

*'Her work of love': forced separations,
maternal grief, and enslaved mothers'
emotional practices in the antebellum US
South*

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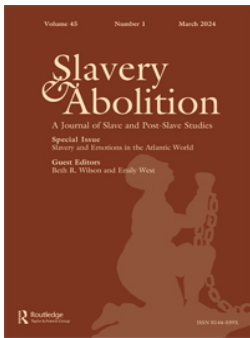
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'Her Work of Love': Forced Separations, Maternal Grief, and Enslaved Mothers' Emotional Practices in the Antebellum US South

Beth R. Wilson

ABSTRACT

This article considers enslaved mothers' emotional responses to the separation of their children. While slavery studies scholars have discussed the individual impact sales had on enslaved people, and historians of emotion have explored white communities' understandings of both white maternal love and enslaved emotion, few studies have explored how events such as sale shaped enslaved women's own emotional understandings, practices, experiences and expressions. Guided by enslaved women's own testimony, this article argues that enslaved women created their own, gendered, emotional worlds in response to their experiences of sale – their own conceptions of love and grief, ways of expressing their emotion, and collective emotional practices in the aftermath of separation. Not only individual responses to emotional pain, their collective emotional practices must also be viewed as acts of refusal to submit to slave trading practices, white emotional standards and racialized emotional ideologies. Through loving and grieving actively, enslaved women maintained their maternal bonds in the face of both practical and ideological attempts to decimate them.

KEYWORDS

US slavery; motherhood; history of emotions; sale; love; grief

With a strong arm and unvaried trust, my grandmother began her work of love.¹

The anticipation and reality of being separated from her children fundamentally shaped Molly Horniblow's experience of motherhood. While enslaved, Horniblow bore five children and as most enslaved women feared, when Horniblow's enslaver died, her children were divided between his children. Reflecting the utter contempt shown towards enslaved maternal bonds, executors sold her youngest child, Benjamin, so that 'each heir might have an equal portion of dollars and cents'.² Separations could happen at multiple times throughout an enslaved person's life and impact a variety of family relationships; enslavers sold sisters from brothers; wives from husbands; fathers and mothers from their children.³

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For example, Harriet Jacobs, Horniblow's granddaughter, described in her narrative how around the age of fifty, Horniblow gained her freedom. As her adult children were still in bondage, however, the auction block continued to cast a long shadow over her everyday experiences, and Benjamin was once again sold away from his mother after attempting to run North to avoid punishment.

How does a mother respond to such a devastating event as being separated from her child? As readers of formerly enslaved people's descriptions of sale, our initial reaction, and the response that nineteenth-century formerly enslaved narrators intended, is to consider feeling. They urge us to reflect on their grief, pain, despair, love and hope. As distant witnesses to Horniblow's life through her granddaughter's testimony, we can never truly understand how she felt about her experiences. Yet, formerly enslaved people chose to bear witness, make public, and emphasize the heart-breaking emotional responses to maternal separations that they witnessed, as well as their own emotions and emotional coping mechanisms.⁴ Jacobs, for example, remembered and emphasized her grandmother's visceral bodily emotional expressions at the sale of her son – her 'heart-rending groans', 'bloodshot eyes' and her 'pleading for mercy' – and such descriptions are echoed by formerly enslaved people throughout their testimony from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including the autobiographies, letters and 1930s Works Progress Administration (WPA) interviews considered here.

From reading these descriptions, historians of slavery have speculated about the devastating individual impact that sales and familial separations had on enslaved people – the pain and grief they experienced.⁵ Yet, as Jacobs' articulation of her grandmother's 'work of love' in the aftermath of her son's sale emphasizes, her narrative reveals not only her individual feelings towards sale, but also attests to how she may have conceived of maternal emotion itself and participated in collective emotional practices to help her manage and communicate her feeling in the aftermath. When considering the nature of emotion, anthropologist and historian of emotion Monique Scheer argues that 'emotions themselves can be viewed as a practical engagement with the world', as they emerge 'from bodily dispositions conditioned by a social context, which always has cultural and historical specificity'.⁶ While visceral, bodily experience is a key component of feeling, scholars of emotion urge us to remember that emotions are socially and culturally constructed and historically contingent, being a way in which we engage with the world around us. If, as Deborah Gray White attested nearly forty years ago, enslaved women developed a female consciousness out of their distinct experiences as enslaved, women and mothers, we must also consider that their conceptualization of emotion was fundamentally formed out of the material realities of enslaved womanhood.⁷

Paying close attention to enslaved women's testimony about their emotion at three stages – in the anticipation of sale, at the moment of separation, and in the aftermath of being torn away from their children – this article uses history of emotions methodologies as a lens to mediate on how enslaved women's distinct

experience of the sale of their children shaped how they conceived of, experienced and expressed maternal emotion.⁸ This requires a consideration of individual mother's feelings in response to sales by listening carefully to the feeling they expressed in their testimony. It also necessitates an acknowledgment that our questions about feeling often remain unanswerable. As Saidiya Hartman and Sasha Turner expertly illustrate, it is possible to use the subjunctive to consider the experiences, motives and feelings of enslaved women, and rely on speculation, imagination and the rhetorical to tell their stories.⁹ Unlike scholars of the Caribbean who are constrained by the relative absence of enslaved people in the archive, however, historians of the US can simultaneously explore patterns of emotion in enslaved people's testimony to consider how emotion was experienced, expressed and used collectively by enslaved mothers.

This article argues that enslaved women created their own, gendered, emotional worlds in response to their experiences of sale – their own conceptions of maternal emotion, ways of expressing their feelings, and collective emotional practices in the aftermath of separation. Due to the perpetual threat of sale, enslaved mothers asserted that their maternal feelings were both complex and unique, as love was ultimately inseparable from the pain and grief that came from this uncertainty. Due to enslaved women's need to survive separations and reflecting bell hook's assertion that the word love should be used as a verb, enslaved mothers knew they had to love and grieve actively.¹⁰ They created two emotional practices that reflected this understanding of maternal emotion: the public expression of embodied, visceral emotion at the moment of sale, and the writing of letters to find their children in the aftermath. Far from passive displays of emotion, these practices allowed enslaved mothers to maintain their maternal bonds through communicating the depth of their love and grief to their children and enslavers. These practices must thus be positioned as acts of refusal to submit to white emotional standards, racialized ideologies that disregarded enslaved maternal ties, and slave trading practices that physically tore families apart.¹¹ In both asserting their own understandings of maternal love and grief, and expressing this publicly in the aftermath of sale, enslaved women used their public emotional expressions to make important political statements about the ultimate injustice of separating a mother from her child.

The Anticipation of Sale

Reflecting on enslaved mothers' emotions on New Year's Day in her autobiography, Jacobs described their 'peculiar sorrows', stirred by the likelihood that they would be hired out for the coming year or sold:

She sits on her cold cabin floor, watching the children who may all be torn from her the next morning; and often does she wish that she and they might die before the day

dawns. She may be an ignorant creature, degraded by the system that has brutalized her from childhood; but she has a mother's instincts, and is capable of feeling a mother's agonies.¹²

We can only speculate as to whether Jacobs herself sat on the floor of her cabin, or in the hiding place in her grandmother's house, watching her children Joseph and Louisa sleep, contemplating the following day. Did she witness her grandmother observing her as she slept, or watching Harriet's own children, after she had decided to hide? Did she notice the pain of female relatives and friends before the New Year? Perhaps describing her own experiences, but undoubtedly those of countless women who were enslaved on her plantation and across the South, she emphasized that enslaved mothers, as a collective, felt both a 'mother's instincts' and could feel a 'mother's agonies' – they had the same maternal bonds, and thus had the same capacity to feel pain, that all mothers felt.

Directing her description to her audience, Jacobs both testified to her own feelings in this passage, and fundamentally counteracted white perceptions of Black emotion during a time when maternal feeling was a central topic of discussion in white society. With the rise of sentimentalism in the nineteenth century, white society moved from partly mistrusting maternal love to increasingly idealizing and requiring it, seeing it as a 'political virtue'. Mothers played an increasingly important political role, idealized in the image of the 'Republican Mother', through bringing up virtuous citizens and imparting their love onto their children which would live on eternally in their memories and character. Society therefore idealized a mother's love as 'pure, unconflicted and fundamentally self-denying'.¹³ While wider US society increasingly valorized maternal emotion, slavery became more entrenched, and the flourishing domestic trade utterly devastated enslaved family ties. To justify the tearing apart of Black families, southerners formulated 'scientific' ideas about Black emotion, and created explicit ideologies about the difference between how Black and white people, including mothers, experienced emotion.

Thomas Jefferson in *Notes on the State of Virginia* outlined the prevailing white view of racialized emotional difference when he wrote about Black men as more lustful and lacking in emotional complexity: 'They are more ardent after their female: but love seems with them to be more an eager desire, than a tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation.' Jefferson also wrote that 'their griefs are transient' and afflictions are 'less felt', reflecting white views that Black people felt less intensely.¹⁴ When describing her experiences on her husband's Georgia plantation, Fanny Kemble likewise suggested that enslaved women had less capacity for maternal affection. In contrast to Jefferson, however, she noted that this was a result of the impact of slavery itself rather than innate biological difference. Writing in her journal, she described 'wretched mothers, whose apparent indifference to the plight of

their offspring, and utter incapacity to alter it, are the inevitable result of their slavery'.¹⁵ Though Kemble focused on enslaved maternal emotion to condemn slavery, both white ideologies posited that Black men and women did not experience love and grief in the same way as white people. For pro-slavery advocates, this ultimately justified the separation of enslaved families through pathologizing and politicizing enslaved people's emotions.

However, far from displaying 'indifference' to the suffering of her children, Jacobs testified to her own understanding of maternal emotion and responded to this ideology of racialized emotional difference with passages that made it abundantly clear that white perceptions of Black feelings were simply wrong. Jacobs and other autobiographers focused on counteracting the idea that their 'griefs were transient' and sale did not impact them emotionally through emphasizing that they had the same capacity to feel as whites. While these phrases combatting white perceptions of Black feeling appear throughout published autobiographies and in some ways reflect white abolitionists' sentimental tropes of Black emotion, we must acknowledge that enslaved women, in the giving of their testimony, ultimately forged and emphasized this counter-conceptualization of Black feeling.¹⁶ In her work on Black abolitionism, Manisha Sinha argues that 'Scholars have ... been too quick to ascribe to white editors and amanuenses the abolitionist content of slave narratives. Fugitive slaves created an authentic, original, and independent critique of slaveholding.'¹⁷ In the telling of their life stories, Jacobs and other formerly enslaved women evidenced their own understandings and experiences of maternal emotion and thus put forward an independent critique of the ideology of racialized emotional difference which must not be solely attributed to white abolitionists and sentimental tropes. Jacobs' description of her 'mother's instincts' may well be directed at her audience, designed to motivate them to act against slavery, but we should not discount the embodied, individual feeling at the centre of this collective political assertion.

Despite arguing that enslaved women had a 'mother's instincts', formerly enslaved women emphasized that unlike white idealizations of maternal love as 'unconflicted' and 'pure', enslaved women's experiences of love could not be this way. Bethany Veney, in her autobiography, described the complexity of her feelings towards her new-born child:

My dear white lady, in your pleasant home made joyous by the tender love of husband and children all your own, you can never understand the slave mother's emotions as she clasps her new-born child, and knows that a master's word can at any moment take it from her embrace.¹⁸

Veney here articulates a perpetual and intimate form of enslavers' violence that was a fundamental and all-encompassing aspect of enslaved life: being forced to live in a state of uncertainty, instability, and apprehension. This constant insecurity weighed heavily in the background of all enslaved mothers' interactions

with their children, stemming from enslavers' constant threats of sale. Veney implies that this continuous state of flux led to a unique set of feelings – 'the slave mother's emotions' – that others could not conceive of and contrasted explicitly with white mother's feelings of 'tender love'. Described ambiguously, perhaps these feelings were unknowable, inexpressible, and even language-defying. Elaine Scarry argues that 'physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned'.¹⁹ Clearly, emotional pain also disrupts language. When the term 'love' was connected to 'uncomplicated' feeling in white society, how could Veney put into words a form of maternal affection, a form of maternal love, that was inextricably linked to a constant anticipation of grief?

'He is not hers' is the simple, but repeated phrase that Frances Watkins Harper used in her poem 'The Slave Mother' to describe the inherent uncertainty of enslaved motherhood that Veney discussed. Using poetry to give form and voice to the maternal emotions that Veney struggled to articulate, Watkins Harper described an enslaved child as 'the only wreath of household love/ that binds her breaking heart'.²⁰ Jacobs also found words to articulate her complex maternal feeling, describing how her child's 'clinging fondness excited a mixture of love and pain', as she 'could never forget that he was a slave'. The complexity of Jacob's experience of maternal feeling is also exemplified when she explained that: 'Sometimes I wished that he might die in infancy.'²¹ Similarly, Veney discussed her desire to die alongside her child rather than see her grow up. Showing awareness that these thoughts differed from white cultural attitudes and valorisation of 'uncomplicated' maternal love, Veney wrote that 'it is not strange that, rude and uncultured as I was, I felt all this, and would have been glad if we could have died together there and then'.²²

Jacobs and Veney did not act upon their thoughts about ending their children's lives. However, Veney testified that these were shared rather than individual feelings – not 'strange'. How can we account for this desire for death? Enslaved woman Margaret Garner, who has been immortalized in historical literature, chose to kill her child rather than let her be re-enslaved after she ran away from bondage with her children in 1856. In *Beloved*, a fictional interpretation of Garner's actions and the long-term impact of them, Toni Morrison contemplated and imagined the role that emotion, and in particular love, played in Garner's actions. Throughout the book, the main character Sethe contends that her decision to kill her child, Beloved, was both motivated by, and a form of 'true', 'thick' and 'tough' love. 'Morrison asserts that one *can* kill out of love', argues Kristine Yohe.²³ As in the case of Veney and Jacobs, we can use speculation, imagination, and empathy to consider Garner's maternal emotion, but we can never truly comprehend the feelings that motivated her. Yet, we can – and should – be guided by female narrators who chose to

testify about their feeling and emphasized that though instinctual, the experience of maternal love was complex, painful and at times indescribable, but ultimately inseparable from the anticipation of being separated from their children. Enslaved women could thus define, experience and express maternal feeling in ways that wider society did not traditionally associate with this emotion.

The Separation

The anticipation of sale shaped all lives under slavery, but countless enslaved mothers also experienced the reality of being torn from their children. At the very moment of sale, of separation from their offspring, enslaved mothers grieved. As Scarry argues that physical pain reverts us to sounds and cries – to a state inexpressible in language – many enslaved women expressed their emotional pain through their bodies. They cried, moaned, screamed, and prayed. After describing being bid for from ‘the block’ immediately after her mother, Elizabeth Ramsey, had been sold, Louisa Picquet chose to focus her description of this event on her mother’s ‘cryin’ and ‘prayin’, also recounting that: ‘Mother was right on her knees, with her hands up, prayin’ to the Lord for me. She didn’t care who saw her: the people all lookin’ at her.’²⁴ Solomon Northup, in his autobiography, recounted the response of a woman named Eliza to the sale of her children. When traders sold her son Randall, Northup remembered Eliza ‘crying aloud and wringing her hands’ before she ‘burst into a paroxysm of grief, weeping plaintively’.²⁵ Susan Hamlin, in the 1930s, remembered similar expressions of pain during slavery, and stated during her interview that ‘Sometimes chillen was sold away from dey parents. De Mausua would come and say “Where jennie,” tell us to put clothes on dat baby, I want um. He sell de baby and de ma scream and holler, you know how they carry on.’²⁶

Horniblow, Ramsey, Eliza, and other unnamed enslaved mothers heavily grieved the sale of their children. Jacobs, Picquet, Northup and Hamlin all chose to testify to this grief, refusing to forget it as time progressed. A challenge for historians when writing about the history of emotions is how we follow the lead of those giving testimony to acknowledge this visceral, individual, embodied pain that mothers like Horniblow, Ramsey and Eliza experienced, but also consider what this emotional response tells us about enslaved women’s collective social and cultural ideas, norms and practices. One method is to resist immediate analysis and allow ourselves to sit with these painful descriptions. Considering visual representations of these sales, such as the one below of Eliza and her children ([Figure 1](#)), can perhaps aid us in doing so, by forcing us to confront some of the emotion that resists language, and cannot be conveyed through words alone.²⁷ How do we begin to write about Eliza’s pain? And how do we deal with Elizabeth’s grief, who in the face of her daughter’s trader, openly cried and prayed and ‘didn’t care who saw her’?

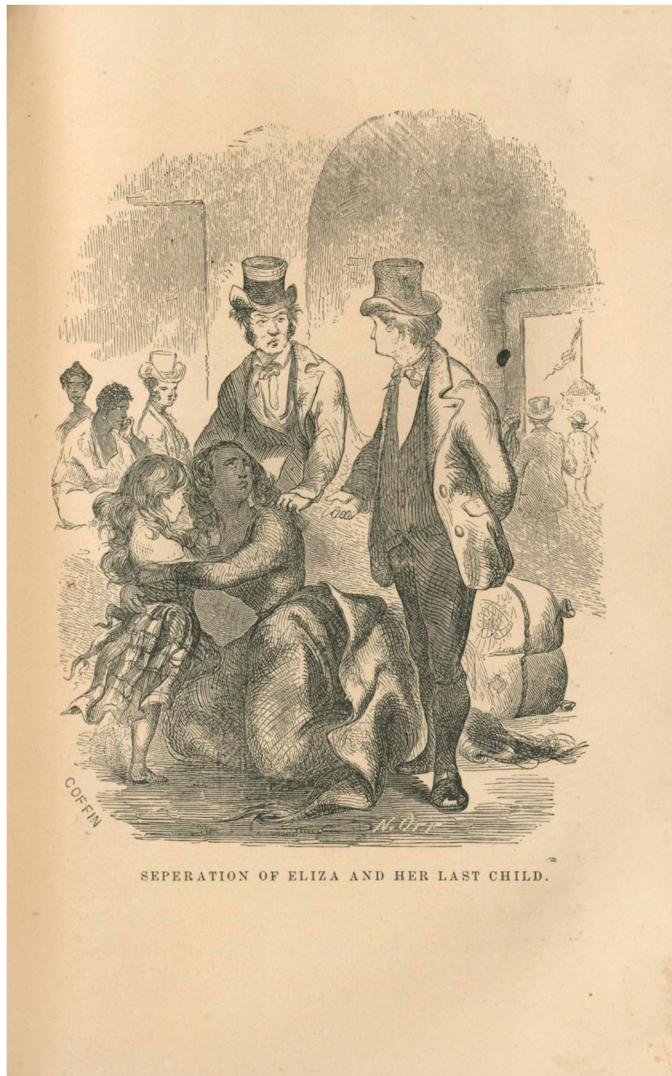


Figure 1. 'Separation of Eliza and her Last Child' in Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup, A Citizen of New York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and Rescued in 1853* (Auburn, Derby and Miller, 1853). Courtesy of Documenting the American South, Libraries of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Was Elizabeth's decision (if it is possible to call it that) to express her grief publicly shaped by the fact that she had a new-born child, or framed by her own experience of sexual abuse, by anger against her enslaver, or fear for her daughter? Elizabeth became pregnant with Louisa at the age of fifteen after being sexually abused by her enslaver and gave birth to a baby boy some years later after again being sold into sexual slavery. Two months after becoming a mother again, Elizabeth was sold alongside her new-born son away from Louisa. With Louisa being fourteen years old and sold to New Orleans,

Elizabeth undoubtedly knew that she was at risk of abuse, particularly due to her light-skin.²⁸ Horniblow, Eliza and every other enslaved mother came to the sale of their children with unique personal circumstances, as Elizabeth did. While these individual contexts came to bear on their emotional responses to sale, the similarity of Elizabeth's public, embodied emotions to other enslaved mothers' expressions of grief makes her response both individual and collective, framed by individual circumstances but also gendered, cultural conventions.

When analysing emotions, Scheer urges historians to consider 'emotional practices', these being the 'doings and sayings' on which 'the bodily act of experience and expression' is dependent. Categories of emotional practices include mobilizing, naming, regulating, and communicating emotions.²⁹ Numerous emotional practices existed in the nineteenth century surrounding death. For example, public mourning practices in white society increased with the emphasis on familial love, with more elaborate funerals, epitaphs and the widespread practice of wearing mourning clothes seen to reflect the love felt towards the deceased.³⁰ Though enslaved people had different mourning practices to whites, including performances, songs, prayers and music adapted from West African traditions, these also played an emotionally regulating function. As Alexis Wells-Oghoghomeh argues, enslaved women 'worked alongside their male counterparts to create religious performances and protocols capable of managing the untold emotions of a perpetually grieving population'.³¹ Clearly, in the wake of the sale of their children, when they did not know if they would see their child again, enslaved women felt the same intensity of love and grief. The nature of the loss associated with sale, however, precluded the engagement in mourning rites that would reflect and manage these feelings. In the absence of traditional mourning rituals, but the presence of the same intense emotions of love and loss, it appears that enslaved mothers created their own emotional practice, akin to their performances surrounding death, to channel, regulate and process their love and grief in this moment.

This gendered emotional practice not only reveals how enslaved women regulated their emotion through collective practices, but also much about how enslaved communities understood the distinctiveness of motherhood, conceived of maternal feeling, and comprehended the actions of their enslavers. Barbara Rosenwein, when researching emotional communities' norms of emotional expression, argues that researchers should focus on what that community defines as valuable or harmful to them, as it is in relation to this that they express emotion.³² In a rare piece of testimony that reflects on differing levels of harm, Lucy Delaney described how she felt 'intense grief' after her husband died in a steamboat explosion. Reflecting on her grief with her mother whose husband had been sold South, her mother stated 'Your husband, honey, is in heaven; and mine – God only knows where he is!' Making a rare but direct comparison between how she felt after her husband

died with the pain her mother felt in relation to the sale of her spouse, Delaney wrote that ‘in those few words, I knew her burden was heavier than mine’, and in consequence stated ‘I resolved to conceal my grief, and devote myself to my mother who had done so much and suffered so much for me.’³³ Though both women were experiencing emotional pain, Delaney displayed her belief in a hierarchy of grief – that the burden her mother felt after the sale of her spouse was heavier than the grief she experienced after the death of her husband, due to the inherent uncertainty and despair that separation caused.³⁴

Though this passage describes differing experiences of spousal loss, Delaney’s understanding of how such perceived hierarchies shaped her own emotional expression gives us insight into why enslaved communities accepted or suppressed some expressions of grief, depending on how loss was perceived. All separation was heart-breaking, yet it is clear that enslaved people did consider the grief that resulted from the separation of mother from child – as distinct from other familial separations or bereavements – as particularly painful.³⁵ To return to Northup’s discussion of Eliza’s experiences, after traders sold her away from her second child, at the very moment when Eliza thought that she was about to be emancipated, he wrote that, ‘never have I seen such an exhibition of intense, unmeasured, and unbounded grief, as when Eliza was parted from her child’. Northup himself had been torn from his children and described his sorrow at being parted from them but chose to focus much of his description of being held by slave traders on Eliza’s distinctly ‘maternal sorrow’ and ‘unbounded grief’.³⁶

In the longer term, Northup believed that Eliza had ultimately died from the weight of her maternal feelings. He explained that after several months, ‘she had sunk beneath the weight of an excessive grief’ and died after becoming ‘utterly helpless’, with her heart breaking from the ‘burden of maternal sorrow’.³⁷ Other mothers were also described as dying from grief in enslaved testimony, reflecting the idea that this separation was particularly emotionally impactful. The intensity of enslaved women’s grief, and the public expression of it, can thus be seen to reflect the belief, asserted by Jacobs and others, that an enslaved mother’s emotion was unique – that ‘she has a mother’s instincts, and is capable of feeling a mother’s agonies’ – and provided a way to process and regulate these distinct emotions.³⁸

In the face of enslavers’ physical violence being used to restrict enslaved women’s expressions of grief, many women continued to grieve openly and publicly, as is clear from Northup’s discussion of Eliza’s emotion.³⁹ Enslaved mothers’ insistence on expressing their grief, their refusal to remain silent, and their utter rejection of enslavers’ emotional standards must be seen as a practice of refusal which reflected both the intensity of their feeling, but also the communicatory and oppositional nature of their emotional practices. In his discussion of a rite of mourning that spontaneously occurred onboard a slave ship, *Hudibras*, after the death of a popular enslaved woman, Vincent

Brown argues that this funeral was a political act, being ‘an act of accounting, of reckoning’, an act that ‘enabled them to express and enact their social values, to articulate their visions of what it was that bound them together’ in the face of the social alienation that resulted from forcibly enslaving someone.⁴⁰ Similarly to the women aboard the *Hudibras*, at another moment when enslavers attempted to sever enslaved social, political and cultural ties, enslaved women articulated the strength of their maternal affection to their children, reminding them at the final moment together of their love.

Through the creation of this widespread grieving practice, enslaved women also communicated the strength of their maternal bonds to their enslavers, counteracting white ideologies of racialized emotional difference and displaying their own political values. Enslaved people saw the separation of mother from child as a uniquely inhumane and unjust act. A formerly enslaved woman reflected this view in the 1920s by placing emphasis on the importance of breast-feeding and the extremely young age that babies were sold, asserting simply that ‘The meanest thing they did was selling babies from the mother’s breast.’⁴¹ Enslaved women, at the sale of their children, articulated the injustice that this quote emphasizes in an emotional, embodied and collective way, and crucially, in a way that enslavers could not misinterpret. White observers, when watching enslaved mourning practices and funeral rites, often did not understand their emotional dimensions, due to mourners’ perceived cheerfulness.⁴² In comparison, enslaved women’s emotional practices after the sale of their children forced their white enslavers and traders who were the architects of this injustice to face the impact that mother–child separations had, in a way that they could not misconstrue.

Tiya Miles asserts that ‘We forget that love is revolutionary.’⁴³ So too, do we forget this about grief – the manifestation of love severed. The women’s emotional expressions not only reflected deep personal sorrow, but also made a powerful political statement about the strength of enslaved communities, the power of mother–child bonds, and the uniquely inhumane nature of this act. Rarely a passive act, enslaved women’s refusal to remain silent and insistence on feeling and expressing their love and pain ensured that slave trading practices could not decimate their family and community bonds, and thus also fundamentally undermined the racialized emotional ideologies that provided the foundation for slave trading practices.

The Aftermath

The immediate grief that enslaved women felt at the moment of sale did not just disappear – in her narrative, Elizabeth Keckley discussed the emotions of a mother whose enslaver sold her baby, and noted that ‘morning after morning passed’, and she continued to grieve. Describing the enslaver’s response to this woman’s long-term anguish, Keckley wrote that ‘One day she was

whipped for grieving for her lost boy. Colonel Burwell never liked to see one of his slaves wear a sorrowful face, and those who offended in this particular way were always punished.⁴⁴ Some women, like Eliza, were utterly devastated by their grief and could not continue to function in the face of it, particularly when enslavers coupled this with physical violence. Mattie Jackson remembered a mother, who after having her children sold South, could not continue to function and later died from her emotional wounds; ‘This cruel blow, assisted by severe flogging and other ill treatment, rendered the mother insane, and finally caused her death.’⁴⁵ Stories of mothers’ unbearable pain continued to be told into the twentieth century. Interviewed in Arkansas in the 1930s, Hettie Mitchell discussed the stories she heard about slavery from her grandmother, whose mother had ‘died from the grief of it’ when she had been sold away as a child. Mitchell’s grandmother bore witness to her mother’s anguish, passing her story down through the generations, highlighting the weight that she and other enslaved women ascribed to maternal grief in their memories of slavery and the importance of telling their stories.⁴⁶ Can we consider these mothers’ responses to separation in the longer term as further acts of refusal to submit to the conditions of enslavement? These enslaved women declined to accept their situation and continue as normal within the system that was the architect of such grief and injustice. Even years after emancipation, Mitchell’s grandmother refused to forget her pain or remain silent about it.

Some mothers simply could not continue in the face of their grief; however, other women managed to embark on actions to help their children in the aftermath of separation. Tiya Miles evocatively detailed the story of three African American women – Ashley, Rose and Ruth – whose story makes plain how love was both central to, and communicated through, enslaved mother’s actions to support their children. When enslavers sold Ashley from her mother Rose, Rose gave her a sack filled with a tattered dress, three handfuls of pecans and a braid of Rose’s hair. In the 1930s, Ruth Middleton, who had heard about Rose’s actions from her grandmother Ashley, sewed these details onto the sack, alongside the line ‘told her it be filled with my love always’. Like Hettie Mitchell’s grandmother who passed down stories of maternal emotion in the face of sale to her children and grandchildren, Ashley clearly remembered and related that ‘Rose insisted on love’, which Rose communicated to her through both her words and the material artefacts. As Miles writes, ‘The work of Rose’s hands, captured by her great-granddaughter’s words, illuminates the importance of materiality as well as emotionality to Black women’s survival strategies.’⁴⁷

Emotionality was also central to enslaved women’s other forms of survival. In the aftermath of sale, once enslaved women could no longer communicate their love to their children as Rose did, some enslaved mothers focused their attention on trying to reverse the sale or gain their child’s freedom through

communicating their feelings to whites. Though rare due to laws surrounding literacy, some women wrote letters to their previous owners or other traders.⁴⁸ Vilet Lester wrote to Patsey Paterson, most likely the daughter of her former owner who she called her 'long loved and well wishing play mate', hoping to locate her daughter after she had been separated. Lester had not seen her daughter for five years; she was sold numerous times to different owners, being forcibly moved from North Carolina to Virginia and Georgia, and was separated from her daughter in Goldsborough, NC, by a man named Walker. After enquiring about her owners, mother and friends who remained in North Carolina, Lester hinted at the distinct pain of not knowing the whereabouts of her child and emphasized the strength of her maternal affection, writing that 'I wish to [k]now what has Ever become of my Presus little girl.' Ultimately attempting to elicit Patterson's support and sympathy through communicating and emphasizing the extent of her grief surrounding this uncertainty, Lester then explained that her new owner had agreed to buy her daughter and reunite them; 'an my Boss being a man of Reason and fealing wishes to grant my trubled breast that mutch gratification and wishes to [k]now whether he will Sell her now'.⁴⁹

Other women managed to find sympathetic whites to write on their behalf. Mary Walker fled bondage in 1848 after being threatened with sale to the Deep South by her enslaver. Walker left without her children; we can only imagine the complex emotional toll that this decision took on her. When in the North, however, Walker attempted to be reunited with her children. After becoming acquainted with the Lesley family, J. P. Lesley wrote to Mildred Cameron on Walker's behalf, communicating her profound maternal emotion and asking for Cameron to allow Walker to buy her children.⁵⁰ Of Walker, Lesley wrote that 'her heart is slowly breaking. She thinks of nothing but her children and speaks of nothing else when she speaks of herself at all, which is very seldom. Her mother-heart yearns unspeakably after them', further emphasizing that 'She feels as if she must die of anxiety and grief and longing love, unless she can get her children with her soon'.⁵¹

As enslaved women's emotions within published slave narratives were framed by sentimental tropes but were ultimately forged out of their own ideologies and experiences, the authors of these letters were clearly aware of white letter-writing conventions and wrote with the purpose of eliciting sympathy. Lesley explicitly played on the emotions of the recipient to invoke her empathy – 'I must trust in your goodness of heart and in the remembrance of any sufferings you may have had'.⁵² Descriptions of these mothers' grief, however, also ultimately reflected the very real emotional experiences of enslaved women. Making plain the inseparable connection between love and grief that is similarly emphasized by enslaved women in their narratives, Lesley attempted to communicate Walker's maternal emotion to her previous owner. As these letters show, however, through communicating their feelings, enslaved women

explicitly used emotion as a political tool to aid their quest to be reunited with their children.⁵³ Out of the devastating events of separation, and due to the love and grief that they felt in response, enslaved women undertook a range of acts to ensure the survival of their children. The communication and cultivation of emotion was fundamental to these survival practices. Indeed, Katherine Burns' discussion of the trauma communicated by formerly enslaved people in Information Wanted Advertisements in the 1890s highlights how emotion remained central to practices of survival and reunion long after Emancipation.⁵⁴

Enslaved mothers' attempts to buy their children's freedom also reveal much about how women conceived of these 'emotional practices'. Moving back to Horniblow's actions after traders sold her son, she laboured 'day and night' to provide enough money to buy Benjamin's freedom. Significantly, Jacobs labelled Horniblow's labour 'her work of love'.⁵⁵ This phrase is poignant and evocative and invites us to contemplate what Jacobs is revealing about her grandmother's love. Perhaps, moving beyond motivation, Jacobs understood that this labour, on behalf of her child's freedom, constituted an important form of love in and of itself and was central to her experience of this emotion. bell hooks argues that love should not be described as a mere sensation that we feel, but as an active action or a practice – the action we take to encourage another's spiritual growth.⁵⁶ While hooks considered love in a more modern context, her ideas reflect well what Jacobs conveys about emotion in her important phrase. Due to the realities of enslaved motherhood and the ultimate familial insecurity emphasized throughout enslaved testimony, for enslaved women, emotion could not just be felt passively. Instead, enslaved mothers understood and experienced their emotions as verbs; they had to love and grieve actively, channelling their emotion into practices that communicated their love to their children and to their enslavers, helping their children to survive and escape the institution.⁵⁷ These 'emotional practices' were not just motivated by grief and love but were central to enslaved mothers' understanding and experience of these emotions.

'The Slave Mother'

Beginning with the line 'Heard you that shriek?', Frances Ellen Watkins Harper evocatively described an enslaved mother's response to the sale of her child in her poem, 'The Slave Mother'. In this poem, Watkins Harper gives voice to many of the central aspects of enslaved women's emotional worlds that have been discussed in this article. Enslaved women's feeling for their children was both unique and forever bound up with the anguish and pain that came with perpetually knowing that 'he is not hers'. As the choice to title the poem simply as 'The Slave Mother' suggests, the constant anticipation of sale fundamentally framed an enslaved mother's emotional relationship with her children.⁵⁸ In response to the ever-present reality of sale, but also in opposition to it, enslaved women

formulated their own understanding of maternal emotion, testifying to the fact that they loved their children as others did, but that this love was ultimately inseparable from pain and grief and thus also had to be actively practised.

This unique understanding of maternal love framed how enslaved women responded to their grief at the very moment of separation. When being separated from their children, enslaved women participated in their own collective, embodied and gendered emotional practice to regulate and channel their pain and communicate the depth of their maternal love to the world around them. Describing, in her poem, an enslaved mother's 'shriek', her 'hands so sadly clasped', her 'look of grief and dread' and her 'sad imploring eye', Watkins Harper evocatively visualized these practices. So while these were individual expressions of profound anguish, they also tell us more about enslaved ideas surrounding motherhood, loss and enslaver's actions, serving as collective communication of these ideas. Through creating this emotional practice, enslaved mothers communicated the depth of their maternal feeling to their children, who would remember these displays in the aftermath of sale, but also to their enslavers forced to witness the impact of their inhumane actions.

In the aftermath of sale, enslaved women's emotional practices remained communicatory and political. They communicated, through actions including letter writing, their depth of feeling to enslavers in order to elicit sympathy and urge them to act on their behalf. Historians have often focussed on grief when considering the impact of forced separation, but enslaved women urge us to bear witness to their love, and recognize how this emotion shaped their actions in response to sale and was intimately connected to grief. As Jacobs' phrase 'her work of love' indicates, and other enslaved women's actions in the aftermath of sale reveal, enslaved women's labours to help their children in the aftermath of grief were a form of love. They did not conceive of love and grief as passive sensations. Instead, they practised both emotions, and saw actions on behalf of their children as central to their understanding and experience of maternal feeling.

Enslaved women's conceptualization of emotion, alongside their unique emotional practices, arose in response to the realities of sale and the need to ensure the survival of their children, but were also formed in response to slave trading practices. Through refusing to stay silent about their grief, publicly expressing it in embodied forms, confronting their enslavers with their pain, and communicating the depth of love they felt in letters to their enslavers, enslaved women rejected a racialized ideology and trading practices that sought to deny their emotional personhood. Following the lead of the WPA interviewees who, in the 1930s, remembered and emphasized mothers' expressions of love and grief and their emotional practices as central to their memories of slavery, historians need to recognize the importance of emotion in the lives of enslaved women and how they formulated their own, distinct, emotional worlds out of the realities of their experiences.

Notes

1. Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Boston: 1861), 39.
2. *Ibid.*, 13.
3. Michael Tadman estimated that each decade between 1820 and 1860 around 200,000 enslaved people were sold from one region to another. See *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 5.
4. Enslaved mother's expressions of grief appear most frequently in enslaved people's testimony. Though I focus on enslaved mothers, I am not arguing that enslaved men did not experience grief when sold from their children, but that enslaved women had distinct, public emotional practices surrounding sale. Similarly, I focus here on biological mothers, but 'other mothers' experienced separation from those they cared for and is a fruitful area for further study.
5. Heather Williams' important study explores the emotional impact of family separations. I build on her more general study to consider motherhood and sale explicitly, utilizing the idea of collective emotional practices. Heather Andrea Williams, *Help me to Find my People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).
6. Monique Scheer, 'Are Emotions a Kind of Practice (And is that What Makes Them Have a History)? A Bourdieuan Approach to Understanding Emotion', *History and Theory* 51 (2012), 193.
7. Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985).
8. Few studies either in the history of emotions or slavery studies have analysed enslaved women's own emotional understandings. In a key exception to this, Sasha Turner considers enslaved women's emotional responses to the death of their children in the Caribbean. Turner, 'The Nameless and Forgotten: Maternal Grief, Sacred Protection, and the Archive of Slavery', *Slavery and Abolition* 38, no. 2 (2017): 232–50. I am also grateful to Turner for her feedback on an earlier version of this article, urging me to consider the individual alongside the collective.
9. Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14; Turner, 'The Nameless and Forgotten'.
10. bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: William Morrow, 2001), 4.
11. This idea of refusal builds on the work of Aisha Finch and Jennifer Morgan, who urge us to rethink our understanding of enslaved women's resistance. Due to the centrality of enslaved women's reproductive potential in slavery's perpetuation, Morgan argues that we should focus on the body when considering enslaved women's forms of refusal. Here, I argue that paying attention to embodied emotional expression – often viewed as apolitical and passive – expands our understanding of enslaved women's formation of an oppositional political consciousness. Aisha Finch, "What Looks Like a Revolution": Enslaved Women and the Gendered Terrain of Slave Insurgencies in Cuba, 1843-1844', *Journal of Women's History*, 26, no. 1 (2014): 112–34; Jennifer L. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).
12. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 26.
13. Jan Lewis, 'Mother's Love: The Construction of an Emotion in Nineteenth-Century America' in *Social History and Issues in Human Consciousness*, eds. Andrews E. Barnes and Peter N. Stearns (New York: New York University Press, 1989), 210; 214; 225. See also Linda Kerber, 'The Republican Mother: Women and the

- Enlightenment – An American Perspective’, *American Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (1976): 187–205, for a discussion of ideological development of the ‘Republican Mother’.
14. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787).
 15. Fanny Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation, 1838–1839* (1863).
 16. See Louisa Picquet and Hiram Mattison, *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon: Or Inside Views of Southern Domestic Life* (New York: 1861) for another example of the counter-conceptualization of maternal feeling.
 17. Manisha Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 421.
 18. Bethany Veney, *The Narrative of Bethany Veney: A Slave Woman* (Worcester: Massachusetts, 1889), 26.
 19. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 4.
 20. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, ‘The Slave Mother’ in *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (Boston, 1854).
 21. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 96.
 22. Veney, *The Narrative of Bethany Veney*, 26.
 23. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Vintage Classics Edition, Penguin Random House UK, 2022), 320; 208; 211; 256. and Kristine Yohe, ‘Enslaved Women’s Resistance and Survival Strategies in Frances Elle Watkin Harper’s “The Slave Mother: A Tale of Ohio” and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Margaret Garner’ in M. Frederickson and D. Walters, *Gendered Resistance: Women, Slavery and the Legacy of Margaret Garner* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 104.
 24. Picquet and Mattison, *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon*, 18.
 25. 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* (Auburn: Derby and Miller, 1853), 81.
 26. Susan Hamlin, interviewed by Jessie A Butler, Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative project, Vol 14, South Carolina, Part 2, Library of Congress. Hamlin was interviewed once by white woman Jessie Butler, and once by Black interviewer Augustus Ladson, who listed her surname as Hamilton. Significantly, both interviews describe sale and separations.
 27. The inclusion of this image by Northup in his narrative also served this purpose by forcing the reader to confront the realities of sale.
 28. For more on the portrayal of sexual abuse in Picquet’s narrative, see Andrea Livesey, ‘Race, Slavery and the Expression of Sexual Violence in Louisa Picquet, *The Octoroon*, *American Nineteenth Century History* 19, no. 3 (2018): 267–88.
 29. Scheer, ‘Are Emotions a Kind of Practice?’, 209.
 30. Peter Stearns and Mark Knapp, ‘Historical Perspectives on Grief’, 134–7.
 31. Alexis Wells-Oghoghomeh, *The Souls of Womenfolk: The Religious Cultures of Enslaved Women in the Lower South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 151–9.
 32. Barbara Rosenwein, ‘Problems and Methods in the History of Emotions’, *Passions in Context* 1, no. 1 (2010): 11.
 33. Lucy A. Delaney, *From the Darkness Cometh the Light or Struggles for Freedom* (St Louis: Publishing House of J T Smith), 56–7.
 34. See Turner, ‘The Nameless and Forgotten’, 241 for a discussion of ideas surrounding death and Christianity.

35. See Williams, *Help me to Find my People*, 87–88, for a brief exploration of the difference between mothers' expressive grief when sold from their children and enslaved men's muted silence when sold from their spouses.
36. Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 85.
37. *Ibid*; 107; 160; 53. See Katherine Burn's article in this collection, 'She Died from Grief: Trauma and Emotion in Information Wanted Advertisements'.
38. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 26.
39. Erin Dwyer demonstrates that physical punishments were often used by enslavers to both incite certain emotions and punish those who were expressing the wrong emotions. *Mastering Emotions: Feeling, Power, and Slavery in the United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), 139; Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 81.
40. Vincent Brown, 'Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery', *American Historical Review* 114, no. 5 (2009): 1232–3.
41. Fisk University, *Unwritten History of Slavery: Autobiographical Accounts of Negro Ex-Slaves* (1968), 2.
42. Wells-Oghohomeh, *The Souls of Womenfolk*, 158–9.
43. Tiya Miles, *All that She Carried; The Journey of Ashley's Sack, a Black Family Keepsake* (New York: Random House, 2021), 3.
44. Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* (New York: G. W. Carleton & Co., Publishers, 1868), 29.
45. Mattie J. Jackson and L. S. Thompson, *The Story of Mattie J. Jackson: Her Parentage – Experience of Eighteen Years in Slavery – Incidents During the War – Her Escape from Slavery* (Lawrence: 1866), 17.
46. Hettie Mitchell, interviewed by Irene Robertson, interviewed by Irene Robertson, Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol 2, Arkansas, Part 5, Library of Congress.
47. Miles, *All that she Carried*, xiv; 12; 21.
48. For more on literacy amongst the enslaved, see chapter 1 of Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Ben Schiller, 'Learning Their Letters: Critical Literacy, Epistolary Culture, and Slavery in the Antebellum South', *Southern Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (2009): 11–29; Randall Miller, "Dear Master": *Letters of a Slave Family* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977).
49. Letter from Vilet Lester to Paterson, John Alfred Papers, Duke University Archives, <https://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/scriptorium/lester/lester.html>.
50. See Sydney Nathans, *To Free a Family: The Journey of Mary Walker* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013) for more details of Mary Walker's experiences.
51. Letter written by J. P. Lesley on behalf of Mary Walker to Mildred Cameron, September 4, 1859. Cameron Family Papers, Box 50, folder 1197, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.
52. *Ibid*.
53. These letters are examples of what Ben Schiller terms 'critical literacy', where enslaved people 'produced texts that disturbed the terms of their bondage, even as they worked within an epistolary culture that maintained and emphasized the imbalance power dynamic of the master/slave relationship.' In these cases, the authors explicitly used emotion to try to disrupt the terms of their bondage. Schiller, 'Learning Their Letters', 15.
54. Burns, 'She Died from Grief'.
55. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 39.

56. hooks, *All About Love*, 4.
57. Sarah Knott, in *Mother is a Verb*, explores ‘the doing’ of motherhood across time and space. I argue here that enslaved women saw maternal emotion as central to the work of mothering, and conversely, the work of mothering as inseparable from the experience of maternal emotion. See *Mother is a Verb: An Unconventional History* (New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 2019).
58. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, ‘The Slave Mother’.

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