

## Disability History Association Podcast

Interview with Micah Khater

March 2021

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**Kelsey Henry:** Hello and welcome to another episode of the Disability History Association Podcast. I'm Kelsey Henry.

**Caroline Lieffers:** And I'm Caroline Lieffers.

**Kelsey:** And today it's our huge pleasure to be talking to our colleague, Micah Khater. Micah is a PhD candidate in History and African American Studies at Yale University. Micah you know that we're really looking forward to chatting with you today. Thank you so much for joining us.

**Micah:** I'm so excited to be here. It's really a pleasure to be in conversation with both you and Caroline, and I look forward to hearing, you know, your thoughts so that we have a great dialogue about what this chapter brought to the fore.

**Kelsey:** Great, we're so excited. I was wondering if you could paint the picture of your larger project. So how does this chapter fit within your larger dissertation project?

**Micah:** So the dissertation, which is called "Unable to Find Any Trace of Her: Black Women, Genealogies of Escape, and Alabama Prisons, 1920 to 1950"— you know, we always have those dates as bookends of the story. It's a cultural and social history of Black women who ran away from prisons, jails, and police in Alabama during the early 20th century. And the core of the dissertation theorizes that escape was not monolithic. What I mean by that is that escape contained multiple valances that were responsive to the sites and epistemes of gendered and racialized violence. So put another way, the choices that Black women made when running away from prison strategically challenged the specific ways in which their race and gender was weaponized against them.

And I think about this both spatially and in terms of epistemology. So to give a very clear sense, the dissertation is divided into two sections. The first section is called "Fugitive Geographies," and it centers that spatial analysis, that way of thinking about how Black women's escape is really rooted in certain spaces of domination, and that these spaces of domination are not all made the same, and reciprocally, that's why escape looked very different. So to give an example, Chapter 1 it's an analysis of how Black women strategically escaped the implementation of domesticity as a form of punishment within the prison. So very concretely, what that looks like is trying to sort out how Black women specifically deploy notions of Black subservience and loyalty that were conditioned and impelled in prison as they were caretakers for white prison employees in order to be able to walk out the front door during the day. And so like Pearl Finley, I have a lot of cases and I end up calling them kind of collectively a repertoire. A lot of cases of Black women who were forced to work in private homes on prison property and then leave in response to those very specific sites. Chapter 2 then kind of picks up at the point of the breach of the penitentiary walls, and so it's in the tradition of Katherine McKittrick's spatial analysis about thinking about critical geography and Blackness, and it delineates how the state's spatial domination spilled over past the walls of the prison. And then how Black women had to contend with this increasing New Deal-era cooperation between prison guards and police officers.

And that brings us to this chapter that we're here talking about today, which is thinking about how disability within the prison and Black women's petitions about their conditions of disability were spatial claims. The way that I do this, and the way that I think about this in conjunction

with the first two chapters, is that a lot of these claims are being made in response to the very specific sites of labor, the factory labor, the laundry work, and that claiming useless-ness to the state was wrapped up in these terms of labor and was wrapped up in very specific types of labor that were being done. And as it may come up later in the podcast, for instance there are Black women that I have sources of self-harming in ways that are meant to address and provide refuge from particular kinds of labor with the hands specifically.

I'll give a very brief overview of the second section, but I won't go into as much detail because this chapter is really situated in that first section. So the second section is called "Genealogies of Escape," and it interrogates how Black women contended with prison administrators' mobilization of the antebellum past through technologies that survived the abolition of slavery. So for instance, I look at escape notices, I look at the use of hunting dogs, and then finally the last chapter in that section considers the genealogical and twinned imperatives of running away and finding kin. And so that really, that is it, that is the dissertation.

**Kelsey:** Thank you so much for that really helpful contextualization. So Micah I already know a little bit about the pathways that led you into disability history and disability studies, but we would love to hear more about what this journey looked like for you. I know that your larger project has its foundational roots in carceral studies, Black feminist theory, and African-American history, and so maybe these aspects of your project and your engagement with those fields felt more immediately apparent to you. When did you realize you were also doing disability history, and that disability theory was a necessary part of the story that you were trying to tell? And how did your sources lead you in this direction?

**Micah:** That's a great question and one that I have since thought about a lot because, really, it was my sources. I did not envision that I was embarking on a project that demanded disability studies as a lens, not necessarily because I didn't think it was important or a really central analytic to a lot of work happening in Black feminist theory, Black studies, African-American history, generally, but because the prison as a site was a really confounding and complicated space when we think about disability for reasons that we can of course go into in more detail. But one of the most prominent examples that come to mind for me is dealing with violence in prisons and how that is working in tandem with disability in general in carceral sites.

And so what I mean by that, is that, for me, when I was looking at my sources, which of course are generated by the state, and when I say by the state I'll be a little bit more specific because that can be really nebulous and not really give folks a good sense of who are the state actors who are generating these documents. So the main people who are writing documents for the State of Alabama prisons in the first half of the 20th century are what we call the warden, the state doctors, which are traveling from different prison camp to different prison camp, from penitentiary to chain gang. And we also have folks who are working at the top bureaucracy in the state, who are then kind of responsible for cohering policy and also administering dictums and dictates to individual prisons and wardens. So because a lot of these documents that are produced about prison are being produced in the logics of the state and its actors who are really in charge of discipline and punishments, that means that disability is both everywhere and nowhere. Because on the one hand, disability we can see through the violence enacted by the state, we see the disabling effects of that violence, while the doctors might talk about that violence in varying nebulous, non-committal ways, because in part, that was their job to inure the state to any kind of criticism of cruelty, even as they themselves enacted brutality. There was also a sense that disability couldn't exist because Black women particularly who are incarcerated were already deviant in terms of their body and minds, and were also there to be worked. Disability could not really co-exist with that, and if it did, it had to be in very certain temporal terms. And what I mean by that is it had to be temporary, because the state was also in a state of austerity—this is really common in a lot of southern states for a long time in the 20th century, but particularly in the first half of the 20th century,

as we kind of leave the Progressive Era, even as the state is expanding certain services, they are also contracting and trying to think of themselves as a very slim facet of the political economy. But I didn't really think about all that theoretical infrastructure until my sources lead me there.

There was one source in particular that I'd like to talk about just really briefly, and it does open up the chapter. So I came across a letter, and I was looking for notices of escape. And in the State Archives of Alabama, these are organized in a multitude of ways. Some escape notices are in boxes that are literally runaway advertisements, somewhat a similitude of the genre of runaway advertisements from enslavement and I talk about that later in the dissertation. But others are actually letters that were written every time someone tried to run away from prison. These were letters written by the warden up to the state bureaucracy so that they would catalog every single attempt to run away. And in one such letter I found something really peculiar, which was very odd, and I'll just give a brief excerpt of the quotations and when I do I'll say that I'm quoting, but otherwise I'll just give a narrative overview.

So we're in December of 1924. It's Alabama so it's not particularly cold, it's towards the end of the year, and a woman named Pearl Finley who's been incarcerated for some time, it's in the middle of the day, she has been forced and coerced to work as a care laborer in one prison employee's household. And during the day, she gets up and she walks out. She makes it into a field near the prison, and of course, they immediately go looking for her, and as someone comes upon her, it's unclear what happens, but there's no discussion of any kind of a fight, there's no discussion of any kind of resistance, it's as if as easily as she walked out the door, she came back in. And so the letter that gets generated after her attempt to walk away, in broad daylight, is one that I had never seen before, because rather than discussing what was the appropriate punishment to be meted out, which were very carefully calculated and brutal ideas of how much the body—and this is, of course, in the context of the racialized and gender logics of the carceral state of Black women's bodies—how much punishment could be taken, instead, what was written was 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.” And so instead the warden suggests that rather than punish her, she had no willfulness to even walk away—the act of walking away from cooking was emptied of any kind of agential choice because of this state of her mind.

But of course, that wasn't uncontested because carceral logics were very confused and confounded within the broader discourse of ability and disability. And so even as the warden makes that note, the physician wrote a note at the bottom of the letter in his own handwriting, because these letters were typed, and it said “I will have to see this woman before I can pass my opinion.” And so here, in this moment, in this one letter, it's very short in the archive, I felt that both disability, as I mentioned before, is everywhere in nowhere. We know nothing really about Pearl Finley's state of being in terms of her embodied experience. We only know that disability is at the core of the question of whether she willfully walked away and thus whether she would be exposed to further disabling violence. And the complexities of that really compelled me to think about how to talk about disability, and white supremacy, and carcerality as these very entwined, messy, and entangled processes that sometimes produced results that I wouldn't expect, like I did in this letter from the archives.

**Kelsey:** Thank you so much for that, Micah. You've already touched on these themes of escape and refusal and the instrumentalization of disability that incarcerated Black women made use of to avoid penal labor in Alabama prisons from the 1920s through the early 1940s. I actually want to go back to the multiplicities of ways that disability is showing up for you in this chapter and in these sources, because this is such a critical part of the intervention that you're making and I think that you do it so beautifully. So you write about how disability shows up in this chapter as a result of carceral violence, but it's also naturalized as a metaphor for

innate Black deviance, or it's showing up in multiple registers, and you have this beautiful sentence, or it's part of a sentence in the chapter, where you say that disability discourse about racialized inability and violent punishment formed an entwining helix. I'm wondering if you could break down this concept of the entwining helix for us and all of the different ways that disability is showing up in the chapter.

**Micah:** Of course. And I would love to first say that that phrase, I have to credit Sami Schalk because I was in a conversation with her about this chapter, and at first I had a different phrase in there—I can't quite remember at this moment—but she very poignantly offered this helix shape as a better way to think about the continuities that exist. Because essentially that was both the possibilities in this archive and their limitations were the ways in which these categories run together. So if you think about an entwining helix, you think about the ways of all the sides are visible at certain moments, but as you turn the helix shape you see that the sides are also running together. So this is quite complicated, obviously I have space in the chapter to really write in quite detail about the theory behind this. I thought I would hone in on a few points that really informed how I came to this theoretical framework. And in so doing, I'll bring up a few anecdotes along the way to kind of help listeners get a sense of why I felt like all these categories needed to be discussed in tandem with each other. Because much like Pearl Finley's case in 1924, when she walks away, there is so much going on both in terms of what the state is producing about that moment, the knowledge they're producing about it, but also about what we can see within the source if we read against the grain.

So the first thing that I will bring up is I have a concept in the chapter called medicalized non-compliance, and I think this is a really powerful way to enter into this conversation about how disability discourse about racialized inability and violent punishment were forming this helix. So medicalized non-compliance came about for me because I was seeing in a lot of the archives—and this is, for listeners, this is like punishment records, which are annals of punishment, they're very violent but also very dispassionate sources to use Vincent Brown's language. This is also coming out of correspondence written between state physicians, wardens, and bureaucrats, so those three state actors I talked about earlier. And I noticed that in regards to a lot of the punishment being meted out to Black women in particular, there were these recurring words and what we get with those words are: stubborn, deviance—I won't name all of them because I think that a lot of them are quite violent, but it might even be something that sounds like a pseudo-medical term, like dementia simplex, or it might have been a contemporaneous medical term that was then reapplied and repurposed to describe someone who was being willfully dissident. And this is where the complexity lies, and I really appreciate this question, Caroline and Kelsey, because at once the state did their best to completely erase any traces of dissidence and resistance, and yet in every instance in which there was kind of a willful move against the conditions of being incarcerated or even sometimes not, it was met with violent punishment. So when I use the term medicalized non-compliance, I'm saying specifically that state physicians and wardens worked together to create certain definitions and named a lexicon, if you will, of Black women who were resistive, who had desire, who had the audacity to have willfulness in the face of punishment and discipline, and in using those names is suborned violence. My argument is not that the names necessitated or were necessitated by the situation, but that the names themselves and the kind of diagnoses of medicalized non-compliance legitimated and justified and made it almost necessary in the carceral system for Black women to be subjected to torture.

So I'll give an example of one person in particular where the records, they oscillate and they're all over the place. Because at first there was a real attempt to discipline this woman into working, and when they couldn't get her to do that, they use these terms of medicalized non-compliance to suborn punishment, but when that didn't work, disability comes into play in a really particular way. So in 1927, a 35-year-old woman named Mary Thomas begins her incarceration at Wetumpka State Penitentiary. And at the prison there was an internal factory that the state had contracted in order to make money to make both clothes for the state—

these women generated clothing for all people incarcerated in Alabama—but also it was an underwear factory that was being contracted by a private company. And the acting warden at the time, as for every Black woman who wasn't assigned to the kitchens or to other kind of isolated labor tasks would be assigned to the factory. And they tried to get her to sew, and they had a lot of difficulty—she just, for some reason, as Carlton the warden reports, she “did not want to do anything.” Now, we don't really know what those instances are like, we don't really know how much she resisted or whether this was just kind of a way to encapsulate his racialized gendered understandings of Black women's relationship to work. But they had the doctor examine her because they thought the only reason that she's not working is that there's something wrong with her, that there's something that is incapacitating her. And the warden was concerned specifically was that she was “playing crazy.” And this is the phrase that was specifically difficult to work through, because at once there's kind of embedded in it a sense of mental disability, but on the other hand, they're talking about her feigning it, that there's not the veracity, that it must undergo medical clearance before they really believe that her reason for not working is embedded in a racialized inability that they don't quite call disability, but is adjacent to a kind of disability. So the doctor examines her and basically says, no, there is nothing, they say, “I cannot find anything wrong with her mentally.” And so diagnosing Thomas as playing crazy would suborn violence. And this is the kind of language I'm talking about with medicalized non-compliance.

I made a certain decision when I decided to come on a podcast that I'm not going to go into details of how torture was acted out, specifically for listeners who don't have the choice of whether to pause—I just want to make sure that everyone can fully listen—but I will say that there was violent punishment that came after this. But then after a while, it flips. It was no longer playing crazy. They then decided that, in 1932, that Mary Thomas was in fact mentally disabled in a way that would allow them to send her to Mount Vernon Searcy Hospital, which was an institution. And she never returned home, she died in that psychiatric institution. But this story really stuck with me because she was implicated from the beginning in these discourses about racialized inability, and that racialized inability is sutured to the notion of a compulsion and a kind of innate nature of workability. So this is the complication here, is that Mary Thomas was at one seen as someone—as all Black women who entered Alabama's prisons—that was very workable, could be worked without regard for her body and mind, but at the same time, when she refused to work, it was seen as a racialized inability. These are kind of competing claims being made about Black womanhood, and it was never going to be identified as a disability in the sense of what her embodied experience of ability or disability was. Instead, when she could no longer be controlled by violent punishment, when they determined that no matter what they did, she was resistive, no matter what they did to her, she would not comply, they then instead went to a psychiatric institution, which was—Sami Schalk has a great summation of this in her work— which is the process of being institutionalized as we know, was “to be read and labeled as disabled in a different way than one is actually disabled.” That kind of source material is what I am trying to work through when I talk about the entwining helix of disability, the discourse about racialized inability, and then the violent punishment that is meted out in response to those things.

**Caroline:** Thank you so much for that, Micah. Following up in many ways on what you've already said, I think Kelsey and I would like to ask a little bit more about some of these criteria around disability. So you write in your chapter that state physicians and prison officials were often dismissive of Black women's reports of disabling violence that happened while they were incarcerated and denied their appeals for early release due to disability. And so we're wondering if you could say a little bit more about this business of authority and who got to define disability. What was their burden of proof, right? When was it believed and under what conditions?

**Micah:** That's a great question and one that demands somewhat of a contingent response because part of the difficulty of this archive is that records are both inconsistent and in plenty.

So there is an overwhelming amount of material, but some of the underlying logics, the very minutia policy decision, are subsumed under the quantity of paperwork that was produced. So why I start there is because it's not a straightforward answer, and it certainly isn't a straightforward answer between let's say 1920 and 1945 because administrations are changing, policies are changing. But I will say broadly speaking, the burden of proof was really the doctor's responsibility from start to finish. So I'll give listeners a little bit of a better sense of what I mean by that, because folks might not be sure, you know, how are doctors involved from start to finish.

So when someone was to be punished in prison, they would call the doctor in, and the doctor was responsible for interviewing and for performing a physical exam to see whether the person was physically fit and able to undergo punishment. But of course, this like a lot of reforms was really less about producing any spaces of refuge and safety, and more about indemnifying the system of punishment by using the guise of care as an alibi for the state. And from most of the records that I found from doctors, no one is really getting excused or released from punishment, no matter their physical condition, and these ranged widely, but doctors found pretty much everyone capable of undergoing brutal punishment.

To give you an example, and this is one of the examples that starts in the chapter, the section in which I talk about medicalized noncompliance, in the 1920s there's a young woman named Willie Young, who is at Speigner State Prison, which was where a lot of Black women were incarcerated before the reopening of Wetumpka State Penitentiary just a few years later. And Speigner had a massive cotton mill, and it was very violent. And this is something that comes up a lot in Black women's petitions later at Wetumpka when they're worried about getting sent back to Speigner. Willie Young is in some sort of a romantic—it's not clear whether it is coercive or not, so I won't speculate, because I don't have the information—but she's in some sort of, I shouldn't have said romantic, I should have said sexual encounter with a Black man. And the guards come upon this, and she is tortured by several of the guards. But in response, what happens when she writes her letter to the state warden general about this, she's basically saying, you have to come here, you have to see the evidence of what they've done to me. Really what the state does in response is two things: one, they send a physician inspector to go investigate the claims, and two, they take the word of a prison employee who wasn't even present at the time, and we know this from her letter, as the kind of final word on whether any of the things that she names very specifically happened to her. And most importantly, a doctor was present at the whipping. And this was very common, because again, like the initial evaluations, the presence of the doctor was meant to create a sense of order, and as we know from scholars who work on modernity and slavery and racial capitalism, order is essential, modernity is essential, the kind of bureaucratic management of people and violence is how the system is reproduced.

To answer the second question, when was disability believed and under what conditions, it was believed somewhat—it was racialized in gender terms, and if it was believed, it was not believed in the sense of, oh, this person has an embodied experience of being disabled, what kind of care and do they need, what kind of resources can be of use. Disability was believed in terms of surveillance, and what I mean by that is two things. One, in the 1940s in particular when we're moving toward a more expansive carceral state, which there is now a lot of county sites for incarcerated people in addition to the state sites, venereal disease is kind of this penultimate manifestation of racialized gendered ideas about sexual behavior, ability, incapacity, and so county officials and state officials wanted to track venereal disease in the 30s and 40s, and they subjected Black women and, really they subjected all women who are coming through the carceral system to gynecological exams in order to do so. But, again, it was only believed in terms of what they needed to surveil. So of course, they want to surveil venereal disease, so they see it, they mark it, they note it, they talk about it as a kind of incapacitating force for penal workers. And then in terms of surveillance, what I also mean is that in accident reports that get produced in the prison, which is one genre that I came across

a lot. And accidents, I mean, could vary, but that was a very broad term that the state could use. But they would have length of disability listed on the form, and that was always produced in relation to workability, and it was also kind of used in these kind of pecuniary terms of how much is the state losing in this accident, how much did the warden and the guards do wrong in whatever they abdicated their responsibility so that we have lost money. And so it was kind of a way for the state bureaucracy to surveil individual sites and for wardens and guards to surveil the capacity of individual workers in these sites.

**Kelsey:** Oh my gosh, that was such a multi-dimensional answer, and there are so many directions, so many questions, that are coming up for me around everything that you just said. I'm curious about the ways when we're talking about legibility, what kinds of disability and when disability became legible to prison wardens, to prison physicians. I'm curious about this distinction between mental illness or categories of, like, mental defect or inferiority and physical disability, and if in the records if you were seeing a tendency towards identifying and believing mental inferiority in Black women because that was already a naturalized part of the way that they were racialized, this idea of mental inferiority and deviance. Whereas physical disability was less legible because of, again, this racialized-gendered understanding of ability and disability that you're talking about. That Black women and Black people in general were often associated with hyper-able bodies, but inferior minds. I'm wondering how that distinction between the mental and the body were coming up for you while you were doing this research?

**Micah:** That's a great question. It provokes me to think a little bit about two very different examples in the archive in which it was a little bit of a struggle sometimes to cohere everything around this one term of disability because there was very divergent responses and preceding circumstances to Black women's attempts of fugitivity in relation to disability.

So the first example I'll give, which kind of opens the chapter after Pearl Finley, is of Josephine Coats, in the 1930s. She was temporarily paroled, and let me just pause for a second to give folks a sense of what that is because it's not really in our contemporary landscape of carceral terminology, at least to my knowledge, and it was a really big practice in the early 20th century in Alabama. So we go back to those austerity politics of the state, they were constantly concerned about how many people were in prison not because of people's welfare, obviously, to be clear, but because of the financial cost of incarcerating people. So the state often temporarily paroled people out and they often did this with Black women, sometimes they would do it to work in white people's homes as Sarah Haley delineates in *No Mercy Here*, in which she calls the domestic carceral sphere. And in this case, Josephine Coats was one of those people, she was paroled out to work in a white family's home with a date that she had to return to prison, and these dates were very important because the state surveilled these people and kept close tabs. So even though the technology they were dealing with in the 30s, they would have been dealing with a lot of letter writing to keep tabs on people, they did a remarkably efficient job at it. So the day when Josephine Coats was supposed to return came and went and she didn't come back to the prison, and when the white man for whom she had been working realized that she had missed a day, he frantically wrote to the recording secretary at the state capital, so someone who was kind of involved in this process of bureaucratically managing these paroles, and he noted that they were "having Josephine return" in this very kind of passive language that basically turned her into an object, and we know from Black studies the complexity of objecthood and how it is articulated through Black women. But he begged them not to "allow the incident to affect her standing," and he took the blame himself, he said, I am afraid "she must not have understood me," and then he calls her ignorant, perfectly submissive, and says "she intends to do the right thing."

And so I have a lot of stories of women who don't go back on their time, when the time comes, they try to stay out in any way they can, and one of the complexities of this story and the subsequent stories I tell this chapter is that I don't actually have archival material from Josephine Coats. I don't really know why she missed the date, I can't really be sure, but I do

know that her white employer, and eventually it seemed like she convinced both the state bureaucrats as well, did not believe that she was willfully dissident because she appeared "submissive, ignorant" and in some ways was seen as mentally disabled. And like you said, Kelsey, that kind of submission, that willingness to, in her white employer's words, "do the right thing," which is to perform under the terms of white supremacy, inoculated her from any kind of accusations of willfulness, which, in the system was the ultimate, the ultimate kind of thing to be punished and rooted out.

So we have on the one side Josephine Coats, who is kind of seen as under the cover of this inability to have will, and Kelsey you and I've had conversations at length about willfulness and disability, and I think it's still very complicated and messy to deal with. But then on the other hand we have Vera Nall, who around the same time writes to the state and is petitioning to be released, saying I have only one leg, and she's saying that her work, she cannot perform the labor that is being demanded of her because of her disability. And the state does not respond to this in the same way because it is seen, and in my opinion the issue here is this bifurcation of capacity and ability, and I think for Josephine Coats she was seen as incapacitated, but for Vera Nall who is saying I am unable to do this work, that is not the same as being incapable, incapacitated to do the work. And I see that as the essential divergence in how the state is responding.

**Kelsey:** That's a really, really helpful clarification. Thank you so much for that. I want to go back to something that you were saying that you were considering about the ways that mental inferiority in your archives were already naturalized to all incarcerated Black women. This is kind of a question about terminology. I noticed when addressing your subjects, the subjects of your analysis, you toggle back and forth between saying "disabled incarcerated Black women" and "disabled *and* incarcerated Black women," and the inclusion of incarcerated Black women, regardless of impairment, I think really does challenge our assumptions about who might qualify as a disabled subject in disability history. I'm curious about how you feel like your work troubles assumptions about an ability or disability binary, and when disability history is told through the lens of Black women's history, how does that particular lens complicate assumptions that we have about disability and ability?

**Micah:** What a great question and it makes me think specifically of Alison Kafer's work, in which she talks about how able-bodiedness is relational even as it is corporeal, and reciprocally, how disability is relational even as it is corporeal. It's about the body and the environment, and I think that this is how I navigate the stories I tell in the archive that I'm analyzing. Because while I am in line with a lot of disability studies scholars who shy away from this notion or the truism that everyone will experience disability in their lifetime, I shy away much like other disability scholars in saying that everyone is disabled and there is equity in that term, because that's not true. But what is true in terms of the rationality and how Black women's experience particularly in prison complicates the binary of ability and disability, is that, of course, some women entered prison disabled, but the compounding factor is that a lot of Black women left prison disabled who did not enter it disabled, or for those who entered it disabled might have left prison disabled in a different and compounding way than when they entered prison. And the reason for this is about environment, it has everything to do with the violent apparatus of the state.

So for instance, in the early 1920s, a woman named Mary Etta Timmons is incarcerated, and she begins to have symptoms of pellagra, and it's really hard to determine how she ends up suffering from pellagra, which for those of you who don't know, is a disease that essentially stems from nutritional deficiencies and it does begin to affect your neurology. Pellagra could have stemmed from innate circumstances at the prison, meaning that the kind of food was not nutritionally fulfilling, the food was spoiled or rotten, it could also be that she herself chose and willed to not eat. I don't know why she had pellagra, but the way that the state talks about her having pellagra and the conditions that compel them to want to send her to a psychiatric



institution instead is because that there's something innate—again, it goes back to this racialized inability—as if by nature of her being Black, she is somehow more susceptible to a disease of nutritional deficiency, even as she is seen as very workable. And this I think would draw a lot of parallels for my colleagues who work specifically within chattel and plantation slavery, because I know that there are paralleling logics here about both workability and the body's susceptibility or inoculation to disease, either, you know, there are these kind of confused binaries that definitely exist around Black women's bodies. But it's so interesting because there are these moments of absolute confoundment, that we know that racist patriarchal ableist states have very confused logics, but the ironies of those logics are never felt so much as they are in this case, because even as they are kind of confounded by her pellagra, which seems quite clear that it's stemming from her environment in one way or another, the place that they suggest to send her to in response, which is to this psychiatric institution at Mount Vernon, was where studies were done to figure out how pellagra is actually produced in the body. Meaning like this was the site in which doctors came into before the 1920s to perform studies to find out why are people experiencing these disparate symptoms that we now call pellagra, and they realized it was because of nutritional deficiencies. And so the very place that they're suggesting to send her is the very environment that's been steeped historically in producing this kind of disability, and then relinquishing any kind of care in its aftermath.

**Kelsey:** Wow, I think using pellagra as an example was so helpful for clarifying to me something that you said earlier about the ways that the environmental factors that contributed to disability or debilitating in carceral spaces could be unseen or invisibilized because the body that was experiencing pellagra was Black. And even though pellagra could be linked to nutritional deficiencies because Black bodies were already seen as deficient, that was a more convenient rationale than the environment. Yeah, wow.

This is a little bit of a pivot. I wanted to talk with you more about the place of disability theory and theory in general in your project. And so I know you already mentioned Alison Kafer; I know that she's an interlocutor for you. Can you talk to us about some of the disability theorists who have inspired your work, and on the other hand, talk to us a little bit about vernacular theories that disabled incarcerated Black women developed, or the ways that you read theories of freedom into your archives. And were there instances where your historical actors or sources either extended or upended some of the 21st century disability theories that you're working with. So that's a multi-pronged question about 21st century disability theory that's inspired you, vernacular theories of your actors, and how they work together.

**Micah:** Great, I love that. Such a great opportunity to discuss all of the wonderful scholars that I've been able to be in conversation with. And I think from both the chapter and I hope for listeners from hearing the podcast a little bit today, I hope that you've gotten the sense that I do think of theory really capaciously. I've had a few really great conversations with colleagues and friends about when do we ascribe theorization to our actors. And I, you know, was really informed by Aimee Cox who's an ethnographer and anthropologist, her work in *Shapeshifters* her book on Black girlhood and what she calls the choreographies of citizenship in thinking about how we really rigorously treat our subjects' theorizations, even if they don't use the language of what we might consider like high theory or a very academic language to discuss theory. But none the less, I do use a lot of academic theorists. So let's talk about a few of those.

So first of all, my work is very much indebted to and informed by Sami Schalk's work, and I specifically have been able to think with her work about how to get at the nexus of these interlocking structures of violence without falling into the trap of simply saying that disability is only and always a metonym for Blackness used by white supremacy. Because I think that's certainly a trend in some work, to relegate and silo disability as a discursive structural violence rather than an embodied experience that has real material consequences. Reciprocally, I really

benefited immensely from the discourse that has kind of emerged between Jasbir Puar's work *The Right to Maim* and Liat Ben-Moshe's *Decarcerating Disability*. And thinking about, with both of those works I think the real richness there is certainly how do we attend to what the possibilities, the futures, the beautiful aspects of the embodied experience of peoples' disabled lives without neglecting how Black women in particular often become disabled. And that's not to say, of course, that violence precedes every Black women's disability, that's absolutely not true. But it is to say that particularly in the context of prisons, that disability is very difficult to extricate from the violence, the discursive and the physical violence that act in tandem to create structures of subordination. But really, I have to say, one of the first pieces of theory that compelled me to take my time with this material to really get into the meat of it, was the pamphlet from Sins Invalid, which is a Disability Justice Collective, and they have this really wonderful pamphlet primer called *Skin, Tooth, and Bone: A Disability Justice Primer*. And it was after reading that that I understood and better, I felt like I had more tools to really contend with my archive even as I'm dealing with instances and references to disability that are often very spectral. And what I mean by that is not that they're immaterial, but that they're opaque, as in the case of Josephine Coats or Pearl Finley we're getting these descriptions under the terms of their captivity, and that complicates it, but I felt like I had the tools with these theorists, I feel like I was empowered and emboldened to kind of think critically about how disability was the necessary analytic to look at these archives.

So I'll pivot here too to the second part of the question, which was about, so given all these disability theories I'm engaging with, then how am I then mapping it onto how disabled incarcerated Black women theorized freedom, and what did these freedom—theories of freedom look like. For me, one of the primary sites of this theorization is in the relationship to labor, and I think about this a lot partially because a lot of the archives I have from disabled incarcerated Black women are talking about themselves and their bodies and minds in relationship to the labor they are forced to do, for very good pragmatic reasons, because they understood in a very sophisticated and nuanced way that the state valued them in so far as they could labor for them, and that their capacity to labor was an essential site of domination and punishment in the prison, and if their labor was then evacuated, whether this was a veritable experience, whether it was a way to strategically position the body and the mind to feign inability to work—although I try to stay away from that because I don't really have the ability to determine what their workability was, I think, again, part of their theorization was, I have the right to determine and tell you what my workability is, what I can do and when I don't want to do it. And so what was really striking to me is the language that I kept coming across of uselessness to the state, and this is really poignant, very powerful language to me because, again, it was very sophisticated and it was a very nuanced and demonstrative argument about the pecuniary relationship of the state's prisons to Black women who are forced to work in them. Because they're not arguing "I didn't do anything." That's not their argument, and it's not because they did or they did not, it's simply because that wouldn't have worked. They're not arguing that – you know, some try to argue "I'm not well," but those petitions don't always really go anywhere because, again, the state doctors perform surveillance of those claims, and so really your wellness is adjudicated by a doctor who thinks anyone is well for punishment, and so when are they really going to say that you're too ill be in prison. And so instead, they draw the conclusions that they know will be most effective at getting them out of prison, which is, "I cannot work for the state any longer, I will become a financial burden—to use the language of the state—rather than a productive mechanism for the state." And so if we think about what Saidiya Hartman says about liberalism's compulsions for Black labor and disability, these twin concepts, or contorted willfulness, Kelsey, to kind of use some of the language that you and I have talked about, under the guise of free labor, that is what these women are contesting. Because this is not free labor, right, but it is actually tricky in the language of post-emancipation, free market labor. And so these women are contesting what the state is compelling them to do and to perform docility, I mean the state wants them to perform docility in this labor.

And so, let's take it one step further though, because the story about one woman named Mary Alexander is really compelling. She is incarcerated and writes to Governor William W. Brandon in 1923. And she is very detailed about her disability, and also that she is having bowel and rectum trouble, these are her words. She knows she has to be very specific. She can't eat anything but milk and eggs, and very little of that. That letter is not successful, so then she writes another letter and says, I can't do anything, I'm not able to work. And so here, Mary Alexander understands that not only, in Sarah Haley's argument about Black women were only legible to white authorities as what she called "imbecilic, monstrous bodies," is what Sarah Haley's words are in her book, but I'm saying that Alexander and others had to pair the notion of the monstrous body, which is racialized and gendered, with the material consequences of disability, that she was not a productive worker to the state.

But I bring her out not just to reiterate what I just said, because actually there's something else that happens with Mary Alexander. So a month later, after they do release her, because she can't work, the warden at one of the prison camps, at a mine, calls one of the bureaucrats in Montgomery and says he has information about Mary Alexander. So we see kind of how the surveillance continues after release. And there's basically an exchange of information in which someone tells the warden that Mary Alexander has been hanging out with people somewhere, it's unclear, who run a "blind tiger," which is an ableistic name for illegal drinking salons during prohibition, and this is the language that they're using, not my words. And that basically, because she is hanging out and partying and drinking that this should cast doubt on her inability and illness that she used to say she couldn't work. And so what ends up happening is they revoke her parole and she has to come back. But why I tell the story is because what I see in this, even though I don't have Mary Alexander's words after her parole was revoked, is that she articulates an inability to work, a uselessness to the state, she gets out and then she continues to theorize freedom in her actions. I don't know if she ever writes about them, but she's living a life that says, I do not need to work, but I can still have a full-fledged, fulfilling life. And so it's really challenging liberalism's compulsion to be like a good worker, right, that's your worth, that's your value in life is to be a good worker, especially for Black women. And I think it's particularly her participation in these kind of illegal economies that is seen as a subversion of the story that she told to the state. But to me, this is actually a continuation of what she was claiming in her letters, that I will not work for you, I am disabled, I will not do this work, but it doesn't mean that I have to perform that disability in a particular way. But unfortunately the state does view it that way, and that's why she is sent back.

**Caroline:** You've been kind of alluding to this a lot through our conversation, but I was wondering if you actually did want to say more about that relationship between chattel slavery and the story that you're trying to tell. Both of them, of course, centering around questions of Blackness, ability, and labor.

**Micah:** So, simply put, historiographies of enslavement are really essential to the dissertation as a whole. I made a note here that it stalks my archives in really particular ways, some are more apparent than others. So I'll start with the more apparent ones, and then I'll bring us to a little bit more of the abstract, intergenerational ones that I really am using to anchor the latter half of the dissertation. So in the most concrete sense, chattel slavery is producing these ideas about discipline and punishment that are being used in the prison. My advisor and I had many good conversations about how to talk about this, the kind of violence that is descendent from slavery, and she offered, Crystal Feimster, she offered this terminology of "survive the abolition of slavery." And I think that's a really great way to put it, because whippings, which is one of the primary ways that people were punished in prison, were not kind of in a vacuum. I mean, none of these violences are occurring in a vacuum. And even if the state itself does not see the direct connections and means—even if they're not conscious, the state actors that I introduced in the beginning of the podcast, are consciously thinking about the iterative and intergenerational significance of what they are doing and how they are including discipline and punishment, the epistemological productions around these, meaning like how people how have

weaponized them and used them, they are also intergenerational and they are improved upon, and I mean that not in a way of reform, as if torture and brutality could ever be reformed, which is unequivocally cannot be, but what I mean is that they are undergoing the illusions of betterment, and that is how the conditions of paperwork mandates to stay within 10, 15, or 21 lashes, and that's one of the only details I'll give about the violence. That's how they are adapted and used. And so I can see very keenly in my archives how these productions of violence are so deeply entwined with how violence was used as a system of surveillance and punishment during chattel slavery.

But it also stalks my archive in another way. And this is what I really try to take up in the second section, because although I am telling a story, in Kelsey's words, which I love, this permutation, of permutation, and somewhat continuity, I'm also grappling with how Black women significantly ruptured the continuity and descendancies of violence, of slavery. So what I mean by that is I have a chapter in which I write about a racially ambiguous woman who was racialized as Black, as a white-passing Black woman, and this genre of escape notices is really important to this chapter because in it I kind of trace the epistemological connections between how slave owners are trying to discipline light-skinned and white-passing enslaved women into the category of Blackness and thus away the category of freedom, and reciprocally how in the 1920s and 1930s, prison officials are trying to shore up racial invariableness because of the intergenerational significance and association of Blackness with bondage. Which is to say that when this woman runs away, they are very concerned with her ability to be white-passing, because they want people to understand her when they see her as a mirage of freedom and not freedom itself, because whiteness, of course, even the white women are incarcerated in Alabama, the numbers are quite low and the intergenerational significance of what that incarceration means and how it is meted out to them is significantly different. So, in that way, I'm also tracing kind of the ephemera of memory and intergenerationalism, and I also am really trying to attend to the fact that a lot of these women, especially in the 20s, when they're incarcerated, are only a generation or two out from slavery.

And so what actually prompted me to think about this term that I used for the whole project, "genealogies of escape," is my own experiences. I'm a Lebanese-American, Arab-American woman, and my father and his family were in the Lebanon civil war in the 70s and 80s, and they were kind of caught in the crosshairs in Beirut. And I was thinking how the stories of the war that I never experienced are really foundational to how I move through the world. They inform a lot. And my memories of Lebanon, like the land that I walk in, the physical places I go in Beirut, because I don't live there, and even if I did, I think about the war in relationship to it a lot. And this project really helped me make those connections about genealogy and significance of land so that when I went back to my archives after I kind of spent time thinking about this very personal nature of memory, it became apparent to me that there is—I don't have smoking gun evidence for this, but I talk around it using different sources—that the intergenerational significance, what stories might have been told about people running away from enslavement, the land, the significance of landmarks, whether it's a tree, whether it's a church, whether it's a particular road, and I get these from the 1930s ex-slave narratives, these had bearing on when Black women right away from prison. Because there was something iterative and recursive about it, and it's not kind of an anachronistic collapsing of the two, of course not, but it's to say that how can slavery which is only a generation or two apart, and for which stories kind of blossom both in violent but in very significant ways for people, how can this not be endemic to the very land that these women are traversing, both metaphorically and literally. And so that's kind of how that chattel slavery has factored into my work.

**Caroline:** Thank you so much for that answer. I also want to talk to you a little bit more about industrial capitalism and racial capitalism. So labor historians like Sarah Rose are of course writing a lot about how disability was kind of redefined under industrial capitalism. How does that look when put in this context of racial capitalism that you're writing about?

**Micah:** Well to return to one of the earlier points that we've been discussing here, disability, or rather how the state deployed it as a metonym for Blackness, was defined in austere terms because prisons were under the paternalistic guardianship of state divested in social welfare. So what I mean by that is that disability was merely a way of accounting the fluctuating labor numbers. You know, when we talked about the very temporal nature of how they're thinking about disability—it's almost less of a permanence of a corporeal embodied experience and more about time. How much time will we lose, how much time will we gain. Time was really an important concept in the prison, so much so that when one Black woman steals the clock from the factory it is an enormous uproar by the wardens and the guards because time is what they are counting. If you not do your tasks, which is what they call doing a certain number of sewing, sewing a certain number of products within a certain time, you're going to face punishment. So when I think about Sarah Rose's work in particular, which I kind of see as a tracing of how disabled people are both maligned and haltingly included in the developments of industrial capitalism, I think about the way that workability is really kind of married to an ablebodiedness, but an ablebodiedness that can be supplanted or mechanized—I'm thinking here specifically about Rose's argument about the Ford factories and how disability can almost be bridged into ablebodiedness through this kind of inclusion in the terms of workability. But this isn't what happens in the prison. Because it's workability—and I use that term throughout our podcast—yes, workability is essential. But workability is not narrow and exclusive in the prison in terms of Black women's experiences, because by nature of their race and their gender and almost regardless of their state of disability or ability, which again, that binary is very fuzzy and not clear, they are workable. And so in this way, there is no acknowledgement of violence as in vulnerabilities in the prison, there is only kind of a temporal measurement of how much time are you truly incapacitated to work. So in that sense, you know, I see convergence in the discussions of industrial capitalism, to kind of zoom back out here and talk about Rose's work a little bit, but I think from a vantage point of racial capitalism, what gets added here is that there was not a concern about the kind of dependency of Black women, because that already existed. There was already the terms that Black women were dependents of the state that needed to be worked, they needed to be productive laborers for the state. And so in some ways, disability, when it was acknowledged, was acknowledged again in the terms of medicalized noncompliance in some ways so that racialized inability takes over.

And I know that it can be maybe a little tricky because we're using a lot of these different terms here, but maybe the simplest way for listeners is to just put it this way, that under the terms of what a white woman in the Northeast, with the story of industrial capitalism in Rose's monograph might be, that there's kind of both a halting inclusion into domestic work for disabled white women. For disabled Black women, there is a compulsion of constantly being in the service of white people, and that disability, you know, in Josephine Coats's example, for instance, that disability actually only further suborns that indentured kind of labor in servitude, or in the case of Vera Nall who only has one leg, it's a fleeting thought for the state that actually doesn't preclude her from workability in so much as it proves her need to be worked. I wouldn't say that that's perfectly true across the board because there are some disabilities and medical conditions that the state does say, okay, we don't really want to pay for you anymore, but I think they would go to a very far point before they would ever say that, and I think it has everything to do with the terms of penal and racial capitalism.

**Caroline:** There's something really interesting there too about the forced labor that happens at asylums and other institutions, and the way that occupational therapy is fed into that as well in the 20th century. So just sort of making me think about pieces of my own work differently, and I really appreciate that. I think Kelsey and I would both really like to hear you speak more about some of the methodological issues that came up when you were doing this work as you're trying to salvage Black women's strategies of survival from this archive of state records of corporal punishment. So what kind of reading practices and methodological strategies did you adopt as you were working with these sources?

**Micah:** That is such a wonderful question and it's one that I think about a lot in my work, particularly because of the constraints of the archive. So I think to begin to answer this question, I would like to reference a section in the chapter which I call "exiting one wound through another." And this section is really about how I make sense of documents that are discussing and indicating that Black women sometimes harmed themselves in order to escape work. And I had to wrestle with the best reading practices for this section given the opacity of records, given that many of these records are produced under already violent circumstances and then are ascribing certain violences to the women themselves. And so to begin what I'm going to do is I'm going to read a very brief part of that section, which is narrative, of how I describe Emma Rose Cooper, a young woman's experience of Camp Ketona, which is another carceral site, that led her to drink or perhaps fake drinking, Lysol. And after that, I'll just briefly trace some of the sources I used to write this section, we can maybe have a great discussion about speculative writing in historical monographs.

"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. Petit larceny, her cause for punishment. Didn't someone once tell her that petit was French for small? Nothing felt little about the buildings and halls covered in shrubbery and flowers. She could almost overhear the inspector who came through every week: 'the grounds are attractive,' he might say, as he dipped in between the many courts that surrounded them. But she knew better, her arms dipped into vats of water that at first scalded, but now cracked her skin open. There was nothing beautiful about the tired cloth they all wore, the kind they couldn't get clean even though they washed heaps of linen all day long. The sun might have been a welcome companion, even the rain, but the camp was covered, the smell of laundry burrowed in their noses, it was all they smelled. In the dining hall, they were all orderly and quiet. Isn't that what the jailman had said? Because there was nothing left to say. The taste of food long gone, swirling in the dirty water and soap. Someone may have sneered that the doctors made you tell them if you had trouble peeing or if it itched bad down there. 'What do you mean?' she asked, knowing you had something to do with what she smelled when everyone's trip down to wash in a single bathtub. Fifty women swaying, three to the tub at a time. By the time Cooper got in, the water was cold. She tried to stand, keeping her feet submerged and only splashing the murky water up when she needed. Camp Ketona was where Jefferson County Court got you. Cooper was eighteen, or was she twenty-five? Camp Ketona was where Black women like her laundered next to the county home, and the place for the 'feeble-minded and insane.' Camp Ketona was a chained hell. 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. She knew Lysol from all the newspapers and store windows, plastered everywhere as a cure-all disease from disease to fleas, it made things clean and fresh. Or was it a bottle of old water? Cooper smelled it until her nostrils burned. She stood right there steam pulling at her hem and drank two large swallows of it. At dinner time, the warden was mad. He found about Cooper had drunk Lysol and yelled at her. She sat down when they told her that the doctor would have to come out to inspect her. She wasn't sure what they would do. She felt warmth in her belly, even though she cried a little; 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. Cooper exhaled, opened her mouth, and 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. She was just a malingerer.”

So that ends the section about Emma Rose Cooper. It was a very difficult section to write with a very limited range of documents, but I'd like to talk a little bit about why I spent time with the imagery. I'm also a creative writer and a poet, and so partially, I think analytically through images a lot. But there was something particular about the story that compelled me to write about it in a narrative way. Partially it was the opacity of whether she drank the Lysol or not, because the documents are very confused, of course, they're produced by the state. She insists that she drank the Lysol, the doctors say she didn't, and yet they still give her the emetic solution to make her vomit.

I start this section with the context of Camp Ketona because I found one of the methodologies that's really important to me is when I read sources, I read them to resist the logic and chronologization—I don't know if that's the word, but I just made it a word if it's not—but the chronologization of the state, meaning how the state sequences things, how their logic demands that they produce documents. So in order to write this section, I had a few letters, an accident report. I went to the newspapers and looked up what the weather was like, and I looked up descriptions of Camp Ketona from other letters I had. And what is lost if Cooper's story is told as if it springs from a singular accident report rather than collaged alongside other sources is all of the leading moments, all of the little violences, the slow deaths, if you will, of this carceral violence, of the ways that it instrumentalizes and produces disability, in a way, that led Cooper—and I use this language later in that section—to delve, she had to delve deeper into a kind of violence in order to escape this kind of collages of violence that she was faced with. So, the archival materials are organized in the logic of the state, so if we just read this accident report, we have Emma Rose Cooper, we have this day, we have her going to the dining hall and telling them she drank the Lysol, and we have the aftermath, and her state recorded disability of three days for what happened. But instead, I wanted to give a sense of all the environments—we're going back that kind of notion of the corporeal as being spatial—all of the environments that contributed to this decision to either drink the Lysol or at least to say that she drank the Lysol.

But I also think, again, this illustrates, and I do this analytical work after talking about the narrative, so I don't just let the narrative hang, I also give the reader a sense of like, what are we analyzing this for, and it's important that the story is told as a way to resist—and I think this is a methodology—the very specific causal chronologies that the state depends on, meaning that how the states saw Black women's actions as precedents for rather than responses to violence. Because if we sit just with the accident report, this is the precedence to the violent treatment she was given. It is *her* actions. But instead, if we look capaciously, and I found it was most compelling to do this narratively, and I will say that although the section is speculative, pretty much most every sentence is grounded in a source. There are things that I do, and the places that I bend a little bit beyond, I oftentimes put in question marks to make sure that my reader understands that I'm, you know, speculating here, that I'm not quite sure, but by doing this, by organizing it and really rooting it in what I imagine Cooper's daily experience of being incarcerated would have been, I am trying to upend this notion and show that even as Black women were forced into these quarters of further violence to themselves, it was a response to violence, rather than a precedent for it.

**Kelsey:** Micah, I'm wondering – you know I have a question about Black willfulness. I'm curious, though, if you could say a little bit more about—your conversation about speculation and speculative methods made me think about the way that you're working with understandings of fugitivity and fugitive movements. So I'm wondering if you could say a little bit more about the ways that you understood incarcerated disabled Black women's escape strategies and theorizations of freedom as being demonstrations of fugitivity, like what that means for you in your work. And to what extent do you understand speculative methods as a kind of fugitive methodology. And really where I'm going with that does have something to do

with salvaging an account of Black willfulness in an environment where there were so many attempts by wardens, by physicians, to strip Black women of will. How does speculation potentially lend itself to a salvage project that is thinking about reading Black willfulness back into an archive that is constantly disavowing it?

**Micah:** That's a really beautiful question. Thank you for asking that. I actually feel honored that this is even coming up because it is so central to my work, and I've made it such a point, or I've tried at least in my work, to really center desire and willfulness. So I'll zoom out a little bit and just say something about willfulness first, and then I'll make my way back toward speculation as a fugitive methodology, which I really like and we should discuss more in the future. I see the project as recovering how Black women navigated outside of the hallmarks of state subjecthood, like fitness for work, productivity, loyalty to capitalism, loyalty to employer. But I do that very specifically through, and I always use the analytic of desire, resistive desires, is what I think of it as. But I think willfulness captures it more capaciously because that was what was at stake for the state in terms of rooting out, erasing, and contorting will, but more importantly, it was what was essentially at stake for Black women who were incarcerated, because willfulness was something that was very punishable but it was the fabric, the spiritual fabric, material of life for people who were surviving, who are trying to find spaces of refuge, which is part of the title of this chapter, amongst this kind of relegation to refuse. One of the questions, at least that is percolated if not articulated exactly like this, it is recovering Black willfulness in the face of debilitating violence, I don't think that's too strong of a word, I think that's on point, but I think it's trying to recover it in a way that also doesn't castigate and relegate these women to a state of constant resistance, because that is an exhausting analytic in a lot of historical methodology about the binary of oppression and resistance, if we're looking for systems and structures of oppression, we're necessarily looking for resistance. One of the things that I really, I envisioned and wholeheartedly hope that this project would not become was a story of binary of oppression and resistance. And I think this actually takes us back nicely to Emma Rose Cooper in the narrative I wrote about her, because part of my methodology of writing very narratively from the sources I can of these women's lives is to try to not render them only in these spectacular moments of subjection, because—and this is something I'm constantly humbled by and think about as a historian—I have maybe three documents, maybe four, on Emma Rose Cooper. And she lived an entire life, she had an existence that I can't even begin to imagine, and I'm not so arrogant as to think that my few-page narrative description of Emma Rose Cooper somehow captures even an iota of what her life was to her. Because her life was not only framed in these terms of oppression and resistance. And particularly that's of course very important when we're dealing with Black women's history because so often we want to identify and see the politics of resistance in people, we want to create resistance narratives for many reasons that I won't go into right here, because I think a much more interesting question remains, which is speculation as a fugitive methodology for salvaging Black willfulness, particularly.

And I think what speculation allows us to do, and I've read a lot of different ideas about critical fabulation, which is what Saidiya Hartman talks about extensively in her work, I also think that Marisa Fuentes's work is really important here. But Marisa Fuentes—actually, I was in conversation with her a few months ago, and she reminded me of something really important, which is critical fabulation, according to some of the methodologies laid out by Saidiya Hartman is not just kind of creating what is not in the archive, but acknowledging the limitations of what we can never create out of the archives, what we can never actually narrativize out of the archives, to get out of it. So I don't speculate as a way to pretend that I somehow am giving Emma Rose Cooper a chronology, a genealogy that doesn't exist in the archives, but should. But instead, I think what speculation allows me to do is it allows me to come up and take a breath out of the state's very suffocating narratives that again, are about these specific causal chronologies that Black women's actions are precedents for violence and then just sitting with the aftermath of violence.



But I do like your words, Kelsey, and I think that there's something really important there about fugitive methodology. And for a second there maybe let's meditate on fugitivity for a second too, because that's essential to my project, it's essential to how I'm thinking about disability here as a spatial analytic. And so for me, fugitivity is, I now it's not two things, and I'll say what I think it is, even though I think escape is not monolithic, but fugitivity is not from A to B. It's not just from point A to point B, and that's it. And that's kind of something we really understandably often get in the Underground Railroad and slavery. I understand why, because it's a notion of unfreedom to freedom, although that's very troubled by what's going on in states that don't have slavery, especially post the Fugitive Slave Act. But I also think that fugitivity is not all-encompassing, even as it is a way in which for people to avoid and get around state violence, and I think that's maybe what brings me to what I think of what a fugitive methodology is, it's not trying to get to a very specific place that the archive does not yield. It's also not trying to render people in constant states a fugitivity. I think instead, it's a way of—and I do this in one of my chapters and I think this is a nice image—it's a vanishing point, and I use that image in one of my chapters, which I've had many conversations with people, both artists and scientists about what a vanishing point is. I will say the way I understand a vanishing point so folks don't get confused about my metaphor, is it's like the point in a painting, or also if you're standing on a railroad tracks, and you see the parallels converge. For me it's not that fugitivity is like, okay, well, that's it, once you go past the point of the horizon and you can't see the railroad tracks being parallel, they're just fugitive forever. That's not what fugitivity is. For me, it's like we get us to a vanishing point, and then it's the possibility and what could have been otherwise that's on the other side, and I think that's what speculation is to me, is like, what is otherwise. And rather than say for sure what it is, because I can't, because it's past that vanishing point for me, instead I just think it's an alternative state of being, and for me, for this chapter, for these archives, it's these disabled incarcerated Black women who are arguing like, Mary Alexander, I can't work, not going to work for you., but my condition of being disabled has nothing to do with how I'm theorizing freedom on the outside in terms of what you think my disability precludes me from doing, in the way that you think my behavior should be. So Mary Alexander is not a perpetual fugitive. Pearl Finley is not a perpetual fugitive. Fugitivity is a conditional state of being that was responsive to the labor they were forced to do, the violence that they were encountering. And their fugitivity, likewise, in my opinion, was so rooted in willfulness, because everything about running away from prison was about taking the will of the state, the compulsion to be a docile laborer under the terms of liberalism, and refusing it. And that fugitivity looks very different in the case of women who talk about their disabilities, as we've talked about in this podcast today, there were particular valences. But for other women, there were different valences. So that's kind of where my project is intervening and trying to investigate.

**Kelsey:** Thank you so much, Micah. I really appreciated this imagery in the language around the vanishing point and speculation as revealing a vanishing point between the limitations of the archive and social lives that cannot be derived from the archives themselves, but you can gesture towards an otherwise—and it does leave space or leave room for fugitive, fugitive movement.

**Caroline:** Thank you so much, Micah, for your time, for sharing your work with us. It's just been an absolute privilege and we're really, really grateful.

**Micah:** Thank you guys so much. It has been an absolute pleasure to be here with you today, and I really look forward to continuing these conversations in the future.

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

