

Languages of Slavery: Emotional Languages of Slave-owning and Mastery

I hope to contribute to this discussion an exploration of the linguistic choices made by elite male slave-owners when talking *about* slavery, or their own enslaved people, and how the emotional language surrounding slavery differed across cultural, and linguistic boundaries.

By comparatively exploring the rhetorical styles employed by proslavery spokesmen in South Carolina and Cuba during the pre-Civil War period, a clear distinction is revealed between the words selected in each language and culture. More complex than simply being attributable to the differences between Spanish and English, the disparity lies between two opposing discursive styles surrounding the theme of slave insurrection: one characterised by confidence in South Carolina, and another by fearfulness in Cuba. My doctoral research has focussed upon these languages of confidence and fear which just so happen in this case to divide along a traditional linguistic meridian. My contribution would explore the *language of mastery*, and its emotional dialects particular to each slaveholding region.

Speaking to the overarching theme of Languages of Slavery, I argue that there existed in the Atlantic world different emotional ‘Scripts’ cannily developed by slave-owners seeking to advocate for the continuation of slavery on their terms. These Scripts were flavoured and restrained by two factors. The first, emotional restrictions (each society’s expectations for appropriate male behaviour, which implicated their emotional display), wedded to the second, their political circumstances.

South Carolina’s political profile was a nationalistic state at the helm of the slow process of mobilising secession from the Union across the South in order to preserve slavery without suffering the interference of the federal government. South Carolina’s fundamentally disruptive objective - to maintain slavery by rupturing an otherwise peaceful Union - necessitated a posture, and a discourse, of self-assurance and defiance. Mobilising humiliation and indignation to provoke hesitant southern men to secession, jibing that loyalty to the Union was tantamount to effeminacy and submission, the South Carolinian language of mastery was galvanised in a historical moment of antagonistic obstinacy. Within that political climate, South Carolina’s Emotional Regime, which guarded the sacrament of a gentleman’s word and his authority, expecting in return his dominance and stoicism in the privacy of his home just as much as upon the Senate floor, bound slaveowners to a discourse of self-assurance not only by their political needs, but also by their social constraints.¹ Refuting abolitionist claims that southern slaveholders lived in fear of the slaves they were fighting so zealously to keep, the result, I argue, was the creation of what I term a Confidence Script: one which asserted confidence and control at all costs and in all moments, regardless of any apparent danger. The Confidence Script, which dismissed any fear of slave rebellion as effeminate folly, was used to convince an audience composed at varying moments of abolitionists, other southerners, slaves, and, at times, the family members of the speaker, not only of the total sustainability and safety of slavery in South Carolina, but also that the state was completely safe from the threat of slave rebellion, which, in any event, white men would be more than able to quell. Their emotional language of mastery was intentionally impenetrable.

¹ William Reddy’s compelling theory of the ‘Emotional Regime’ - the nature in which political regimes, wishing to maintain authority, tailor the correct emotional display for members of that state – is key to the approach I have taken in exploring these emotional languages. The Emotional Regime, Reddy explains, should be imagined as a ‘complex of practices that establish a set of emotional norms and that sanction those who break them.’ William Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: a Framework for the History of the Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp.323-324

Slaveholders in Cuba, the most valuable possession in Spain's rapidly eroding empire, conversely, set out to preserve slavery by placid means: maintaining the protection of Spain by propagating in their communications to the metropolis the metaphor of a weak, defenceless and feminised island in order to guarantee continued military protection, political consistency on the island, and to defend against the annexationist and acquisitive designs of Britain and the U.S. Propagating a narrative of loyalty, fearfulness, and imploring dependency, painting their slaves as dangerous and sinister, better served that goal. Slaveholders in Cuba needed Spanish protection in order to assure the stable continuation of their livelihoods, and lives, on the island. A threatening, demanding or aggressive script akin to South Carolina's would have antagonised the Spanish Crown, which would have sooner acted to suppress voices emanating from Cuba than hear their requests. As such, those slaveholders cannily realised the advantage of supplication over hostility, evoking helplessness and terror of their own slaves, and, in doing so, evoking a femininity which appealed to, and exploited, Spain's protective masculinity. For these reasons, I term the Cuban discourse a Supplication Script, an emotional language which portrayed the slaveholding experience as a terrifying risk abounding with threat, that Spain needed to protect against or risk losing the island to a rival nation. Fear was a useful tool for proslavery voices in Cuba, joining together Peninsular Spaniards and Creoles on the island in their economic interests. In conjunction with this political circumstance, Cuba's Emotional Regime, which allowed men to repose their public characters in the privacy of their intimate social circles and families, voicing fear and behaving unbecomingly in the safety of their Emotional Refuges, allowed those men a space for cathartic emotional exploration denied to South Carolinians.²

Compellingly, although when arguing for or against the likelihood of insurrection in their regions, the emotional languages differed, in each region, the words used to imagine slave rebellion were considerably similar. In both, common tropes surround the theme of insurrection: combustion, fire, the contagion of rebellion, race war, volcanoes, burning cane fields, and ashes. Even in South Carolina, where fear was only nominated rarely, there emerged a prevailing style for speaking about it, or conjuring its forms, a trend therefore not specific to one region. This imagery spanned the southern U.S. and the wider Caribbean, if not the greater slaveholding Atlantic, raising questions of a language of fear familiar to all slaveholders.³

² Reddy's concept of the Emotional Refuge is comparable to an emotional escape valve for those living in an otherwise unrelenting environment of social performance. Reddy suggests that there are places to which historical actors could have safely escaped, acting with less restraint, without the risks of spoiling their reputations. 'One would expect that any society which imposes strict emotional discipline' Reddy explains, 'will generate various practices, relationships, and venues that provide temporary, local suspension of the mental control efforts prescribed by the Emotional Regime in place.' Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling*, p.154

³ Gillian McGillivray, *Blazing Cane: Sugar Communities, Class, and State Formation in Cuba, 1868-1959* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009) pp.1-13

Primary Sources:

Demonstrating the opposing styles of emotional language, the following primary sources capture the differing rhetorical styles of slave-owners in South Carolina and Cuba when discussing the possibility of slave rebellion:

The declaration of South Carolinian proslavery firebrand and states' rights advocate, William Smith, serving in the United States Senate, is the archetypical example of the South Carolinian Confidence Script deployed when discussing slave rebellion. The suggestion was rebuffed as a foolish notion, to be neither feared, nor, critically, discussed. Refuting the claims made by a northerner who had published a pamphlet under the pseudonym 'Marcus' which had claimed that southern slaveholders lived in perpetual fear of their own insurrectionary slaves, Smith retorted:

'We may be happy to say this man Marcus would be mistaken, as well as many others who had supposed we were not only in a constant state of alarm, but that we were also in constant danger, from an insurrection of this part of our population. This people are so domesticated, or so kindly treated by their masters, and their situations so improved, that Marcus and all his host cannot excite one among twenty to insurrection... the owners of these people can place arms in their hands. if necessary...they are the shield of their masters, instead of their enemy.'⁴

Yet, that tone was not typical of the discursive style of slaveholders in Cuba. A letter principally signed by the Cuban-born slaveholder the Marquis of Arcos, Ignacio Francisco de Borja de Peñalver y Peñalver, a member of one of Cuba's foremost sugar producing families, on the proposal by the British to liberate all slaves illegally imported to Cuba following the Spanish abolition of the Atlantic slave trade in October of 1820, when read alongside the above quote from South Carolina, reveals a compelling disparity in emotional tone:

'We dominate by custom, by prestige; but, difficult though it is to confess it, we do not dominate by force, and force is the only element that can sustain slavery. The slave makes continuous efforts to test the resistance and strength of his chains, and these chains today are imaginary. We have slept in this danger, and it's now necessary to awaken... this concerns our lives and plantations, the honour of our wives and daughters, it concerns questions of extermination, because, as the abolitionist DeToqueville expresses it: 'wherever the blacks are stronger, they destroy the whites.'⁵

The slaveholders of Cuba indicated, without qualms, that every white inhabitant of the island, themselves included, had good reason to be fearful of the enslaved population. They did not make the point of scapegoating women as the only category that was made nervous by the prospect of rebellion, as the slave-owners of South Carolina did. Moreover, while South Carolinian enslavers emphatically rebuffed as absurd and offensive the insinuation that rebellion among their enslaved people was a looming threat, much less a prospect to be feared, slaveholders in Cuba unhesitatingly vocalised their palpable trepidation. In these ways, among others, Cuban documents concerning the theme of slave rebellion are starkly different to those pertaining to South Carolina. They contain themes of anxiety, paranoia, fear and doubt, all of which were expressed with an apparently unflinching forthrightness.

⁴ Speech of William Smith, *Annals of Congress*, Senate, 16th Congress, 1st Session, p.267

⁵ 'A Report From the Commission, Appointed for that Effect, on the Draft Convention of his British Majesty Relative to the Liberty of the Slaves', Havana, 28.9.1841, C.M. Morales, T.78, No.123, Vidal Morales y Morales, BNJM

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