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The Emotional Foundations of Racialized Slavery

A mother and a daughter. Their heartbeat drums in sync. She pushes in. She wants to breathe, she wants to be caressed without fear for once, she wants. The pain is unbearable. But it is less pain as long as you are here with me. There is nothing I want more than to see you, and there is nothing I want less. You are my everything, everything I long, I love, I anticipate. You are life and fear of death. I cannot have you. She is Weeping.

Slavery has always primarily been an emotional economic system.¹ The racialization of emotions in the Atlantic world is the consequence of the historical transcendence of the ancient discourse of “slavery to passions” and the medieval notion of “slavery to sin.” Fueling relativism of slavery, these principles were mostly shaped by ancient and medieval philosophical theories about the recognizable biological difference of the “naturally enslaved.” The rise of scientific racism in the eighteenth century accelerated the racialization of “emotional difference,” arguing that distinct racialized categories feel differently. The theoretical definition of Blackness in scientific racism, and thus in modern economies of racialized

¹ As a trigger warning for enslaved people and descendants of enslaved people, this book tells a painful history that sparks painful memories. Quoted primary sources include hateful language and might be misgendering historical figures. English translations of primary sources in other languages were all done by the author and can be found in the footnotes. This book abstains from showing racial slurs in quoted sources as a way to connote the profound indignation the author feels toward the fetishization of this hateful violence and the minimization of the history of the intersection of racial slurs and racialized violence in academia. Translations point to the racial construct targeted by the racial slur, while still abstaining from writing down the racial slur.

slavery, can be summarized in the following tension: Black bodies were thought to be emotionally impulsive and to simultaneously be deceptive about their feelings. This opportunistic ambivalence sanctions the everlasting emotional policing of Black communities. This emotional policing is inescapable and the essence of Black captivity itself, then and now.

The scholarly conversation about the history of emotions has contextualized epistemological approaches to emotional ideas. This scholarship has argued that language about emotions has been historically “poorly suited to the phenomena the terms are intended to describe”² and has theorized how discourses about emotions influence the “self-perception of the feeling subject.”³ Emotional expression has been described as impacted by “cognitive reflection” and in turn influenced by historical and social transformations; “performance of affect” then lies at the intersection of individual subjectivity and societal constructs.⁴ It has been claimed that the influence of Galenic medical theory in “Western” knowledge production solidified “the cultural and spiritual origins of the heart as a symbol of affect (and affection),” spreading a “heartfelt” language of emotions.⁵ Researchers contend that emotional concepts, such as “nostalgia,” spark the “affective power” of “heritage”⁶ and that the “cultural politics of emotion” propel a dichotomy between the “fear of passivity” and the “fear of emotionality.”⁷ These politics are differentiated in distinct “emotional communities,” societal structures that dictate the “norms” of which emotions are of “value” and the “modes” of expression.⁸

The scholarly exchange about the history of emotions has highlighted the eighteenth century as a turning point of meaning in the Atlantic

² Jerome Kagan, *What Is Emotion? History, Measures, and Meanings* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 9.

³ Jan Plamper, *The History of Emotions: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 32.

⁴ David Lemmings & Ann Brooks, “The Emotional Turn in the Humanities and Social Sciences,” in *Emotions and Social Change: Historical and Sociological Perspectives*, edited by David Lemmings & Ann Brooks (New York: Routledge, 2014), 3.

⁵ Fay Bound Alberti, *Matters of the Heart: History, Medicine, and Emotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 4.

⁶ Alicia Marchant, “Introduction: Historicising Heritage and Emotions,” in *Historicising Heritage and Emotions: The Affective Histories of Blood Stone and Land*, edited by Alicia Marchant (New York: Routledge, 2019).

⁷ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 2.

⁸ Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Generations of Feeling: A History of Emotions, 600–1700* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 2–3.

world.⁹ According to this scholarship, during this “Age of Sentimentality,” literature on “elocution” engendered definitions of a “well-bred” body that could balance politeness and emotional expressiveness,¹⁰ while “sentimentalist fiction” intensified the commodification of emotions in economic systems, leading to the conceptualization of “goods as objects of emotional attachment.”¹¹ Scholars have affirmed that there is a correlation between the rise of “modernity” as molded by colonialism in the Atlantic world¹² and eighteenth-century thought about the “bodily nature of affect as an aspect of the mind/body/soul relation.”¹³ Sentimentality represented the “literary mode of empire in the eighteenth century” by disseminating discourses about the “selective recognition of the humanity” of the colonizer versus the colonized.¹⁴ White elites historically elevated their own emotions as “refined feelings” in order to “discredit the emotions of social antagonists.”¹⁵ Research on the history of emotions has explored how “Europe’s refined bourgeois economy of emotion” mobilized the “export of European standards of emotion to colonial societies.”¹⁶ The “emotional narratives” of imperialism validated “legitimate conquest” and racial exclusion, while discourses of “pity,” “compassion,” and “sympathy” justified “missionary intervention” in indigenous communities as a “form of atonement and redemption.”¹⁷ The scholarship has pointed out that it is

⁹ The notion of the “Atlantic world” has been primarily constructed by historiography, and this historiography has applied different methodologies to analyze imperial history, many through the gaze of the colonizer, and some through the perspective of the colonized. See A. B. Leonard & David Pretel, “Experiments in Modernity: The Making of the Atlantic World Economy,” in *The Caribbean and the Atlantic World Economy: Circuits of Trade, Money and Knowledge, 1650–1914*, edited by A. B. Leonard & David Pretel (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

¹⁰ Paul Goring, *The Rhetoric of Sensibility in Eighteenth-Century Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 39–41.

¹¹ Ute Frevert, *Emotions in History: Lost and Found* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2010).

¹² Sibylle Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 24.

¹³ Fay Bound Alberti, *Medicine, Emotion and Disease, 1700–1950* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), xix.

¹⁴ Lynn Festa, *Sentimental Figures of Empire in Eighteenth-Century Britain and France* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

¹⁵ Nicole Eustace, *Passion Is the Gale: Emotion, Power, and the Coming of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 5.

¹⁶ Ute Frevert, “Defining Emotions: Concepts and Debates over Three Centuries,” in *Emotional Lexicons: Continuity and Change in the Vocabulary of Feeling, 1700–2000*, edited by Ute Frevert et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 7.

¹⁷ Jane Lydon, *Imperial Emotions: The Politics of Empathy across the British Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 2, 18.

in the nineteenth century when the history of a multiplicity of categories, such as “appetites, passions, affections, and sentiments” culminated in a “single over-arching category of emotions.”¹⁸ It is also in the nineteenth century when the categorization of “civility and civilized emotions” structurally determined political participation in imperial jurisdictions.¹⁹

The historiography of emotions has been mostly focused on the “West.”²⁰ Although a scholarly debate about the intellectual history of racialized slavery as an emotional economy is nonexistent, the scholarship has examined how the intersections of ideas of race, gender, sexuality, class, age, and “disability” have historically impacted which feelings of pain are “othered, sidelined, reduced, justified, condoned, condemned and mythologized.”²¹ It has been analyzed how, due to the overpowering historical authority of the Aristotelian theorization of the enslaved, an enslaved person is deemed a “vehicle of emotion, but not an origin or end.”²² Scholars have investigated how discourses about emotions cultivated the “sectionalization” of “political allegiances” into “North and South” in the antebellum United States,²³ while also evaluating how, in recent history, public emotional discussion about “criminality,” “terrorism,” “welfare dependence,” and “illegal immigration” has systematically legitimized “military-carceral expansion and the retreat from social welfare goods.”²⁴ Nonetheless, the scholarly production about the history of slavery and of emotions has not yet traced the ascent of racist thought back to the emotional justifications of slavery in the ancient and medieval worlds, or explored the influence of scientific theories of racialized emotional difference in historical and contemporary racialized criminalization and exploitation.

¹⁸ Thomas Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 2.

¹⁹ Magrit Pernau & Helge Jordheim, “Introduction,” in *Civilizing Emotions: Concepts in Nineteenth Century Asia and Europe*, edited by Ute Frevert & Thomas Dixon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1.

²⁰ Susan J. Matt & Peter N. Stearns, “Introduction,” in *Doing Emotions History*, edited by Susan J. Matt & Peter N. Stearns (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 5.

²¹ Rob Boddice, “Introduction: Hurt Feelings?,” in *Pain and Emotion in Modern History*, edited by Rob Boddice (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 2.

²² Daniel M. Gross, *The Secret History of Emotion: From Aristotle’s Rhetoric to Modern Brain Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 36.

²³ Michael E. Woods, *Emotional and Sectional Conflict in the Antebellum United States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 2.

²⁴ Paula Ioanade, *The Emotional Politics of Racism: How Feelings Trump Facts in an Era of Colorblindness* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 1.

This book argues that the intellectual history of racialized slavery in the Atlantic world has always been and still is defined by the inescapability of emotional policing of racialized bodies. This structural inescapability violently distresses Black lives and propels institutional hatred toward a racialized body that simultaneously feels “too much” and “too little,” keeping the Black body at the brink of death. The ancient world relativized slavery with the notion of “slavery to passions,” while also propagating ideas about the “biological difference” of an othered “naturally enslaved” person. Ancient intellectual production advocated for the systematization of passions as the fulfillment of political justice through the absolute “emotional subjugation” of the “naturally enslaved.” The rise of Christianity led to the extension of the notion of “slavery to passions” toward the discourse of “slavery to sin,” which eventually validated religious, colonial, and corporeal conquests. These ancient and medieval emotional justifications of enslavement set the framework for the globalized racialization of the institution of slavery. Eighteenth-century scientific racism built on from this framework and was therefore mainly concerned with “emotional difference,” consecrating a racial hierarchy of feelings. Blackness was fatally marked with the synchronicity of emotional impulsivity, emotional resilience, and deceptive emotional performativity. The Black body is judged to be wholly driven by disruptive feelings, and yet deemed more calculated, simulated, imitative. Yet the Black body feels less. Yet the Black body can bear it.

The symbiotic hypersexualization, depersonalization, and suspicion of Black emotionality sustained the imperial emotional economy and systemic sexual violence of Atlantic slavery, sanctioning the institution of racialized slavery as a perpetual stage of paternalistic emotional tutelage and education. This emotional surveillance prescribed the self-containment of emotions within the Black body, which in turn resulted in the legitimization of the continuous escalation of imperial genocidal violence toward the Black “defect” of disorderly emotionality. The “order” of racial inequality guaranteed the protection of “happiness” in colonial societies via this incessant racialized emotional policing, while the resistance of the enslaved was persecuted as transgressions emerging from “passionate” bodies that had to be tamed. Even nineteenth-century White abolitionist efforts utilized emotional imagery that othered Black “feelings” and mobilized empathy toward the protection of the “innocence” of White, “loving” familial structures. In contrast, Black antislavery thought and the revolutions of the enslaved vehemently denounced the emotional detachment and morbidity of the imperial slaveholding

regimes of the Atlantic world. Throughout the “post-emancipation era,” the longings of Black communities for political citizenship and economic mobility were disregarded by structures of power as emotional weakness that went against the value of capitalistic progress and benevolent political agency. The exacerbation of the racialized carceral landscape was grounded on the institutional insistence in the failure of the Black body to diligently serve as a carceral site of suppression of unruly emotions.

During the twentieth century, the emotional policing of the racialized and the colonized fueled the persistence of racially premised enslavement, the expansion of carceral economies, and the propagation of emotional archetypes in politics, economics, health, media, and education. The enlargement of the carceral landscape mirrored the intensification of the institutional antagonism toward “Black rage” and mimicked the imperial reactions to the revolutions of the enslaved. Today, the narrative of the “abolition” of racialized slavery thrives in the preservation of a racially premised, enslaving emotional economy and in the political fascination with “White slavery,” framing the recent intellectual history of legal and media emotional responses to “human trafficking.” Today, public discourse about racism vividly visualizes the “fear” and “guilt” of White privilege instead of the actually visible structural hate toward Blackness. Today, the racialization of childhood, concretized by scientific racism, still claims “menace” in a murdered Black child and “innocence” in an “emotionally complex” White assassin. The commodification of Blackness is now even more a conduit for White emotional performativity, and the inexorability of racialized emotional criminalization is still intact and drives the capitalistic “order” of White happiness. The institutional dependence on contemporary racialized exploitation and genocidal violence is embodied in the political imagining of an emotional Other that will silently take it and will be better for it.

EMOTIONAL JUSTIFICATIONS OF SLAVERY IN THE ANCIENT
AND MEDIEVAL WORLDS

For a man who is able to belong to another person is by nature a slave (for that is why he belongs to someone else), as is a man who participates in reason only so far to realize that it exists, but not so far as to have it himself – other animals do not recognize reason, but follow their passions.

—Aristotle, *Politics*

In *Politics*, Aristotle infamously argued for the perceptible existence of the “naturally enslaved” and contended that the condition of slavery can be “advantageous” to the one subordinated to the whim of a master. The philosopher first defines enslaved people as an “animate piece of property,”²⁵ a “tool” disconnected from a soul, and then proceeds to craft an allegory about the power relations between body and soul: “it is clear that it is natural and advantageous for the body to be ruled by the soul and the emotions by the intellect (which is the part that possesses reason).”²⁶ Aristotle asserted that these power dynamics “must apply to mankind as a whole,”²⁷ generating a complex parallelism among the “differences” between man and animal, man and woman, and master and the enslaved. After having affirmed that “men” in their “natural state”²⁸ are ruled by soul/reason and not body/emotions, the prominent philosopher concludes: “Nature must therefore have intended to make the bodies of free men and of slaves different also.”²⁹ The bodies of “free men” are destined for a public life of citizenship. The bodies of the enslaved are driven by an absence of self-governance, like “animals” that indiscriminately “follow their passions.” While *Politics* ambiguously “clarifies” that the enslaved body is not at all times unequivocally identifiable in order to avoid the “illogicality” of the enslavement of “rightful” citizens, Aristotle does proclaim the state of being of a “stronger,” generally recognizable, a manifest “naturally enslaved” person.

Both Aristotelian and Platonic thought nurtured a parallelism in the power relationships between reason and passions, soul and body, man and woman, father and child, master and the enslaved, King and the State. It is through these mirrored definitions of political governance that ancient Greek philosophy introduced the concept of “slavery to passions” to both relativize and legitimize the societal practice of slavery. The doctrine of “slavery to passions” normalized the institution of slavery by projecting the link between the body and the soul as a political one that should ultimately aim for the regulation of emotions, regulation that had to mimic the rule of the Father over his Home and the sovereignty of the King over the State. Thus, the principle of “slavery to passions” built an emotional economy grounded on the corporeal control of the “naturally” enslaved for being “emotionally different”

²⁵ Aristotle, “Politics,” in *Greek and Roman Slavery*, edited by Thomas Wiedemann (New York: Routledge, 2003), 15.

²⁶ Aristotle, “Politics,” 16. ²⁷ Aristotle, “Politics,” 16. ²⁸ Aristotle, “Politics,” 16.

²⁹ Aristotle, “Politics,” 17.

and “biologically identifiable.” Both Plato and Aristotle summoned this reasoning to disseminate ideas about “quality of men” and bodies that are recognizably distinct, setting a racist precedent for future “biological” hierarchies. Throughout the Middle Ages and the European conquest and colonization of the Atlantic world, this premise of “slavery to passions” extended to the religious concept of “slavery to sin,” which in turn progressed into the conceptualization of imperial subjugation as the righteous and predestined consolidation of a global hierarchy of feelings.

SLAVERY TO PASSIONS: EMOTIONAL FOUNDATIONS OF
 SLAVERY IN THE ANCIENT GRECO-ROMAN WORLD

The connection between exploitative power and the notion of “emotional difference” can be unveiled in the initial artifacts of the history of slavery, unearthing the etymological and mechanical conceptualization of bondage. David Brion Davis contended that the institution of slavery was born in the processes and mechanisms of the domestication of animals, establishing “dehumanization” as a vital component of the enslaved experience.³⁰ Even in the earliest written sources about slavery, there are references to “emotional difference,” from “*dullu*,” the Akkadian word for “corvée” that has been translated to “misery,” to texts that disparage enslaved women as having an inclination toward laziness and “constant complaining.”³¹ The animalization and emotional disavowal of enslaved bodies would later be exemplified in the etymology of multiple ancient terms for enslaved people, such as the Egyptian *hm* “from a word for ‘body’”³² and the Greek *andrapodon*, meaning “man-footed thing,”³³ among the multiplicity of ancient terms³⁴ that either infantilize the enslaved person or metonymically refer to an unfeeling enslaved body. Homer’s *Odyssey* materialized a dominant literary statement on the

³⁰ David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 32.

³¹ Daniel C. Snell, “Slavery in the Ancient Near East,” in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, vol. 1, edited by Keith Bradley & Paul Cartledge (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 8–12.

³² Snell, “Slavery in the Ancient Near East,” 16.

³³ T. E. Rihll, “Classical Athens,” in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, vol. 1, edited by Keith Bradley & Paul Cartledge (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 51.

³⁴ See Youval Rotman, *Byzantine Slavery and the Mediterranean World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 82.

condition of slavery: “For half the virtue that the God-head gave, the God resumes when a man becomes a slave.”³⁵ Ancient rationalizations of slavery would indeed cultivate an inexorable tie between the exercise of freedom and the public display of virtuous emotions.

Various ancient Greek didactical texts represented slavery as emerging from the nature of the excluded Other, nature ambivalently marked by a predisposition toward both revenge and complacency. The well-known fables attributed to formerly enslaved Aesop show several slavery tropes and plots of animals becoming enslaved to Men. In “The Horse and the Stag,” the Horse “acquires” its servitude by asking for help from Man to exercise revenge on the Stag; instead, Man “mounts” and thus overpowers the Horse, and the Horse becomes “from that time forward the slave of Man.”³⁶ “The House-Dog and the Wolf” creates a dichotomy between the “lean, hungry Wolf” and the “plump, well-fed House-Dog.”³⁷ Similarly, the *Pseudo-Phocyclides* included the aphorism “Provide your servant with the share of food that he is owed. Give a slave his rations so that he may respect you.”³⁸ The discursive distrust toward the “well-fed,” and yet potentially vengeful, enslaved person aimed to normalize the notion that the “nature” of slavery arose from the emotional, carnal, self-destructive, and animalized deviance of the enslaved, while simultaneously belittling the lived experience of slavery as a content and “plump” existence.

The ancient Greek literary canon further explored the anxiety between the human and inhuman in the conception of enslaved feelings. In “The Banqueting Sophists,” Atheneaus collected diverse slavery tropes already present in the ancient Greek literary tradition, including the imagery of substituting enslaved people with “walking” inanimate objects³⁹ and the description of enslaved people as “bringers of gifts, trembling before their lords.”⁴⁰ Multiple ancient Greek plays depicted “comedic” instances of physical punishment toward enslaved people.⁴¹ This spectacle of the

³⁵ Homer, *Odyssey*, vol. 4 (London: Nicol and Murray, 1834), 122.

³⁶ Aesop, *Aesop's Fables*, edited by W. T. Stead (London: Review of Reviews Office, 1896), 13.

³⁷ Aesop, *Aesop's Fables*, 22.

³⁸ “Pseudo-Phocyclides,” in *Greek and Roman Slavery*, edited by Thomas Wiedemann (New York: Routledge, 2003), 179.

³⁹ Atheneaus, “The Banqueting Sophists,” in *Greek and Roman Slavery*, edited by Thomas Wiedemann (New York: Routledge, 2003), 82.

⁴⁰ Atheneaus, “The Banqueting Sophists,” 76.

⁴¹ Peter Hunt, “Slavery in Greek Literary Culture,” in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, vol. 1, edited by Keith Bradley & Paul Cartledge (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 30.

penalization of the enslaved for the enjoyment of audiences of citizens has been interpreted as a manifestation of the “consciousness of the precarious nature of freedom.”⁴² The “comedic” portrayal of bodily punishment of the “trembling” enslaved could serve as an emotionally cathartic simulation of the potentiality of falling into slavery and thus dishonor.

The exclusionary politics of honor in ancient Greece were precisely framed with the concept of *atimia*. Within the gradations of disenfranchisement, total *atimia* represented the denial of honor, public life, and political participation.⁴³ Orlando Patterson notably contextualized the enslaved experience within the concept of “systematic dishonor,” reducing the lived enslaved condition to a fixed “social death” and sparking a scholarly debate about the subjectivities of the enslaved.⁴⁴ Ancient Greek morality did intertwine the notions of honor and freedom, constructing the condition of slavery as intrinsically dishonorable and granting a high value to the public spectacle of political agency and citizenship as a validation of honor. Within this public spectacle, the hubris code of conduct emphasized civic moderation toward the enslaved, as their public humiliation for the gratification of the master was deemed a moral transgression.⁴⁵ Execution of enslaved people by masters was also frowned upon, since it was regarded as a matter of the State.⁴⁶ The hubris law encompasses how honor was conceived as the public performance of freedom, morality, and citizenship: the home was a private sphere that theoretically mirrored public life and yet also operated as a space of morbidity. This duality of an emotional economy rooted in paradoxical discourses of honor is central to the connection between the lived experiences of the enslaved subject and the emotional performativity of public and private life. This duality is ever-present and is vital to the examination of the global history of enslaved subjectivities and the suffering they fervently condemned.

⁴² Rob Tordoff, “Introduction: Slaves and Slavery in Ancient Greek Comedy,” in *Slaves and Slavery in Ancient Greek Comic Drama*, edited by Ben Akrigg & Rob Tordoff (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 47.

⁴³ Deborah Kamen, *Status in Classical Athens* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 74–78.

⁴⁴ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 78.

⁴⁵ Demosthenes, “Against Meidias,” in *Greek and Roman Slavery*, edited by Thomas Wiedemann (New York: Routledge, 2003), 166.

⁴⁶ Antiphon, “Death of Herodes,” in *Greek and Roman Slavery*, edited by Thomas Wiedemann (New York: Routledge, 2003), 165.