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"An Itchin 'Roun the Heart You Can't Get at to Scratch": Exploring the Emotion of Love in Black Enslaved Communities of the Nineteenth Century

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Through adopting a history-of-emotions framework, this article explores romantic love within Black enslaved communities of the antebellum and early postbellum South. Whilst several historians have already explored the emotion of love in enslaved emotional communities, there is a growing understanding by scholars of the history of emotions that emotions, including love, are not always adequately historicized, and have perhaps been taken at face or written value. In some contrast to previous historical scholarship, this article argues that the love, as expressed and experienced within Black enslaved communities, was complex, contentious, and far from monolithic.

INTRODUCTION

When Dellie Lewis was interviewed about her experiences of enslavement, she recalled a song that her community used to sing:

> Go choose yo' east,
> Go choose yo' wes'
> Go choose de one dat you love best,
> If she's not here to take her part,
> Choose de nex' one to yo' heart.[1]

Dellie spoke of choosing intimate partners based on the direction of one particular emotion: love. Embracing the romantic, love is conceptualized as

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[1] Dellie Lewis in George Rawick, *The American Slave*, 17 vols. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1972), Volume VI, *Alabama and Indiana Narratives*, 256, emphasis mine.

something felt and given selectively, an emotion situated squarely in the "heart" that instinctively leads and guides you to the person that, above all others, "you love best."[2] But Dellie did not go on to explain what love meant to her and her community, or even whether she had experienced the emotion herself. When speaking of her lifelong partner, she said simply, "I ma'ied Bill Lewis when I was fifteen year old in Montgomery an' us had three chilluns."[3] But what did it mean for Dellie and enslaved communities to love, and "love best"?

While the foundational scholars of the history of emotions Peter Stearns and Jan Lewis have pointed out that "we may never be able to know with certainty … whether what we call love … is what people in the past understood by th[e] term," historians from outside this subfield continually demonstrate a tendency to use the term "capaciously for all times and places."[4] Drawing on Stearns and Lewis, it is imperative for historians working with emotions to engage in analyses that endeavour to better understand how emotions were valued, expressed, and, to some extent, even experienced, in their highly culturally and temporally contingent contexts.[5] This article presents an analysis of romantic love within enslaved Black communities in the antebellum and early postbellum South through the lens of the history of emotions.[6] In so doing, I destabilize the dominant historical trend of presenting romantic love of Black enslaved communities as necessarily enduring, mutually exclusive to coercion, and heteronormative.

This article begins by discussing the state of existing scholarship that explores love and intimate enslaved partnerships in the antebellum and early postbellum South. The following section outlines the utility of using theories of the history of emotions as a framework to explore the emotion of love, and describes the two key theories from the field that inform my analysis: Barbara Rosenwein's notion of emotional communities and Monique Scheer's theory of emotional practices.[7] Next, I explore the diverse and complex expressions and practices around love present in the two key source materials that this

[2] Ibid. [3] Ibid.

[4] Peter Stearns and Jan Lewis, eds., *An Emotional History of the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 1; Katie Barclay and Sally Holloway, "Interrogating Romantic Love," *Cultural and Social History*, 17, 3 (2020), 271–77, 271.

[5] As Nell Irvin Painter has also warned, "there can be no literal translation" of emotions and modern psychology that can be suitably projected onto and "into the culture of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century societies." Nell Irvin Painter, *Soul Murder and Slavery* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 1995), 8.

[6] Acknowledging that love takes many forms, this article focusses exclusively on romantic love as shared between intimate partners, and does not discuss platonic, maternal, paternal, or other forms of non-romantic love.

[7] Barbara Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2006); Monique Scheer, "Are Emotions a Kind of Practice (and Is That What Makes Them Have a History)? A Bourdieuian Approach to Understanding Emotion," *History and Theory*, 51, 2 (2012), 190–220.

analysis draws upon: enslaved people's autobiographies and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) narratives, paying particular attention to the divergences in expression present in these two sources.[8] The following four sections, "'Til death do us part?", "embracing complexity," "love and coercion," and "queer potentialities," each challenge various elements that are assumed to be integral to the emotion of love in the context of enslaved intimate partnerships. I conclude by suggesting that the emotion of love in this context was complex and multiplicitous in meaning, expression, and experience, and that our conceptualization of love in the context of enslaved intimate partnerships must be expanded to reflect this. In essence, I explore and reflect upon these sometimes seemingly impossible stories of love, and equally on the "impossibility of its telling."[9]

SCHOLARSHIP ON LOVE AND INTIMATE ENSLAVED PARTNERSHIPS

An excellent body of scholarship on slavery, by traditional Americanist historians who do not utilize a history-of-emotions approach, has grappled with the emotion of love in the context of enslaved communities.[10] Rebecca Fraser, in the landmark *Courtship and Love amongst the Enslaved in North Carolina*, concluded on the powerful note that enslaved people had "loved and … had been loved" with a depth of feeling that provided them with strength when the will to continue was lost.[11] Everlasting, this was a love of "passion," "endurance," and "tenderness," deep meaning, and, evidently, significant power.[12] Frances Smith-Foster has also suggested that love "is one of the only experiences that an external force, regardless of its powerful ways and means, cannot deny people or dictate for them against their wishes."[13] Emily West similarly posits that "the majority of [enslaved] marriages were characterized by great affection," simultaneously suggesting that enslaved

[8] The Works Project Administration (WPA) narratives, sometimes referred to as the Federal Writer's Project narratives, refers to a rich and extensive archive of interview material taken from formerly enslaved folk during the 1930s detailing their experiences of slavery.

[9] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *small axe*, 26, 1 (2008), 1–14, 11.

[10] I focus particularly on the works of West, Fraser and Smith-Foster due to the fact that, whilst they now belong to a slightly older historiography, their works are the ones that deal *most explicitly* with romantic love.

[11] Elsewhere, Fraser notes the "endurance of love [that] supported them when they were feeling hopeless and helpless." Rebecca Fraser, *Courtship and Love among the Enslaved in North Carolina* (Jackson: Mississippi University Press, 2007), 6, 103–4.

[12] Ibid., 103.

[13] Frances Smith-Foster, *'Til Death or Distance Do Us Part: Love and Marriage in African America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 54.

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folk were "early pioneers in marrying for romantic love because they had nothing to gain or lose materially."[14] Most recently, Tera Hunter's *Bound in Wedlock* viewed enslaved people's marriages as the very "product of love," and has argued that "we should never lose sight of the depth of feeling and affection that undergirded these relationships."[15]

In effect, this body of scholarship arrives largely at the consensus that love as experienced by Black enslaved communities of the South – *despite* existing within the tight confines of the power and domination of slavery – was ultimately a romantic love, characterized by deep feeling, passion, and eternal power. All the aforementioned scholars have acknowledged degrees of complexity and ambiguity in expressions of love among and within enslaved communities.[16] Nevertheless, the emotion of love in these foundational works remains, on the whole, characterized as being formed from free choice, unfettered from coercion, societal pressure, or pragmatic considerations.[17] Indeed, twentieth-century historian Lerone Bennett went so far as to suggest that this "pure" love was the *founding emotion* with which African American emotional communities were formed. "It began," Bennett writes, referring to the first Africans to be brought in servitude to the American South, "with a love story. Antoney, who had no surname, fell in love with Isabella and married her."[18]

While these works have furthered our understanding of love in enslaved communities, it remains that the emotives and expressions of love that have

[14] West has suggested that love as experienced by enslaved communities was "pure" and less bound to pragmatic or economic considerations, which were central elements to love as experienced by white individuals during the antebellum period. Emily West, *Chains of Love: Slave Couples in Antebellum South Carolina* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 25–27. See also Karen Lystra, *Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

[15] Tera Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock: Slave and Free Black Marriage in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 301, 34. Hunter's work has revolutionized understandings of intimate partnerships in the antebellum and early postbellum periods, particularly in reference to trends of serial monogamy and the concept of "gradations of intimacy." This article builds on Hunter's work to more fully interrogate the emotion of love, as Hunter does not endeavour to provide an examination of love. See also Heather Williams, who has noted that enslaved African Americans "were people who … maintain[ed] the desire to be with loved ones and to establish and maintain emotional bonds." Heather Williams, *Help Me to Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 11.

[16] Fraser captured this particularly well, noting explicitly that "there were competing definitions of what love was" and that its expression and meaning differed within and between each individual. Fraser, 8.

[17] Hunter, 14.

[18] Lerone Bennett, *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America* (New York: Penguin, 1993; first published 1988), 29. In a different work, Bennett claims that partnerships during slavery were "love match[es] in the true sense of the word." Bennett, "The Roots of Black Love," *Ebony Magazine*, 36, 10 (1981), 53–58, 56.

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informed their conclusions have potentially been taken at face – or more aptly, written – value, and without close examination or sustained engagement with history-of-emotions scholarship.[19] In doing so, historians run the risk of retelling stories of love in a romanticized fashion, that, as Saidiya Hartman has suggested, consoles and counters the degradation of slavery through the creation of love stories, inadvertently replicating forms of violence in and through the act of narration.[20] Adopting a history-of-emotions approach allows us to more accurately trace the many contours of feeling that were negotiated and navigated within emotional communities. Moreover, it both allows for a way to listen "for the unsaid" and acts as a mode of translation in the archives of enslaved experiences.[21]

USING A HISTORY-OF-EMOTIONS FRAME

This article applies two concepts from scholarship in the history of emotions in order to shed new light on the nature of love within enslaved (and previously enslaved) communities. I draw equally on Rosenwein's conceptualization of emotional communities and Scheer's theory of emotional practices.[22] Rosenwein's notion of emotional communities allows for an analysis of discrete communities, where the systems of feeling they value and their

[19] Moreover, these historical works on enslaved love were written in the context of a "resurgence of romantic love … following the sexual revolution," – as, admittedly, this article is equally situated within – which inevitably increases the likelihood of construing what was referred to as love and placing it within this modern frame. William Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia and Japan, 900–1200 CE* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 381.

[20] Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 12–14.

[21] Ibid., 2–3. Being conscious and reflective of our emotional positioning as historians is crucial, as love, like all emotions, is a concept that is fundamentally culturally and historically bound. Historical expressions of "love" must be disentangled from modern (largely Western) assumptions about what constitutes love, in order to continue to probe our understandings of emotion within various contexts more fully. Susan Matt and Peter Stearns, "Introduction," in Matt and Stearns, eds., *Doing Emotions History* (Urbana: University of Illiois Press, 2014), 4–6; Rebecca Griffin [Fraser], "'Iffen I Doan Love Yo' Den Dar Ain't No Water in Tar Riber': Courtship and Love amongst the Enslaved in Antebellum North Carolina," PhD dissertation, University of Warwick, 2003, 17.

[22] Rosenwein considered emotional communities as communities that share in their own discrete "values, modes of feeling and ways of feeling," where its members largely "adhere to the same norms of emotional expression." Barbara Rosenwein, *Generations of Feeling: A History of Emotions, 600–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 3. Here, I use the plural *communities* to recognize the fact that enslaved communities across the antebellum South were diverse and sometimes discrete. Nevertheless, given the fact that the primary source base for this analysis draws widely from a range of states across the American South, and identifies similarities in emotional norms and expression across these communities, I adopt use of the plural.

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subsequent expression are largely shared, which can help illuminate how these communities understood and expressed the emotion of love.[23] Despite the widespread utility of Rosenwein's conceptualization of emotional communities, this framework does not offer a strong differentiation between language and physical experience.[24] In order to explore this distinction, this article also draws upon Scheer's notion of emotional practices. Scheer's theorization of emotional practices argues that emotions are produced through their practice – viewing emotions as things that are "done" or performed, and therefore are done and performed differently, dependent upon cultural and historical specificity.[25] Scheer's practice theory is useful as it takes the emphasis away from the fraught quest to find emotional truths or sincerity. Rather "the question becomes how and why historical actors mobilized" their feelings "in certain ways [and] cultivated specific skilled performances," and a question of accounting for the practical use of an emotion's generation and deployment in particular social settings.[26] This is key, as it elucidates how and why emotions are seemingly expressed and mobilized differently in particular situations: the reflection of love within enslaved people's autobiographies, for instance, often differs significantly from its presentation within the WPA narratives, despite referring to effectively the same (or highly similar) emotional communities. Two recent contributions to the literature have demonstrated to great effect the value of exploring enslaved people's emotions through a history-of-emotions frame, namely Erin Dwyer's *Mastering Emotions: Feelings, Power, and Slavery in the United States* and Beth Wilson's article "'I Ain' Mad Now and I Know Taint No Use to Lie':

[23] Ibid., 2; Katie Barclay, *The History of Emotions: A Student Guide to Methods and Sources* (London: Red Globe Press, 2020), 54. I consider Rosenwein's model better suited to this analysis than other potential approaches, such as William Reddy's notions of "emotional regimes" and "emotional refuges," which, within the context of enslaved Black communities in the antebellum South, necessarily positions these communities disadvantageously as "refuges" operating within the dominant emotional regime of white classes in a "top-down transmission" of feeling. This has two major shortcomings. First, it renders the navigation and formation of emotional norms always political in nature – a criticism Rosenwein herself is cautious of. Rosenwein, *Generations of Feeling*, 11. Second, it precludes the opportunity to disentangle the two groups for discrete analysis. Here, I do not seek to refute the fact that emotions were produced and navigated within a complex dialogical, and sometimes coproductive, interplay between groups, particularly the white planter classes and enslaved communities, as Dwyer has so capably interrogated (see Austin Dwyer, *Mastering Emotions: Feelings, Power, and Slavery in the United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021)). However, I see Reddy's model of emotional regimes and emotional refuges as ill-suited to discussing intergroup production and understanding of emotion, which this article is most concerned with.

[24] Barclay, 73.

[25] Scheer, "Are Emotions a Kind of Practice?" 193; 217.

[26] Ibid., 215, 219.

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Honesty, Anger, and Emotional Resistance in Formerly Enslaved Women's 1930s' Testimony."[27] However, both focus on emotions other than love, and neither utilizes strongly history-of-emotions scholarship as a frame of analysis within their works.[28]

ENSLAVED PEOPLE'S AUTOBIOGRAPHIES AND SENTIMENTALISM

When searching for love, the most expressive and poetic sentiments usually derive from enslaved people's autobiographies, and therefore this is the body of source material most heavily consulted when identifying sentiments of love. Thomas H. Jones, for instance, expressed in his autobiographical narrative, "it seems to me that no one can have such *fondness of love*, and such *intensity of desire* … as the poor slave."[29] Similarly, Moses Grandy's narrative went to great affective lengths to stress the depth of feeling involved in his relationship. Watching his wife being sold away from him, Grandy remarked, "my heart was so full that I could say very little … I have never seen or heard from her from that day to this. *I loved her as I love my life*."[30] Henry Bibb, reminiscing on his affections for Malinda, wrote, "I was deeply in love … Malinda was to me an affectionate wife … She was with me in sorrow, and joy, in fasting and feasting, in trial and persecution, in sickness and health, in sunshine and in shade," and concluded that "Malinda loved me above all others on earth."[31] For Bibb, his time with Malinda was "one of the most happy seasons of my life."[32] Henry "Box" Brown's narrative expressed love similarly. Rushing to see his family as they were sent to the auction block,

[27] Dwyer; and Beth Wilson, "'I Ain' Mad Now and I Know Taint No Use to Lie': Honesty, Anger, and Emotional Resistance in Formerly Enslaved Women's 1930s' Testimony," *American Nineteenth Century History*, 22, 3 (2021), 307–26.

[28] Equally of note is Heather Williams's *Help Me to Find My People*, which engages with emotions in her work on families and partnerships of enslaved people, though her focus remains primarily on the expression of grief and loss, and similarly does not engage with history of emotions as a frame of reference.

[29] Thomas H. Jones, *The Experience of Thomas H. Jones, Who Was a Slave for Forty-Three Years* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995; first published 1862), 30, at https://docsouth,unc.edu/fpn/jones/jones.html, emphasis mine. See also Williams, 53–56.

[30] Moses Grandy, *Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy; Late a Slave in the United States of America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996; first published 1843), 17, at https://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/grandy/grandy.html, emphasis mine. See also Williams, 70.

[31] Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018; first published 1849), 41, at https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/bibb/bibb.html.

[32] Ibid., 41. See also Williams, 54–57.

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Brown caught hold of his wife's hand and clasped it for several miles, as he walked alongside the wagon that carried his family steadily away from him.[33] Brown's reflection on the event suggests that he understood their mutual love to extend beyond the earthly realm that sought to separate them, indicating that love could continue to exist and be felt beyond the earthly parallel. As Brown explained, "both our hearts were so overpowered with feeling that we could say nothing, and when at last we were obliged to part, the look of mutual love which we exchanged was all the token which we could give each other that we should yet meet in heaven."[34] Almost all references to love found in enslaved people's autobiographies closely follow this characterization, and it is difficult to find an autobiography that does not adhere to this trend of expression, conveying a sense of deep feeling and mutual attraction. However, the sentiments of love in the WPA narratives often depart markedly from those in enslaved people's autobiographies. This begs the question, should we take the expressions of love in enslaved people's autobiographies at face value?

As Scheer argues, the context within which this emotion was practised is central. Enslaved people's autobiographies, mostly written prior to southern abolition, not only functioned as recollections of enslaved experiences, but served equally as abolitionist propaganda imbued with a highly political purpose.[35] Abolitionist political rhetoric revolved strongly around mobilizing love to refute the powerful racist logic that regarded African Americans as a race of "blunter capacity."[36] Thomas Jefferson, for instance, claimed that enslaved folk experienced love both differently and deficiently compared to their white counterparts. "Slaves," Jefferson argued, "are more ardent after their female … love seems with them to be more an eager desire, than a tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation."[37] Ezra Tawil has termed this "racial sentiment," where "members of different races" are expounded to "both feel *different* things, and feel things *differently*."[38]

[33] Henry "Box" Brown, *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999; first published 1849), 47, at https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/brownbox/brownbox.html.

[34] Ibid., 47. See also Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock*, 24.

[35] See Barclay, *The History of Emotions*, 80–82.

[36] Erin Austin Dwyer, "Mastering Emotions: The Emotional Politics of Slavery," PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 2012, 38, at https://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/9282890. Barclay has put this similarly, observing that the distinction was not that enslaved Black folk were *absent* of emotional feeling, but that "their passions were more straightforward." Barclay, 80.

[37] Jefferson elaborated on this by explaining that the "love" of the enslaved was more appropriately termed "lust." See Dwyer, "Mastering Emotions," 44.

[38] Ezra Tawil, *The Making of Racial Sentiment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2, emphasis mine.

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Difference, therefore, was as much "biological" or "racial" as it were emotional. The recent work of Dannelle Cordero has also identified love as one of the emotions specifically targeted for mobilization around ideas of racial difference, pointing in part to the 1808 work of Christoph Meiners, who structured Black love as a different love of distinctly lesser feeling, producing what Cordero has aptly termed a "racialized hierarchy of love."[39] Meiners noted that whilst "a negro may love his wife," it could *only* be "with all the affection that it is possible for a negro to possess," which was "limited."[40] Enslaved people's autobiographies, therefore, made deliberate attempts to poeticize and emphasize their depths of feeling in order to challenge the racist rhetoric that bound them, in ways that strikingly aligned with white emotional norms and standards of the time.[41] In other words, love was mobilized, named, and communicated in a particular way that sought to achieve a particular purpose.[42]

Scholar of the history of emotions Katie Barclay has observed that "writings by 'subalterns'" – in this case, previously enslaved people – "had to perform a balancing act," and thus appropriated an emotional vocabulary the target group was familiar with, a sentiment which finds particular pertinence in this context.[43] Maria Diedrich, reflecting specifically on Bibb's autobiography, has noted that Bibb's expression of love was formulated according to "white standards as depicted in contemporary sentimental literature."[44] Bibb's love is in part a "romantic passion" – what was beginning to be understood as "romantic love" – but one where "principles of a religious and political nature" take precedence over passions.[45] Thus the expression of love in enslaved people's autobiographies reflects a love hallmarked by deep feeling, mutual attraction, and lasting bonds, yet its curation remained carefully tempered by moral and political concerns.

Here, it becomes clear that the emotional practices of love captured in enslaved people's autobiographies were deployed, at least in part, to appeal

[39] Dannelle Gutarra Cordero, *She Is Weeping: An Intellectual History of Racialized Slavery and Emotions in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 73.
[40] Christoph Meiners, *History of the Female Sex*, in Cordero, 73.
[41] In this context, white standards of love refers to a general conceptualization of love, initially of European origin, that appeared from the sixteenth century onwards. Generally characterized by elements of companionship, friendship, affection, and to a lesser extent passion and desire, romantic love began to dominate the choices of partnership in North America during the first half of the nineteenth century. See William Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 153, 319; and Griffin [Fraser], "Iffen I Doan Love Yo' Den Dar Ain't No Water in Tar Riber," 13. [42] Scheer, "Are Emotions a Kind of Practice?" 212. [43] Barclay, 79.
[44] Maria Diedrich, "'My Love Is Black as Yours Is Fair': Premarital Love and Sexuality in the Antebellum Slave Narrative," *Phylon*, 47, 3 (1986), 238–47, 243. [45] Ibid., 242–3.

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to white middle-class emotional communities primarily of the North, and appropriated white emotional standards and literary expressions in order to communicate the affect accordingly. Scheer's practice theory is clearly reflected here, where emotions are performed differently in particular contexts. It follows that expressions of love may have manifested alternatively if enslaved people's autobiographies had not been imbued with such an urgent political purpose. This is not to imply that expressions of love within enslaved people's autobiographies were insincere. Drawing on Scheer, attempting to separate particular emotional practices as "more real or legitimate" than others is a "judgement not inherent in the emotional practice itself."[46] Nevertheless, recognizing that expressions of love within enslaved people's autobiographies constituted a particular form of emotional practice with a very particular goal remains crucial not only for understanding the emotional practice itself, but also for recognizing the complexities of interpretation in working with these sources. This complexity cannot be fully appreciated without specifically adopting a history-of-emotions frame.

LOVE IN THE WPA NARRATIVES

The WPA narratives, sometimes referred to as the Federal Writer's Project narratives, refer to a rich and extensive archive of interview material taken from formerly enslaved folk during the 1930s detailing their experiences of slavery. The WPA narratives serve as a useful comparison point to enslaved people's autobiographies, as their historical positioning, well after the dismantling of the institution of slavery, means they are largely free from the abolitionist political purpose present in enslaved people's autobiographies written prior to emancipation.[47] Despite the fact that the interview question directives were

[46] Scheer, 207.

[47] Anticipating a counterargument, it could be claimed that the responses from the WPA were also constructed with a political purpose in mind. The foundational works of John Blassingame, Norman Yetman, and Paul Escott established the presence of race and gender dynamics influencing previously enslaved individuals' responses, often omitting certain topics entirely. John Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-slaves: Approaches and Problems," *Journal of Southern History*, 41, 4 (1975), 473–92; Norman Yetman, "The Background to the Slave Narrative Collection," *American Quarterly*, 19, 3 (1967), 534–53; Paul Escott, *Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1797). More recently, Soumya Kambhampati's quantitative analysis of a subsection of WPA narratives found that ex-slaves were more candid in their responses when their interviewer was also Black, with the word "happy" appearing 1.5 to 1.9 times more often in front of white interviewers. This led Kambhampati to suggest that ex-slaves, to some degree, simply "told white people what they thought they wanted to hear." Soumya Kambhampati, "'I Ain't Tellin' White Folks Nuthin': A Quantitative Exploration of the Race-Related Problem of Candour in

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not explicitly concerned with uncovering emotional affects, the WPA narratives include a plethora of references to love that can serve as a useful comparison, and counterparts, to enslaved people's autobiographies. For instance, the most relevant question directives given to interviewers included leading questions such as (a) "how close were slave family ties?" (b) "were slave families ever broken up?" and (c) "could slaves marry a slave on another plantation?"[48] Despite the fact none of these directly refer to the experience of "love," there is an abundance of attempts to explain and express the experience of love throughout the WPA, or at least an explicit use of an emotional terminology of love and related emotives. The many references to love and closely related affects that were inadvertently shared during interviews are particularly revealing, given the distinct lack of prompting.

Several expressions of love present in the WPA narratives do share close association with the expression of love in enslaved people's autobiographies, and in some cases share a striking correlation to Lerone Bennet's foundational "love story" of "pure love." Andrew Simms's WPA narrative, for instance, described the following:

> My parents come over on a slave ship from Africa about twenty year before I was born … My folks didn't know each other in Africa … Maybe they was on the same boat, I dunno … Somehow or other mammy and pappy meets 'roun the place and the first thing happens is *they is in love*. That's what my mammy say. And the next thing happen is me.[49]

In Andrew Simms's narrative, one is strongly reminded of Bennet's imagining of Antoney and Isabella. In choosing to couch his "love" within language that borders on the sentimentalized romanticism akin to enslaved people's autobiographies, Andrew was not alone. Violet Guntharpe told her WPA interviewer that "de happiest minute of my eighty-two years" was when her partner Thad Guntharpe first confessed his feelings of love for her.[50]

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the WPA Slave Narratives," honours dissertation, Yale University, 2018, 17. However, there is little evidence to suggest that ex-slaves should deliberately change their sentiments around love (specifically of love that did not refer to love for an enslaver), and therefore whilst all emotions are expressed in particular ways with a particular purpose for doing so in mind, I argue that the WPA transcripts remain useful for their nuanced divergence from the emotional expression within enslaved people's autobiographies.

[48] See Charles Perdue, Thomas Barden, and Robert Phillips, eds., *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), Appendix 6, 368–76.

[49] In line with most scholars' treatment of WPA narratives, I have chosen to quote verbatim from the WPA transcripts, even when spellings are unusual, without the use of the notation *sic*. Andrew Simms, in Rawick, *The American Slave*, Volume VII, *Oklahoma and Mississippi Narratives*, 295.

[50] Violet Guntharpe, in Rawick, *The American Slave*, Volume II, *North Carolina Narratives*, Parts 1 and 2, 217.

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However, Violet also recollected how, after "Thad got to lookin' at me" and developed a habit of accompanying her "night and mornin'" to the pigpen where she was responsible for slopping, Violet asked him to clarify the emotion behind his intentions. At first, "Thad didn't say nothin' but just grin," but later he

> took de slop bucket out of my hand … put upside down on de ground, and set me down on it; then he fall down dere on de grass by me and blubber out and warm my fingers in his hands. I just took pity on him and told him mighty plain dat he must limber up his tongue and … say what he mean.[51]

After "he scrouge so close" that "de slop bucket tipple over," Thad eventually managed to "bleat out dat he love me."[52] For Violet, Thad's emotional expression, told partly through clumsy bodily expression and partly through faltering language, would be forever affectionately remembered as her "happiest minute."[53] In both Andrew Simms's and Violet Guntharpe's WPA testimonies, whilst a clear resemblance can be seen to the references of love present in enslaved people's autobiographies, its expression has begun to differ: their expressions of love – sometimes awkward, or perhaps just unpolished – depart markedly from the purely sentimentalist, always highly polished expressions of enslaved people's autobiographies. Similarly, when Lily Perry was interviewed by the WPA about her experiences during slavery, she reminisced on her affectual connection with her partner Robert, "I loved him frum de time I was borned."[54] In addition to ascribing the emotive of "love" to her affect, Lily clarified the extent of this depth of feeling rather differently from the poetic and highly sentimentalized expressions of love within enslaved people's autobiographies, through the sentiment "iffen I doan love yo' den dar ain't no water in Tar riber."[55] This declaration led Fraser to regard Lily's expression as evidence of the "everlasting and eternal force" of enslaved Black love.[56]

Sally Nealy's WPA testimony, for instance, described love as "an *itchin* 'roun the heart you can't get at to scratch," although this "itchin" was not something Sally personally experienced, reflecting, "I thought I was in love but I wasn't."[57] Sally's description is particularly useful not only because it

[51] Ibid., 218. [52] Ibid. [53] Ibid.

[54] Lily Perry, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project*, Volume XI, *North Carolina Narratives*, Part 2, 1936, manuscript/mixed material, 165, at https://memory.loc.gov/mss/mesn/112/112.pdf. [55] Ibid., 166.

[56] Griffin [Fraser], "Iffen I Doan Love Yo' Den Dar Ain't No Water in Tar Riber," 279.

[57] Sally Nealy, in Rawick, *The American Slave*, Volume X, *Arkansas Narratives*, Parts 5 and 6, 185. Sally Nealy, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project*, Volume II, *Arkansas Narratives*, Part 5, McClendon–Prayer, 1936, manuscript/mixed material, 185, at https://memory.loc.gov/mss/mesn/025/025.pdf.

utilizes the emotive "love," but equally for its suggestion that love produced physical or bodily effects, in this case an "itch." Anderson Bates made this link to physical dimensions of love even more explicit, in his description of his love for Carrie, whom he "fell head over heels in love wid."[58] Despite the fact that "dere was seven more niggers a flyin' 'roun dat sugar lump of a gal," contending to secure return affections from Carrie, Anderson felt himself unable to "trol [his] feelin's wid them fools a settin' 'roun dere gigglin' wid her," which drove him "clean crazy!"[59] In his endeavour, Anderson proved successful, and eventually the other men vying for an emotional bond with Carrie would "carry deir 'fections to some other place than Carrie's house."[60] The inability to control his feelings, an irrepressible passion that drove Anderson "clean crazy," is a facet that is notably absent from enslaved people's autobiographies. Anderson's testimony goes further, offering a description of how this passion of love manifested physically, explaining, "I knocks one down one night, kick another out de nex' night, and choke de stuffin' out of one de nex' night. I landed de three-leg stool on de head of de fourth one, de last time."[61] Anderson's love, it seems, was felt more as an overpowering passion rather than the restrained, and by contrast *dis*passionate, love of enslaved people's autobiographies, which never hint at dimensions of physical violence.

The recurring thread of "falling in love" that runs through the WPA testimonies, particularly Anderson's description of "falling head over heels," was similarly reported by Pheobe Henderson in her Texan narrative. Explaining the absence of coercion in her partnership with David, that "Master Hill didn't have nothin' to do wid bringin' us together," Phoebe attributed her bond forming simply in affectual terms: because "we fell in love."[62] Others also reported their love as an emotional manifestation that could not be ignored. Ed Barber, for instance, observed his love for Rosa Ford as a major determinant of his life's trajectory immediately post-emancipation: an emotional "pull." "I got to roamin' 'roun to fust one place and then another," Ed explained, "but wheresomever I go, I kept a thinkin' 'bout Rosa and de ripe may-pops in de field in cottin pickin' time."[63] Although Ed does not

[58] Anderson Bates, in Rawick, *The American Slave*, Volume II, *North Carolina Narratives*, Parts 1 and 2, 44. [59] Ibid. [60] Ibid.

[61] Ibid. In a similar vein, Doddington has also noted physical aspects to courtship, observing that "courtship sometimes veered into aggressive expressions." David Doddington, *Contesting Slave Masculinity in the American South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 155.

[62] Phoebe Henderson, in Rawick, *The American Slave*, Volume IV, *Texas Narratives*, Parts 1 and 2, 136.

[63] Ed Barber, in Rawick, *The American Slave*, Volume II, *North Carolina Narratives*, Parts 1 and 2, 35.

explicitly utilize the emotive love in his testimony, his feelings for Rosa would drive him back to his old plantation, to "marry de gal de Lord always 'tended for me to marry."[64] Charley Barber placed similar emphasis on love in his life course, recollecting that his experience of falling in love was one of his most important life events and worthy of retelling in his selective WPA interview. "De nex' big thing I done," Charley reported, "was fall in love wid Mary Wylie."[65] Love, it is clear, was a major force of feeling that determined the development and navigation of intimate bonds and partnerships.

Moreover, when this feeling was prematurely lost, WPA respondents often express emotives of profound sadness. Mollie Tillman, who held reciprocal feelings for a boy living on the adjoining plantation that had "tuck a shine to [her]" and had asked his enslaver to purchase her so they could marry, expressed sentiments indicating deep devastation at his unexpected sale to another state. "I grieved fo' dat nigger so dat my heart was heavy in my breas'," Mollie confided.[66] "I knowed I would never see him no mo." As time passed, Mollie began to "go 'bout some wid de young bucks," but her affections remained securely bound to "dat boy," and she "couldn't git my mind off" him.[67] When, by a chance encounter, Mollie was reunited with him, she signified a return to "happiness," reporting feeling "so happy I shouted all over dat meetin' house."[68] "We jes' tuck up whar we lef' off," Mollie told her interviewer, who wrote that they continued to "liv[e] happily" until his passing.[69]

Barbara Haywood's WPA narrative expressed her partner Frank's love of her very simply: "he axes me ter have him an' I has him. I knows dat he tol' me dat he wasn't worthy but dat he loved me an' dat he'd do anything he could ter please me, and det he'd always be good ter me."[70] Barbara's testimony indicates that their love was less about "worthiness," as was so integral within love amongst the emotional communities of privileged white communities of the South, but more based around feelings of respect and emotional

[64] Ibid.

[65] Charley Barber, in Rawick, *The American Slave*, Volume II, Volume II, *North Carolina Narratives*, parts 1 and 2, 31.

[66] Mollie Tillman, in Rawick, *The American Slave*, Volume VI, *Alabama and Indiana Narratives*, 382.

[67] Mollie's testimony also delineated between her "boy" and the other "bucks": the latter term historian Gregory Smithers associates with dehumanizing and debasing connotations, particularly within the context of coerced reproductive partnerships. See Gregory Smithers, *Slave Breeding: Sex, Violence, and Memory in African American History* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013), 93.

[68] Tillman, in Rawick, 382.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Barbara Haywood, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project*, Volume XI, *North Carolina Narratives*, Part 1, Adams–Hunter, 1936, manuscript/mixed material, 388, at https://memory.loc.gov/mss/mesn/111/111.pdf.

support.[71] Silvia Witherspoon's WPA narrative includes a similar reflection on love. Recalling her wedding a year after emancipation, Silvia described marrying her partner "in a dirty work dress an' my feets was bare jus' lak dey is now." Silvia included this in her testimony apparently to draw attention to the fact that she considered "dat iffen he loved me, he loved me jus' as well as in my bare feets as he would wid my shoes on."[72] Maggie Jackson recollected similar sentiments on her love, noting, "I married John … 'cause I loved him and we didn' fuss and fight."[73] Millie Barber, however, stressed two things about her love for her partner Prince Barber in her WPA. First, Millie emphasized the depth of feeling of her love that she thought could not be fully or accurately expressed through writing, noting, "I loved dat young nigger more than you can put done dere on paper, I did."[74] But Millie also associated her life of love with Prince through other signifiers of feeling: as full of both "joy" and equally of "fuss." "Ah, the joy, de fusses, de ructions, de beatin's, and de makin'ups us had on de Ed Shannon place where us lived," Millie described.[75] Evidently, Millie's love also encompassed the affects associated with "fuss": the absence of which had so clearly defined Maggie Jackson's experience of love.

In these WPA narratives, there is an element of simplicity and an absence of self-justification in the expression of love, in contrast to enslaved people's autobiographies, which went to great literary lengths to stress, and perhaps seek to "prove," their depth of feeling. Moreover, it is clear that significant discrepancy exists within *and* between the various characterizations of love expressed through the WPA narratives. We can begin to reconcile these divergences in expression by drawing on Scheer, who has argued that the *context* within which emotion was practised is central. The WPA narratives, occurring after the abolition of slavery, were more removed (though not absent) from the need to practice emotion in a way that would refute that their race, and therefore their emotions, were of an inherently blunter, or superficial, capacity. As such, the WPA narratives did not need to deliberately stress the depths of their feeling, and characterize their love in a sentimentalized, romanticized frame. Rather, they performed their emotions differently. Thad's love for Violet was not expressed through a polished, sentimentalized declaration of

[71] See also Griffin [Fraser], "Iffen I Doan Love Yo' Den Dar Ain't No Water in Tar Riber," 282.

[72] Silvia Witherspoon, in Rawick, *The American Slave*, Volume VI, *Alabama and Indiana Narratives*, 430.

[73] Maggie Jackson, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project*, Volume XVI, *Texas Narratives*, Part 2, Easter–King, 1936, manuscript/mixed material, 186, at https://memory.loc.gov/mss/mesn/162/162.pdf.

[74] Millie Barber, in Rawick, *The American Slave*, volume II, *North Carolina Narratives*, Parts 1 and 2, 40.

[75] Ibid.

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love. It was raw, and stumbling, involved falling off his chair whilst he "bleated out" his love.[76] Silvia's love was not characterized as persisting "in sunshine and in shade" as Henry Bibb's love was in his autobiography, but instead as "in my bare feets" as well as "wid my shoes on."[77]

'TIL DEATH DO US PART?

References to love, in both the WPA narratives and enslaved people's autobiographies, provide strong evidence that love continued to be felt and experienced beyond and past the point of physical death. Reflecting back upon Henry Box Brown's slave autobiography, he described that whilst their separation was temporary, feelings of love for his beloved wife Nancy were eternal. "The look of mutual love which we exchanged," Brown wrote on their separation, "was all the token which we could give each other that we should yet meet in heaven." This sentiment, of love continuing to persist beyond the earthly realm, is also present in the WPA narratives. Lucy Ann Dunn, for instance, stressed the everlasting nature of her love and affection for her husband, which stretched on past his death. During her WPA interview, she avowed, "I loved him during life an' I love now, do he's been daid now for twelve years."[78] Similarly, for Gabriel Gilbert, his love for his wife Medora Labor also proved so strong and perpetual that he could never bring himself to seek another partner for the thirty-five years following her death. "I love my wife so much I never want nobody else," he imparted. Notably, Gabriel placed the tense of the emotive in the present.[79] In a similar vein, Caroline Bevis's WPA testimony described her love with her "sweetheart" Ben Harris as reaching its peak whilst in his absence and later death. Following her father's rejection of Ben's marriage proposal, Ben "kissed me good buy [*sic*] and went off to Virginia."[80] He would never return, killed whilst on duty, and Caroline never saw him again. However, Caroline nevertheless reflected that at the event of Ben's funeral, "I have never been so much in love since then."[81]

[76] Violet Guntharpe, WPA, 218.

[77] Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*, 41; Silvia Witherspoon, WPA, 430.

[78] Lucy Ann Dunn, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project*, Volume XI, *North Carolina*, Part 1, Adams–Hunter, 1936, manuscript/mixed material, 282, at www.loc.gov/item/mesn111.

[79] Gabriel Gilbert, in Rawick, *The American Slave*, Volume IV, *Texas Narratives*, Parts 1 and 2, 69.

[80] Caroline Bevis, in Rawick, *The American Slave*, Volume II, *North Carolina Narratives*, parts 1 and 2, 56.

[81] Ibid.

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Lest these experiences of love be taken as representative, not all WPA respondents' descriptions of love were flecked with these seemingly "everlasting and eternal" qualities. Cinda Johnson, for instance, "didn't have no graveyard love" for her husband who had passed on.[82] Jane Johnson even hinted that love was not felt by enslaved emotional communities *at all*, explaining,

> Colored people don't pay no 'tention to what white folks call love, they just 'sires de woman they wants, dat's all. I married dat man of mine, Tilhgman Thompson, and us got 'long right smart, 'til he die. I got 'nother one, Anderson Johnson, and he die too, so here I is.[83]

Sarah Douglas's WPA contained a similar expression, imparting to her interviewer that "a Darkey jes don' love one another an stick t'gether like white fokes does."[84] Whilst white folks may "love," Jane indicated that Black emotional communities did not experience this affect, or at least not in the same way as white emotional communities. Their partnerships were instead marked by pragmatic considerations and compatibility, with partners – and that "love" – rendered effectively interchangeable. Tom Douglas's WPA testimony takes this idea this a step further, presenting his belief that Black folk "don' … stick t'gether" at all.[85] Jane's delineation runs counter to the conclusion drawn by historian Emily West, who has argued that for enslaved communities in the antebellum period, "romantic love and ties of affection were put before all other considerations when it came to choosing a partner."[86] The expressions of Cinda, who "didn't have no graveyard love"; Jane, who "don't pay no 'tention to … love"; and Sarah differed considerably from the characterization of feeling by other enslaved individuals. The presence of these discrepancies poses inherent problems to this conclusion, and encourages reflection and further revision. Allowing these generalizations to persist perpetuates a binary and homogeneous understanding of love, and precludes the opportunity for scholarship to properly grapple with love. Here, enslaved and previously

[82] Cinda Johnson, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project*, Volume II, *Arkansas*, Part 4, Jackson–Lynch, manuscript/mixed material, 76, at https://memory.loc.gov/mss/mesn/024/024.pdf.

[83] Jane Johnson, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project*, Volume XIV, *South Carolina*, Part 3, Jackson–Quattlebaum, manuscript/mixed material, 50, at https://memory.loc.gov/mss/mesn/143/143.pdf. See also Williams's discussion of the emotional "crossroads" enslaved people encountered when navigating partnerships, particularly in spaces of separation and loss. Williams, *Help Me to Find My People*, 77–81.

[84] Sarah Douglas, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project*, Volume II, *Arkansas*, Part 2, Cannon–Evans, manuscript/mixed material, 196, at https://memory.loc.gov/mss/mesn/022/022.pdf.

[85] Tom Douglas, WPA, 196.

[86] Emily West, "Tensions, Tempers, and Temptations: Marital Discord among Slaves in Antebellum South Carolina," *American Nineteenth Century History*, 5, 2 (2004), 1–18, 2.

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enslaved people expressed, and perhaps even felt, their love as a complex, highly nuanced, and contentious emotional experience.

Not all individuals chose to utilize the terminology or expressions of love to describe their intimate partnerships. Rosa Starke, for instance, recalling her marriage to Will Harrison in her WPA, noted, "I can't say I love him, though he was de father of all my chillun."[87] Further, following Will's death after a long sickness, Rosa remembered feeling rather on the contrary, communicating that she felt "more like I was free."[88] Later Rosa married John Pearson, although only "in a half-hearted way," explaining that her union formed under the precedent that he might help provide financial support to herself and her three children.[89] Love, at least for Rosa, did not factor into her partnership choices. Other respondents invoke the terminology selectively when referring to one partner, and omit it when recollecting another. The testimony of Betty Power is a pertinent case in point. Whilst Betty had at least two intimate partnerships, first to Boss Powers and later to Henry Ruffins following Boss's passing, Betty chose to retain the name "Power," because she "dearly love" Boss Powers and "can't stand to give up he name."[90] Betty elected not to employ the emotive of love or other affects to characterize her much longer relationship with Henry Ruffins, and instead focussed her attention on recalling the affective language of her first husband's will, where he wrote, "to my beloved wife, I gives all I has." Betty affectionately recalled this, noting that it was "sweet of him."[91]

EMBRACING COMPLEXITY

These examples of love in Black emotional communities do not necessarily reflect a static and homogeneous "Black emotional community." Many respondents expressed the perspective that love, even within Black emotional communities, had undergone tremendous transformation between the antebellum and postbellum periods, with the contemporary equivalent rendered almost unrecognizable compared to during enslavement. In her WPA interview, Sarah Smiley noted that "young folks of today don't love like they did in the olden days. Now it is *hot* love, *minute* love, *free* love."[92] Gus

[87] Rosa Starke, in Rawick, *The American Slave*, Volume III, *South Carolina Narratives*, Parts 3 and 4, 150. [88] Ibid. [89] Ibid.

[90] Betty Power, in Rawick, *The American Slave*, Volume IV, *Texas Narratives*, Parts 3 and 4, 192. [91] Ibid.

[92] Sarah Smiley, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project*, Volume II, *Arkansas*, Part 6, Quinn–Tuttle, manuscript/mixed material, 172, at https://memory.loc.gov/mss/mesn/026/026.pdf.

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Bradshaw put this rather similarly, reporting that whilst he "love … [his] wife fifty years 'fore she died," the youth of the postbellum period, by contrast, "don't stay married fifty days, sometimes."[93] Della Harris closely echoed these sentiments, explaining that "in olden days, husbands *loved*."[94] For Della, enslaved love was a completely different emotion than the love between partners of her contemporary postbellum context, a point she established through placing both forms of love in direct opposition: "Is de young folks marrying fur love? Dey don't stay together long enough to warm hands."[95] For Lewis Bonner, too, the feeling had changed. "That was love," Lewis held, referring to his long-standing relationship with his wife. "That was love, which don't live no more in our hearts."[96] Laura Bell's WPA closely reiterated these shared sentiments, regarding that "love ain't what hit uster be by a long shot … 'Cause dar ain't many folks what loves all de time."[97] Alonzo Haywood also responded in the same vein: "I've heard some of the young people laugh about slave love, but they should envy the love which kept mother and father so close together in life and even held them in death."[98]

What is so valuable in these responses is their demonstration of the fact that emotional communities and the values they hold not only change over time, but also change how they are perceived and expressed. We might be tempted to draw the conclusion here that love among enslaved emotional communities, compared to the love among African American communities at the time of the WPA interviews, was built more upon endurance, a love that grew along with the passage of time, and was less characterized by contemporary fleeting passions, the "minute love" that Sarah Smiley referred to. But equally, we might complicate this conclusion by reflecting upon Sally Nealy's classification of enslaved love as "an itchin" – itches being inherently fleeting things that fade with time.[99] Love, here, existing necessarily within tight

[93] Gus Bradshaw, in Rawick, *The American Slave*, Volume IV, *Texas Narratives*, Parts 1 and 2, 132.

[94] Della Harris, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project*, Volume 17, *Virginia*, Berry–Wilson, 1936, manuscript/mixed material, 26, at www.loc.gov/item/mesn170, added emphasis.

[95] Ibid.

[96] Lewis Bonner, in Rawick, *The American Slave*, Volume VII, *Oklahoma and Mississippi Narratives*, 18.

[97] Laura Bell, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project*, Volume XI, *North Carolina Narratives*, Part 1, Adams–Hunter, 1936, manuscript/mixed material, 102, at https://memory.loc.gov/mss/mesn/111/111.pdf.

[98] Alonzo Haywood, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project*, Volume XI, *North Carolina Narratives*, Part 1, Adams–Hunter, 1936, manuscript/mixed material, 384, at https://memory.loc.gov/mss/mesn/111/111.pdf.

[99] See also Hunter's discussion on meaning ascribed to and diverse natures of intimate partnerships. Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock*, 31–33.

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parameters of power, is thus rendered as both different *and* the same, not necessarily shared by all community members or remaining static through time. But it is precisely for this reason that the emotion must be interrogated more closely. Heterogeneity pushes analysis deeper and challenges the projection of modern assumptions onto historical subjects. A homogeneous, singular, "love" is simply not supported by the source materials, and, as such, scholarship should seek to challenge this monolithic conceptualization that runs dangerously close to being ahistorical, and simply projecting our contemporary frame onto historical subjects. Rather, it is clear that various kinds of love were in operation, at much the same time, and in much the same spaces. Here, I consciously align my analysis to echo Katie Barclay's elucidation of love, where it "emerges as something messy, contested, and negotiated."[100] Here, too, love reveals itself as equally complicated, ambiguous, and, at times, paradoxical.

LOVE AND COERCION

Love gains further complexity through an exploration of coerced partnerships. Some intimate partnerships of enslaved people were not naturally occurring, out of love or other emotional bonds, but were instead coerced into being through the intercedence of their enslaver.[101] As Tera Hunter aptly observes, whilst enslavers wielded "the power to separate couples or force them to live together as man and wife, *they could not control their emotions*."[102] This has led most historians to read love as incompatible within spaces of coercion.[103] Thomas Foster has pointed to a dearth of (positive) emotion between coerced partners, arguing that enslaved men faced either "emotional withdrawal" or "resentment" towards their forced partners.[104] David Doddington renders love and coercion as equally mutually exclusive, through his identification that coerced relationships were spaces of "power and dominance *rather than* love and affection."[105] Indeed, most enslaved individuals, particularly in the WPA, placed emotional distance between love and coercion (whilst enslaved people's autobiographies largely fail to mention coercion at all).[106] Molly,

[100] Barclay, "Interrogating Romantic Love," 275.
[101] See Thomas Foster, *Rethinking Rufus: Sexual Violations of Enslaved Men* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2019); Smithers, *Slave Breeding*; and Doddington, *Contesting Slave Masculinity*.
[102] Hunter, 39, 33.
[103] Foster, *Rethinking Rufus*, 49; Doddington, 150–51, 169–70.
[104] Thomas Foster, "The Sexual Abuse of Black Men under American Slavery," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 20, 3 (2011), 445–64, 457.
[105] Doddington, 150–51, added emphasis.
[106] Foster, "The Sexual Abuse of Black Men," 457; Doddington, 141.

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for instance, had initially sustained a bond free of coercion with her husband, who was subsequently sold away. Molly was coercively paired with a new husband, Tony, yet still regarded her "*real* husband" – and perhaps her "real love" – as connected to the man who had been sold away.[107] Willie Blackwell's testimony recalled one enslaved man, years after his forcible removal from his initial partnership into a coerced bond, who would reflect back on his first wife and express that "he still loved dat woman."[108] John Andrew Jackson's narrative similarly pointed to emotional distance in their feelings towards their coerced partners, and their emotions remained strongly tied to partnerships that had formed through (relative) choice. Jackson's narrative brings us the story of Adam, coerced into a second intimate partnership. Adam demonstrated an emotional refusal to feel affectionately towards his new partner, "obstinately persisting in *loving* his [original] wife."[109] Similarly, Rose Williams, who had been forcibly paired with Rufus, referred to her union as an "experience," and chose not to utilize emotion words such as "love."[110] Instead, Rose reported that she "don't like Rufus."[111]

However, the absence of love in coerced partnerships was not necessarily so straightforward. Mary Gaffney, who was coercively partnered with her husband by their enslaver, stated resolutely, "I just hated the man I married."[112] Yet interestingly, Mary "kept on living with that negro," the coerced partner she "hated," long after emancipation, an important detail largely omitted by historians of American slavery who discuss Mary Gaffney's experience and navigation of

[107] Fanny Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation 1838–1839* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984; first published 1863), 325. See also Griffin [Fraser], "Iffen I Doan Love Yo' Den Dar Ain't No Water in Tar Riber," 80. See also Foster, "The Sexual Abuse of Black Men," 458; and Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton, 1985), 150, added emphasis.

[108] Willie Blackwell, quoted in Smithers, 91.

[109] John Andrew Jackson, *The Experience of a Slave in South Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996; first published 1861), 34, added emphasis; Foster, *Rethinking Rufus*, 40.

[110] For a comprehensive analysis of Rose Williams's testimony, see Foster, *Rethinking Rufus*. See also Doddington, 168–69.

[111] Rose Williams, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project*, Vol. XVI, *Texas*, Part 4, Sanco-Young, 1936, manuscript/mixed material, 176, at www.loc.gov/item/mesn164. See also Emily West, "Reflections on the *History and Historians* of the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves: Enslaved Women and Intimate Partner Sexual Violence," *American Nineteenth Century History*, 19, 1 (2018), 1–21, 10; and Foster, "The Sexual Abuse of Black Men under American Slavery," 457.

[112] Mary Gaffney, quoted in Liese Perrin, "Resisting Reproduction: Reconsidering Slave Contraception in the Old South," *Journal of American Studies*, 35, 2 (2001), 255–74, 262. See also Foster, "The Sexual Abuse of Black Men under American Slavery," 457.

coercion.[113] Here, feelings of love gain an additional element, of both complexity and possibility.[114] Whilst it would be more straightforward to assume that Mary did not love the partner she had been forcibly thrust upon, the fact remains that Mary, like many others, stayed with her partners even when imbued with considerably more freedom of choice.[115] Notably, others staunchly refer to their emotional sentiments *as* love. Sam and Louisa Everett reflect a pertinent case in point. Whilst Louisa was initially forced on Sam, instructed by her enslaver to "git busy and do [it] in his presence," Louisa ended her interview by expressing, "Sam was kind to me and I learnt to love him," and that, "thank God," she "never had another man forced on me."[116] It seems reasonable to assume that the long duration of their coerced relationship mitigated any chances of either Sam or Louisa forming other loving bonds more "freely." Nevertheless, Louisa still voluntarily admitted that she "learnt to love him," in a relationship that stretched well after emancipation and in a bond that grew despite – and *within* – the space of coercion.[117] Within these seemingly impossible stories, we are compelled to consider the possibility that love, as experienced within enslaved emotional communities, was not necessarily antithetical to coercion, but could in fact constitute part of it. Conceptualizing the two as discrete and in binary opposition to one another not only is reductive, but equally negates the multiplicity of meanings

[113] Historians such as Doddington, Jacqueline Jones, Foster, and Marie Jenkins Schwartz all focus exclusively on Gaffney's "hat[ing]" of the man she was partnered with. This further evidences the tendency of scholars to project modern understandings of love onto historical actors. In the case of Gaffney, they have selectively chosen to ignore the fact that she "kept on living with that negro," and raised five children with him post-emancipation. See Doddington, 166–67; Jacqueline Jones, *Labour of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 33; Foster, *Rethinking Rufus*, 66; Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 93.

[114] Here, I take up Doddington's call, who suggested that "the complications attached to enslaved intimacy," including emotional ramifications, must be considered in more detail. See David Doddington, "Manhood, Sex, and Power in Antebellum Slave Communities," in Daina Ramey Berry and Leslie Harris, eds., *Sexuality and Slavery: Reclaiming Intimate Histories in the Americas* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018), 145–58, 154.

[115] With the information available from Gaffney's WPA narrative, the only source available that details Gaffney's story, it is impossible to fully comprehend why Mary continued to live with her husband after emancipation, or how her feelings may have changed over time. The potential for other dynamics of power, perhaps from her husband, or the possibility of financial dependence should not be ignored.

[116] Sam Everett and Louisa Everett, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project*, Volume III, *Florida*, Anderson–Wilson with combined interviews of others, 1936, manuscript/mixed material, 128, at www.loc.gov/item/mesn030.

[117] Tera Hunter forwards a similar observation on this point, noting that "sometimes, regardless of the circumstances, forced partners learned to adapt and adjust to their situation and could even develop genuine feelings of affection." Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock*, 209, 33.

and expressions of love that are present within the recollections of enslaved people. This finding shares some similarities to West's analysis of coerced relationships, which purports that "what was once *disunion* become more solidly a sense of *union*," and that partners could grow to "feel affection for each other."[118]

QUEER POTENTIALITIES

Like the messiness of coercion, love is further obfuscated by the emotions ascribed to same-sex relationships. In his autobiography, Frederick Douglass explicitly referred to his feelings towards fellow male bondsmen *as* love. "I have never loved, esteemed, or confided in men more than I did these," Douglass wrote, referring to the relationships he developed with the men he was hired out with.[119] "No band of brothers could be more loving."[120] Whether this love had erotic or romantic dimensions remains, in some senses, peripheral.[121] These were, according to Douglass, affective ties "as strong as one man can feel for another."[122] Douglass's use of an expression of love, a same-sex love, could not serve the same political purpose as the heterosexual vision of love exclusively present in other enslaved people's autobiographies: a deviation that ultimately detracts from abolitionist

[118] West, "The Union of Enslaved Couples during the Disunion of the Nation," 17, added emphasis. Here, the emotion of love between partners of coerced bonds may be argued to have been forced upon them, in ways that lend themselves to analysis through Reddy's concept of emotional regimes. However, we might equally consider Frederick Douglass's comments on forced love, where love could not be fostered nor "annihilated by the peremptory command of anyone." Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Miller, Orton and Mulligan, 1855), 86, at https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/douglass55/douglass55.html.

[119] Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2001; first published 1892), 189.

[120] Ibid. Interestingly, Douglass's expression of same-sex love only appears in this narrative, but remains conspicuously absent from his first biography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1999; first published 1845), at https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/douglass/douglass.html. See also Sergio Lussana, "'No Band of Brothers Could Be More Loving': Enslaved Male Homosociality, Friendship, and Resistance in the Antebellum American South," *Journal of Social History*, 46, 4 (2013), 872–95; Lussana, *My Brother Slaves: Friendship, Masculinity, and Resistance in the Antebellum South* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2016), 99–100; and Jim Downs, "With Only a Trace: Same-Sex Sexual Desire and Violence on Slave Plantations, 1607–1865," in Jennifer Brier, Jim Downs and Jennifer Morgan, eds., *Connexions: Histories of Race and Sex in North America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 15–37, 18, who also explore expressions of intimacy in Douglass' autobiographies.

[121] For a full exploration of the affective ties of friendship amongst enslaved men see Lussana, "No Band of Brothers"; and Lussana, *My Brother Slaves*.

[122] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 274; Lussana, "No Band of Brothers," 883.

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rhetoric.[123] As Hunter has similarly observed, the stories of enslaved experiences that ran counter, or were unproductive, to the gradual "full embrace of Protestant Christian conversion and its ethics" were "unwelcomed."[124] Although we may easily explain away Douglass's love as non-romantic love of friendship, to do so – as Thomas Foster has identified – prematurely "clos[es] down queer possibilities."[125] Similar evidence of the dimensions of same-sex love within the WPA has not yet been excavated by scholars – it is perhaps here that Darlene Clark Hine's "culture of dissemblance" crystallizes.[126] Due to this dearth, it becomes necessary to instead invest in a more speculative approach and to explore queer *potentialities*: in the words of Hartman, "exploiting the capacities of the subjunctive (a grammatical mood that expresses doubts, wishes, and possibilities)."[127]

Several important works of scholarship have begun to explore queer relationships in the context of slavery, yet most focus their attention on same-sex sexual abuse between racial groups.[128] Whilst this work is of tremendous importance, I echo Jim Downs's identification, that these works largely "tell us *only* about … [same-sex] interaction[s] between white men and enslaved men," and elide emotional histories of "intimacy, desire, and even love" felt in queer enslaved partnerships.[129] Further, whilst Sergio Lussana's work on friendships among enslaved men has importantly concluded that "same-sex relationships occupied a central stage in the lives of enslaved men," consideration for the emotional dimensions and affective lengths of the "strong bonds

[123] Abdur-Rahman notes that "literary constructions of sexuality" in enslaved people's autobiographies function *exclusively* as "tropes to reveal heinous institutional practices within slavery." See Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman, "'The Strangest Freaks of Despotism': Queer Sexuality in Antebellum African American Slave Narratives," *African American Review*, 40, 2 (2006): 223–37.

[124] Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock*, 41.

[125] Foster, *Rethinking Rufus*, 91. Here, it is also important to highlight the fact that distinctions between "friendships" and "partnerships" were not as concrete as we might perceive them today. Lillian Faderman's study of romantic friendship in women has indicated that "romantic friends opened their souls to each other and sp[oke] a language that was in no way different from the language of heterosexual love," which may complicate the study of love in this historical and cultural context even further. See Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1981), 16.

[126] Darlene Clark Hine has suggested the notion of a "culture of dissemblance," or a community-wide policy of nondisclosure, to help explain the dearth of evidence within the WPA on sexuality and sexual violence. See Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 14, 4 (1989), 912–20.

[127] Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 11.

[128] Abdur-Rahman's work, which has discussed queer dimensions of slavery, also focusses on enslaved people's autobiographies, not the WPA narratives. See Abdur-Rahman, 224–26.

[129] Downs, 26, emphasis mine.

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of affection" present within these relationships, with particular reference to the nature of romantic love, remains to be fully explored.[130]

Whilst acknowledging that one emotional community cannot simply be substituted by another, we might begin to fill this adage through looking to other Black enslaved emotional communities across the Black Atlantic, for evidence of emotional norms that may share some degree of applicability. Historian Vincent Woodard has pointed to males in Cuban enslaved communities who established long-term partnerships with other men which included erotic dimensions: they "had sex with each other and didn't want … anything to do with women."[131] Omise'eke Tinsley has also pointed to the existence of *mati* partnerships – a word used by Creole women meaning *shipmate*, and used to describe "a highly charged volitional relationship" that developed between women who were emotionally and physically intimate during their journey through the Middle Passage.[132] Tinsley has explicitly called *mati* relationships ones of "female lovers."[133] Closer to home, we may read queer possibilities of love within Solomon Northup's recollection of "Uncle Abram". Described as possessing a "contempt of matrimony," Abram, according to Northup, had no interest in sexual intimacy with women, including his wife, whom he had "well nigh forgotten."[134] Yet Abram retained intimate, affective relationships with many of his male bondsmen, including Northup himself, who remained his "cabinmate for years."[135] Situating queer possibilities within the love of enslaved Black communities remains in its formative stages, and further research is required to establish more fully the presence of this dimension in emotional norms. Nevertheless, these fragmentary pieces of evidence should not be ignored, especially because they do not fit neatly within the accepted framing of emotional norms. Any attempt to examine love within the enslaved American antebellum context must consider the

[130] Lussana, "No Band of Brothers," 887, 881. Lussana's *My Brother Slaves*, whilst exploring the intimate same-sex relationships amongst enslaved men, chooses not to explore homosexuality, or, by extension, romantic love. Lussana, *My Brother Slaves*, 10.

[131] Vincent Woodard, *The Delectable Negro: Human Consumption and Homoeroticism within U.S. Slave Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 235.

[132] *Mati* has been observed in a specific enslaved emotional community: Suriname, South America. However, as Tinsley points to, other individuals have identified a host of intimate *shipmate* relationships in other contexts, from Haiti to Trinidad. See Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 14, 2–3 (2008), 191–215, 198.

[133] Ibid., 192.

[134] Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New-York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and Rescued in 1853* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2011; first published 1853), 222.

[135] Ibid.

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experience of love as including the *possibility* of same-sex expressions of love that fall outside heteronormativity.[136]

CONCLUSION

This article has explored love within Black enslaved communities of the American South during the antebellum and early postbellum periods, through the lens of a history-of-emotions framework. I argue that romantic love – as expressed and experienced by enslaved emotional communities – was not necessarily enduring, mutually exclusive to coercion, or innately heteronormative. In doing so, I seek not to refute the important historiographical contributions of existing scholarship on slavery and emotion, to dispel the idea that love in enslaved communities existed, or to temper its power. Rather, I demonstrate the importance of moving beyond the tendency that has persisted in historical scholarship, beginning with Bennett, that has entered the archives looking for evidence of a particular affect – in this case love – and emerged prematurely victorious with what *looks like* love, or uses language we associate with contemporary understandings of love, inadvertently negating the multiplicities of meaning that exist through the process. The narration of references to "love" in the archives of slavery must observe and embrace the complexities, nuances, and transcendences that exist in the love stories of enslaved people. It must recognize the lack of "graveyard love" that some members of these emotional communities expressed, a complexity that must be recognized.[137] It must grapple with expressions of love within spaces of coercion. And equally it must acknowledge that Bennett's love story, of "Antoney, who … fell in love with Isabella," *may* have prematurely ascribed Isabella's love to Antoney, as opposed to a female *mati*.[138] Further, the strict alignment of expressions of love within enslaved people's autobiographies to white standards and literary modes of expression, often strikingly different in both expression and content from the WPA narratives, points to further complications in attempting to develop understandings of the love experienced by these emotional communities. Whilst the only conclusions that can be safely drawn are ones of ambiguity, navigation, and complexity, this nevertheless deepens our understandings and more accurately traces the contours of feeling that

[136] Here, I want to stress again the point that non-heteronormative love be placed within the sphere of emotional experiences within emotional *communities*, and not, to adopt Reddy's terminology, within emotional *refuges*. This is because models of queerness as non-normative had not yet crystallized in medical, psychological, or sociocultural discourses at this time, and thus were absent of the same stigma we attribute to it. See Foster, *Rethinking Rufus*, 87.

[137] Cinda Johnson, WPA, 36.

[138] Bennett, *Before the Mayflower*, 29.

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operated in emotional communities, even when their stories, and their emotions, seem impossibly irreconcilable.[139]

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[139] Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 13.

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