"Unable to Do This Heavy Work": (Dis)ability, Carceral Punishment, and Searches for Freedom

This is an abbreviated version of a longer chapter within my dissertation, which examines the multiple meanings and productions of black women’s escape from Alabama prisons, jails, and police in the early twentieth century.

The only cause that Warden J.O. Benton could imagine for Pearl Finley to walk off in broad daylight from her prison assignment, cooking for Mr. Carlton, was that “she was temporary insane.” On the morning of December 30, 1924, thirty-one-year old Finley picked up and left. Two miles from Wetumpka State Penitentiary, she might have heard the guards and the warden come for her as she walked through the fields, their sallow soil hardened by cool December winds. It was an escape that began and ended in the light of day.¹

Benton reported the escape, as wardens always did, to the State Board of Administration. Normally, he would have requested permission to enact punishment. But in a rare turn of events, he stated that he did “not recommend any punishment for her or that she be demoted to C class.” Indeed, he believed her incapable of such willful insubordination, because “she was temporary insane which caused her to leave.” Furthermore, Benton reported that Finley was “very weak minded and when [they] got her back to the Walls she did not seem to have any mind at all.” The physician inspector, F.F. Blair was not so sure. On Benton’s letter, the physician scribbled a note: “I will have to see this woman before I can pass my opinion.” And in that moment of possible contention

between the warden and the physician, Finley was at once incapable of choice and full of deceit.²

In reality, the condition of Pearl Finley’s mind was ancillary to the ways in which prison officials’ perceptions of her informed their conclusions about her motives. Finley may have had a mental disability or she may have been able-minded and adept at dissemblance. There may have been elements of both in her escape attempt. But what we do know is that first, the warden assumed that her nonnormative mind evinced unintentionality and that second, the physician inspector retained the power to decide whether or not Finley was able-minded and, thus, whether she deserved punishment in the eyes of the state.³

While prison officials questioned the intentionality of Finley’s escape in 1924, the local sheriff did nothing of the sort when she broke out of the Choctaw County Jail in 1920 during her trial.⁴ One night in spring, after midnight, but before daybreak, she, alongside a white man, named Lee Waltman, also incarcerated at the jail, tore out a “window sash and lights” and escaped “through [the] same hole” another person had made in their attempts to runaway months or years earlier. Finley and Waltman furtively took keys from “the Guard room,” and “tied blankets together,” climbing all the way down the fateful hole.

Finley stayed out longer than Waltman: it was four and half months before the sheriff recaptured her.5

There was no question about Finley’s intent during this first escape. But officials’ confusion around her second delineates the complexity with which disabled black women experienced incarceration. In Finley’s case, the question was principally about agency, because prison officials believed that if she willed her escape, she was likely able-minded and thus culpable. The inspector physician’s skepticism and desire to scrutinize Finley further was far more typical in the matrix of carceral violence than the warden’s initial response. State physicians and prison officials routinely dismissed black women’s protests of the disabling violence of incarceration and appeals for early release or parole because of their disabilities—whether those disabilities existed before prison or not. Moreover, prison bureaucrats defined disability, both mental and physical, narrowly, and often only in relation to workability.

Black women were not silent about the trauma they experienced and endured. Nor were they acquiescent to the ways in which the prison defined and punished disability. In numerous letters of protest, disabled and incarcerated black women individually collated their experiences of carceral violence and testified to the limitations of their workability. Yet, their petitions were very often denied, because they were caught in a nearly inescapable quandary policed by the borders of race, gender, and ability: officials weaponized racialized and gendered categories of non-normativity and deviance to cast doubt on black women’s experiences of disabling violence.

Black women’s attempts to escape from penal labor reveal how the categories of (dis)ability and deviance were mutually constitutive. Both categories of being, as black feminist scholars have argued, were “constructed and relational,” meaning that notions of (dis)ability and deviance evolved in the important contexts in which these women lived: as black, often young, women who endured white supremacy and its attendant carceral manifestations. Both categories of difference carried racialized and gendered valences, which meant that the ways in which black women identified their own disabilities drastically diverged and contested the state’s formulation of them. In fact, much of the archival detritus left in the wake of prison administration reveals that wardens, guards, and, most importantly, prison physicians occluded very real disabilities in the service of categorizing black women as deviant to underwrite further physical and psychological domination.

By the 1920s, across the nation, exclusions from the “wage labor market and economic citizenship” rendered “people with disabilities unproductive citizens...synonymous with reliance on public dependency.” Institutionalization and custodial incarceration increased, as did disabled white women’s parole into domestic work in the North, for example. Yet, the anxiety about (dis)ability and “reliance on public

---

6 Sami Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women’s Speculative Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 5 - 8. I employ (dis)ability as black feminist scholar, Sami Schalk, does to mean the system by which disability and ability are construed to inform the other. I follow her lead when I use (dis)ability to refer to the larger social construction of ability and disability; when I refer to specific kinds of disability, I omit the parentheses. I also rely upon the term bodymind, which “insists on the inextricability of mind and body and highlights how processes within our being impact one another.”


dependency” manifested differently for black women than it did for white men or women. In many ways, prison officials collapsed deviance and disability in their evaluations of black women; in part, because they imagined that black women, were already “unproductive citizens,” who regardless of their state of being, were to work in the service of white people. Disability, then, only furthered state officials’ notion that black women were non-normative and, thus, deserving of penal labor.

The state’s capitulation to some people’s disabilities was always an exception that upheld the rule that incarcerated people would work until prison physicians deemed them “useless.” This medical gate-keeping cohered alongside other centralizing and modernizing aspects of Alabama’s carceral infrastructure: the end of convict leasing, the expansion of custodial prisons, the opening of women’s only institutions, and the renewed dependence on black women’s care labor in white homes. Paperwork kept these modern institutions, and their violences, alive. Correspondence back and forth between wardens, physicians, and state officials ensured that black women’s claims about the limitations of their labor, and any disabilities they experienced, would be scrutinized on multiple fronts.

Running away from prison and escaping back-breaking work were contrapuntal. Or put another way, assertions about (dis)ability were also spatial demands—many women hoped that their insistence that they could not work would create opportunities to leave prison early. Because white supremacist and carceral regimes relied on both bodily and spatial domination, black women’s attempts to escape work, and prison, were insurgent reclamations of autonomy, even as they tricked in the language of capital production and usefulness to the state. Beneath these strategies, what disabled, incarcerated black women

---

9 I discuss these aspects extensively in other chapters in my dissertation.
really did in their appeals was to imagine freedom apart from the able-bodied, whiteness of citizenship, and the totalizing “emphasis on submission, docility, fear, and trembling” of state subjecthood. In so doing, they attempted to deny their service to a state that was willing to kill them in the cause of work.

**The Entanglements of Institutional Violence and (Dis)ability**

At summer solstice in 1922, Willie Young was condemned by a new name, one that the state often imposed on unruly black women: “considerable trouble,” a prison official noted, if only “from time to time.” Naming was a powerful weapon of control within prisons. It encouraged and justified physical violence. It gutted an already inaccessible system of oversight, which essentially indemnified the brutality of officials and guards. Naming extended fault, instead of relief, to victims of wardens’ ire and guards’ impatience. It allowed the State Board of Administration to more quickly overlook the most galling testimony from incarcerated people. Naming was a baptism by fire, in which through a “locus of confounded identities,” the state conspired to cast out any lingering hope of mercy in a system where there was to be “no mercy here.” To be named “trouble” or “malingering” or “insane” was to carry a prefix to violence, a grammar of non-citizenship and unfreedom.

---

10 My theorization of postbellum citizenship and state subjecthood originates from Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). Hartman contends that citizenship, as defined in the American polity post-Emancipation, was the illusion of will through coercive measures and surveillance.


Black women endured this discursive violence that suborned physical torture in prison. The names that officials called them by, particularly in response to their testimony of horrific brutality, served to cast doubt on both their experiences and their pain. In May 1922, Willie Young, a twenty-five-year-old black woman incarcerated for pickpocketing, implored William Feagin, the State Warden General at the time, to “come [to Speigner] at once.” After guards discovered her “with a colored man,” they tortured her. Young’s description lacked no detail. She carefully recounted the violence—a trauma in and of itself—so as to make a record of what they had done to her:

They have beat me nearly to death I can’t sit down and can hardly walk. I am down all in my back and I got to go and try to walk any way. They give me twenty one licks on my necked[sic]. I haven’t cut no one. I got caught with a colored man. Mr. Britt [a guard] knocked me down and choked me and Mr. Goran slaped[sic] me and got my teeth all loose I ain’t sleep a bit all night long I just cryed[sic] and grone[sic] all night Mr Feagin they haven’t whip no body here for drawing Blood as bad as they whip me...they kicked me choked me and did me worse than a dog...

Young tried to resist the violence, to ease the unbearable pain of corporal punishment. “She had put on extra clothes,” but “she was made to take [them] off.” Both Young’s testament to physical abuse, and her attempts to shield herself from the pain, resulted in further scrutiny of her person rather than of the officials who had tortured her.

---

15 “Letter from Willie Young to Mr. W. M. Feagin, May 28, 1922,” Box SG017578, Folder “Y 1920 – 1926,” Administrative Correspondence. My decision to recount the entirety of this episode was weighed with the need to avoid what Saidiya Hartman has called “the casualness with which” these instances of torture, in histories of slavery and white supremacy, “are circulated, and the consequences of this routine display of the slave’s ravaged body” (3). Yet, I chose to include the totality of Willie Young’s testimony because I believe it diverges from white abolitionists circulation of “scenes of subjection” and I believe, in Fred Moten’s words, that there is a certain “inevitability of such reproduction even in the denial of it” (4). Moreover, I take Moten’s point that “the history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist” as a waylay into discussing Young’s protest of her own torture (1). See Hartman, Scenes of Subjection and Fred Moten, In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
A month after she penned her letter of protest, F.E. Prickett, an inspector sent by the state to investigate the claims, dismissed her claims and faulted her because “she showed fight when she was called on to take her punishment.” In the eyes of the state, she was “considerable trouble,” and thus unbelievable. The more resistance to violence, the more punishable. In fact, the word of one prison employee, Mr. Tinsley, who was not present at Young’s beating, carried more weight than Young herself: “Mr. Tinsley assured me that no one choked or struck this prisoner.”

Notably, as was often the case, the physician on staff, Dr. Boswell, also attended the whipping. The presence of a medical professional sustained the illusion that prison guards and wardens never enacted violence “in excess,” as if the very act of beating was not always an excess in and of itself. Moreover, state officials often recruited doctors to provide medical evaluations of incarcerated black women’s bodyminds that invented racialized, gendered categories of inability that justified the violence meted out: deviant, rebel, illiterate, “low intelligence,” “mentally unbalanced,” “dementia simplex,” “considerable trouble,” “stubborn,” “ignorant.” Through these terms of medicalized non-compliance, officials cast corporal punishment as necessary and inevitable, particularly for African Americans. Indeed, these categories increasingly shored up, in Sylvia Wynter’s words, the

modern, racialized binary of the “rational/irrational,” or how “one’s selected or dysselected status could...be verified by one’s success or failure in life.”\textsuperscript{20}

In other words, state officials used incarcerated black women’s very testimony of violence done to them against them, as evidence of insubordination and thus their incapacity to tell the truth. The matrix of carceral violence was cyclical: officials justified punishment by naming black women as deserving of violence, which duly meant that their ability to recount the experience of brutality was constantly thrown into question. Subsequently, their testimony often became a pretense for further brutality.

Several months before Willie Young sent her letter, thirty-six-year old Mary Hobdy\textsuperscript{21} wrote to Governor Thomas Kilby about the whipping she experienced while contracted out to work at the River Falls Lumber Camp as a domestic servant during her incarceration. Hobdy, like Willie Young, made her purpose clear from the beginning: “I am writing you a few words to tell you that Mr. Crawford whipped me to-day for almost nothing.” Appealing to his paternalistic senses and very real political authority over the State Board of Administration, Hobdy implored Governor Kilby: “I am writing you because I have no one else to look to for protection...I want to ask you to please remove me from this camp at once. I think that it would be best for me and I am looking \textit{to you to take care of me } [emphasis added].”\textsuperscript{22} Within a few days, Governor Kilby instructed William Feagin, the

\textsuperscript{20} Sylvia Wynter, “‘Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom—Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument” The New Centennial Review, Volume 3, Number 3 (Fall 2003), 310.

\textsuperscript{21} Her name is written in two different ways in the archive: Hobby and Hobdy. I have opted for Hobdy, because this is how she signs her letter. See “Record for Mary Hobdy,” Alabama Convict Records and “Letter from Mary Hobdy to Mr. Feagin, May 22, 1922,” Box SG17562, Folder “Ho 1922,” Administrative Correspondence.

\textsuperscript{22} “Copy of letter written by Mary Hobdy to Gov. Kilby, February 24, 1922,” Box SG17562, Folder “Gi – Go 1926 – 1927,” Administrative Correspondence.
State Warden General, to “make a thorough investigation of this case.” Scrawled on a scrap piece of paper, loosely appended to the Governor’s instructions, Feagin or someone else in his office, noted: “Dr. Smith is today looking into this.”23

Physicians’ role as investigators, as was their presence during corporal punishment, was a mechanism by which the State Board of Administration circumvented incarcerated people’s testimony. State doctors’ inspections often subjected incarcerated women to fictitious and subjective evaluations of the harm done to them. Indeed, these investigations often had little to do with the actual violence and more with adjudicating whether the physician felt that an incarcerated person’s behavior required corporal punishment. The physician inspector’s, C.H. Smith, findings were short: “I wish to state that this woman was punished for repeatedly refusing to carry out the instructions of Mr. Henderson, the Superintendent.” Like Willie Young, the physician inspector suggested that Hobdy’s refusal to comply with her incarceration and its attendant violences substantiated the punishment. “Mary,” he wrote casually, “has been dissatisfied at River Falls for several months and consequently, very stubborn at times…It is my opinion that she should have been punished.” The warden beat her ten times “with a strap,” a violence that C.H. Smith, in his so-called expertise as a doctor, characterized as “not severe.”24 William Feagin passed on the results of the investigation to Governor Kilby, where it reached a dead end.25

---

23 “Letter from Governor Thomas E. Kilby to William F. Feagin, February 27, 1922,” Box SG17559, Folder “Gi – Go 1926 – 1927,” Administrative Correspondence.
25 “Letter from State Warden General to Thos. E. Kilby, Governor, March 2, 1922,” Box SG17559, Folder “Gi – Go 1926 – 1927,” Administrative Correspondence. There are no records that indicate Mary Hobdy was transferred away from River Falls. The “Convict Record” states that she was paroled from there in 1929.
But only three months later, Mary Hobdy wrote again, this time to William Feagin himself. Hobdy asked to be transferred, because she was “sick & unable to do this heavy work down here.” Hobdy did not mention the beating that she reported to Governor Kilby back in February, likely because she knew nothing would come of it since officials had cast doubt on her before. Yet, her general condition of ailing, and the difficulty of the work asked of her, could not be separated from the earlier violence she endured. She emphasized her condition: “I am disable[sic] to cook for Mr Moore & Do His Heavy work I have ben[sic] operated on & is not well at all & not emproving[sic] any much & if you will send me in I think I can Get Along Better Please Sir Send Me in at once.”

When did Hobdy fall ill? Did she undergo surgery before incarceration or perhaps during, as an effect of years of corporal punishment? Regardless, how could the whipping not have exacerbated what she characterized as her condition of being “disable[d]”? Feagin’s underwhelming response shadowed her attempts to advocate for her well-being: “I do not think it best to move you without first talking to Mr. More and our physician there...” Ultimately, neither Hobdy nor Young’s testimony about brutality mattered so long as the state’s physicians disagreed with their pleas.

When state officials cast doubt on the letters of protest that they received, their response to and characterization of these women often built out from the language of (dis)ability, even as it served to negate black women’s very claims about the disabling violence enacted by the state. In this way, incarcerated black women had to advocate for

---

26 “Letter from Mary Hobdy to Mr. Feagin, May 22, 1922,” Box SG17562, Folder “Ho 1922,” Administrative Correspondence.
27 “Letter from State Warden General to Mary Holbdy[sic], May 22, 1922,” Box SG17562, Folder “Ho 1922,” Administrative Correspondence.
themselves in a white supremacist bureaucracy that collapsed blackness with childlikeness (even as it evacuated black children from the category of innocent childhood), imperviousness and relegation to pain, as well as general inability.\textsuperscript{28} In his broad overview of Alabama’s prison system in the late 1930s, social scientist Malcolm Moos noted the endurance of these ideologies, which he characterized as ephemeral, as a “general feeling,” despite the fact that it carried permanent, material consequences: “There is a general feeling among the custodial personnel that whipping is a more effective deterrent for the Negro than solitary confinement. The contention is that the Negro needs to be disciplined like a child, that he understands whipping as punishment better than solitary.” Violence, its disabling effects, and the racialized language of (dis)ability then entwined in these collapsed notions of blackness and childlikeness. Prison officials, and white observers, built a lexicon around these ideologies to justify and further violence while erasing the effects of what it truly meant for incarcerated African Americans to “be disciplined like a child.”\textsuperscript{29}

The challenge of reading this carceral archive then—as black feminist and disability studies scholars have argued in regard to enslavement—is that white prison officials raised the specter of racialized inability to justify horrific acts of brutality; as a metonym for untrustworthiness, unfreedom, and unfitness. And yet, this violence was also literally disabling.\textsuperscript{30} In this way, (dis)ability was “simultaneously material” and deployed as

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{28} Robin Bernstein explores this entanglement extensively in her book, \textit{Racial Innocence}. There she writes that “the unfeeling, unchildlike pickanniny is the mirror image of both the always-already pained African American adult and the ‘childlike Negro’” (35).
\textsuperscript{29} Moos, \textit{State Penal Administration in Alabama}, 134 – 135. This echoes Bernstein’s analysis of \textit{Uncle Tom's Cabin} when St. Clare suggests that “sensibilities...decline” during enslavement—a white abolitionist argument that imperiled “all people involved in slavery.” But part of this process is the notion that “an enslaved person may become governable ‘only by the lash,’” a violent ideology that furthered corporeal brutality. See Bernstein, \textit{Racial Innocence}, 45.
\textsuperscript{30} I am indebted to Sami Schalk’s critical intervention and summation of these complicated, interlocking structures. In \textit{Bodyminds Reimagined}, Schalk writes that “I contend that scholars must read representations of
\end{footnotes}
metaphor by the state for blackness. Moreover, black women sometimes entered prison with nonnormative bodyminds, and if not, those who survived often left their incarcerations altered in some way. In other words, disability existed in a spectrum, sometimes in response to carceral violence, other times as an antecedent to it. Thus, it is imperative to disentangle the violent procedure of naming black women as disabled and the very real ways in which some were differently-abled before, during, and after their incarcerations.

“No use whatsoever to the State”

“I am writing you in regards of my self[sic],” thirty-two-year-old Mary Alexander began in her letter to Governor William W. Brandon on August 12, 1923. In this first letter to the governor, she went to great lengths to describe the extent of her disabilities in order to ask for a temporary parole to “gain [her] health” at home. Alexander began her incarceration at Wetumpka State Penitentiary nine years and two months earlier, and in that time, she had been “sick…going on 3 years.” She was immobile, “in Bed off and on all [the] time.” Even as she wrote the letter, she explained that she was “in Bed now” and “[had] been for four weeks.” Alexander, like other incarcerated women who appealed to state officials, understood that providing excruciating detail offered the best chance of being heard. So, she laid everything out on the table: her “Bowels and Rectom[sic] trouble,” her inability to eat anything but “milk and eggs and very little at that,” and her record at the prison. This

---

disability in neo-slave narratives as constitutive of both the discursive use of (dis)ability to justify the enslavement of black people and the physically and mentally disabling repercussions of racism for black subjects in the antebellum period and beyond” (34-35). Moreover, she argues that “these categories [of race, gender, and (dis)ability] mutually inform one another” (66).

31 Schalk, Bodyminds Reimagined, 35.
32 “Entry for Mary Alexander,” Alabama Convict Records.
last point was one of the most important: “I have always done the best I could do…and give
satisfaction heare[sic], and I have never been punished since the whole 9 years and 2
months I spent heare[sic].” She signed the letter “Your Servant,” but added “Mrs.” in front of
her name. Upon receipt, someone with a blue pencil circled the honorific, drew a line and
wrote “negro.”

The discursive violence of denying black women honorific titles was essential to the
state’s adjudication of who was worthy of parole for illness and disability. Marking
Alexander’s letter with the word “negro” served to remind whomever would read the
letter, and make the decision, that she was not to be afforded the same protection as a
white woman. Indeed, black women’s pain did not excuse them from hard labor, since
white bureaucrats imagined that black women were naturally fit for back-breaking work.

Alexander’s first application for temporary parole was denied.

In a second letter sent two months later, Alexander revised her strategy. She began
by recounting a surgery she had undergone eight weeks prior—between her first and
second letter—and then instead of describing being confined to bed, Alexander rendered
herself in relation to labor: “I am not able to work any at all…I have been sick for 2 years
and 10 months. first up and down. and now I am down and can’t do anything [emphasis
added].” In this way, Alexander understood that successful petitions to the state not only
required exacting descriptions of disability, but also evaluations of workability—both of

33 “Letter from Mary Alexander to W.W. Brandon, August 12, 1923,” Box SG17550, Folder “Aa – Am 1922 –
1926,” Administrative Correspondence.
34 Sarah Haley discusses this process of gendering and racialization that informed the divergent applications
and circumstances of Eliza Cobb, a black woman, incarcerated in Georgia and her white counterpart, Martha
35 There is no correspondence that corroborates this, but in the entry for Mary Alexander in the Alabama
Convict Records, all of her paroles are listed, and there is no parole given after this letter.
her productivity in the past and her inability in the future. In this first letter, Alexander only briefly alluded to this, stating that she “[gave] satisfaction” during her incarceration. But by October, she spoke directly to the state’s crude valuation of her labor: “I am in Class A. No 1.,” indicating that she had no punishment for work-related infractions according to prison rules. At the close, she signed “Yours Truly,” this time without “Mrs.” Two months later, Alexander received a temporary parole.

Mary Alexander and other disabled, incarcerated black women’s appeals for parole elaborates upon Sarah Haley’s incisive argument that black women were “only legible to white authorities as an imbecilic, monstrous body.” While this was certainly true, the experience of black women in Alabama’s prisons suggested that in addition to descriptions of abjection, inability to work was also central to these appeals. In other words, Alexander, and others, had to pair the notion of the “monstrous body” with the material consequences of disability: that she was of no “productive” use to the state.

Whether or not petitions for release were born of dissemblance and subterfuge, or veritable embodied experiences; black women attempted to circumvent the violence of penal, racial capitalism by leveraging the specter of uselessness. Indeed, incarcerated

---

36 A large number of records in the punishment records are related to work. See Book SG016427 – SG016430.
37 “Letter from Mary Alexander to W.W. Brandon, October 7, 1923,” Box SG17550, Folder “Aa – Am 1922 – 1926,” Administrative Correspondence and “Entry for Mary Alexander,” Alabama Convict Records.
38 Haley, No Mercy Here, 20.
39 Some scholars have begun to make a similar argument about enslavement, or how bondpeople successfully “passed” disabilities in order to avoid the auction block or to circumvent punishment. In “'I Made Up My Mind to Act Both Deaf and Dumb,'” Dea H. Boster writes that “Slaves performing disability, whether it was genuine or feigned, could capitalize on a variety of reactions, including sympathy, fear, and disgust to negotiate the terms of their bondage” (73). While I agree with the notion that disability incited different reactions than able-bodiedness, I hesitate to suggest that this enabled negotiations of “the terms of their bondage,” since that presumes a balance in power. White slaveowners, and prison officials for that matter, still held unilateral authority in making decisions and often did so with complete disregard for how black women evaluated their bodyminds’ condition. Dea H. Boster, “'I Made Up My Mind to Act Both Deaf and Dumb': Displays of Disability and Slave Resistance in the Antebellum American South,” in Ed. Jeffrey A. Brune and Daniel J. Wilson, Disability and Passing (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013). For other literature on the state of
black women sought escape from the strain of prison labor by making claims about their bodyminds in varying states of disability. Whether the state believed them or not was often dependent on how it affected their labor.

When disabled, incarcerated black women argued that they were not productive laborers, they masqueraded behind the state’s crude valuation of their labor. While these petitions deployed the language of economic worthlessness, they did so to reclaim value that lay outside of the caged walls of racial capitalism: corporeal freedom. These attempts to circumvent exploitative penal work were not black women capitulating to how prison officials valued them. Instead, these carefully crafted appeals were an informed manipulation of a system designed to work black women beyond when they could no longer. They were a reclamation of worth beyond the racialized and gendered borderlands of state subject and penal worker.

Indeed, castigated from political legibility in multiple ways, incarcerated and disabled black women’s cries of “no use whatsoever to the State” portended a freedom that had little to do with being a productive, worthy state subject. It was, after all, a category that excluded black women both in bondage and freedom no matter how much work they did. The end of slavery, for example, did not guarantee a radical freeing of the will so much as it reclaimed black labor under liberalism’s specter of choice: “the choice to labor dutifully, bend one’s back joyfully, or act willingly as one’s own inquisitor,” in order to survive racial capitalism’s demands and threats. These women’s apt critiques then,

masked in subservience, were antecedents to later black feminist theorizations that individual value transcended capitalist production: “you are not the work you do; you are the person you are,” or that “the level of labor” is not the “measure of” the self. In sum, disabled, incarcerated black women’s appeals in the language of “the State,” were a rejection of its violent economic valuation of black womanhood, and blackness more broadly. They were a contestation of the limitations of choice under liberal, racialist citizenship.

In the context of the state’s never-ending desire for able-bodied penal workers—an enduring facet of liberalism and state subjecthood—incarcerated black women’s dissent through their disabled bodies were also spatially insurgent demands. They were hopes of escape staked on the grounds of inability to work. Indeed, attempts to run away sometimes co-evolved with women’s protest of the use and abuse their bodyminds. In this way, when black women contested their workability through disability, they attempted to perforate the geographic bounds of carceral punishment and penal labor.

Exiting One Wound Through Another

---

41 This notion of antecedent is informed by Angela Davis in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*. She writes that “what is most interesting—and provocative—about the bodies of work each woman left behind is the ways in which hints of feminist attitudes emerge from their music through fissures of patriarchal discourses.” See Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1998), xi. Toni Morrison, “The Work You Do, The Person You Are,” *The New Yorker*, May 29, 2017, [https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/06/05/the-work-you-do-the-person-you-are](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/06/05/the-work-you-do-the-person-you-are).


43 My analysis is informed by Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom*. 
The exhaustion festered for months. Every corner of Camp Ketona smelled of rot and the belching humidity of industrial laundry. The refrigerator played host to rats. Its putrid odor was indistinguishable from other decaying scents: the beds and their endless infestations; the sheets stained with what seeped from untreated sores; the toilets overflowing. Emma Rose Cooper may have never known this hell could exist so close to the place she had once lived as a free girl.

The sun might have been a welcome companion, even the rain. But the camp was covered. The smell of laundry burrowed into their noses. It was all they smelled. In the dining hall, they were all “orderly and quiet”—isn’t that what the jail-man had said?—because there was nothing left to say. The taste of food long gone, swirling in the dirty water and soap.

One day not far into December, on a not-so-winter afternoon, Cooper spotted a large jug of Lysol underneath the laundry boards and wood sticks. Cooper smelled it until her nostrils burned. She stood right there, steam pulling at her hem, and “drank two large swallows of [it].”

At dinnertime, the warden was mad. He found out Cooper “had drunk Lysol” and yelled at her. They told her that the doctor would have to come out to inspect her. She

---

45 “Entry for Emma Rose Cooper,” Alabama Convict Records.
46 “Letter from Valmon J. Stewart to ?, July 18-19, 1939,” Box SG17593, Folder “Camp Ketona Correspondence with Warden 1939 – 1940,” Administrative Correspondence.
wasn’t sure what they would do. It was a Saturday night. Maybe any other year, she might have been dancing or singing, sweet-talking her way into a ride somewhere far from here. But this year, in 1939, she was one “ounce [into]...undiluted Lysol solution.” Saturday nights meant nothing good at Camp Ketona.49

Cooper heard the doctor say “there was no evidence.” Still, she swore: “I drank two large swallows.” They rushed the treatment, mixing flour, mustard, and water—there was something else, but no one told her what it was. She was sick for hours, wrenching over and over again. The doctor and the warden smelled the bile every time she vomited. She thought they were disgusting: sycophants to science. She drank it, she said. Didn’t she know better? They told her she wasted their time; that she was just a “maling[er].”50

The “apomorphine treatment” that Dr. Smith administered to Emma Rose Cooper caused enough short-term harm that she had a state-recorded disability for “about three days.”51 The veracity of the warden’s accusation that Cooper was “malingering” is as unknowable as to whether or not she drank the Lysol. Regardless, Cooper purposefully ingested something that she knew would either kill her, or harm her—chemically, via medical intervention, or both. Perhaps she saw other women stay away from the laundry for days or weeks at a time with diarrhea or vomiting. In any case, she stumbled upon the fact that there was a kind of sickness that excluded you, even temporarily, from laundry work.52

49 “Preliminary Report of Accident: Emma Rose Cooper, December 9, 1939,” Box SG17593, Folder “Accident Reports 1939 – 1944,” Administrative Correspondence
50 “Preliminary Report of Accident: Emma Rose Cooper, December 9, 1939,” Box SG17593, Folder “Accident Reports 1939 – 1944,” Administrative Correspondence
51 “Preliminary Report of Accident: Emma Rose Cooper, December 9, 1939,” Box SG17593, Folder “Accident Reports 1939 – 1944,” Administrative Correspondence
52 There is ample evidence that the warden and state physician were constantly concerned about the sanitation of women forced to work in the laundry facilities, which washed linens for both the “County Home” and the carceral facility for the “feeble minded and insane” of Jefferson County. For example, when discussing
Cooper was due to be released eleven days after she did or did not drink the Lysol. She did not run away from Camp Ketona; she walked away on December 20th. But in the days leading up to her release—time that she owed the state simply because she could not afford her “fine and cost”—she took a risk and wrested a “rival geography.”53 As with forebears during enslavement, spaces of temporary relief were not always places of freedom. Cooper left the laundry rooms for the prison’s medical ward: another site of domination that threatened black women’s safety.54 But, as geographer Katherine McKittrick has argued, “geographic options, such as escape, concealment, and racial-sexual safety [could be]…bound up with troubling spatial strategies.”55 Cooper did not free herself, but she did temporarily render her body useless to the state: an ambivalent relief in and of itself.

Black women’s attempted escape from work was mired in the punishing terms of gendered and racialized medical surveillance.56 Indeed, just as prison physicians drew medical conclusions to service the state’s penal workforce, so too did they forestall treatment as part of a larger atmosphere of fiscal austerity. In March 1941, D. Driver Smith

[53] Camp, Closer to Freedom.

54 Other scholars have discussed this LeFlouria, Chained in Silence; Haley, No Mercy Here; Kunzel, Criminal Intimacy.

55 McKittrick, Demonic Grounds, 40 – 41.

56 See Regina Kunzel, Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of Modern American Sexuality (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008), 12 – 13. Kunzel identifies that “by the 1940s and 1950s,” there was a “growing influence of the practice of classifying individuals primarily according to sexual object choice,” and I would also argue based on other racialized and gendered notions of psychological and physiological “health.” For more on the histories of black women’s experience of racialized, gendered medical surveillance and coercion, see C. Riley Snorton, Black on Both Sides; Marie Jenkins Schwartz, Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); LeFlouria, Chained in Silence, 95 – 99; Barclay, “Bad Breeders and Monstrosities.”
requested that Nat G. Clark transfer Stella Toney just a month before her release, because “it look[ed] as if she would need surgical care before that date.” Toney was suffering from a “severe flare-up of chronic pelvic inflammatory disease.”\textsuperscript{57} Writing just a day later, Prison Medical Superintendent Clark hedged: “Due to the fact that [her] sentence expires...about one month from now, I believe I will ask you to retain her.” Clark’s dismissal hinged on Smith’s suggestion that the flare-up was \textit{perhaps} becoming “quiescent.” Moreover, he was unduly concerned that prison medical staff might have to care for her after the end of her sentence. “She would certainly,” he complained “be confined to her bed at the expiration of her term.”\textsuperscript{58} 

Not only was Toney left extremely vulnerable at the hands of state negligence, but so too were her loved ones. On March 26, Smith wrote with uncharacteristic joviality to Clark. He had come up with a “solution” that he found “thoroughly satisfactory.” In the two days between Clark’s letter and Smith’s final note of correspondence, prison employees “rounded up [Toney’s] relatives and induced them to pay out the remainder of her obligation to the state.” Despite Clark’s dismissive conclusions about her case, Toney was likely so ill that she could not, or would not, work. When Smith could not secure a transfer, he instead relied upon the out-growth of prison surveillance (discussed in another chapter of the dissertation) to find Toney’s kin to pay for her remaining time since she could not work. He summed this up with brevity and frigidity: “[we] induced them to pay.”

\textsuperscript{57} “Letter from D. Driver Smith to Nat G. Clark, March 23, 1941,” Box SG17593, Folder “Correspondence with Physician 1939 – 1944,” Administrative Correspondence. 
\textsuperscript{58} “Letter from Nat G. Clark to D.D. Smith, March 24, 1941,” Box SG17593, Folder “Correspondence with Physician 1939 – 1944,” Administrative Correspondence.
means by which this coercion took place is unknown, but not unfelt in the silence of the record.59

In response to Toney’s disabling condition, prison officials furthered their geographic domination. There was a particular cruelty, and hegemonic logic, to refusing Toney treatment and then forcing her family to pay. Indeed, such was the punishing violence of prison, its attendant medical practices, and the vulnerability of black women who no longer stood as productive laborers for the state. After all, once Toney’s relatives collected enough money, Smith “deposited” her at “Hillman Hospital...without [her] ever being taken home.” Her care was hostage to the indemnity levied against her inability to work; her freedom was tenuous.60

In these ways, subjecting oneself to further medical evaluation, even for the purpose of avoiding penal work, was to exist in a world of false choices. It was to risk further surveillance and punishment. And, yet, there were times when the known alternative—the same work, day in and day out—was too much to bear. For some, there was a reality in which these false choices felt more and more like possible escapes, pathways to a future yet unknown, but dreamt of in between the quiet hum hovering in the dining hall; the rides from the prison to the fields; and the gasps of hot air in the laundry rooms.

Twenty-year-old Mollie Wade, for instance, worked in the laundry facilities all day long during her incarceration at Camp Ketona in 1941. Ten months into a sentence that was meant to last just over twelve, the camp physician successfully issued a transfer for

59 “Letter from D. Driver Smith to Nat G. Clark, March 26, 1941,” Box SG17593, Folder “Correspondence with Physician 1939 – 1944,” Administrative Correspondence.
60 “Letter from D. Driver Smith to Nat G. Clark, March 26, 1941,” Box SG17593, Folder “Correspondence with Physician 1939 – 1944,” Administrative Correspondence.
Wade to Wetumpka. What precipitated the transfer was an alternative site of carceral violence: self-inflicted harm.61

At some point, Wade had cut, deeply enough, along the back of her hand to sever tendons in both her ring and middle finger. There were no further details, just that she was “suffering” and that the physician, D. Driver Smith, had run a Wassermann test for syphilis, which had come back negative.62 The wound was extensive. Was she assigned to another job at Wetumpka before her release? Did her hand recover from the injury, or was had she permanently altered her body? Did she understand her actions as freeing, or as a painful alternative to the future she could not bear in her time left at Camp Ketona?

In the chasm of carceral punishment, agency was central to this act of self-harm. But by the same token, Wade’s choice was an emblem itself of penal violence. The two kinds of dismemberment—one enacted by the state, the other in response to it—entwined around each other.63 In order to attempt to separate herself from the work of the state, Wade had to dip further into its violence, even if temporarily, to carve out a space of relief. The brutal injury to Wade’s hand was representative of the ways in which white supremacy continued to tear at the “flesh...its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship’s hole, fallen,

61 “Letter from D. Driver Smither to Nat G. Clark, June 21, 1941,” Box SG17593, Folder “Correspondence with Physician 1939 – 1944,” Administrative Correspondence.
62 “Letter from D. Driver Smither to Nat G. Clark, June 21, 1941,” Box SG17593, Folder “Correspondence with Physician 1939 – 1944,” Administrative Correspondence.
63 The analysis that follows is in conversation with scholars of slavery that have explored the contested meaning on suicide. Many thanks to Alycia Hall for her guidance on these questions within her own expertise. In From Africa to Jamaica, Audra A. Diptee discusses the multiple meanings on suicide and how they reflected on both the condition of bondage and how bondpeople understood the connection between living, dying, and the afterlife. See Diptee, From Africa to Jamaica: The Making of an Atlantic Slave Society, 1775 – 1807 (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012), 106 – 113 and Stephanie Smallwood, Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 62 – 64. In the carceral context, Sarah Haley makes mention of suicide briefly in No Mercy Here, 41.
or ‘escaped’ overboard.” Even if Wade herself was the one to do it, every preceding act of brutality and torture at Camp Ketona led up to that enormously painful decision.

Indeed, to escape was sometimes to befall further harm, even so far as to risk death. Sometimes the two—running away and committing suicide—blurred together. Since 1940, twenty-three-year old Rosa Lee Grays, for example, had been incarcerated on and off for vagrancy. During one of her first spells in Alabama’s prisons, Grays worked at Camp Ketona in the laundry rooms, which likely exacerbated her extensive eczema that covered her “face, scalp, shoulders, legs and arms.” At the time of sentencing in January 1940, she was undernourished, suffered from “venereal warts,” and likely had an infection throughout her reproductive tract. She left prison, possibly in a worse state than she entered, in early 1941. Just a few months later, however, she was convicted again. By 1943, she was working in the “garden squad” at Julia Tutwiler Prison.

On an early summer day in 1943, Grays rode on the truck “back to the garden to work” as she did every day. The truck passed through the hot, sticky fields, carrying women, like her who wore a white uniform, and others, in stripes; some with shaved heads. Below, Grays could see the “concret[sic]” pass beneath them, her feet dangling just above its rising heat. Perhaps, in a moment of exhaustion and agony, she “had discovered a way off [the truck].”

---

65 “Entry for Rosa Lee Grays,” Alabama Convict Record; “Letter from D. Driver Smith to Nat G. Clark, August 16, 1940,” Box SG17593, Folder “Correspondence with Physician 1939 – 1944,” Administrative Correspondence.
67 Moos, *State Penal Administration in Alabama*.
how each section so quickly passed. She “climb[ed] up on the body of the truck.” Maybe she had no time to take a few deep breaths. Maybe it was swift. Perhaps she did not want to hear others cry out to her. Alone in this moment, she “willfully jumped,” leaping toward the concrete “while the truck was moving.”

The attending physician, J.F. Sewell, noted that the “accident could not have been prevented as it was willfully committed [emphasis added].” Yet, neither the warden nor the physician could ascertain motive driving this “willful” action. They suggested that it “was to escape or commit suicide,” but they recorded no statement from Grays, even though she survived. When she jumped from the truck, either to escape by running away or by death, her head hit the pavement. Her nose bled and she “required ten stitches.” As to the “probable length of disability,” either the physician or the warden, or both, simply typed “unknown.”

Grays lived her life with multiple disabilities: eczema, chronic inflammation, undernourishment. In carceral records, these were incidental so long as wardens could extract labor from her. Upon that afternoon in May 1943, officials still hedged on her “disability,” because they interpreted her injuries solely in terms that mattered to the state—evidence of her inability to work. These notes on disability were simply a way of recording the capital loss of penal labor. There was no room for incarcerated black women’s value beyond these ledgers. No room for Grays, or the countless other women whose disabilities mattered only in so far as “accident reports” and authorized transfers.

---

Grays’ intent in 1943 is irrecoverable, but it seems true to say that the reality she imbibed was ever at odds with the state’s. Neither the warden nor the physician could understand her. And perhaps she refused to answer their questions, to divulge what she dreamt of in that moment when the concrete passed before her eyes. Suicide, or not, Grays lived in a reality where clawing your way to the fast-moving ground was preferable to remaining on the truck. There was no relief in this story. Just the remnants of it on the page: that one day, Grays saw an opening and leapt. She neither escaped nor died that day.

And, yet, 1943 was not the end. Two years later, Grays was back at Camp Ketona working “the night shift at the County Laundry.” Her shift began at four o’clock. Five hours later, lightening and wind, “during a severe storm,” knocked all the power out. It was dark “all over the premises.” The darkness became what the pavement could never be: an envelopment, a refuge. Sometime in the two hours that the lights “went out,” Grays did what she failed to do two years earlier. Through a window, she ran. And in the thunderous dusk, the guard did not notice “until some time[sic] later.”71 There she slipped into the night, and out of the archive.72 And along that route, perhaps we can imagine her “soaring and on her way home.”73

The stories that emerge from these archives come in fits and starts, momentary breaths. Despite the collective efforts of state bureaucrats, physicians, and wardens, the

---

72 There are no records that indicate that Grays was recaptured. No correspondence stating the circumstances of recapture, which was routine. And no entry exists for these later incarcerations in the Alabama Convict Records. I refrain from speculating as to whether her escape was successful, because there are an innumerable range of possibilities of what might have happened to her. But this statement, at the very least, is true to the best of my knowledge.
73 Hartman, Lose Your Mother, 152 – 153.
line between disability and ability was never as clear-cut as they intended to make it. Black women subverted these categories, ultimately contesting the state’s valuation of their time, their labor, and their bodyminds. Those who experienced this hell had to search for freedom, as they might have in the “free world,” apart from the state and its institutions. Those places had only served to further their pain. If being a subject of the state led these women to prisons and jails, if citizenship was always already coded as white, if captivity was a breeding ground for racial capitalism; then these women charged freedom as something distinct from what the state could fashion, something other than able-bodiedness, something that would spirit them away from work that they were forced to do.

---

74 Incarcerated people in this moment often used the term “free world” to demarcate between their lived experience of incarceration and freedom.