Disability History Association Podcast
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Interview with Stefanie Hunt-Kennedy

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Caroline Lieffers: Hello and welcome to another episode of the Disability History Association Podcast. My name is Caroline Lieffers and it's my pleasure to have Stefanie Hunt-Kennedy on the show today. Stefanie is a historian at the University of New Brunswick, and she recently published her first book Between Fitness and Death, Disability and Slavery in the Caribbean. Stephanie, thank you so much for joining me.

Stefanie Hunt-Kennedy: Thanks for having me.

Caroline: First of all, tell me a little bit about yourself. How did you become a historian of disability and slavery in the Caribbean?

Stefanie: OK, a little bit about myself. I'm Canadian. Are you Canadian, too, Caroline?

Caroline: I am.

Stefanie: Yeah, yeah, yeah, I thought so. I'm originally from Peterborough, Ontario, and now I live in New Brunswick with my husband and three kids. I teach Caribbean, Atlantic World, and Disability History at UNB. I came to study disability and slavery kind of through two different paths. I began my studies, my graduate studies, as a historian of metropolitan Britain, but I quickly began to question many of the silences around empire. And it was those questions about the, kind of, interdependency of British national and global history from a particularly imperial and post-imperial perspective that led me to study the Caribbean. And my interest in disability history stems from a more personal place. I grew up with disabled siblings and in a family that is very much invested in disability rights. And so the lives and stories of disabled folks have just always been close to my heart and my politics since I was quite young. So it was these kind of two paths that led me to explore the lived experiences of enslaved people who were disabled and tried to uncover a history of disability in the archives of slavery.

Caroline: Let's actually start by talking a little bit more about those archives. You visited a number of different archives and libraries for this project. Did you experience challenges in trying to find material that would help you better understand the relationship between disability and slavery in the Caribbean?

Stefanie: Yeah, so I did most of my archival research in Barbados, Jamaica, and the UK. I spent a little bit of time in the States as well. And it, I mean, it was challenging. It's kind of odd because the violence of slavery is, on the one hand, so ubiquitous that in some ways disability is everywhere. But there is no index, right? You can't to ask an archivist, "can I see the section on disability?" Right" so it did kind of take some, some navigating, which most projects do. But, you know, I discovered that, you know, like Douglas Baynton now famously said, disability is everywhere in history once we start looking for it. And, you know, it's difficult to piece together the lifeworlds of enslaved people because they appear as kind of fragments in the archives. But as historians and scholars, sorry, as historians of slavery have shown time and time again it is possible to kind of knit these lives together. The first two sources that I discovered that kind of gave me hope for finding disability and slavery were slave law and runaway ads. Slave law, kind of showing that there were legally sanctioned punishments that disabled the enslaved, and then runaway ads gave evidence to the fact that these, the violence in slave law was not just theoretical, right? That it was, it was very real. So those two sources kind of started me off on the, on the right path. And then I discovered it in various other places. And of course, now I see it everywhere.

Caroline: Of course, yeah. In your introduction, you made a point that I found really interesting and important, which is that, while disability rights and much contemporary work

on disability really works to advance the idea that disability should not be understood as a tragedy or something to be necessarily prevented or cured, when it comes to studying the relationship between disability and slavery and colonialism, we actually need to take a bit of a different approach. So can you kind of expand on this little bit and explain what you mean by this?

Stefanie: Yeah. So, as you just said, you know, many disability scholars and activists have done important work in showing that disability is not an individual problem. It's not a personal tragedy that needs to be cured or prevented. Rather, the issue is our ableist society, right? Not disabled folks themselves. But when it comes to thinking historically about disability among a population of exiled and colonized people ruled by a European plantocracy and whose impairments were produced by the violence of colonization, it requires a different set of methodologies from those formulated in the northern metropole. So in the book, I argue that the production of impairment in slavery was tragic because it involved incredible levels of violence and we must not ignore that fact. So tragedy and disability are also historically produced and must be understood in specific historical context.

Caroline: That's a really important point and something that I'm going to be taking into my own research as well, so I really appreciate you having fleshed that out a bit through your work. This is an extraordinarily difficult book to summarize, and an extraordinarily important book. It makes crucial interventions in how we understand disability and enslavement and life in the Caribbean and even the origins of anti-Blackness, the discourse of abolition. There are far-reaching implications to this work. And I'm so grateful that you've done it. So I feel the best approach is probably to go through some of the major concepts and interventions so that readers can really appreciate the depth and breadth of what you've done. In many ways, I think your first chapter helps us understand some of the origins of anti-Black racism. You explore the concept of black monstrosity. So can you explain this a little bit more, maybe using some examples of how Europeans constructed and propagated this concept of black monstrosity?

Stefanie: Yeah. So, the European portrayal of Africans as deformed and monstrous beings really dates back to ancient and medieval times. And these texts, which described Africans as having monstrous bodies, you know, with one eye in the middle of their chests and no noses or animal-like features were widely circulated among Europeans in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. So by the time the English began to travel along the West African coasts, their imaginations were already filled with images of Africans as these kind of monstrous beings. And then, with the onset of slavery and the expansion of the slave trade, blackness enters English discussion as a matter of debate, as a subject of debate. And there are, there were several theories that kind of circulated on the origins of blackness, from the climatological theory, to the Biblical curse of Ham. But one of the most widespread understandings of blackness was that it was caused by maternal imagination. So the notion of maternal imagination had a long history in English thought and was used to explain birth deformities or anomalies. And a theory goes that the mother's wayward imagination could print upon the developing fetus, thereby determining the infant's appearance. So by the late seventeenth century, maternal imagination was used by English writers to explain the origins of blackness. So here you have, you know, two overlapping histories coming straight into view, right? Disability and race. And there's all sorts of implications, not the least of which is the suggestion that blackness and disability are aberrations from an original norm. And there's also the gendered component that says it is women who produce these supposedly natural, unnatural deformities. So the connection between monstrosity and blackness suggests that monstrous races were monstrous because they were inherited, because they inherited their characteristics from women rather than men. But it's quite complicated, but, but also very fascinating.

Caroline: And very important, too. What are some of the consequences of this concept when it's sort of put into practice, especially when Britain begins to establish Caribbean colonies?

Stefanie: Generally speaking, the idea that Africans were monstrous beings, while it didn't necessarily entirely justify African enslavement, it served to mute opposition to African

dispossession in the Atlantic World, in the English Atlantic World. And the other link I make in the book is that English conceptualizations of black skin color as a monstrosity inherited from mothers was intertwined with the legal notion of maternal inheritance. So the principle of maternal inheritance, which was later given the term *partus sequitur ventrem* by William Blackstone, was applied to the Anglo-Caribbean colonies as well as regions in North America. And it declared that the status of the mother determines the status of the child, irrespective of the status of the father. So the law's purpose was to expand and sustain slavery by making all children born of bondswomen be enslaved property of the mother's owner. So this made enslaved women particularly vulnerable to white men's sexual terrorism. Atlantic slavery in this way kind of created a legally lesser and destructible form of humanity that mothers then passed on to their children. So these two ideological claims, maternal imagination and maternal inheritance, overlap, suggesting, suggesting an intergenerational link between monstrosity and enslavability.

Caroline: These notions of deformity and monstrosity made enslaved Black people's humanity, as you argue in the book, uncertain or troubling, at least from the perspective of white slave owners and lawmakers. And you make the claim that various slave laws in the English Caribbean, managed this uncertain humanity by, quote, “disabling” people at both discursive and physical levels. So can you kind of explain a little bit more? Like, how does this actually work?

Stefanie: Yeah, so I argue in the book that African humanity was the fundamental problem of slave law, as well as what made slavery possible and profitable. So, for instance, in the preamble to the 1661 Barbados slave law, which was the first comprehensive slave code of the British Atlantic world, lawmakers referred to enslaved Africans as, quote, "an uncertain and dangerous kind of people." So they clearly recognized African humanity, but they treated it as a suspect and exploitable form of humanity, a kind of foil for the monstrous link between the human and the animal. Through legally sanctioned punishments, the enslaved endured physically debilitating abuses like whipping and dismemberment, castration, branding, et cetera. But perhaps the most disturbing aspect of slave law when it comes to punishment was that slave owners were given the power to mete out draconian punishments however, they saw fit, and with impunity. So these these punishments were particularly sadistic and, and disabling. Bondspeople also endured the long-term disabling consequences of repeated episodic incapacitation. In terms of discursive disabilities, slave law also placed severe limits on enslaved people's freedom of movement, of their mobility. And another example is, again, the principle of maternal inheritance, which created a kind of enforced kinlessness, an institutional disablement that targeted African women and their descendants.

Caroline: You do a lot of really important work in your book to trace and list some of the harsh punishments that bondspeople received. I don't want to go into too much detail describing those. Certainly people can find them in your book. But what was the kind of logic - this is in big quotation marks, if I can use so generous a term, right? What was the, sort of, logic behind these kinds of horrifying practices of disablement? Because on the surface, enslaved people's bodies were valuable for labor, right? So why disable them?

Stefanie: Yeah, it's a great question. All of these punishments that I just mentioned were performed at the cost of reducing the enslaved person's ability to labor. And of course, this seems like a contradiction, right? Why would someone intentionally disable their labor power? According to the logic of Atlantic capitalism, bondspeople were expendable and disposable labor units. We see this also in the brutal forms of labor that the enslaved performed. This same logic determined that it was economically more efficient to work enslaved laborers to death than to treat them well so that they could survive. The disabling punishments of slavery also show that the intention behind such violence was not simply to just punish the body, but also to create a culture of fear and terror that would subdue bondspeople. So enslaved people were also subjected to this intense psychological trauma, which was intended to make them more acquiescent, right? To kind of terrorize them into being obedient. And in the psychological aspect of slavery is a really important one and one that's getting a lot more attention by scholars.

Caroline: So one of the important points that you make near the outset of your book was that the concept of ability itself had a raced history. And I found this very important. Can you explain what ability or fitness might have meant in the context of Caribbean slavery?

Stefanie: Well, I think there's multiple ways of reading this. So first, Europeans argued that Africans were intellectually deficient and deformed and therefore supposedly unfit for anything other than the most brutal forms of labor. Within the economy of slavery, fitness did not just refer to one's physical health, but also their compliance with slavery. So, again, obedience was a kind of central feature of ability or fitness when it came to the enslaved. And I also make the point, and this relates back to your previous question, that although traders and planters desired young, healthy, physically able captives who they estimated could survive the Middle Passage and labor on the plantations, the state of slavery worked at every level to undermine and destroy that state of fitness that planters and merchants so desired. And this is where the book's title comes from. I argue that slavery tried to suspend the enslaved in this liminal space between fitness and death. But it's also important to, to understand that enslaved people moved in and out of this liminality. So, for instance, a bondsperson who was infected with the smallpox and therefore quarantined would be removed from this liminal space. Or children - in plantation records, children were often described as unfit to do anything. So there were instances in which bondspeople moved in and out of this space between fitness and death. It wasn't a static position or space.

Caroline: What happens to those people that you just talked about, right, who are deemed less fit, who can't labor anymore? What happens to them?

Stefanie: Enslaved people - you know, because their bodies were owned, because it was not their labor, but their bodies, that were owned, they were really worked in some capacity until they literally could not contribute to plantation production at all. They were, you know, forced to work under the threat of violence. So some individuals were assigned less physically taxing jobs, like carrying water to the field laborers if they were themselves impaired or sick or elderly. Sometimes they were caregivers. They were assigned to take care of the sick. Sometimes we see enslaved people who feign or exaggerate disability in order to negotiate the terms of their enslavement. So in this way, bondspeople use disability as a kind of resistance to their status as commercial objects and labor power. But impairment among the enslaved did not necessarily exempt one from hard labor, because they were, they were working under the threat of the whip. Some enslaved people continue to work in the sugar fields, the most physically destructive of labor positions, despite having, you know, a limb removed, for instance. Likewise, elderly men with sight impairments were often assigned as watchmen, their job being to monitor the plantation at night for runaways and other so-called criminal activity. And this is why it's so important that we understand disability in specific historical contexts, right? What constituted disability in one society may not have in another.

Caroline: Did slave owners ever try to find ways of just manumitting disabled bondspeople? Were there laws to prevent this?

Stefanie: Slave owners found ways to rid themselves of the responsibility of disabled – of caring for disabled bondspeople, who they viewed as not contributing to plantation production. So one of the cases that I discuss in the book is a 1774 plantation management guide written a Jamaican slave owner named John Dovaston. And in the guide he encourages his fellow slave owners to employ disabled bondspeople as watches, doctors, and assistants of the care of the sick. According to Dovasto, this was not common practice to, you know, put them into different labour positions. In fact, Dovaston claims that it had become custom for slave owners to charge disabled bondspeople with crimes they were innocent of and execute them for the sake of the reward. So we see how the legal ownership of human bodies caused repercussions for slave owners who property included bodies that had once been capable of labor. We also see, you know, the kind of violence that often, you know, historically attends disability. The other thing to note is that caring for disabled enslaved people became a driving force behind manumission laws, in both Barbados and Jamaica. So by the late eighteenth century as part of amelioration, laws were put in force to ensure that owners and not the state provided for their disabled laborers. So this was an attempt to keep the disabled from quote-unquote "wandering

the islands." The laws forbade owners from manumitting enslaved individuals on the basis of sickness, age, or infirmity. So the manumitting of disabled bondspeople had become a very common practice by the late eighteenth century, and the state considered disabled free people as a threat to the social order of plantation society, as well as a burden on poor relief.

Caroline: The conditions of slavery, uniquely terrible conditions of slavery, also caused many different kinds of impairments and illnesses and disabilities, which is something you note. But I want to ask you about your Chapter Four in particular, where you, I think, really get at, get at this history through something you've mentioned already, which is advertisements for runaway slaves. These ads are extraordinary. I think you look at over a thousand of them. They're a catalogue of the brutality of slavery and they confirm the racial prejudice of those who paid to put them in newspapers. So one of the things that you say these ads do is they worked to separate black from white, to sharpen racist assumptions. Can you explain how that worked a little bit more?

Stefanie: You know, when I first started reading runaway advertisements, I was struck by just how creepy they are, not just individually, but collectively. So after reading hundreds and hundreds of advertisements, you really get the sense that regardless of class, whites were committed to maintaining this system of power and control that was slavery. Enslaved people were under this constant threat of surveillance, and runaway advertisements played a really important role in creating this state of fear. They worked to limit enslaved people's freedom of movement, and they created the sense that they were always being watched, right? not just by their plantation owners, the managers, the overseers, but by, by all of white society, who were invested in keeping them in their supposed rightful place. But the advertisements, the texts in the advertisements, also worked to kind of, as you say, sharpen these racist assumptions and divisions. They described Africans in racist ways. They exaggerated phenotypic characteristics in a way that produced, reproduced earlier European portrayals of African bodies as abnormal. So we see both racism and ableism at play in these advertisements for fugitive bondspeople. So, yeah, so I argue that, you know, the runaway advertisements, it wasn't just the text, it was the kind of surveillance that they created that worked to disable the enslaved on both these levels.

Caroline: Mmmhmm. The work that you've done to link together disability and racism and see the connections between them and give us more clarity about that is really important, and I'm so grateful that you've done that. [Stefanie: Thank you, Caroline.] What role does disability play in the discourse of abolitionism?

Stefanie: Yes. So this is one of my favorite explorations of disability and slavery, because it's so multi-layered, it's so conceptually challenging. And, you know, like a lot of other aspects of slavery, often contradictory. So abolitionists portrayed the enslaved as broken, beaten, supplicant bondspeople, kind of in need of whites to save them from slavery. So we see this in the famous Wedgwood seal, right, that everyone knows. And in this way, they use disability as a way to kind of appeal to British sympathies and a growing charitable culture toward disabled people in metropolitan Britain, in eighteenth-century metropolitan Britain. So the figure of the disabled bondsperson was particularly powerful, a particularly powerful propaganda strategy in the wake of the Haitian Revolution, which had created fear among whites throughout the Atlantic World of revolutionary insurgency and emancipation. So abolitionist representations of the supplicant disabled bondsperson contrasted with whites' fear of the threatening, able-bodied, armed Black male revolutionary and anti-slavery rebel, which was exemplified by the Haitian Revolution. So these two images embody different paths to emancipation, the choice between revolutionary and armed rebellion on the one hand, exemplified by the Haitian Revolution, and emancipation as a process of imperial and legislated reform on the other. So what we see in abolitionist discourse is disability being used as a way of envisioning a Black subject who, in her or his freedom, was not a physical threat to the British Empire. So disability was a crucial way to facilitate the possibility of incorporation while blunting its radical potential.

Caroline: That's really interesting. You also make the claim following, I think, on what you've just said, the abolitionists approached their work from a model of humanitarianism rather than

a model of human rights. And I think that's sort of echoed in what you've just said about contrasting abolitionist discourse from the Haitian Revolution. Can you expand on this a bit more?

Stefanie: Yeah, I mean, I think it's, it's, you know, in 18th-century Britain, we see these efforts to relieve the suffering of both disabled people and the enslaved. But it's important to, to know, to understand that these efforts were not framed in terms of human rights, but humanitarianism. So in both campaigns, there was this moral component, right? So infirmaries and hospitals that care for the disabled sought not only to save their bodies, but also their souls. And the idea was that once they were cared for, these people would return to the workforce as supposedly useful citizens. And abolitionists made really similar claims to social rescue, arguing that emancipation would free the enslaved from the impairments of human bondage and lead to intellectual and moral advancement among Africans and their descendants. So both campaigns have commitments to humanitarianism, advancement, and the free labor system. For abolitionists, revolutionary able bodies fought for human rights and equal citizenship. But abolitionists basically rejected those after the American Revolution. So abolitionists, abolitionists were all about offering humanitarianism to the enslaved. But they remained silent and implicitly rejected the more fixed idea of human rights.

Caroline: Yeah. So much, I think of what we talk about in nineteenth-century disability reflects the, sort of, disability's awkward fit, if you will, with notions of liberal subjecthood. And I think the historicizing that you've done in your book really helps complicate and deepen that story by helping us appreciate where humanitarianism fit into that as well, so that's really important work. Did disability or monstrosity also factor into the work of proslavery advocates, right, these opponents of abolition?

Stefanie: Yeah, definitely. So disability was used on both sides of that debate. In proslavery arguments, anti-abolitionists use disability to argue that the enslaved were intellectually unfit for freedom, and they increasingly argued that Africans and their descendants were a different species than human. So by the abolitionist period, by this first wave of abolition in the late eighteenth century, the monstrous figure of earlier portrayals of Africans that we see in the, in the sixteenth century had pretty much disappeared from proslavery writings, and in its place was this increasingly sophisticated notion that Africans were more akin to animals than humans. And this is kind of, you know, with the rise of scientific racism, that these arguments kind of come out. And so in these debates, in these discussions of Africans' supposed fitness for freedom, intellectual ability really becomes a mark of humanity in the debates between anti and proslavery writers.

Caroline: This is a big question, but do you see connections between your work and what's happening today in terms of disability and racism? Is there a legacy here that we need to recognize?

Stefanie: Absolutely. I mean, I think disability is key to how slavery and the unfinished work of emancipation continue to haunt former slave societies. You know, as scholars and filmmakers, activists, public intellectuals, all these, like really great thinkers have shown, racial minorities and people with disabilities are still being constrained by the prejudiced and racist societal forces of capital today. So in prisons across the Americas, a racialized and disabled workforce labors for a capitalistic means, yet under different structural forms of violence. The prevalence of disability caused by poor nutrition and inadequate access to health care in the US and the Caribbean is another key manifestation of slavery's goals. And this has been given renewed visibility in the wake of COVID-19, where Black people are dying in the States at alarming rates because of, you know, their quote unquote, "underlying condition" of systemic racism, right? And, and we also see, you know, when we think about, when we look at police violence against racialized people, we see connections between race and disability in the stories of people killed by police in US, in the US and Canada. The recent deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Rayshard Brooks in the States, and then in Canada, most recently Chantel Moore, Rodney Levi, Regis Korchinski-Paquet are reflective of a long history that dates back to colonialism and slavery, in which slave owners could murder African-descent people with impunity. And we can also see the protests, though. It's important

to know that the protests that we see against such violence also have early modern legacies rooted in the history of Black resistance to colonialism and slavery, Black and Indigenous resistance.

And then there is the disability connection, which has not received enough attention, I don't think. But, you know, Sandra Bland, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, many other Black Americans who were killed by police were also disabled. And in Canada, many Black and Indigenous people who had been killed by the police have had mental health issues. So here again, we see these connections between racism and racism and ableism. And, you know, Caroline, we could talk about this for a long time, but I do want to, to to say that I think these discussions, I think we need to start asking another question in these discussions, which is, you know, what of those who survived? What of those who survive such state violence, but whose bodies and psychologies are permanently marked? So, for instance, like, just last week in Ontario, a white Toronto police officer was found guilty of a 2016 assault that left a Dafonte Miller, who was only 19 years old at the time, partially blind, having had his left eye removed because of his injuries. So what happens to people like Dafonte Miller who survive these horrific abuses of state violence, but whose bodies and, and probably psychologies, are permanently marked by this kind of violence. So it's you know, we must not forget about the survivors of these encounters and the impact of racism and state violence on them.

Caroline: One of the things that you've just done that I think has been something that a lot of activists have stressed is the need to see the names of people who have experienced or died as a consequence of this abuse of power and state violence. And when I think about your work on slavery, often there are no names or we only have a name and we don't know much more than that. So how, when you were approaching this in your work, did you try to honor the many people who faced violence and show up as only fragments in the archival record?

Stefanie: You know, I, I, I've been really inspired by, you know, the work of scholars who have come before me, who have been able to take these lives that are just fleeting, you know, they're just like these fleeting lives in the archives, and creatively and responsibly, you know, create, recreate lifeworlds. And the, I mean, I'm thinking right now of Marisa Fuentes and her discussion of, of runaway advertisements in her book Dispossessed Lives, in which, you know, she really is able to tell us a story of people who, you know, do not appear in the archives as having much of a story, right? So it really takes it's, it's you know, it's a historical tool, right? It's a kind of skill to look at these people and, you know, as you say, a name, an age, often a physical condition, maybe a labor position, and, and try to trace, trace their lives and kind of recreate a story. I'm really not articulating it that well. But I think it's something that, that I've seen scholars of slavery do so well. And I think that's really important as, as scholars of slavery that we do that, you know, that we remember, you know, as Laurent Dubois and Trouillot and all these other great scholars have talked about. We remember our positioning, right? Where are we positioned in this story? Are we going to be positioned in the metropole or are we going to be positioned in the colony? And you know, whose, whose story are we telling.

Caroline: Yeah, yeah. I'm curious about what else you're working on right now. Your first book was amazing and congratulations. But I'm sure you're already onto the next exciting thing. So tell me what you're doing right now? What's next for you?

Stefanie: Well, it's funny. I mean, I've, I've, there's a part of me that that, you know, looks at the first book -- it was only released two months ago, so I'm hoping that this will fade -- but there is a part of me that says, no, that's all I got. You know, all my ideas are there. I've got nothing else. But then another part of me is really excited to move on to another project. So, I mean, for a few years now, I've been working on an ongoing research project called the Slave Law Project, which is a website that will provide worldwide access to the British Atlantic slave laws from the earliest comprehensive codes of the seventeenth century to the laws that governed emancipation in the nineteenth century. So that's kind of ongoing and I hope to have it launched within the next couple of years. And then my second book project will explore old age, disability, and capitalism in Caribbean slave societies, which kind of stems from my first book. I do discuss old age and disability a little bit, but I think that there is a lot more potential to discuss those kind of states, and, yeah.

Caroline: Well, that's really interesting. Thank you. I'll be looking forward to that work. Thank you so much, Stephanie, for your time. It's just been an absolute pleasure to talk to you. And I really appreciate what you've shared today.

Stefanie: Thanks, Caroline.

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Caroline: Thanks to everyone out there for listening or reading the transcript. Please join us again next time. Bye bye!