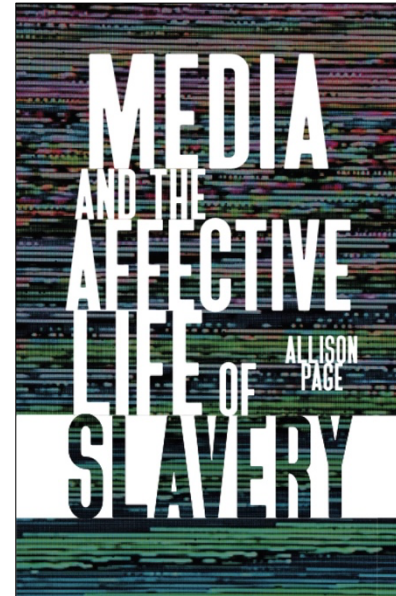


Allison Page, **Media and the Affective Life of Slavery**, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022, 186 pp., \$26.00 (paperback).

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To bear witness to the current politics is to apprehend a political moment of retrograde law and policy initiatives banning anything from books, words, access to healthcare, medicine, and to thought itself. As suggested by recent curriculum challenges to critical race theory, queer theory in schools (“Don’t Say Gay”) and hampering access to bodily autonomy through medical intervention, the “culture wars” rhetoric exposes deep anxiety over “bad education” (Parental Rights in Education Act, 2022; Schwartz, 2021). Casting its retrograde reforms of public institutions as protecting children and securing parents’ rights, the mainstream story America tells itself about itself is working through another round of discipline.

Into the fray, author Allison Page’s **Media and the Affective Life of Slavery** offers a compelling and much needed archival media history of how the national story America tells itself about itself is renewed. Specifically, this book details shifts in the remaking of U.S. culture’s dominant domestic structure of feeling—antiBlackness—at the end of so-called official racism. A plethora of writing on new materialism emerged during the late 1990s through the aughts to the benefit and invigoration of cultural studies, queer theory and philosophy. Scholarship in new materialisms took up the idiosyncratic concepts of emotion-affect-feeling that deal in the irrational, indeterminate, and the minor in human experience; scholars have examined them as embodied time-spaces in which *affective experience* entails sliding between emotion-affect-feeling and back again, unable to pinpoint a pure moment of any one experienced (Ahmed, 2004). Feminist contributions to what we now call the “affective turn” proffered a reading of politics as learning theory: *We learn* to feel the complex ways we do. Furthermore, some of our strongest feelings and sentiments are the result of some sticking process; importantly, the process whereby certain issues stick (i.e., become ideology) is where we might locate the social. Increasingly, this process is also the place to theorize the digital. Black feminists brought the question of new materialism and affect theory to bear upon Black subjectivity, especially the global circulation of Black cultural production. Over 25 years ago, Saidiya Hartman’s (1997) enormously influential *Scenes of Subjection* turned our attention to the afterlife of slavery. Hartman (1997) powerfully asks what Black culture can be outside the violent condition of enslavement imposed on Black people throughout the Transatlantic Slave Trade. It is a question whose depths are mined in her subsequent books *Lose Your Mother* (Hartman, 2007) and *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (Hartman, 2019). Allison Page’s wonderful book suggests the afterlife of slavery is an *affective* one. Key to the acquisition of political feelings about slavery, enslaved people, and their descendants is a media pedagogy carefully orchestrated by state and corporate forces. *Media and the Affective Life of Slavery* intervenes into the materialist line of affect theory and media studies by focusing not on how we apprehend or liberate ourselves from anti-Black



racism but instead how anti-Black racism is reformed and managed through popular national culture and social media.

Each chapter of *Media and the Affective Life of Slavery* addresses a single media production—television miniseries, a video game, a consumer marketing campaign—that invokes the history of enslaving Black Africans in the United States. Whether analyzing analog or digital media, Page’s close readings disclose how racial formation changes yet remains the same alongside capitalist production, and, with it, demands for the “cultivation of particular emotions” (p. 6). Informed by affect theory, Black studies, and film and media studies, Page’s book offers a reading practice that apprehends the aesthetics of post-Civil Rights governance. Page’s case studies begin with an archive of 1960’s race documentaries that pathologized Black anger. The enormously influential television miniseries, *Roots*, is the topic of chapter 2, specifically the ways Alex Haley’s autobiographical melodrama made Black anger palatable during the “official end” of U.S. racism through instructional teaching guides that accompanied the film (p. 4). A third chapter examines the educational role-playing game *Flight to Freedom* for how it renders empathy and agency—emotions required for neoliberal multiculturalism (p. 16). *Slavery Footprint* is a digital app examined for how the platform’s presumption of data neutrality helps manage an ethical subject who “thinks about, and acts against, race and racism through consumption and digital media rather than emotion” (p. 17). The final chapter discusses Kara Walker’s 2014 exhibition of *An Audience*, a film highlighting the “adaptability of whiteness to antiracist critique alongside a refusal to prescribe and discipline feeling,” and two female-authored projects about slavery that were sidelined in favor of Haley’s masculinist miniseries, *Roots*—Margaret Walker’s novel *Jubilee* and Lorraine Hansberry’s TV screenplay *The Drinking Gourd* (p. 125). Together, the chapters respond to Hartman’s (1997) deeply generative discussion of the terror behind the “innocent amusements” of Black expressive performance and reception during slavery with a nod to our contemporary era of digital online publics and streaming platforms.

Page demonstrates that racial formation operates in between the macro of collective social structure and the micro of individual identity. The pedagogy is apparent in how Page brings media aesthetics to the analytic of racial formation: Affective protocols governing media production, circulation, and consumption from the 1960s to the contemporary, from analog to digital texts, teach Americans to feel admiration and empathy for the struggles endured by the Black community, but (crucially) to also feel a sobering relief that racism in the United States has ended. If aesthetics is a discourse for the evaluation of pleasure, it is also a discourse of *justification*. We are called to justify our evaluations and affective experiences. Media, for its part, mediates. The movement from vicious rage against Black people to admiration for Black people is induced by pedagogic media about slavery, which comes to justify setting cognitive and temporal limits on White culpability for Black racial suffering. A new fantasy emerges where Black people are now autonomous, free, and responsible for their individual successes and failures. Page explains the result is that Whiteness is “able to remain slippery and invisibilized even as it is simultaneously hypervisible” (p. 126). On this point, the book dialogues with previous writing on plasticity and Blackness, suggesting the ways the shapeshifting aspect of Whiteness is also entwined with the concept. While Page is clear about the benefit of this affective protocol to White America in particular, the global circulation of the media texts under consideration could be considered more closely. As it stands, though, the author does *open* the possibility for more global analyses to come.

Media and the Affective Life of Slavery details the radical liberationist pedagogy of race in the United States post-Civil Rights in ways that accord with recent texts: Lee Edelman's (2023) *Bad Education: Why Queer Theory Teaches Us Nothing*; Nicolas Mirzoeff's (2023) *White Sight: Visual Politics and Practices of Whiteness*; Lyndsey P. Beutin's (2023) *Trafficking in AntiBlackness: Modern Day Slavery, White Indemnity and Racial Justice*; Erica Fretwell's (2020) *Sensory Experiments: Psychophysics, Race, and the Aesthetics of Feeling*; and Erica Edwards' (2021) *The Other Side of Terror: Black Women and the Culture of US Empire*. *Media and the Affective Life of Slavery* is sure to become a leading text about racial formation and its corporate-state media conditioning of not only historical narrative but *the very possibility of* collective political unconscious.

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