A Feeling for History: Exploring Eighteenth-Century Emotion

In Passion Is the Gale *(2008) Nicole Eustace traces the changing understanding of emotions in the personal and collective lives of colonial Pennsylvanians and shows that the American Revolution was truly an emotional upheaval.*Common-place *asked her: how can we study emotions in past societies, and what we do we learn about our affinities with and differences from eighteenth-century Americans by exploring their emotional expressions?*

Many newspaper reporters admit that the requirement to ask nosey questions is one of the chief pleasures of the job. Historians, as a group, are even worse. We claim the right to snoop about in people's most private papers—to review their wills, peruse their letters, even peep into their diaries—all as a matter of professional prerogative. Still, even unfettered access to personal records offers little guarantee that we can ever understand the interior lives of people of past times. When it comes to trying to uncover the history of emotion, scholars face a daunting task.

In one way we are fortunate: because the papers we pilfer belong to those long gone, we can usually tell how the story ends. Pondering origins and outcomes, weighing the relative influence of various causal factors and the comparative significance of different effects, we can take a more or less omniscient view

of events. But our powers of observation founder when it comes to trying to discover things that went largely unremarked. How did historical actors feel about each other? Did they express their emotions to each other directly or obliquely to anyone else? If we do chance to find, say, an exchange of letters averring enmity or affection between the writers, how can we know whether to take such declarations at face value? Might societal expectations have provoked expressions of emotion that were not truly felt? Conversely, if we find no trace of recorded emotion does this mean people felt nothing? Or might it simply be a matter of scarce paper, sparse ink, and scant time?

Resistant to quantification or even to classification, emotions are a slippery topic for any scholar at any time, and particularly so for historians. While we'd love to be able to assess our historical subjects with a battery of psychological tests, we are unable to interrogate anyone directly. To write a history of emotion, then, requires that we clearly define what constitutes relevant evidence and then devise a reasonably reliable method of analyzing that data. Taking stock of the available sources of information about emotion in past times, we might come up with the following list: abstract discussions about which emotions people ought to privilege or repress (such as the directives contained in etiquette books or the reflections of philosophers and theologians); artistic representations of emotion (contained in anything from novels, to poems, to paintings); concrete depictions of the emotions observers attributed to their contemporaries (noted in everything from personal letters, to court records, to political pamphlets, to newspaper accounts); explicit records of particular emotional utterances by individuals (again, such as might be contained in court transcriptions, correspondence, or public speeches); and finally personal descriptions of emotional experiences (such as might arise in a private letter or diary). To succeed, a history of emotion must take all of these strands of evidence and attempt to braid them together.

With this in mind, I chose to undertake a history of emotion focused on a particular place and time: eighteenth-century Pennsylvania. Confining myself to these chronological and geographical boundaries brought significant advantages. For starters, the period saw a huge upsurge of cultural interest in emotion, from the moral philosophers who posited that emotions provided the basis for moral decisions to the Protestant theologians who proposed that emotional awakenings were the basis of vital faith. Artists and writers of every stripe explored the role of emotion in aesthetic productions, giving rise to what would come to be known as the culture of sensibility, while the writers of conduct books laid down careful rules for the regulation of emotion. Meanwhile, colonial Pennsylvania, seat of the largest port city in British America and home to a religiously and ethnically diverse array of people, from Europeans of varied origins to free and enslaved Africans as well as members of Indian nations, offered the opportunity to scrutinize a dynamic set of competing approaches to emotion. Because I chose to restrict my efforts in terms of time and place, I had the opportunity to extend my survey to myriad historical sources and subjects.

Still, crucial decisions about how to find and select records of emotion can only advance us so far in the quest to understand emotion's history. We still need to find the means to analyze the evidence we amass. And although we most want to know how emotions felt, we are left mostly with evidence of how they were encoded, in one way or another, through language. Since what we are really interested to recover is the substance, not just the utterance, of past emotions, we need some way to make sense of the distance between experience and expression, between the emotions people may have perceived internally and those they voiced externally.

Faced with this difficulty, I took comfort in the fact that many of my eighteenth-century subjects were also acutely aware of the problem. In colonial Pennsylvania, people not only confronted the age-old problem of how to put feelings into words but also became newly conscious of both their choice in the matter and the social implications inherent in their decisions. For example, a rising Pennsylvania merchant, John Smith, mused in his diary one day in 1747, "How painful and grievous my reflections upon this occasion were is more pungently felt than I am either able or willing to describe." Wracked with doubts about his ability to win the hand of Hannah Logan, daughter of one of the province's leading men, the 25-year-old Smith depicted his emotions as both "pungently felt" and as more than he was "able or willing to describe." Emotional life posed a two-fold problem: Smith perceived both a separation between language and subjectivity and the necessity of regulating his efforts to bridge this gap. Remarkably similar concerns were cited by another man named Israel Pemberton, Jr., who after devoting more than a page of a 1749 letter to describing the "ardency of his affection" for his brother confessed to him that "such thoughts have often afforded me pleasant reflection, but this is the first time I have ever expressed them in this manner and I am now in doubt whether I shall not yet keep them to myself." Reflections, from the painful to the pleasant, might be more easily felt than admitted, more easily experienced than explained.

I came to understand that evaluating the bare existence or final authenticity of any given emotion was more that I or anyone else could accomplish. What I could manage was to look for patterns in the expression and attribution of emotion, to note the words with which people expressed their feelings, to chart when, where, and by whom various emotions were invoked. Given the fact that emotion was a topic of enormous contemporary interest to my subjects, it seemed a fair inference that their choices about when and how to use emotion would carry with them real historic significance.

In the final analysis, the expression of emotion constitutes an exercise of power. In colonial Pennsylvania, elites generally, and men particularly, espoused the idea that genteel feelings provided the basis for civilized life, but that base passions could drive people, especially servile members of the lower orders, to despicable acts. Warnings against what one writer called devotion to the ''momentary Gratification of…selfish and sordid Passions'' were rife in colonial Pennsylvania. Exasperated masters were wont to ascribe every

rebellious impulse of their servants to selfish and willful emotional excess, as in the case of the missing servant woman Elizabeth Ferrall, who was described in a runaway ad of 1762 as “red faced…very talkative, subject to Passion, and easily offended.”

Men and women alike sought to constrain their displays of angry passion and to cultivate their powers of sympathetic feeling. One Quaker leader described colonists’ emotional responsibilities in 1752 by reminding them to bear a “daily cross in opposition to sensual lust…enmity and wrath.’’ As the prominent Anglican physician Thomas Graeme counseled his daughter Elizabeth in 1762 (at a time when her emotional disturbances threatened to become physical ailments): “a cure …must be left to…the power your reason has over all your thoughts and inclinations, joined with the sympathy your friends partake with you.’’

Indians who threatened backcountry colonists were routinely castigated as furious savages driven by unbridled passions. When frontier warfare threatened in 1754, the *Pennsylvania Gazette* was filled with stories about extreme Indian anger. Polemicists used such descriptions to argue for military preparations in the Quaker colony, as when one writer, after laboriously recounting Indian “cruelties too shocking to be described,” asserted that the only way to “be safe from their Fury” would be to build a “Sort of Fort in every Parish.”

However, given that passions were intimately linked to the capacity for action, they could never be entirely dispensed with. As colonial British Americans endured a moment of acute imperial crisis with the coming of the Seven Years War, the motivating power of the passions to stir the will to act came to seem ever more desirable. Looking to passionate emotion as a source of strength, colonists such as 18-year-old Joseph Shippen (soon to become an officer in the Pennsylvania militia) sought justifications for their stance. “All Passions in general are planted in us for excellent Purposes in human Life,” Shippen wrote in a commonplace book in 1750. “Stoical Apathy is not a human Virtue.” Shippen then went on to quote lines from Alexander Pope: “On life’s vast ocean diversely we sail / Reason the card,[compass] but passion is the gale.”

In competition with Quakers and pietistic sects, in concert and in conflict with local Indian nations, many Pennsylvania men pivoted in their attitudes towards passionate emotions over the course of the eighteenth century. By the close of the Seven Years war in 1763, colonists could declare proudly that memory of their victory should be preserved as “a lasting monument of the Wrath of injured Britons.” Still, individual women continued to avoid direct expressions of anger as unseemly. Likewise, the emotion was seldom imputed to them. Angry emotion thus emerged as a particularly masculine source of strength, one to which Euro-American men would make increasingly exclusive claims.

Indeed, as popular embrace of angry passions evolved alongside continued communal devotion to sympathetic feelings, the polar opposite of the critiques once leveled at Indians would be aimed at enslaved Africans and their descendants. Those held in bondage were represented as naturally spiritless, so emotionally apathetic that they could never stir themselves to embrace liberty. Despite the fact that roughly one out of ten households in the province contained enslaved Africans, the master class seldom made any record of their emotions, never once depicting blacks as loving and carefully avoiding any mention of anger. If the emotions of the enslaved attracted attention at all, they were most often said to display a “down look,” a phrase suggesting that emotional dejection and legal and social subjection naturally went together.

With the onset of the American Revolution, the “spirit of liberty” would come to be claimed as the unique legacy of Euro-Americans, who attributed to themselves alone the ability to achieve an ideal balance of emotion, the better to embrace the ideals of freedom. Consisting of a heady blend that included civic love, mighty anger, and communal sympathy, the “spirit of liberty” was to mediate between the debased insensibility imputed to the enslaved and the excessive spirit ascribed to Indians while also avoiding the ineffectual effeminacy by then associated with English civility. According to the revolutionary code of feeling, love was unknown among ‘‘natural slaves,’’ mercy and sympathy were absent in ‘‘savages,’’ and anger was admirable only in men. The new emphasis on spirit at once opened a rhetorical door to equality for free white men and effectively closed it to Africans, Indians, and women.

Still, the most socially radical of the American revolutionaries, such as Thomas Paine, would ultimately move beyond this circumscribed notion. In place of praising Euro-American men’s unique “spirit,” Paine promoted the argument that all human beings share the same emotions. His famous call to action in the best-selling pamphlet *Common Sense* appealed to the “passions and feelings” of all “mankind.” This universalizing position posited that every person had the same capacity for feeling and passion alike. Paine’s invocation of emotion provided crucial support for emerging beliefs in the moral equality of all

people and thus for the development of theories of natural rights. It promised to make the American Revolution truly “revolutionary.”

If John Smith, with his musings on “pungent feelings,” got me started in thinking about the power of emotion, Joseph Shippen gave me the lines from Pope that would ultimately sum up the significance of emotion in the eighteenth-century Atlantic. Passion was a “gale” force blowing in fierce social and political changes that would affect every element of personal and public life in revolutionary America.