

Slavery and Emotions in the Atlantic World Special Issue  
Introduction

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The articles in this special issue place emotions firmly at the centre of the study of Atlantic slavery. Considering a diverse range of themes, geographical areas and emotional states, they reveal that emotions were central to the creation, justification and perpetuation of the system of slavery, to the everyday experience of and resistance to the regime and must be central to how researchers engage with Atlantic world slavery in the present. This special issue is the result of a conference held at University of Reading in November 2022, entitled ‘Slavery and Emotions in the Atlantic World’. Bringing scholars together who work on Cuba, Brazil, the United States, Haiti, British Guiana, Jamaica, and the French colonies, this two-day event allowed researchers to discuss, debate and develop the methods that can be used to analyse slavery through the lens of emotion, and question how doing so can enrich our understanding of the lives of enslaved people, their enslavers, and others involved in the institution. We additionally considered how we can communicate our research on this topic and the ethical implications of undertaking this work. The articles here are the result of these probing, fruitful and enlightening methodological discussions.

Discussing emotion in the context of slavery is clearly not new. As these articles show, enslaved and formerly enslaved people spoke about their emotions to family members, friends and enslavers. They wrote down their feelings in slave narratives, testified in court trials and placed advertisements in newspapers. Enslavers revealed their own feelings in regard to the institution in diaries and correspondence. They described in plantation manuals how best to regulate their own emotions to maintain power, discussed the emotional expressions of those

they enslaved, and developed highly racialized theories of emotion. Historians of slavery have subsequently written about the feelings of the enslaved and enslavers, yet these discussions usually sit at the margins of research into other aspects of the transatlantic regime. Yet, we are now in the midst of what some scholars have termed the ‘emotional turn’ within the academy - as a distinct field of study, the history of emotions has gained particular traction within the last ten years. On its most fundamental level, historians of emotion consider how the understanding, experience and expression of emotion has changed across time, place and cultures, and emphasise that emotion is socially and culturally contingent. Katie Barclay, in her 2021 state of the field article which reflects on the burgeoning number of works on this topic, identifies two distinct historiographical strands in the history of emotions: ‘the first seeks to elucidate how emotion is understood and experienced in different times and places; the second seeks to employ these insights to help explain other historical events and phenomenon’.<sup>i</sup> Numerous historians of emotion have considered how people within Western societies – in particular the US and Europe - have largely understood and experienced emotion and how this has changed over time. But despite this impressive and innovative body of work, there has been a distinct lack of research that considers how race has framed these processes and how slavery - as a system and a lived experience - shaped how enslavers, the enslaved, and wider society understood, experienced and expressed emotion.

The articles in this special issue provide a crucial starting point for the analysis of the understanding, experience and uses of emotion in different slave societies across the Atlantic World. Methodologically, contributors utilise an array of concepts and frameworks developed in the history of emotions (often being applied here to slave societies for the first time) to analyse the cultural component of emotion and the role emotion played in slave societies. Many of these articles, for example, begin with the Stearns’ concept of ‘emotionology’. In the 1980s, Peter and Carol Stearns urged historians to recognise and study ‘emotionology’, namely the ‘attitudes or standards that a society, or a definable group within a society, maintain toward basic emotions and their appropriate expression’, contrasting this to the idea of ‘basic emotions’.<sup>ii</sup> Historians in this issue use this methodological framework to explore the emotional standards enslavers set themselves and the enslaved (see in particular, Liana Valerio’s discussion of the ‘confidence script’), as well as the emotional styles developed within enslaved communities.

Particularly useful for the study of slave societies, Perez, Valerio and Esty also utilise William Reddy's concept of 'emotional regimes' and 'emotional refuges'.<sup>iii</sup> As these articles reveal, Reddy's theory helps us to examine the normative emotions that a political regime - in this case the institution of slavery - inculcates in society and the spaces that enslaved people created to relax and subvert these norms. Finally, Göttl, Wilson and Perez utilise Monique Scheer's concept of 'emotion-as-practice' and associated idea of 'emotional practices' (the bodily practices that the experience and expression of emotion is dependent on), to consider enslaved people's observable expressions of emotion and how these practices were used by the enslaved.<sup>iv</sup> Through utilising these methods and theories, individually these articles tell us much about the valuation, performance, expression and experience of emotions such as fear, confidence, grief, love, and insolence. Yet when considered collectively, the articles in this edition allow us to make wider claims about the role that emotion played in slave societies; across the geographical areas considered here, emotion (especially the performance of confidence and downplaying of white fear) was clearly central to the cultivation, justification and perpetuation of white power. While the condition of enslavement shaped how those held in bondage understood, experienced and expressed feeling, emotion was also used by the enslaved as a key survival mechanism and strategically employed as a method of resistance. These arguments have the potential to make a profound contribution to the history of emotions, especially within societies characterised by great power and horrific forms of oppression.

While contributors to this edition have used history of emotions methodologies, they have not simply supplanted these onto existing frameworks for the study of slavery. Considering emotion in slave societies comes with distinct challenges. One significant area of workshop discussion focused on how we may analyse and acknowledge *individuals'* feelings that we encounter in the archive, alongside our uses of emotion at community or societal level. How do we (and should we) acknowledge and communicate enslaved people's individual feelings of love, grief, joy and pain? This is a particularly important question to consider given enslavers' attempts to deny enslaved people their emotional personhood, resulting in distinct silences in the archive of slavery. Though, as this edition shows, enslaved people did testify about their emotions in various surviving primary sources, these testimonials remain relatively rare - created in exceptional circumstances - and are often marred by contextual silences. Scholars in this edition, particularly those considering the emotions of the enslaved, have navigated archival silences and omissions by largely engaging with the pioneering methods of Black feminist scholars, most notably Saidiya Hartman.<sup>v</sup> Guided by Hartman's methods, these

articles consider how we can use speculation, the rhetorical, and empathy in our attempts to research and write about the emotional experiences of the enslaved when documentation may be lacking. Allowing for greater, and arguably more empathetic, analysis of individual feeling, the articles here show how individual feeling and societal emotional standards can be explored in tandem. The history of emotions therefore offers historians ways of understanding Atlantic slavery that move beyond the apparent silence of the archive by thinking laterally and innovatively about what our primary sources reveal and how we might analyse them. This history can be challenging and onerous to write. Many of the articles here rely on deep textual analysis and speculation, with the authors themselves sometimes using the first person, writing more autobiographically about the *process* of archival research and the emotions that can generate. Such moves should be welcomed as we seek a more explicitly honest, nuanced and empathetic understanding of the past.

As Hartman argues, and Hannah Cusworth considers in the final article of this issue, there are ethical questions we must consider when thinking about enslaved peoples' emotions. Building on Stephanie Smallwood's article about our accountability to the enslaved, Cusworth probes us to think carefully and deeply about our research - why are we interested in enslaved people's emotions? What are we gaining from doing this work, particularly for those of us who are white?<sup>vi</sup> Where are the limits of the archive? How do we avoid our work being extractive in nature? What about our own emotions? When considering emotions and slavery, Cusworth suggests 'being accountable to the enslaved and their descendants requires us to act with care', as well as transparency. It was refreshing to sit in a room with scholars who were truly willing to share their concerns, questions and reservations about their own methods, discuss the difficulty of their archival processes, and think about their own emotions within this research. Care, ethics, collaboration and archival transparency were at the heart of this conference – how we must sit with the sources and individuals we are writing about; how we can use our own emotional registers in our writing; and how we must be accountable in our work to descendants. This methodology is particularly important given the very real legacies that the emotional regimes of slavery continue to have in the present, as both Cusworth and Valerio argue in their articles, including the racialized emotional stereotypes that continue to impact Black people's experience on a daily basis.

Fundamental to building up a picture of the emotional worlds created by enslavers and the enslaved, the first two articles in 'Slavery's Emotional Politics, Regimes and Refuges' focus

their attention on the emotional regimes that enslavers created to maintain power in the U.S. and Cuba. Erin Dwyer's article focuses on the emotion of fear. Arguing that enslavers in the US ruled through the implementation of fear but lived in constant dread themselves, Dwyer considers how anxiety over enslaved poisonings was managed (or amplified) by the Southern and Northern press. Expertly following newspaper stories of poisonings as they travelled through the Northern and Southern press, Dwyer reveals that the Southern press attempted to manage and downplay these collective fears in their reporting through providing details of unsuccessful plots and those that were successfully thwarted or resolved. In contrast, the Northern press attempted to amplify white fears and generate abolitionist sympathy and anger, emphasising the brutality of the institution through speculating about the motives of the enslaved poisoners. Not only telling us about how emotion was used to defend and critique slavery, Dwyer also reveals how the antebellum press had a role in amplifying and managing collective emotion about slavery.

Complementing Dwyer's consideration of the emotional politics of fear, Liana Valerio explores how proslavery elites in the US and Cuba managed and downplayed collective fears of insurrection. Using public documents such as newspapers and published proclamations alongside private correspondence, Valerio considers the liminal space between public and private where enslavers strategized as to how to use and perform emotion to aid them in maintaining power. Developing the theory of the 'confidence script', Valerio argues that proslavery elites in both places developed a performative narrative style, publicly asserting white confidence despite private declarations of fear, dread and anxiety. This confidence script was maintained not only through silence about insurrections and emotional censorship in the press, but also through architectural elements and codified law. While this emotional style was developed under slavery to bolster the regime, the 'confidence script' has not disappeared. As Valerio convincingly argues, politicians still use this emotional style to maintain white dominance and racial inequality, revealing that the emotional politics of slavery continue to have profound legacies.

Perez shifts our attention to the enslaved, considering the emotions that the enslaved expressed during *Dia de Reyes* in colonial Cuba. A holy and celebratory day sanctioned by slaveholders, Perez draws on Reddy's theory to position this day as an 'emotional refuge', one in which the enslaved were able to freely express emotions beyond those usually sanctioned by the prevailing 'emotional regime'. Mainly analysing white authored sources which document

enslaved peoples' observable emotional expressions, Perez reads past the stereotypical depictions of enslaved emotionality to consider enslaved peoples' range of experiences on this day, from sadness for a distant homeland to a joyful festive spirit expressed through song, dance and clothes. Aware that this day of emotional release was in fact sanctioned by slaveholders to maintain power, Perez nonetheless urges us to recognise that this day allowed the enslaved a moment of emotional liberty to rewrite emotional norms, re-formulate their identity, create solidarity and assert their agency. Considered collectively, the three articles in this section ultimately reveal how white power was maintained by enslavers through a careful and deliberate balancing of emotional states - fear, confidence, dread and joy - and how the enslaved were, at times, able to subvert these normative emotional styles to assert their own emotional liberty.

In the second section of this issue, we turn from careful analysis of sources produced by white elites to a focus on emotion within enslaved testimony. In 'Enslaved Relationships and Affective Ties in the U.S.', Kaisha Esty, Beth Wilson and Katherine Burns reflect on how enslaved people in the US South forged emotional bonds with family; how the investment in these affective ties was an important form of survival and everyday resistance for enslaved people; and how formerly enslaved people used different forms of testimony to bear witness to these life-sustaining bonds. Providing a much-needed focus on enslaved men's emotions, Esty analyses slave narratives and WPA interviews to consider their emotional responses to slavery's sexual economy. Enslaved men sought and valued intimate relationships - they engaged in love marriages and fulfilling relationships with male friends despite enslavers' attempts to undermine these emotional bonds. While historians have considered enslaved women's experiences of sexual abuse, Esty pivots our attention to consider the trauma, pain, rage and pride that enslaved men experienced in response to the rape of their wives and their own sexual violation. Engaging with recent literature on refusal, Esty argues that we should position enslaved men's investment in affective ties and love marriages as an important form of everyday resistance or refusal.

Supplementing Esty's consideration of enslaved men's affective ties, Wilson explores enslaved women's emotional experiences by focusing on the sale of their children. Devastating depictions of enslaved mothers' embodied, expressive and public emotional responses to the sale of their children appear throughout enslaved testimony. While these emotional expressions were individual responses to devastating pain, Wilson argues that they are also evidence of a

collective (and political) emotional practice developed by enslaved women to express the depth of their grief to their children and enslavers, the power of their mother-child bonds, and the uniquely inhumane nature of this separation. Alongside Esty, Wilson argues that emotions and affective ties were central to enslaved peoples' practices of refusal, arguing that enslaved women created their own, gendered emotional worlds in response to the realities of separation. Forming unique understandings of maternal emotion and their own emotional practices, enslaved mothers loved and grieved actively, fundamentally counteracting enslavers' efforts to decimate the mother-child bond.

Focusing her article on the aftermath of slavery, Burns considers how the familial ties that Esty and Wilson discuss were maintained and asserted through formerly enslaved peoples' use of information-wanted advertisements in the post-emancipation era. As Wilson argues that enslaved women used their public expressions of grief to bear witness to their suffering and the strength of their familial bonds during slavery, Burns asserts that formerly enslaved people used declarations of grief and suffering within these advertisements to testify to the cruelty of these separations in the post-emancipation era. In memorialising those they had lost, and writing of other instances of violence against them, formerly enslaved people also asserted the strength and endurance of their family ties and refused to surrender these, despite physical separation. While focused on different forms of affective bonds, the three articles in this section reveal that through investing in, maintaining, and testifying to loving bonds with family and kin, enslaved people countered enslavers' strict emotional regimes, as well as racialized ideologies that positioned the enslaved as unfeeling and incapable of meaningful relationships. Simultaneously, the methodological approaches taken by these scholars show how despite archival silences, it is possible to write powerful, speculative, and empathetic considerations of an individual's emotional experiences while also making wider claims about the political and communal nature of emotion.

In this special edition's third section, 'Enslaved People's Emotional Vocabularies and Expressions' Teresa Göttl and Gordon Gill consider the manifestation of emotions in the context of former French colonies and British Guiana respectively. Göttl innovatively explores trials against enslavers where the enslaved served as witnesses to reveal how we can centre the lives of the enslaved through using the lens of the history of emotions. Courts hence served as sites of resistance in which the enslaved made their voices – and their emotions heard. While, as property, the enslaved were prohibited from testifying, judges *could* take depositions from

the enslaved to clarify the circumstances of a case as long as they did not testify against their enslaver. Of course, this evidence is highly mediated. Original records rarely survive, and evidence given by the enslaved often had to be translated from Creole into French. That said, verbatim accounts in local newspapers often conveyed very visual impressions of the ‘performances’ of the enslaved at these trials that historians can then utilise, including sounds, facial expressions and body language as well as words themselves. Göttl’s approach allows us to probe more deeply enslaved people’s experienced and enacted emotions with methodological diligence and sensitivity.

While Göttl explores a range of emotions among the enslaved, Gordon Gill hones in on the specific emotions of anger and vengeance, using direct evidence from the enslaved thanks to a colonial rule that permitted them to make legal complaints. Common among regimes with extreme power relationships such as slavery, these two emotions represent affective responses to the oppression of the regime. They served as cathartic coping mechanisms through the release of frustration and the sense of satisfaction achieved by the ability to punish transgressions of power. These emotions therefore served as a means of resistance because the enslaved were well aware that accusations against enslavers could reduce their availability to obtain credit and their social standing among enslavers, ultimately undermining their authority. Gill’s work additionally engages with the emotion of sympathy, evoked among wider enslaved communities at the time, but also in a more contemporary context among the subsequent historians who are reading about these legal cases. The legal evidence used by Gill and Göttl, while different, both emphasise performance as a means to understanding emotions as well as stressing the importance of deep textual reading of both witting and unwitting testimony that probes what is not recorded as well as what is.

The final section, ‘Emotions and the Afterlives of Slavery’ takes a different approach though considering how representations of the collective memory of trauma might be conveyed through the history of emotions for public audiences. It also questions whose emotions historians can and should explore in light of continued patterns of racial injustice in modern societies and our responsibility towards descendants of the enslaved. Matthew Jones suggests the concept of ‘affective autonomy’ can be used within museums seeking to display the challenging history of enslavement in a way that encompasses the emotions of those held in bondage. Using the International Slavery Museum, Liverpool as a case study, Jones elaborates on how the museum has displayed contemporary art in a way that enables dialogue with its

more traditional displays about transatlantic and contemporary slavery. As well as articulating archival absences in accretive and imaginative ways similar to that shown in works of fiction, for example, contemporary art can underscore the agency of enslaved peoples to have complex emotional engagements with their experience of captivity. Affective autonomy as a concept therefore promotes more compassionate and emotional engagement with the history of transatlantic slavery for general audiences.

Bringing this special edition to a close is Hannah Cusworth's thought-provoking article that questions whether historians *should* be bringing together the history of slavery with the history of emotions. Warning against replicating the extractive nature of transatlantic slavery, Cusworth prioritises the lives of researchers and descendants (and researchers who are descendants) in considering the ethics and emotions of historians' work in this area. As Cusworth points out, the history of slavery inevitably has an emotional impact on those who research it. As historians we need to honour those who lived under enslavement and not simply 'take' raw material from the archives that is intrinsically linked with the stolen labour of the enslaved. While welcoming the methodological innovation that forging the history of slavery and the history of emotions can bring, Cusworth nonetheless urges for 'meaningful accountability' that recognises the way in which Black writers *have already* brought these fields together and additionally credits the foundational Black feminist theory behind recent methodological innovations in historians' research. A hostile academic environment of mainly white scholars means that, for Cusworth, anger is an emotion very much felt in the present, and she notes how emotional responses to primary sources have often been policed and/or silenced. The continuum Cusworth draws between past and present serves to remind us that the past itself is never purely behind us and that historians need honesty and transparency in their research processes.

Our impression is that research on the history of emotions and the social history of slavery have both traditionally – and arguably still – not been taken as seriously by the white, male dominated academy as other forms of historical enquiry, especially within the context of UK higher education. Though things are changing, hostility remains towards methods developed by pioneering Black female scholars, including the reading of archival silences, the use of speculation, the transparency about archival processes and researchers' emotions, and forms of writing that centre care and accountability. Similarly, Black scholars who develop and use these methods bear the brunt of this hostility.<sup>vii</sup> More optimistically, though, this special issue reveals

that these methods are not only transforming the writing of histories of slavery, but also have the potential to wholly enrich the field of the history of emotions. While the primary intervention here is into the history of transatlantic slavery using a history of emotions lens, we hope the collection will also inspire scholars grappling with our understanding of emotions in the past within different geographical and chronological contexts, particularly as the history of emotions scholarship has traditionally focused on white, western societies. Our conference was truly inspiring and we are grateful to all who attended and enriched our discussions, including presenters who were, for a variety of reasons, unable to write for this subsequent special edition, namely Marjoleine Kars, Kathryn De Luna, Maria Helena P. T. Machado, Jennifer Leetsch, Mary Niall Mitchell, Brenda Stevenson, and Sasha Turner. We also want to thank the British Academy, (grant number PF21\210110), the British Association of American Studies (BAAS), the US Embassy and the University of Reading for funding the event.

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<sup>i</sup> Katie Barclay, 'State of the Field: History of Emotions', *History: The Journal of the Historical Association* 106.371 (2021), 460. See this article for an extensive discussion of the themes and geographical areas that have been the focus of discussion.

<sup>ii</sup> Peter Stearns and Carol Stearns, 'Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards', *American Historical Review*, 90.4 (1985), 813.

<sup>iii</sup> William Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001)

<sup>iv</sup> Monique Scheer, 'Are Emotions a Kind of Practice (And is that What Makes Them Have a History)? A Bourdieuan Approach to Understanding Emotion', *History and Theory* 51 (2012), 193-220

<sup>v</sup> See, for example, Daina Ramey Berry and Leslie Harris, 'Researching Nineteenth-Century African American History', *Journal of the Civil War Era* 12 4 (Dec. 2022), 429-447; Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) and 'Venus in Two Acts', *Small Axe* 12, 2 (June 2008), 1-14; Stephanie Smallwood, 'The Politics of the Archive and History's Accountability to the Enslaved', *History of the Present: A Journal of Critical History* 6, 2 (Fall 2016), 117-132.

<sup>vi</sup> Cusworth's article encouraged us to reflect on our own positionality as white editors of this special edition. We recognise that the emotional labour of undertaking this research and writing these histories is felt more acutely by those who are descendants of the enslaved.

<sup>vii</sup> Berry and Harris, 'Researching Nineteenth-Century African American History', 429-447.