

Between Fitness and Death: Disability and Slavery in the Caribbean. Stefanie Hunt-Kennedy. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020. 244 pp. \$28. Paperback. ISBN-13: 9780252085062.

In a scene from the documentary series *Redemption Song*, cultural theorist Stuart Hall takes viewers to the still functioning Saint Nicholas Abbey Plantation in Barbados. Hall follows a descendant of slaveholders now serving as a plantation tour guide who jollily describes the leisurely life of the sugar planter, resting daily in an adjustable chair to drink rum punch without barely having to move his arm. As Hall observes, “gentility indoors hid some harsh realities outside.” In the sugar mill, outside, the guide describes a machete that sat next to the steam engine, waiting to amputate the hand of an enslaved descendant worker when it would get caught in the machine. If the St. Nicholas Abbey steam engine and the planter’s chair were post-slavery imports, the racially determined exposure to violence was a legacy of the “disabling power” of slavery in the British Caribbean.

Stephanie Hunt-Kennedy’s *Between Fitness and Death* demonstrates how hereditary racial slavery in the British Caribbean operated through the calibrated production of disabling violence in the form of anti-Black injury and harm. This violence was central to the creation of a liminal space “between fitness and death” which defined the predicament faced by enslaved people in the British Caribbean. Delving into cultural, economic, gender, and legal history, *Between Fitness and Death* provides a transformative account of British Caribbean slavery, demonstrating that disability cannot be understood as a discrete aspect within the history of slavery but rather must be seen as central to slavery’s constitution, regulation, reproduction, and legacy.

This book is wide-ranging in historical scope, extending from the early history of British colonialism in the Caribbean during the sixteenth century through the era of slavery emancipation in the nineteenth century. The first chapter, “Imagining Africa, Inheriting Monstrosity,” examines how early English colonial cultural equivalences between Blackness, deformity, and monstrosity conditioned the emergence of hereditary racial slavery in the English Caribbean colonies of Saint Christopher, Barbados, and Jamaica. The chapter’s understanding of the gendered construction of monstrosity draws upon Jennifer Morgan’s *Laboring Women* in its analysis of racialized sexual difference in English representations of African men and women’s sexual organs as distended, burdensome, and fundamentally different from English bodies (27). As Hunt-Kennedy notes, early equivalences between Blackness and monstrosity would have implications far beyond their origins. Throughout the book, Hunt-Kennedy draws upon new archival research while also often returning readers’ attention to sources familiar to scholars of the British Atlantic world including Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Edward Long’s *History of Jamaica*, Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, and the 1661 Barbados Slave Code. Yet, while returning to these familiar sources, the book consistently offers new insights into the centrality of disability within the history of slavery in the British Caribbean.

Between Fitness and Death next considers the disabling power of slave law. The chapter “Between Human and Animal” emphasizes that slave law in Jamaica and Barbados governing enslaved people’s lives derived power “from its ability to see Africans’ humanity and effectively disable it, to take the slave apart as a whole legal being.” (41) This disabling power was central to slavery’s juridical structure which enabled anti-Black physical harm, sexual violence, and death.

As the chapter “Unfree Labor and Industrial Capital” demonstrates, the disabling power of the law took material form in violence on plantations and in the market for enslaved people. Enslaved people’s laboring capacity and price formed in a context in which impairment and illness were everyday aspects of plantation operation. As Hunt-Kennedy persuasively argues, the common focus upon the demographics of “natural decrease” on sugar plantations—when population death outstrips birth—often obscures the reality of enslaved people’s lives lived between the boundaries of fitness and death (71).

Enslaved people challenged this regime of physical and psychological violence through resistance including flight and evasion. This resistance is partially indexed in so-called “runaway advertisements” which describe enslaved people’s flight and document individual efforts for self-liberation. Drawing upon an analysis of approximately 1,200 advertisements, the chapter “Incorrigible Runaways” demonstrates how these advertisements depended upon descriptions of physical and psychological wounds inflicted upon enslaved people in order to facilitate re-enslavement. These advertisements were part of an effort to counter the subterranean realities of enslaved people’s resistance including those who dared to escape despite physical limitations and the threat of violence (125).

The final chapter, “Bondsman or Rebel,” returns to the legacies of early English colonial equivalences between Blackness and monstrosity, demonstrating how disability rhetoric was central to imperial debates over slavery abolition. Pro-slavery advocates including the West India Lobby deployed the rhetoric of Black monstrosity and violence while citing enslaved people’s revolts and the Haitian Revolution as evidence. In contrast, abolitionists emphasized slavery’s production of Black bodily disability in attempts to defuse representations of enslaved people’s revolutionary resistance. As Hunt-Kennedy writes, against the image of enslaved people’s revolts in Jamaica and Haiti, British abolitions framed the case for abolition and amelioration through emphasis upon “the disabled, tortured enslaved body.” (138) Through this, abolitionist depictions of enslaved people facilitated the creation of anti-Black representations of Africans as mentally and bodily unfit and in need of white tutelage. In the British imperial world, such abolitionist representations rendered Black rebellion as a form of non-politics and emancipation as a humanitarian gift. These representations reduced Black people to Black bodies depicted as “disabled, abject, and in need of white support” (144). Ultimately, the disabling power of slavery and representations of this power would have a long legacy in the post-slavery world.

Bringing together a wide array of sources with carefully crafted interpretive insight, *Between Fitness and Death* is a tremendous accomplishment. This book, along with Jenifer Barclay’s *The Mark of Slavery*, both in the University of Illinois Press’s Disability Histories series, form part of an emerging field of disability-centered slavery studies. Hunt-Kennedy provides a theoretically innovative framework for future scholarship on how enslaved people in the British Caribbean and beyond perceived of and operated in relation to the disabling power of slavery. *Between Fitness and Death* deserves wide-readership and will be especially welcome for readers interested in histories of disability, Atlantic slavery, and the African diaspora.

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