

Slavery, Authorship and Literary Culture

Maison française, Columbia University, New York
January 24-26, 2019

This interdisciplinary and transregional workshop explores slavery, past and present from the perspective of authorship, textuality and literary culture.

Slavery is often portrayed as shrouded in silence due to the simple fact that the number of texts and accounts written by enslaved people is very limited, especially when compared to the vast amounts of documentation produced by the colonial powers. As recent scholarship has shown, however, enslaved people were not silent—silence is rather an effect created by the privileging of some forms of writing and as a result certain voices and viewpoints over others.

This workshop aims to investigate writing about slavery in all its forms, from the written traces left by enslaved people to the archives of slaveholders and from the discourses of abolition to postcolonial narrative. While we acknowledge the problem of invisibility as a fundamental condition for the study of slavery we also wish to highlight the ways in which discourses about slavery have found their way into print and other media as well as the ways in which these texts have circulated and been read. The workshop will consider how enslaved people expressed themselves in writing, considering, among other genres, letters, legal and financial documents, as well as published texts of all kinds. We will explore how the formerly enslaved took up authorship as free colored people or after emancipation in newspapers, journals or in other contexts and venues. We will consider the literary cultures that took shape in colonies and countries in which texts on slavery were produced and disseminated. Finally, we will explore postcolonial writing about slavery as well as contemporary accounts of slavery in today's world. An important question for the workshop will be how and to what extent authorship corresponds to agency and political subjectivity.

We invite papers that address any of the many ways in which literature relating to slavery has been written, disseminated, read and discussed. This includes, for example, the existence of libraries and literary and scientific circles in colonial settings, the ways in which colonial literature was read and discussed in Europe, international debates about abolition, the uses of literature in colonial schools and missions, and more broadly the use of text as documentation. Papers might also consider processes of translation between languages and cultures, e.g. from an African to a plantation context, when texts pass from one colonial system to another and when accounts circulate between European audiences and the reverberations of these processes in other parts of the world. We also invite papers that address the afterlives of colonial slavery in contemporary literatures worldwide and the recreation of lost authorship as authors engage with the memory of slavery and attempt to recover lost voices.

The workshop will have a broad historical and geographical scope. We encourage papers on modern slavery from the 16th century to the present. While the focus will be on the Atlantic world, we are also interested in the related systems of African, Mediterranean and Indian Ocean slavery. Comparative angles are especially welcome. Areas of particular interest include but are not limited to:

- Questions of agency and political subjectivity in relation to authorship. How do we situate slave narratives and their impact both at the time of their publication and since? Where do we locate the voices of enslaved and formerly enslaved in different genres and forms of textual expression?
- Literary cultures in the colonial world, e.g. the existence of libraries, bookstores, printing presses, scientific societies and the relationship between literature and literary institutions and the practices of slavery in the colonies and Europe.
- The relationship between literary, performative, and visual forms of expression relating to slavery in the colonies and in Europe.
- Gender in colonial literary culture, in relation to questions of subjectivity, and in later historical and literary reflections on the gender structures of slavery and post-slavery societies.
- The relationship between slavery and colonialism and the development of African print culture and the traces and translation of oral slavery stories in printed texts.
- The role of abolitionist movements in the disseminations of early texts on slavery and the establishment of African-American and African-European literary traditions.
- The relationship between economy, capitalism and literature in the colonial Atlantic and its importance for the circulation, translation and commerce of texts across the Atlantic and between colonial spheres.
- How to recognize processes of silencing. Which strategies of reading traces and absences must be employed in order to highlight and perhaps counteract silencing?
- Post- and decolonial responses to slavery in 20th century art, film and literature especially in relationship to questions of voice and agency.

The workshop is the third in a series preparing *Comparative Literary Histories of Slavery*, eds. Mads Anders Baggesgaard, Madeleine Dobie and Karen-Margrethe Simonsen, a three-volume work to be published by John Benjamins in the ‘literary histories’ (CHLEL) of the International Comparative Literature Association. Two other volumes currently under production engage with the topics of *Slavery, Literature and the Emotions* and *Slavery, Memory and Literature*. Workshop participants will be invited to submit proposals for the third volume on *Slavery, Authorship and Literary Cultures*.

Please send 100-200 word abstracts for 20 minute papers to madsbaggesgaard@cc.au.dk no later than September 1, 2018 along with a short biographical note.

Participants will have to cover their own costs for travel and lodging. Lunches and coffee breaks will be provided. For information on recommended accommodation and other practical matters please contact mld2027@columbia.edu. The seminar is hosted by the Maison française, Columbia University and is organized by the research project Reading Slavery at Aarhus University, Denmark, see readingslavery.au.dk.

Kind regards,

Mads Anders Baggesgaard, Madeleine Dobie and Karen-Margrethe Simonsen