bloody revolution and promised a fruitful future.

Such, Americans, is the treatment of individuals belonging to 1,500,000 human beings in this boasted ‘land of liberty,’ this nicknamed ‘asylum for the oppressed.’ One third part of the population of [Virginia], are hunted and persecuted like beasts of prey, while the other two thirds are singing hozannas to liberty, equality, and the rights of man. (*Albany Advertiser*, 1817)

By invoking these pillars of American morality, abolitionists created a discursive context that emphasized the institution of slavery and the treatment of those confined within as a threat to the

way of life the nation's citizens valued so highly. Going further, the editorials also framed apathy as complicity. "By our neglect & indifference, by not raising a general and united cry of execration against this heaven daring crime of our southern brethren, we have become partakers of their guilt" (*Christian Messenger*, 1818). With the claim that slavery shakes the foundation on which the country was built, to not actively fight against it was to be guilty of endangering the very possibility freedom.

The turn towards moralism also allowed for an exposure of the degrading ways slaves were talked about and treated: as animals. By pointing out the relatable human elements of those cast into slavery for no other reason than their skin color, the discourse, manipulation, and pageantry that presented enslaved bodies as animalistic became more readily recognizable.

These auctions, for the sale of negroes, are held almost every day in the week, in some public part of the city, and are viewed by the people of this country, with pretty much the same kind of feelings as a New England farmer would witness the sale of his horses and cattle. I rejoice...that I was not born and educated in a country of this sort, to imbibe such absurd and monstrous principles. (*Hampden Federalist*, 1819)

Abolition, to be sure, was not necessarily equivalent to anti-racism. Most Northerners were still indisposed to an integrated society and, while they found the condition of slavery abhorrent, the response to most free black persons was still very hostile. The motivation of abolitionists was tied their religious beliefs or their commitment to Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. However, they too were invested in maintaining their own social superiority. Garland Thomson's work on "benevolent maternalism" holds that the philanthropic acts of White benefactors were often served to elevate their own social position (1997). Some abolitionists, we might infer, deployed their moral argument as a strategy for raising their own religious or sociopolitical status. Dea Boster observes that, "on the Northern abolitionist lecture circuit, the disfigured and disabled bodies of African American slaves were spectacular texts,

and antislavery activists invited their audiences to ‘read’ those bodies in a way not dissimilar to the way slaves’ bodies were read at slave markets in the South” (2013, pp. 1-2). These contradictions must be noted and, when appropriate, deconstructed in more depth than they are here. However, to be aware of the motival structures or personal opinions of authors and groups does not mean we should discount the public discourses available to us (Dorsey, 2007). If nothing else, the abolitionist texts analyzed here illuminate the differences between proslavery and antislavery rhetorical strategies. They also allow us to see the division between the hyperability expected of slaves at the edge of the physical frontier and the romanticized sentiment embedded in myth told of the frontier. The abolitionist texts establish the importance of nonphysical characteristics imagined as part of the Frontier Myth and how these qualities were also implicit qualifications for citizenship. How the denial of these qualities forced blacks into a state of hyperembodiment is the main argument of this chapter, and these abolitionists’ recognition of these characteristics importance in American life implies that such a denial intentional and functioned to further white supremacist attitudes.

*‘Stout made, very black, appears to walk as though he was lame’*

It is worthwhile here to revisit the case of Joice Heth, the elderly black woman featured in P.T. Barnum’s traveling sideshow. Barnum claimed Heth was 161 years-old, which was later disproven, but her blindness, lack of teeth, inability to walk or hardly move made the former slave a spectacle for patrons to behold. “Joice Heth is direct antithesis of the abled-bodied, white, male figure upon which the developing notion of the American normate was predicated” (Garland Thomson, 1997, p. 59). Garland Thomson also points out that it is not simply her disabilities and deformities that qualify her as a freak, but rather that these were understood as manifestations of her “social devaluation” (p. 59). In my consideration of runaway slave adverts

I focus on how black bodies are described once they are outside the confines of slavery. As opposed to the postings attempting to sell slave, the ones attempting recapture them mark and highlight any and every physical deformity.

The documents examined here come from a database that collected runaway slave postings specifically from North Carolina. As opposed to the temporal boundaries I set in searching for the other two forms of media, I centered this one key terms related to disability. However, the majority of the relevant clippings occurred between 1810 and 1850, coinciding well with the parameters set above.

Slave traders and buyers alike were concerned with presenting bodies in ways that emphasized heightened physical ability but obedient enough so as not to disrupt affairs of the plantation. For those who took part in the slave market through the auction block, securing sturdy, reliable parts of a larger machine required valuing conformity and efficiency equally. Runaways, on the other hand, were already divergent menaces of plantation life; the broken parts who endangered the whole machine. And, in an effort to locate them before they could cause any more damage, they were singled out and described by their brokenness. Along with general descriptions of their body, clothing, and possible motive or location, language such as “lame,” “deformed,” “stutter,” “burn,” and “broken” were also regularly used as a means of identification for the runaway slaves.

The switch here to making slaves’ bodies discernable from one another in the instance of escape should not be read simply as pragmatic identification. Identification it is indeed, but there is also a social aspect to these markings. Black persons away from the plantation, away from the frontier, and attempting to fold themselves into the White social order had to be dually stigmatized. The use of disability as method of social disqualification plays out in these

newspapers postings and “the shared social marginality of these groups arises from the view of the ‘deviant’ body as that which automatically disqualifies individuals from cultural participation” (Snyder and Mitchell, 2006, p. 112). It was not enough to separate them by skin color alone, another uncomfortable characteristic had to be added on. As with Joice Heth, it is the intersection of these spectacular differences that informs the dominant society of their social devaluation.

Moreover, if we apply the theories of enfreakment to this this process of identification, slaver’s application of disability to these bodies also helps to create the image of the dangerous escaped slave. I will discuss enfreakment in more detail in my next chapter, for now it will suffice to say that this is a process of social imprisonment by spectacularizing the non-normative body. As with the quote that leads this section from the *North Carolina General Advertiser* (1812), Jack’s (the name of the runaway) “stout made, and very black” body immediately mark him as Other in the White world. However, his “lameness” adds another element to his social and physical deviance. While the physical limitations of his disability may be miniscule it is, to a certain extent, spectacularized by its inclusion in the advertisement. Physical difference and disability is often spectacularized even in the smallest of instances, because for the abled-bodied, “Disabled people functioned...as an assurance to ‘normal’ people that their own situation was better than that of many” (Snyder and Mitchell, 2006, p. 43). We are happy to amplify the deviations in disabled bodies, turning them into freaks, grotesques and monstrous abominations because it gives us an Other point at and say “this is what we are not.” Presenting a challenge to the security of the idealized body, we bind them on stages and in asylums just as the racialized Other was bound in iron chains and sent to the edge of the frontier. For this dually stigmatized Other to exist anywhere else would be too dangerous. Just as the end of the posting for the



recapturing of Jack says, “I forwarn all persons from harboring or carrying off said fellow at their peril.”

In this chapter I have analyzed how the discourse in print media functioned as one of the tools by used to deprive blacks of their personhood. The advertisements for slave auctions offer a vocabulary by which black bodies could be commoditized. This commodification placed the value of slaves in their physical capabilities. Additionally, the only reference to character in these billings valued docility, which I posit should be read rather as lack of character and individuality. Such a discourse reduces slaves to metaphorical tools being wielded by white Americans and became representative of the physical labor that was valued in the nations imagination but was not practiced by its citizens. I discuss how the focus on spirituality and individuality in the abolitionist editorials emphasizes the importance of these traits which were systematically denied to blacks. This emphasis highlights the affects of reducing blacks to the facts of their bodies, both for the slaves as well as whites who were creating a collective identity in opposition to them. I close this chapter by discussing how escaped slaves were narrated in runaway slave postings. Once slaves escaped they could no longer be considered docile. And the billings in newspapers responded these acts of self-preservation by further dehumanizing these escapees. Runaway postings marked runaways by the disability and/or disfigurement, creating a monstrous, uncontrollable threat to white American society. All of these analyses support the my argument that the claim by whites that blacks were racial inferior to justify the contradictions slavery presented to the American value system could only be achieved by denying blacks consciousness and reducing them to the facts of their bodies. In the next chapter I expound on these concepts of enfreakment while putting them into conversation with Kirk Fuoss’ performative change to examine how the site of the auction provided concrete examples of

hyperembodiment while simultaneously securing the romanticized myth of the frontier for the White American populace.

### Chapter Three: Spectacular Bodies

In *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*, Harriet Beecher Stowe (2000/1856)

describes the swamplands that thousands of escaped or freed slaves called home during the Antebellum period as monstrous and wild. She writes “In those desolate regions which he made his habitation, it is said that trees often, from the singularly unnatural and wildly stimulating properties of the slimy depths from which they spring, assume a goblin growth, entirely different from their normal habit” (p. 496). Stowe’s depiction of the Great Dismal Swamp is, of course, metaphor for the way her titular character, Dred, is perceived. An escaped slave with a seemingly “preternatural” spiritual connection and a revolutionary disposition, Dred is as uncontrollable as the environment in which he dwells. In a period of history when the land was seen as an obstacle to overcome, the swamp challenged these ideas. And so it became something to fear; a dark and dangerous place where “All sorts of vegetable monsters stretch their weird, fantastic forms among its shadows” (p. 496). Those characters invested in maintaining the institution of slavery see Dred in the same way; a threat to the Southern way of life and a freakish manifestation of their fears.

While Stowe’s writing of Dred allowed readers to perceive certain supernatural qualities in him, he was certainly not the picture of what is considered to be a *freak*. Yet, the connection between Dred and the swamp demonstrates how the dominant national body can turn the presumably natural into the disconcertingly freakish. Dred’s unbound black body becomes representative of an otherness that challenges antebellum white America’s perceptions of dominance and thus provokes its perpetual reassertion. His rendering by white characters in the

book is similar to the zoomorphism discussed in the previous chapter but done in a more spectacular manner. The dehumanization required to assert white supremacy occurs more subtly in performances of slave auctions and the scenes surrounding slavery more generally. This chapter considers the work that has already been done in performance studies to situate slave auctions as performative events, and takes these interpretations as an opportunity to reread accounts of the marketplace through a lens of freakery. Reading slave auctions through theories of enfreakment allows for a reading that demonstrates how the slave trade influenced the construction American identity beyond race.

### *Slave Auctions as Performance*

The language of performance permeates contemporary scholarship on slavery and seems almost unavoidable for descriptions and analysis of auctions. Even in writings outside the field of performance, scholars use theatrical terminology. From Johnson (1999) titling a chapter “Acts of Sale,” to Boster’s (2013) observation that traders “made slaves seem healthier” and “emphasized the appearance of happiness” (p. 87), to Baptiste’s (2014) comment that “the crowd sought a particular kind of compliance and entertainment,” (p. 99) we see the full variety of insights gleaned by applying the vocabulary of performance to slave auctions. These analytical choices establish a tradition of understanding these events as spectacles.

Slave auctions were spaces where whites could unite themselves around the subjectification of African Americans in a communal ritual (Fuoss, 1999) and establish a collective memory of what it meant to be American (McMillan, 2011). Jason Stupps (2011) suggests that the intertwining of various groups in each setting is clarified by understanding the human marketplace as a theater. The slaves on stage are of course the focal point, but the auctioneers and buyers are also crucial players in these performances of power dynamics.

Readings of slave auctions that utilize performance theory also account for the presence of audiences, an important component in reading this spectacle as theater, and further proof of how these beliefs were spread and internalized even after spectators left the physical site. In this section I argue that these performative readings of the auction place also open up an interpretation that allows for an application of “freakery” to analyze these scenes.

In this assemblage of actors and audience we can also see the elements of the spectacles that form around freak shows. What the disability studies concept of “enfreakment” gives us that performance studies, perhaps, does not, is a critique that specifically interrogates how the sensationalized staging of bodies instructs the public of what they should look like by offering examples of they should not be (Garland Thomson, 1997). The addition of this theoretical perspective enriches performance studies’s work on slavery. The line of thought I trace throughout this chapter relies on confluence of performance and enfreakment that capitalizes on the way in which performance opens both intentionality and audience to critical interpretation.

The images that we have come to associate with the institution of slavery were embedded in the daily performances that both constituted perceptions of slavery and its lived experiences. Through the enactment of routine practices in chattel slavery, both slave and slaver came to internalize their social position and the consequences of it. Kirk W. Fuoss (1999) discusses how each stage in the ritual of Jim Crow era lynchings functioned as a rehearsal for the next aspect of the ceremony, and how these rehearsals extended beyond the individual lynchings to the embodiment of the racial hierarchy at that time. This “performance chaining function” (p. 26) evokes slavery’s dehumanizing scenery. From the shackled groups of black men and women being marched southward to market, to the stagings and forced performances at on the auction block, to the discipline and managing of plantation slaves, each act served as preparation for

next. The transporting of slaves as though they were cattle permitted a marketplace narrative framing them as productive objects, which in turn influenced both how slaves were put into competition with one another and punished if they were deemed unproductive. Moreover, white witnesses took on participatory roles that, while embodied differently from slaves and slavers, were fully experiential. The scenery of dehumanization staged performances of difference that distinguished slaves from whites in a shocking display; they could not be ignored, and were discussed or recreated in more subtly ways.

Even among abolitionists, these strange scenes became normal ways of understanding the racial dynamic of the country. Jason Stupp (2011) highlights Henry Ward Beecher's faux slave auctions as a strange reiteration of the practice where his church followers would play buyers, paying for a slave's freedom. A chosen slave (or freed black person if the actual slave was not physically present), often light-skinned, would stand on stage. Ward Beecher played the auctioneer, and his parishioners the buyers and audience members as they reenacted these scenes that they claimed to deplore. "In a system of chattel slavery, whites, even so-called abolitionists, wielded power over and could manipulate human beings commonly viewed as 'property'" (Stupp, 2011, p. 76). The performances seen at slaves markets were represented the sentiments that fostered false assumptions about racial difference in early America. The forced performances by blacks at auctions were all the more instructive to spectators of their perceived superiority. They implicitly communicated the power of sellers and buyers by showing slaves' coerced cooperation in the act in order to hopefully find the best possible situation, of which none were good. Even a generous and naïve reading of Ward Beecher's auctions as a well-intentioned faux pas would still have to confront its feigned benevolence. Stupp briefly alludes to the self-serving nature of these acts, but Rosemarie Garland Thomson attends to it in more detail.

In her work on “benevolent maternalism,” Garland Thomson explicates how the seemingly charitable acts of rich, white matrons for their poor, black (and sometimes disabled) house servants are actually narcissistic exploits intended to advance their own social standing. Similarly, then, these staged auctions allow white participants to feel a sense of moral superiority while simultaneously reinforcing racial attitudes and providing relatively little challenge to the wider institution of slavery.

The performative nature of actual slave auctions was almost as evident as the reproductions of them. The market place itself was performative in nature. Whether it was a crowded barroom that used the countertops as stages, a corner in New Orleans where the casual trafficking of humans occurred daily, or the more established open air markets in South Carolina the aesthetic of auction places was a reproduction of the theater. As with any theater, there were stages, actors, audience members, and even spaces in which to rehearse.

In the days leading up to auction, slaves were kept in pens or jails as they awaited their turn on the block. Throughout this time traders would escort potential buyers through the rows of slaves allowing them to inspect and interrogate their prospective products. As much as this was a moment for buyers to gain information about slaves, the opposite was just as true. Though the realities of their bondage still surrounded them, the pens were places where slaves could gather information and attempt to set themselves up with the best possible master. And because the traders had to keep the slaves in good appearance for sale, they were afforded a little more agency than in most other circumstances. “People forced to perform their own commodification” (Johnson, 1999, p. 164) used these rehearsals to entice buyers who might be more kind and have less strenuous work. As Walter Johnson points out, buyers were aware of this fact too and were playing their roles as much as the slaves they sought to buy. This, of course, was not a moment

of understanding or synthesis, but rather an unstated agreement that these two parties could best inform each other. Given that the word of slave traders was less than trustworthy, buyers had to rely on the slaves they hoped to purchase to provide an accurate account of their history, abilities, and temperament. In order to do this, they had to give some version of the same in return and convince the slave they wanted to buy that they were worthy of the slave's best performance. This site of somewhat private performance also marks part of the preliminary stages that Fuoss notes in "performance chaining function." It was a site of rehearsal for slave, trader, and buyer. The roles of "good slave" and "good master" were being established for the coming auction, and consequently what it meant not to be. All of this information was useful to the slaves in the pen, but the involuntary nature of these performances cannot be overlooked. To some degree, slaves had a role in shaping their own sale, however, this was often done through performances of submission and still reflected the racial beliefs of their sellers and would-be buyers. Even in their minimal opportunities for subversion, African Americans were still trapped within the theater of the auction.

Whatever leniency slaves found in the pens before auction was lost as they entered crowded rooms or public squares to be sold. As is expected at an auction, the traders served as narrators for the bodies they paraded across the stage; they highlights height, physique, abilities, and docility as they described their "product." In addition to these descriptions, slaves were also stripped of their clothing and forced to pose in certain positions for better viewing (Baptiste, 2014). But traders still relied on slaves to a certain extent to sell themselves on stage. As in the pens prior to the auction blacks being sold attempted to play the part that would attract the most favorable and humane masters or jobs. This performance, however, was somewhat of tightrope walk. Slaves wanted to downplay their physicality and ability enough so that they



would not be sold to a plantation owner that demanded dangerously strenuous work. However, if they did this so much so that they were not sold, the trader would likely beat them. At the same time, if a slave oversold his abilities and skills at auction and was later discovered by her/his new owner as not being able to perform certain tasks, they would be punished in the future for these performances (Johnson, 1999). This promise of punishment for the slightest deviation in presentation forced those being sold to figuratively contort themselves on stage, simultaneously living up to the auctioneer's narration of their bodies while also preemptively tempering the expectations of their would-be masters. Blacks were all too aware of their social objectification and that to those who bought them they were but investments that had to produce or be punished. Confined to playing this precarious role, slaves were subject to the same reduction that was present in the advertisements for their sale. The denial of agency to seek comfort, manage one's body, and resist subjectification are the conditions that create an erasure of the immaterial aspects that were valued so highly in the Frontier Myth. Dorsey reminds us that "American identity revolved around a combination of physical strength [and] moral character" (2013, p. 4), and the removal of one of these traits prevented African Americans from taking part in that identity. As blacks were intimidated into performing a reductive version of themselves, they were also rehearsing for the exclusionary embodiment that the country's expanding frontier necessitated and cherished in mythic form, but whose citizens were not willing to enact.

The violently enforced boundary setting, rehearsed pageantry, and blatant dehumanizing of black bodies as they came across the auction block were by no means an unintentional occurrences in the slave market. These processes were deliberate, purposeful, and ritualistic. The repetition of roles at the market place fostered individual and collective internalization of American ideology and all of the subsequent values embedded within it. Each iteration of the

auction performance further normalized the spectacular scenery. This allowed whites to rationalize the concept of slavery in a country that mounted a revolution little more than a half-century prior in the name of liberty. This was “The fundamental paradox of a nation that uses language first to articulate a universal human longing for freedom, and then to subjugate, enslave, and sell fellow humans... The illogic of racial categorization required repeated performances of racial subjugation” (Stupp, 2011, p. 66). In affirming their superiority, whites exercised their agency and intellect as evidence of their fitness to rule, but this could only be established against the passive slave body. These scripts of domination could not rely solely racial distinction. Pro-slavery medical writings attempted to justify slavery by claiming that blacks were genetically suited to hard labor, a fact which underwrote the discourse of dehumanization. As W. H. Russell reporting for the *Harper's Weekly* writes of his experience at a slave auction in Montgomery, Alabama, “There was no sophistry which could convince me that the man was not a man—he was, indeed, by no means my brother, but assuredly he was a fellow creature” (as cited in Stupp, 2011, p. 65). But a nascent nation needed to establish black slaves as ultimately different from free whites – they needed a “body [that] itself acted as the imperceptible demarcation” between the two groups (McMillan, 2012, p. 35). The simple selling of bodies was not enough. Slaves had to be as spectacular beings, and the form and aesthetic of the auction place allowed for this.

#### *The Slave Auction as a Site of Enfreakment*

At the intersection of performance readings of slavery and theories of enfreakment lies the assumption that viewing the slave auction was an active process. Maurice Charland (1987) points out that audiences themselves are rhetorical effects. Audiences inform speakers and writers of the most effective way to frame a message. This is done through identification. How a

people collectively identify themselves dictates which messages are most likely to be internalized. Early American audiences were susceptible to ideological discourses regarding what it meant to be American. Slave auctions offered an answer to this question in their dehumanization blacks, and the white audiences helped to shape it.

The participatory staring that spectators at auctions engaged in was equally as important as the rehearsals and stagings that warranted it. As white spectators at slave auctions looked on with interest at the staged black bodies and potential buyers admired the variety of physical attributes presented to them, they responded to a need to distance themselves from the *people* who attracted their stares. Garland Thomson (2009) discusses how staring can be used as a mechanism to communicate dominance and it informs both starrer and staree of her/his social location. It is in this exchange of looking that we come to understand who we are and who we are not. On an interpersonal level these looks affect how we manage our bodies and present ourselves; on a larger level they organize us into the social groups, which form cultural hierarchies. The white audiences that watched African Americans paraded across platforms in public squares and countertops in bars were simultaneously informing slaves of their purpose in society while also enacting their own identity as Americans. Garland Thomson also points out how these stares can turn the *normal* aspects of corporeality into extraordinary features. “The more commonalities we share,” she writes, “the more salient minor differences seem. This patterning of allegiances and exclusions is the root of nationalism” (p. 46). The slave market served white Americans as more than simply a location of commerce; it was also the theater in which they turned racialized others into spectacles more easily distinguishable from themselves; this is the process of enfreakment.

“What Is It?” read an advertisement for an exhibit at P.T. Barnum’s Museum (as cited in

Garland Thompson, 1997). The poster depicted William Henry Johnson, a black man with microcephaly. The rendering of the hunched-over man with a misshapen head is poorly defined, reminiscent of the shadowy crouching figure used as a stock image in auction billings. The fine print of the poster asks its prospective audience if Johnson is “a lower order of MAN ! Or a higher order of monkey !” and noted that he was “AS PLAYFUL AS A KITTEN.” The descriptions of Johnson, while more extravagantly stated, functionally do the same work as descriptions of slaves in newspaper billings or at auctions. The question of whether Johnson is man or animal, and the implication that he neither, is similar to the reduction that slaves experience when they were sold – more valuable than an animal, but less valuable than a human. The reassurance that Johnson was harmless can also be read as akin to the promises of docility and obedience that traders made to assuage buyer’s fears of escape and noncompliance. What is of value in this comparison is the location of both slaves and freaks in a liminal space; they were not a part of social life in the same way white, normate citizens were, but their visible difference had to be acknowledged and confronted. And so, they were enfreaked and enslaved.

Enfreakment, according to Garland Thomson, “emerges from cultural rituals that stylize, silence, differentiate, and distance the persons whose bodies... the showmen colonize and commercialize” (1996b, p. 10). With a simple change in terminology this definition, again, establishes a link between the way physically non-normative bodies and black bodies were managed, displayed, and commodified in the US. Disability theorists have discussed how blacks were devalued through racialized scientific claims. Many of the justifications for slavery revolved around the notion that slaves were biologically suited to the conditions of slavery (Baynton, 2013). Scientists claimed that the nature of Africans was one that necessitated physical labor and control. These studies went on to suggest that free blacks were significantly more likely

to suffer from mental illnesses because they could not handle the intellectual stress that was necessary to participate in a democratic society. Obviously there is no truth to these claims and the science behind them was either fabricated or unfounded. What this does tell us is that the same pseudo- scientific methods used to dehumanize so-called freaks were also used as social disqualification for blacks. It is also worth noting that descriptions of freaks were racialized. The narrators emphasized tropes racial difference such as the African “brute,” turned culturally specific body modification into a spectacle, or fetishized nonwestern female bodies. The discourses of disqualification between the two sites were often similar and, from here, the notion that slaves and freaks were presented in similar fashions becomes less of a stretch.

Garland Thomson (1996b) outlines the narrative criteria for freak shows: lectures on the origin of the freak, newspaper advertisements, rehearsal and performance for an audience, and visual depictions of the attraction. This is the same process that took place in slave trade. When a slave went up for sale it was initially posted in the newspapers, often with specific details about the slaves body. They were then taken to holding cells and instructed by traders how to present themselves on stage before actually going out and enacting these performances. During this staging, traders would narrate the slaves history, obedience, and physical capabilities to the audience. Even the final criterion of visual depiction holds, albeit in a less notable way. Renderings of slave auctions were printed in papers and specific drawings of slave were created for advertisement if the slaves were deemed exceptionally valuable (this was usually only done for young women being sold). This overlap in the performative process links the two sites to each other through the rhetorical effect they were meant to have. Freak shows and slave auctions were places of commerce, spectacle, and dehumanization. And in both spaces white audiences stared at the staged body in either entertainment or horror, but in both cases they understood

themselves as different from the creatures they saw on stage.

Freak shows and slave auctions were aesthetically different. One was meant to be a place of commerce and trade while the other was for entertainment and indulgence.

However, both elicit the same effect from the audiences who attended these events. The freaks show is recognized as a place that equally causes disgust and wonderment. “The spectator was at once shaken by the limitless possibilities unleashed by the freaks anarchic body,” writes Garland Thomson (1997, p. 66), “and mollified by having his own seeming ordinariness verified.” There was a certain uncomfortable pleasure that came from the inhuman scenes at freak shows because the extraordinary bodies they presented in spectacular ways. This was also true of slave auctions despite the assumption that they were simple places of commerce. Returning in greater detail to W. H. Russell’s description of an Alabama slave auction, he writes

I confess the sight caused a strange thrill through my heart. I tried in vain to make myself familiar with the fact that I could, for the sum of \$975, become as absolutely the owner of that mass of blood, bones, sinew, flesh, and brains as of the horse which stood by my side. (as cited in Stupp, 2011, p. 65)

His breaking down of the slave’s body parts is akin to the disembodied scientific language with which freaks were often described (Bogdan, 1996). Russell comparison of the slave with a horse, which was a common discursive practice when describing slaves, is analogous to the zoomorphism that permeated narratives of freaks. Finally, his pseudo- sympathetic identification with the slave as a “fellow-creature” is little more than the self-affirmation patrons of freak shows received because they viewed the bodies presented to them as a lower form of social life (Garland Thomson, 1997). Proprietors of freaks shows, as Elizabeth Grosz (1996) contends, had a tendency to turn the natural unnatural. Most of the freakish phenomena displayed in P.T. Barnum’s American Museum could be explained by genetic diagnoses that are now considered relatively common. Others were the result of

intentional bodily distortion for the purpose of commodification (or, as was stated earlier, the result of cultural customs). Some of the attractions at freak shows were narratively fabricated entirely. Whatever the cause of the person's condition, their enfreakment was strategic and political. Just like Stowe's Dred, non-normative bodies were discursively tuned into freakish commodities as a means of devaluing and othering them. The function of this was to give audiences a visual of what they were not and who they could feel superior to. Freaks functioned as a border by which able-bodied Americans in their unremarkable ordinariness could identify with one another. I argue that slaves performed the same function for white Americans, and the auction place was their American Museum.

*Freakery, Slavery, and National Identity*

What freakery opens up in the discussion of the slave trade that other readings perhaps do not is a dedicated discussion about the politics of establishing a national identity. Studies of slavery mark it as the early stages of what has become systematized racism and white supremacy in American. What I argue here, though, is that the dehumanization of blacks and the institution of slavery on the whole were even more influential in establishing what Garland Thomson (1997) calls, the normate. The normate – unlike the normal – is a comprehensive socially constructed image of the American body. In early American society, this still forming image was synonymous with citizenship. The observation that slaves were reduced to a form of hyperembodiment and pathologized is indicative of how they were used in multifaceted ways to coalesce the national imagination. Reading slave auctions – the site where these reductions were manifested – through a lens of freakery shows how slaves were othered for this purpose along more than just racial lines.

The performances of freaks were understood as undesirable. Despite the audience's

fascination with feats of strength or inexplicable abilities, these were not admirable traits.

Though they relied on skill and muscle, qualities that fit into the American imagination of the self, they served as a boundary for what the average person did not have to do. This is true of the efforts of slaves as well. The expectation for them to function exceptionally out on the Western frontier of the country was a confirmation of what white Americans did not have to do. While the purity of labor and solitude that Ralpho Waldo Emerson championed was romanticized, it was not desirable for most Americans. Forcing slave to do this work “designates a docile body upon which nationalist tensions can be arbitrated” (LaCom, 2011, p. 161). The communicative work done at slave auctions to mark blacks as less than human, but relatable enough for whites to see the potential of their own physicality allowed the myth of the frontier to remain intact. It is in this making of the black body as undesirably spectacular that the attraction of normalcy was allowed to permeate through the American imagination and create a national identity.

The people featured at freak shows, Garland Thomson (1997) notes, functioned to remind the American public of their normalized position in society. So, too, is this true of slaves on the auction block. The dehumanization achieved traders narration of slaves, reminded white spectators of the wholeness of their lives. This wholeness replete with all the characteristic embedded in the Frontier Myth allowed them to feel more a part of American society. This reaffirmation of the myth, in turn, supports itself and the practice of slavery to maintain it. “These mythic stories naturalize the contradictions of a community’s practices, explaining the inequities and abuses by the community as part of the ‘natural’ or inevitable flow of history” (Dorsey, 2013, p. 5). Again, it is important to emphasize that the continual dehumanization of African Americans is what allowed for this preservation of the myth and whites ability to locate themselves within it. Reading slave auctions through the lens of freakery displays just how



substantial this subjectification was and how the compounding features of otherness influenced the imagination of American identity.

#### **Chapter Four: Conclusion: Bodies of Work**

The formation of early American identity influenced the collective concept that has, in many ways, lasted throughout the country's history. In the aftermath of the Revolutionary War and the nation's defining documents, such as the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights, the new republic was constantly in the process of constructing the ethos of the nation and what it meant to be an American. The institution of slavery played an important role as any in the formative stages of American society. Many historians have noted how the relatively rapid growth of the country would not have been possible without the millions of Africans forced into bondage and mobilized as mechanism of frontier expansion. Despite the increasingly frequent cries for abolition, the new nation saw that "Slavery's expansion...yielded a more unified government and stronger economy" (Baptiste, 2014, p. 11). In addition to the political and monetary benefits slavery brought to white Northerners and Southerners alike, it was also a tool for establishing the boundaries by which citizenship would be defined. Along with the millions kidnapped Africans, slave ships brought with them the racial prejudices that had become engrained in European life long before the colonization of America. The continual scenes of degradation which constituted life in slavery were constant reminders to whites that they occupied a more envious position in the social hierarchy, and this disparity was drawn along racial lines. The overarching argument of this thesis is that the criteria for what it meant to be an American was constituted through the bodies of slaves in manifold ways. The process of dehumanizing African Americans began with race but continued past the skin and extended throughout the body. Blacks were denied a sense of self and consciousness which rendered them

simply as bodies for whites to use both for the expansion of the frontier and as an example what the American citizenry should construct itself against.

As the borders of the country continued to spread westward, notions of purity, independence, and determination dominated the American imagination. The frontier was romanticized as a place devoid of the degradations of city life where Christian ideals could be practiced unimpeded. The myth of the frontier and the rugged individualism it symbolized became characteristic of American identity. The Frontier Myth was fundamental in creating a centralized conception of nationhood. However, the pragmatics of actually moving to and cultivating the far reaches of the country's territory was less feasible or desirable to whites who already had established lives along the eastern seaboard. And so, black men and women were sent south and west to do the work whites required but were not willing to perform.

In a letter printed in the *Christian Messenger*, one abolitionist writes of the slave trade, "What a disgraceful inconsistency between principle and practice do we exhibit" (1818). This thesis has primarily concerned itself with how Americans rationalized this inconsistency between holding the frontier life in reverence and treating those who lived it as inferior. By looking at the different practices in slavery which located the worth of African Americans solely in their bodies, I have shown how whites used slave auctions to deny blacks access to their place in the Frontier myth despite their physical location on the frontier. Advertisements for auctions reduced slaves to bodies of utility; a set of individual parts valued solely for their ability to labor and devoid of human characteristics. This process of dehumanization was strengthened through the performance of slave auctions where blacks were made into spectacular commodities as they were forced by traders to present themselves to white onlookers. As slaves were put on the auction block and forced to sell themselves, any relatable human qualities were diminished in the

eyes of their audience. Through these methods of dehumanization white Americans were able to maintain their position in Frontier Myth and establish a collective identity around it.

The advertisements printed in newspapers were more than simple descriptions of the property being sold. They were the first step in the chain of dehumanizing events that constituted the slave auction. Auction billings established the language of commodification which turned human beings into products. Words like “prime” and “likely” spoke to the potential investment buyers were make and carried with them the promise of a return on that investment. Slaves were described only in reference to their physical nature. Height, build, age, and skill were the only relevant qualities as far as slavers were concerned. In the rare case where a characteristic beyond the somatic constitution of slave was mention it was always in reference to their ability to be obedient. Terms such as “sober,” “honest,” and “no runaway” were less a commentary on a slave’s personality and more a description of compliance. What slavers’ were interested in was the slaves ability to operate as a part of the larger machine that was slave labor on the plantation. These discursive practices functioned to strip blacks of any qualities considered to be quintessentially human. Characteristics like spirituality, imagination, and individuality, which were heavily associated with life on the frontier, were entirely absent in descriptions of slaves. Scholars have often discussed these denials as methods of control and discipline that prevented slaves from unifying or having the will to attempt escape. They did serve this function, but they also portrayed slaves as solely corporeal entities making them less relatable to their white counterparts. This reduction to the body fostered the dehumanization of blacks bodies fostered the creation of an other against which white Americans could define themselves.

Advertisement sought to turn the African American body into a tool while the abolitionist opinion articles highlighted the human qualities that were absent in the slave trade. Abolitionists

contrasted the practice of slavery with foundations of the country established in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Abolitionists argued that slavery stood in distinction of the values of freedom, liberty, and equality that were supposed to be the cornerstone of the new country. Part of this argument relied on recognizing that blacks desired freedom as much as whites. Immaterial qualities of those kept in bondage were emphasized in these pleas for manumission. Some editorials imagined black families in romanticized frontier settings rendering their desires the same as whites. These abolitionist texts are instructive of how the Frontier Myth (and the characteristics which constituted it) became a qualification citizenship. The importance of personhood is clearly noted these writings, and the devastating effects of its denial in the slave trade become all the more evident.

Along with the portrayals of bodies in advertisements, postings for runaways were texts which framed slaves' bodies in a particular way. As opposed to the ads trying to sell them, bills for runaways focused on the divergent aspects of slaves' bodies. Instead of emphasizing the strength, skill, uniformity, runaways were marked by disabilities and disfigurements. These physical identifications rendered them as distinctly different from the society to which they were attempting to escape. Escaped slaves were portrayed as animalistic and dangerous through these descriptions. As with slaves at auction, this dehumanization functioned to exclude blacks from the aspects of life that were considered fundamentally American.

The discourse describing slaves in newspapers, and the contrasting emphasis provided by abolitionists, shows how blacks were reduced to their bodies. I have argued that this reduction was imperative for establishing the black slave as template for white Americans to form an identity against. Additionally, this forced embodiment demonstrates how the othering of blacks was multifaceted and started with race but was coalesced in terms of dis/ability.

The auction scene was another site where the dehumanization of blacks was communicated through the erasure of personhood. Auctions were performative events which recreated theater-like settings forcing slaves to perform their own commodification. On the auction block, slaves had to negotiate the dire consequences of their performance. If a slave did not emphasize their strength or skill enough, the trader might beat for purposeful discouraging buyers. Conversely, if a slave played up their abilities too much they risked being beaten in the future by their owners for falsely presenting themselves. These violent penalties forced slaves into a position of passivity where they had to play the role of the “good slave.” Like the descriptions of slave in the billings for these auctions, the performances were predicated by slavers’ expectation of obedience in the slaves they were buying. It is the same process of locating worth in the body and emphasizing a lack of personality. Slave auctions also added the new element of an audience. The crowds at auctions often consisted of more than just buyers. Local residents came out to view the spectacle that was the selling of human beings. The consequences of this staring process were two-fold: Starers – the white audience – made sense of themselves through the differences they saw in those forced on stage (Garland Thomson, 2009) while starees – black slaves – became even more aware of how they wielded their bodies (Scott, 2012). The enactment of this human reduction was reinforced in slave auctions. Further, reading auctions as performative sites is significant because it creates a space where these events can also be read through the lens of freakery.

The study of freak shows gained traction in disability scholarship because they were examples of explainable bodies could be turned into spectacular oddities through narration and staging. Enfreakment has more to do with the portrayal of the body than the actual body itself. Most of distinguishing features exhibited in sideshows are easily explainable by medical

diagnoses and are more common than was thought in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. There were even cases where the attraction were simply of elderly or their differences were cultural. Whatever the case, enfreakment was achieved through the narration and performance of these certain types of bodies. What has also emerged from the study of sideshows is a discussion of how early American citizens could understand themselves as normal compared to the people they were watching on stage. This sensemaking was fundamental in conceptualizing a collective image of normalcy in America. Freaks provided one of the borders within which Americans could define themselves.

What I have argued here is that elements which establish slave auctions as performative events also meet the criteria for enfreakment. Reinterpreting slave auctions as a form of freakery allows for a more nuanced reading of how the dehumanization of blacks required the creation of another, again, distinguishable by more than just race. It also attends to the exclusion of blacks from the Frontier Myth in that enfreakment is the total denial of personhood. Freaks were portrayed as ultimately unnatural, which stood in contrast to the purity that was associated with the frontier. The creation of slaves as spectacles that took place at auction further removed blacks from an American society that heavily valued self-determination, and turned them into monstrous creatures that were simultaneously seen as dangerous and docile. These were the bodies against which whites could build themselves in opposition.

In this connection between freakery, performance, and slavery, I also hope to contribute an example of how disability theory can be generatively applied to analyses where its salience is less obvious. As disability scholars push to make the discipline more prevalent in the academy is it important that we balance creativity and caution. For instance, Mitchell and Snyder's (2000) theory of narrative prosthesis claims that disability is the inciting incident in most of literature.

They contend that the narrative form depends on some sort of disabling of the character or the circumstance; we only understand the arc of a story through the concept of disability. While this theory certainly forces issues of dis/ability into larger conversations about representation, it also implies that there is an innate quality to disability. The argument that disability is a foundational element of narrative takes away from the understanding of disability as social construction.

While Mitchell and Snyder create a relevance to reexamine texts through the lens of disability, they also counteract the work done by scholars in the field to establish the marginalization of people with impairments as social construction within the power dynamics of normalcy. Mitchell and Snyder's work should not be dismissed. It is useful and exhibits the imagination needed to spread disability studies beyond its current borders. Any yet, it perhaps lacks a recursive quality that fully illuminates its implications.

In my application of theories of enfreakment I specifically avoid assigning disability where there is none. The use of disability as a metaphor is problematic on many levels. It takes devalues the lived experiences of people with impairments and it distorts the concept of disability as an embodied experience. Further, as is the case with Mitchell and Snyder's theory, using disability as a metaphor essentializes it, allowing it to stand in for the way we describe all forms of human disqualification. This does not, however, mean the theories developed from study of disability cannot be applied elsewhere. At its core disability studies is concerned with the embodiment and experience of physical and mental impairment. It understands that the social position of people with disabilities is the product of rhetoric that favors familiarity and normalcy. Therefore, disability theory can be generalized to the other sites of analysis where people are defined by and reduced to their bodies.

The comparison between slave auctions and freak shows does not attend to the



disabilities, disfigurements, or oddities which permeated freak shows. Nor does it mark slaves and freaks as synonymous with one another. To do so would distort the histories of both groups. Rather, this comparison is rooted in the discursive strategies used by traders and showman to sell slaves and freaks. With this understanding of similar practices, disability theory can enhance previous readings of slavery and the slave trade and expose the layered practices dehumanization that took place.

Just as disability studies should seek to expand its work beyond its immediate borders, communication studies as a discipline should be more open to multiple uses of disability studies. Communication studies, by its nature, draws on several different fields of study for its theory and methods. This one of the field's strengths as doing so allows for more complete research on a variety of topics. Yet, at present the majority of disability research being conducted in communication studies is only being conducted in performance studies. Disability and the theory that comes with are relevant in many different areas of communication research. For example, health communication, one of the fastest growing areas of research in the field, and its study of aging align seamlessly with and could benefit from research in disability studies as they both deal with how people experience a loss/lack of ability. Additionally, much of the disability research taking place in communication focuses on contemporary contexts. This is only a problem because it means that the historical aspects of disability are left unattended. Rhetoric, philosophy of communication, and performance all, at times, attend to the historical significance of the topics analyzed in those fields. Part of the contribution this thesis makes to field of communication is its combination of disability and communication theory in a historical context.

Research that takes the time to look back at history and reread texts with new theory allows for reinterpretations of the past that influence the present. The emphasis this thesis has

placed on the manners in which slaves were dehumanized through the slave trade seeks to influence readings of how contemporary discursive and performative practices of race and ability function.

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