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Finding Frank

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I. Legacies of Slavery: Finding Frank

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A few years ago, I sent a query to the archives of the Fredericksburg, Virginia, courthouse regarding a court case, *Cornwell v. Weedon*, 1847–55, in my research for the biography of Mary Mildred Williams, *Girl in Black and White: The Story of Mary Mildred Williams and the Abolition Movement*. Her grandmother Prudence Bell, who was a primary subject in the book, was held as property by the Cornwell estate in Prince William County. I cast the net, and it came back full: a box of 180 handwritten pages of stories, property lists, interviews, and catalogs that would serve as the evidential framework for the narrative of her sexual enslavement to the executor of the estate. The documents were tall, light xeroxes covered in tall, light script. When I first opened the box, what I encountered was more akin to a fog at dawn than a primary source: depositions recorded in multiple handwritings about undated events going back to 1809 involving half the townspeople of Dumfries and Brentsville, Virginia.

In these pages I found Frank. He was named and described in these documents to index the property held by the Cornwell women. Prudence and Frank were enslaved by the same family in the 1830s. Prudence could pass for white; Frank was Black. Prudence's children and grandchildren gained the patronage of Senator Charles Sumner, and her son-in-law hid out at the home of Henry David Thoreau. Their proximity to famous white men granted their stories context and promoted them to the published page. My editor and readers were unanimous: "You have to cut Frank." "His story is as inconclusive as his character, of which divisive reports remain." "He distracts from the main story here." "We know him only through the voices of people evaluating his worth . . ."

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What does it mean to have a story worth telling, and how much of a story does it take to merit a biographical account? One could argue that there are but two criteria of value in micronarrative: story and scalability. All of the depositions in *Cornwell v. Weedon* could not scale into the macronarrative of the book, which focused on the bias toward whiteness in abolitionism. History is an art of omission or marginalization. I resisted until the final edit before I let go of Frank and let the scant evidence of him slip back into obscurity. Here was another Black man lost to the domestic slave trade. Who was I to engineer a second forgetting? His story had only a few words left in it when the book came out. A year has passed since publication, and I am unable to forget Frank. I must smuggle this story out, somehow.

* * *

An illiterate Virginian woman of limited means, Kitty Cornwell borrowed Frank from her mother's estate for eight years, from 1827 until 1835. Her mother, Constance Cornwell, in the months before her death in 1825, had not seen Kitty's living station as fit for a bequest of such valuable human property. When the executor of her mother's will, Thomas Nelson, pressed Kitty to make a fair bargain with her sisters for the use of Frank, she paid back her mother's estate for the hire of Frank's time, at the rate of thirty-six dollars for the year. The following year, in 1828, the rate rose, to forty dollars a year. Kitty paid, and Nelson passed the note to her sister Nancy's son Jesse Brockley, who did not see any returns from it. Her note turned out not to be good—in effect, Kitty bounced the check—and she refused to return Frank. She fell into regular debt against her mother's estate, at the rate of forty dollars per year that she kept him in her service. Kitty was making a profit off of Frank's labor and spending the proceeds.

Meanwhile, Kitty was hiring Frank out to Enoch Grigsby, a tavern owner in Centreville, Virginia. Enoch Grigsby was not all that impressed with Frank, saying that he was “*a very indifferent servant, frequently doing much injury by his awkward deportment. He was badly cross-eyed and near of Sight, and was much worse by candlelight than in the day light.*” He admitted that he paid Kitty half what he would have for another man's labor.¹

The court deposed two young men who knew Frank from childhood to corroborate Enoch Grigsby's assessment. Kitty's nephew Jesse Brockley, who lived a half mile from his aunt Kitty's place in Centre-

ville, and Samuel Tansill, the local constable's son, remembered Frank in opposing testimony. Speaking on behalf of his aunt's case, Jesse Brockley minimizes Frank's value in the domestic slave trade, in a derisive and hateful tone:

I have known Frank ever since he was born. His qualities were very bad he was a lazy trifling fellow for one thing, and he was roguish for another. He was cross-eyed and I believe to be near sighted. He was a very homely negro—He was a fellow of pretty good size, chunky and very well set. He was burnt, I think, on the right hand by falling in the fire when he was a child from which a long scar was left and it cramped his hand some. He was pretty much of a jobber, was employed sometime at Mr. Grigsby's Tavern, and sometime on the Turnpike Road breaking stone. He was nothing of a farm hand, and I believe could not be learnt to plough. I reckon he was worth about Three hundred and fifty Dollars in 1835, to sell to a Trader, or anything of that kind. I would not have given that for him, nor do I believe any one in his Neighborhood would. He could sing and dance well.²

Samuel Tansill gave his deposition for the estate, at the request of the executor Thomas Nelson. In contrast, this evidence aimed to demonstrate Frank's high value, which Samuel does, in a striking piece of cognitive dissonance, by speaking to Frank's worth as a boyhood friend.

I was acquainted with the Slave Frank . . . for six years or more before he went to Fairfax to live, when he was a man grown. He was, I suppose, then from about Eighteen or Twenty years of age . . . We associated a good deal together when boys, in washing and fishing and the like and he was then larger and stouter than I was. Frank used to haul the berme for William Duvall before he went to Fairfax and was employed and hired as a field hand also, and was considered a good field hand. When grown he was not to say tall but thick set and strong, and weighted about 150 or 160oz thereabouts. He was very healthy and hearty, I never knew him to be sick that I recollect. He was a good natured, well behaved Servant. He was cross-eyed but it was no hindrance to his being well or attending to his work.

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I had as leave have had him for any use in our County as if he had no such defect, but I am not suppose he would have sold for as much in the Slave market as he would without that defect. I think that about 1835–6, when slaves sold so high, if nothing had happened to lessen his value, after I knew him he would have sold readily for One thousand dollars.³

This dueling evidence is subjective, biased, and monstrous. The depositions record the space where the pathology of whiteness, which categorizes and assesses the body of the other according to systems of value devised to benefit whites, meets the radical alienation of capitalist labor experienced by the enslaved. The fact that these two depositions are mirror opposites of one another highlights the arbitrary and absurd system that held Frank hostage in the fields, on the roads, and in the taverns of the labor camp known as Prince William County, Virginia. Both white men acknowledge this economic system as absurdly freighted by Frank's personhood, when they note that Frank has one value locally, in "*his Neighborhood*" as Jesse Brockley says, where he is known individually and subjectively and another value in the wider slave market, which would assess Frank as a commodity with "*defects*."

* * *

The court sought testimony on Frank's worth in 1835 because that was the year he disappeared. In July, a neighbor, William Harrison, saw Enoch's brother Thomas Grigsby boarding a steamboat with Frank, who was then in his thirties. Harrison remembered that they had a strained conversation on the steamer deck: "*I asked Mr. Grigsby what he was going to do with the slave Frank. Mr. Grigsby said that he was going to Fredericksburg or Richmond to sell him, and also said the slave did not know he was going to be sold.*" In confidence, Harrison went below deck and asked Frank, who would have been chained there, what he thought the trip was for. Frank replied, "*I think for the purpose of waiting on Grigsby.*" Given how such a gesture could be taken as abolitionism, which was a crime, it is unlikely that Harrison took the risk of explicitly warning Frank. We cannot know for sure. We can surmise that William Harrison knew Frank, and Frank knew him. This interaction between them was significant enough for the white man, who stands to lose nothing, to remember and report it to the court under oath nearly a decade later. For Frank, who stands to lose much, an in-

teraction such as this with a white man would instill panic. All parties disembarked at Potomac Creek, and a few days afterward, Mr. Grigsby came back on the steamboat alone.

Harrison later told the court that he thought Frank might be worth \$1,100.⁴ Thomas Grigsby disagreed. *"No such conversation ever took place between myself and William Harrison, or any other person,"* and anyway, *"the first rate for men we paid in 1835 was \$600."*⁵

When her sisters sued her for the proceeds of this presumed sale, Kitty claimed to the court that Frank ran away that day in 1835. A friend of her mother, Jane Haney, told the court in her deposition that she had seen Kitty at about that time and asked her what had happened to Frank. Kitty retorted that *"it was none of my business' so I walked off and said no more to her."*⁶ A Brentsville resident named Isaac Davis had a similarly prickly interaction with Kitty when he asked her about Frank. *"I have known Kitty Cornwell well for twenty years,"* Davis stated in his deposition. He added, *"I was well acquainted with Frank, and I think that he would sell for about One thousand Dollars."* He confronted Kitty about Frank, when he saw her at Fairfax Courthouse, in April 1836: *"I asked her if she had sold Frank, and how she came to sell him."*

"I did not sell him, but I received the money." Kitty equivocated. *"I got the money for him."*

Davis asked how much she had got for him, and she would not tell him the amount. *"I told her I understand that Frank had gone with a gang of Negroes of Major [word illegible] and Mr. Grimsby, by way of Grahams in Prince William."* Davis told the court that *"this was the substance of the conversation we had about Frank, tho' more words were used by her, but I've stated the Substance of all that was spoken about him and the conversation was turned by her talking about a slave called Bet of the same estate."*

Kitty never disclosed what happened to Frank, and the depositions around his sudden departure in July of 1835 are inconclusive.

* * *

I cannot justify the intensity of my interest in Frank. I crave the power of disclosure over history. To paraphrase Teju Cole, "the white savior academic complex" best describes my dogged impulse, as a white historian, to save Frank, fiercely and self-righteously, from a disappearance that has already occurred.⁷ Our overlapping disciplinary frameworks of

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recovery, social history, and archival theory caution against discarding other people's stories, for we know not how, in the present or the future, the evidence of their lives might inform our telling of the past. But for now, this archival impulse, motivated by a sentimental need to exhume and make a gesture of restitution, benefits me alone. Frank's loss was and remains final. Like Harrison, I come to deliver a word of warning, but not bolt cutters. What would more decisive action look like, in biography?

By not writing about nonwhite stories, white historians risk complicity in the silence around past racial violence, and reinscribing our history book of forgetting serves white supremacy foremost. To not write biographies about nonwhite experiences in the nineteenth century would take us all two steps back, to a time when so few biographies of nonwhite subjects appeared. Silence is not an option. Each of us chooses one path or the other, largely without consequence. Often, we are rewarded for this work into our history of oppression with the acclaim of prizes and promotions. Toggling between narcissism (white supremacy) and cultural self-loathing (white guilt), we are looking directly into the mirror of history, but not at ourselves, trading stories that are not our own, in systems of value that benefit us first.

I have noticed that choosing to make a turn to the personal is not the norm in our discipline. This too, is a problem rooted in story and scale. Naming my race as white in relationship to a Black subject may read as performative and unnecessary context, which reduces the scalability of my research and undermines the perceived impartiality of this evidence. If so, I would like to share what I have learned on a book tour, presenting my thirteen years of research into Frank and Prudence's history to segregated audiences that were either predominantly Black or predominately white. Black audiences offered up questions about my motivation, while white audiences, assuming my good intentions, thanked me. However personal it feels to offer up the first person to the reader, no matter how repetitive the reflex to disclaim becomes, researchers must articulate their relationship to social power in order to write with integrity into a biographical project that crosses racial difference. Our shared history is a site of complex cultural trauma, and I believe that white researchers perpetuate harm when we enter that site unannounced, masked by whiteness as a racial position that is still widely understood as objective, authoritative, and normative. It may also become necessary for us to divest from using contested evidence, or evidence given under periods of duress. In the story of Frank that

appears above, I attempt to frame the racial positioning of these depositions, by naming that they were given by white slaveholders. But at this moment, we do not have a disciplinary norm for assessing troubling evidence and presenting it responsibly as biased in our citations.

I would not make the same decision again, to omit Frank from my book, though I agree with my readers' assessment, from the perspective of craft, that those pages slowed my narration of Mary's story. If story and scalability are the relevant criteria of value, then it follows that I must recognize that the artful choice to depopulate my manuscript of a subject doomed to omission by his very marginalization communicated that I did not value Frank's loss. Descriptions of Frank, as recorded by white men in 1844, and by a white researcher in 2020, now have a place in our discourse, but to which macronarrative does this evidence refer? I believe that from this story, we learn that if opportunity arises to effect liberation, unlike Harrison, we must break the silence. Crowd the page with the evidence of nonwhite stories at every opportunity. Micro-narratives that center Blackness are not a "distraction from the main story" of nineteenth-century American life. They are the story.

Notes

1. Deposition of Enoch Grigsby, *Cornwell v. Weedon*, taken 1837. Record Title: *Cornwell v. Weedon*, Collection #CR-CI-H 75-8, City of Fredericksburg, Virginia. All italicized text in the article has been transcribed from the handwritten depositions. The author wishes to alert the reader of the potential for transcription error.

2. Deposition of Jesse Brockley, *Cornwell v. Nelson*, 1837–1844. Included in *Cornwell v. Weedon*.

3. Deposition of Samuel Tansill, *Cornwell v. Nelson*, 1837–1844. Included in *Cornwell v. Weedon*.

4. Deposition of William G. Harrison, *Cornwell v. Weedon*, taken by Thomas Nelson, 1844.

5. Ibid.

6. Deposition of Jane Haney, *Cornwell v. Weedon*, June 1844.

7. Teju Cole, "The White Savior Industrial Complex," *The Atlantic*, March 21, 2012. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/>.