

# feeling *human* beyond biology:

The emergence of the history of emotions as an academic field in the late twentieth century coincided with the rise of postcolonial and orientalist critique in historiography. Although rarely in explicit dialogue, these intellectual traditions share a similar critical engagement with universalist explanations of human experience and the naturalisation of feeling. This essay examines how postcolonial and orientalist critique reshaped both the methodologies and conclusions of the history of emotions by challenging claims about the biological universality of emotions and the teleological narratives around them.

Early work in the history of emotions often assumed the universality of emotional experience and situated emotional development within a civilising teleology. Postcolonial and orientalist critiques, notably by Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, exposed the epistemological violence inherent in such universalising frameworks and revealed how they naturalise power hierarchies. Drawing on these insights and poststructuralist theories of discourse and power, historians of emotions developed analytical paradigms that reconceived emotions as socially constructed, historically situated, and deeply implicated in power relations, challenging assumptions of both universality and linear teleology.

This shift enabled new questions about how emotions circulate, stick to bodies and objects, and serve as technologies of governance and resistance. By systematically engaging sources beyond purely textual analysis and embracing multi-modal archives historians of emotions have responded to critiques about the limits of linguistic and postcolonial methodology. In doing so, the field has opened space to interrogate the embodied and somatic dimensions of emotion and to access the emotional lives of marginalised and subaltern groups in ways that extend and at times transcend postcolonial frameworks.

Ultimately, this essay argues that the history of emotions owes its initial conceptual and methodological toolkit to postcolonial theory, but that its subsequent evolution points beyond those origins to a more dynamic field.

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Embodiment, Orientalism, and Postcolonial Critique  
in Emotional Historiography

The 1980s marked the early developmental phases of both the history of emotions and postcolonial studies, with Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) often cited as the genesis of the latter.<sup>1</sup> Although the two fields rarely cite one another directly, one can trace the impact of postcolonialism upon the development of the history of emotions and its subsequent conclusions and methodologies. To establish itself, the history of emotions had to dismantle longstanding claims that emotions were universal, biologically determined, or part of a civilising teleology that celebrated a movement from childish societies to those centred on emotional regulation. Postcolonial critiques of epistemological violence and universalism were central to this shift, demonstrating how seemingly neutral accounts of human nature were embedded in colonial hierarchies. These insights enabled historians to conceive of emotions as socio-cultural constructions and legitimised the study of their relationship to power, authority, and inequality. They also underpinned the field's movement away from biological or evolutionary explanations of affect and its challenge to civilisational narratives that equated emotional restraint with Western modernity. This influenced some of the key works within the history of emotions such as those of Sara Ahmed,<sup>2</sup> and William Reddy which are discussed later.<sup>3</sup> The history of emotions also took on methodological skills from postcolonialism, namely a focus on literature, but has now progressed past this to a much wider range of sources. This progression is part of a wider development of the history of emotions as a reaction to some of the critiques of postcolonialism and orientalism, such as its heavily linguistic analysis of sources. This essay will trace this

development through the field, concluding that while postcolonialism was crucial for the initial development of the history of emotions central tenements, it could now be a limiting factor constraining a discipline that has developed far beyond its initial theoretical inheritance. This paper will specially focus on the methodological borrowings of the history of emotions, their shared based in constructivism and their questioning of power.

Early work in the history of emotions was mainly focused on European history before the twentieth century and rarely touched on topics of colonialism or of the colonial world.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, they reproduced Orientalist assumptions and ideas from their place within Western epistemology. One of the most notable early contributions was an article by Lucien Febvre in 1941 in which he called for the systematic study of feelings using historical methodology, which many historians of emotions mark as one of the first calls for this type of study.<sup>5,6</sup> This article was also a response to Johan Huizinga's *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (1919) which Febvre critiques for relying on artistic intuition as his historical methodology, undermining the rigor of the discipline.<sup>7</sup> Despite this, Huizinga's main argument that the Middle Ages had a childish emotional life, in comparison to his modern world, gained traction within history.<sup>8</sup> Notably, we see this heightened reverence to emotions in historical research throughout Norbert Elias' *The Civilising Process* (1968), which builds off of Huizinga's *Middle Ages* to look at *civilité* through Freudian glasses, focusing on drives and the process of emotional restraint as pillars of the civilising process.<sup>9</sup> This trajectory of the history of emotions has been critiqued and problematised by historians of emotions.

Medieval historian Barbara Rosenwein also posits that Huizinga and Elias' works have

built a ‘grand narrative’ for the history of emotions, which is that “the history of the West is the history of increasing emotional restraint”.<sup>10</sup> Rosenwein’s critiques are based in her rejection of the reductionism and universalism prominent in her field. However the tools used for critiquing this are rooted in postcolonial theory’s dismantling of universalism and modernisation teleology bringing the two disciplines together.

As stated, *Orientalism* was a seminal book for postcolonial theory in the 80s which looked at these issues of universalism and teleology. Said delineated how colonial violence and hegemony were not only achieved through military intervention, but also via culture and ideology.<sup>11</sup> Importantly for the history of emotions, Said exemplified epistemological violence in the construction of the Orient as the ‘Other’ in opposition to the West.<sup>12</sup> This opposition was built upon by postcolonial scholar Dipesh Chakrabarty in *Provincializing Europe* (2008), where he reiterates the use of Europe as the universal template and that the linear progression towards Western modernity must be challenged; we must see Europe as a case study as it ‘is no longer seen as embodying anything like a “universal human history”’.<sup>13</sup> I posit that this linear, civilising teleology of history is not dissimilar to Rosenwein’s critique of what is perpetuated and legitimised in previous histories of emotion. Historians Margrit Pernau and Helge Jordheim advance this argument, explicitly connecting the practice of assigning emotions to different stages of development with the imperial world order.<sup>14</sup> The aspiration to “emotional self-regulation” and “finer feelings” as markers of modernity and civil society were Western ideas which were spread through colonial contact.<sup>15</sup>

Alongside these Orientalist early histories, the history of emotions subfield has been

instrumental in unpacking a wide range of scientific literature that also reproduced Orientalising epistemologies. Much of this scientific research either saw emotions as neuro-biological actions and/or evolutionary products.<sup>16</sup> It dates back to the research of Charles Darwin (1872), who saw emotions as universal signals within a narrow range of adaptive problems.<sup>17</sup> This trend of universalisation has first been unpacked by postcolonial theorists: by erasing cultural specificity and subjectivity, universalism becomes an epistemological tool that justifies the domination of the many by the few, and postcolonial scholarship has therefore exposed it as a fundamentally colonial mode of knowledge production.<sup>18</sup> <sup>19</sup> This acts as another example of the history of emotions and postcolonialisms mutual topics of interest.



In addition, this reduction of emotions to a biological sense and use of evolutionary language also contributes to their emotion’s irrationalisation, which the history of emotions has had to overcome.<sup>20</sup> This has been most productively analysed by the anthropologist Sarah Ahmed in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*.<sup>21</sup> She notes that Darwin’s interpretation sees emotions as signs of a more primitive time which gets linked to non-whiteness so that “becoming less white would involve moving backwards in time.”<sup>22</sup> This is a rhetoric common

throughout justifications for colonialism, the civilising mission and racism.<sup>23</sup> Pernau and Jordheim extend this critique by showing how the teleology embedded in early emotional regimes mirrors the broader modernist narrative that idealises technological progress and quantitative knowledge as markers of rationality.<sup>24</sup> In doing so, they illuminate how both scientific and historical accounts relied on the same evolutionary and civilisational logic that postcolonial theory dismantles. Therefore, the field's shift from universalist to constructivist understandings of emotion is inseparable from these postcolonial critiques. It marks a decisive break with colonial epistemologies, and a central pivot that enables the emergence of the history of emotions as a sub-field in the 1980's – one that understands emotions as socio-cultural products that are historically and linguistically mediated.<sup>25</sup>



This constructivist shift found historians of emotion working within the same theoretical basis as postcolonial scholars, particularly in their shared reliance on poststructuralist accounts of discourse and power. Constructivism is the theory that reality is socially constructed through systems which are actively built upon, and post-structuralism argues in parallel that social and societal structures are not fixed, universal or timeless, with meaning being

constantly negotiated within and between them. These two come together to show how power operates within discourse to create what is regarded as truth. Throughout *Orientalism*, Said directly references poststructuralist Michel Foucault's idea of discourse to sustain his argument about the Occident creating the Orient, rather than it being a reality.<sup>26</sup> In the same vein, Homi Bhabha directly builds on poststructuralist theories by Foucault, Jaques Derrida and Jaques Lacan, to argue that colonial identity is unstable, contingent and produced through negotiation in what he calls the Third Space.<sup>27</sup>

These discursive theories are pertinent to the history of emotions, as they help move emotions from their place as universal biological responses, demonstrating that emotional life is never simply interior or biological. Rather, history of emotions explains alongside postcolonial theory that emotions are shaped through the same structures of power that reorganise colonial knowledge. Joanna Bourke's *The Story of Pain* (2014) demonstrates how language can impact the feeling, reception and treatment of pain, returning to questions of discourse throughout her book.<sup>28</sup> Reddy reinforces this by highlighting that emotional expression always involves a form of translation, as it is the effort to communicate a non-verbal experience unobservable to others.<sup>29</sup>

The basis of emotions as constructed allowed the methodological space for the field to question what emotions do for power, where they once again draw from postcolonial conclusions about power, authority and resistance. Ahmed's discussion of these three topics in *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* (2004) has been an influential insight, through her idea of emotions 'sticking' to objects.<sup>30</sup> She argues that emotions do not simply exist inside individuals but circulate, through

which they become attached ('stick') to particular groups, objects or ideas over time. She questions what emotions stick to who, where and why across history, demonstrating how emotions as technologies of power impact social hierarchies. Crucially, this sticking is not natural, but once it occurs, it can appear so.<sup>30</sup> In her third chapter, she specifically looks at how fear sticks to the black body and terrorists. She uses excerpts from Frantz Fanon's work to show how fear doesn't simply move from a white body towards the black body but brings the two closer together through a form of shared feeling.<sup>32</sup> However, the emotion that passes between is not the same – it always involves a "(mis)reading [of] the other's feelings" which is especially where power relations come in.<sup>33</sup> Ahmed utilises poststructuralist methodology to study how the language of fear around terrorists intensifies the threat, as it widens the distinction between the threatened and the threatener.<sup>34</sup> Her book demonstrates how emotional regimes were used as tools of governance through power relations. She also focuses on the idea of contact, which directly links with Bhabha's work on hybridity. Hybridity describes the space where identities are formed through negotiation, translation, and the unsettling mixture of coloniser and colonised meanings.<sup>35</sup> Ahmed's focus on contact draws attention to how emotional norms and affective expressions are likewise shaped in these contact zones, producing mixed, ambivalent, and historically contingent emotional formations.<sup>36</sup>

Another facet of power relations interrogated in postcolonial theory is how regimes of power rely on a series of affective oppositions – civil/barbaric, rational/emotional, modern/primitive, black/white, East/West – to construct and maintain hierarchies. These binaries have also become central points of interrogation within the history of emotions. One

particularly productive site of critique is the opposition between emotions as individual experiences and emotions as collective, socially-produced ones. Ahmed cautions against both "inside-out" models of affect, which treat emotions as internal states that radiate outward, and "outside-in" models, which see emotions as merely imposed by social forces; instead, she argues for an understanding of affect that emerges in the relational space between bodies and worlds.<sup>37</sup> Pernau and Jordheim further examine how the civility/barbarism binary intersects with oppositions such as virtue/vice and private/public in the emotional regimes of colonial and postcolonial societies.<sup>38</sup> In doing so, they demonstrate that emotional life is inseparable from the classificatory systems that legitimate power, reinforcing the history of emotions' turn toward interrogating (and undoing) the affective foundations of colonial hierarchies. Across these debates, scholars agree on the necessity of approaching emotions through pluralism, fluidity, and relationality which closely parallels postcolonial theory's own insistence on hybridity, ambivalence, and the negotiated identities of colonial subjects, found within the scholars featured in this essay.

In addition to impacts on the conclusions of histories of emotions, we can trace the impact of postcolonialism and Orientalism on the source material deployed within these histories. Gayatri Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) is one piece of postcolonial theory that has particular relevance to the archive of emotions.<sup>39</sup> Spivak's essay discusses the difficulties for the subaltern attempting to speak (assert their presence and/ or point of view) within Western knowledge systems, where all attempts are translated, overwritten or Antonio Gramsci, but rather than all

silenced. *Subaltern* builds on the ideas of oppressed peoples, Spivak specifically refers to those who can't access Western society due to the oppression of cultural imperialism.<sup>40</sup> This essay has been influential for encouraging historians to look at silence in the archives, not as an absence but as evidence of power at play. This idea of silence is particularly relevant to the history of emotions, as emotions sit at an intersection between the embodied/ internal, and the verbal/ non-verbal.

This has led to some historians of emotions rejecting this to an extent, convincingly arguing that emotions can provide novel ways to let the subaltern speak. Postcolonial literary critic Rukmini Bhaya Nair identifies postcolonial literature as an 'emotional reservoir' where the subaltern can speak through an outcry of emotions.<sup>41</sup> She argues that literature appears to have no evolutionary purpose and yet persists across history due to its unique creation of visceral reactions, ability to break down emotional barriers and nuanced intimacy which posits it as the perfect vehicle for subaltern expression.<sup>42</sup> Here, Nair is drawing on the long connection between postcolonialism and literature, which has been a key source since Said's development of the 'Orientalist canon' in 1978 and his heavily-textual analysis.<sup>43</sup> This methodology is also adopted by Ahmed who uses close text analysis to draw out her arguments centred around emotions as performances and speech acts.<sup>44</sup> In this way, the use of literary texts becomes emblematic of the larger methodological alignment between the two fields, which focus on language and construction.

Due to their similarities, it is unsurprising that the history of emotions has faced some

similar criticism to those of postcolonialism. Reddy has noted that the basic concepts of emotions, such as feeling and affect, are formulated through Western epistemology, and yet emotions' existence is not restricted to this thought system.<sup>45</sup> Reddy situates this difficulty within a broader tension between writing history and accounting for genuine cultural difference.<sup>46</sup> In relation to this tension is the larger critique directed towards postcolonialism, for being overwhelmingly focused on the Anglo-Francophone world. *Orientalism* begins with a quote from a French journalist in Beirut and then explicitly states that the French and British have the strongest Orientalist traditions, as Said's Orient is mainly restricted to the Middle East and parts of North Africa.<sup>47</sup> Building off of this, Spivak critiques *Orientalism* for its nationalist focus, stressing how integrating more pluralistic methods of thinking, such as Caribbean *créolité* and archipelagic thinking, would be more productive when considering colonial legacies and relationships with ex-metropolises.<sup>48</sup>



However, the history of emotions has taken in this criticism and productively used it to progress the field in various ways, mainly through the rejection of a strong constructivist and linguistic approach which postcolonialism can get stuck within.<sup>49</sup>

Studies of emotion are uniquely capable of highlighting and interrogating the embodied experience of emotions, in addition to their verbal expression. Reddy rejects this split between cognitive emotions and somatic affects in his article *Against Constructionism* (1997), suggesting a grounding of universalism in emotional life.<sup>50</sup> In line with this, Bourke's *The Story of Pain* (2014) operates on a body-language-culture trifecta, repeatedly coming back to the embodied experience of pain, including a chapter on non-verbal expression through gesture and facial expressions.<sup>51</sup> Her book also draws on a large range of sources including textbooks, personal testimonies, legal texts and medical questionnaires to conclude that pain is not a universal biological sensation but a historically contingent, socially mediated experience.<sup>52</sup> Not only does this monograph underline the main claims of the history of emotions, it also demonstrates the wider pattern of using multi-modal sources within the history of emotions. This is equally seen in the work of Gabriele Proglia, who interviewed migrants from the Horn of Africa to Italy, arguing that oral history is the most appropriate way to centralise marginalised voices and avoid the typical institutional power relations at work in traditional archives. His methodology, therefore, not only constitutes another way that focusing on emotions can help the subaltern speak, but how non-textual sources have become vital to histories of emotions. His work on migration also forms part of a wider emotional turn within human geography, which has led to a greater focus on spatiality in the history of emotions, and a move beyond nationalistic conception.<sup>54</sup> Spivak herself noted illegal migrants as the new subaltern, suggesting that, based on historians of emotions conclusions about subaltern interrogation, emotions can be highly productive in this field.<sup>55</sup>

Crucially, these improvements are all based in the interdisciplinary nature of the history of emotions. Many of the key scholars of the history of emotions are in fact not historians, such as Ahmed and Reddy. Yet, their methodologies have been highly productive for the study of emotions. Reddy's use of ethnographies of emotions as the basis for his critique of the narrowness of Western understandings within emotional studies is one example.<sup>56</sup> Insights from feminist theory have also been noted as influential in the history of emotions by Ahmed,<sup>57</sup> Reddy,<sup>58</sup> and Nair.<sup>59</sup> While postcolonialism's permanent discreditation of universalism and its literary methods were enormously productive in the early development of the history of emotions, they now risk becoming limiting orthodoxies.<sup>60</sup> Yet through interdisciplinary borrowings, the field has achieved a methodological flexibility impossible within traditional historical practice alone.

As argued, the relationship between postcolonialism and the history of emotions is a fluid one, much like both of their subjects. The birth of the history of emotions owes much to postcolonial theorists, who provided the conceptual tools that enabled historians of emotion to dismantle universalist and civilising narratives; to scrutinise the power embedded in emotional regimes; and to legitimise literary and discursive analyses as historical methods. Yet, as a more established and praised sub-field in and of itself, it now requires a progression that it has been pursuing successfully through critical responses to the limits of postcolonialism. Through interdisciplinary expansion and methodological innovation, the field has developed new ways of accessing and assessing emotional life,

particularly among subaltern and marginalised groups, that move beyond frameworks of foundational/early postcolonial theory, while still honouring its foundational insights.

#### Footnotes

1. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Vintage Books, 1978).
2. Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2004).
3. William M Reddy, 'Against Constructionism: The Historical Ethnography of Emotions,' *Current Anthropology* 38, no. 3 (1997).
4. Gabriele Proglia, *The Horn of Africa Diasporas in Italy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 120.
5. Lucien Febvre, 'La Sensibilité et l'Histoire: Comment Reconstituer La Vie Affective D'autrefois ?' *Annales d'Histoire Sociale* (1939-1941) 3, no. 1/2 (1941): 5–20.
6. Barbara H Rosenwein, 'Worrying about Emotions in History,' *The American Historical Review* 107, no. 3 (2002): 821–45.
7. Febvre, "La Sensibilité," 8-11.
8. Rosenwein, "Worrying," 826.
9. Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil : Witchcraft, Sexuality, and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (Routledge, 1994), 6-8.
10. Rosenwein, "Worrying," 827.
11. Said, *Orientalism*, 1-12.
12. Ibid., 10-11.
13. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference. Provincializing Europe* (Princeton, 2008), 1-24.
14. Margrit Pernau and Helge Jordheim, *Civilizing Emotions : Concepts in Nineteenth Century Asia and Europe* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 4.
15. Ibid., 5.
16. Laith Al-shawaf et al., 'Human Emotions: An Evolutionary Psychological Perspective,' *Emotion Review* 8, no. 2 (2015): 173–86.
17. Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (London: Penguin Classics, 1872).
18. Chakrabarty, *Provincialising Europe*, 15-17.
19. Faisal Nazir, 'Humanism with a Difference: Universality and Cultural Difference in Postcolonial Theory,'" *Journal of Contemporary Politics* 2, no. 1 (2018): 18.
20. Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, 2.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid., 3.
23. Pernau and Jordheim, *Civilizing Emotions*, 16.
24. Ibid., 8.
25. Zuzana Bujačková, 'Theoretical and Methodological Challenges in the Study of Language : Linguistics and the History of Emotions,'" *Ethnologia Slovaca et Slavica* 44 (2023), 12-13.
26. Said, *Orientalism*, 3-135.
27. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994), 217.
28. Joanna Bourke, *The Story of Pain : From Prayer to Painkillers* (Oxford University Press, 2014).
29. Reddy, *Against Constructionism*, 331.
30. Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, 8.
31. Ibid., 1-11.
32. Ibid., 62-3.
33. Ibid., 63.
34. Ibid., 72-4
35. Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 111-13.
36. Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, 5-9.
37. Ibid., 8-11.
38. Pernau and Jordheim, *Civilizing Emotions*, 14.
39. Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. by Nelson, C. and Grossberg, L. (Basingstoke: Macmillan education, 1988), 271–313.
40. Ibid.
41. Rukmini Bhaya Nair, "This is for you": Emotions, Language and Postcolonialism. Interview by Dorota Filipczak. *Text Matters*, 2013.
42. Ibid.
43. Said, *Orientalism*, 4.
44. Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, 13-14.
45. Reddy, *Against Constructionism*, 331.
46. Ibid., 330.
47. Said, *Orientalism*, 1-4.
48. Gayatri Spivak, 'How the Heritage of Postcolonial Studies Thinks Colonialism Today,' *Janus Unbound: Journal of Critical Studies* 1, no. 1 (2021): 19–29.

49. Reddy, *Against Constructionism*, 329.
50. *Ibid.*, 330.
51. Bourke, *Story of Pain*, 159-92.
52. *Ibid.*
53. Proglío, *African Diasporas*, 121-7.
54. Gabriele Proglío, "Geography of Emotions across the Black Mediterranean: Oral Memories and Dissonant Heritages of Slavery and the Colonial Past." In *Dissonant Heritages and Memories in Contemporary Europe*, ed. iris van huis, Tuuli Lähdesmäki, Sigrid Kaasik-krogerus, and Luisa Passerini (Palgrave macmillan: 2019), 255-57
55. Spivak, 'Heritage,' 19-29.
56. Reddy, *Against Constructionism*, 328.
57. Ahmed, *Politics of Emotion*, 12.
58. Reddy, *Against Constructionism*, 328-9.
59. Nair, "This is for you."
60. Nazir, "Humanism," 1-18.

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