

Revolutionary Histories – Caribbean literatures, slavery and the Gothic

Online event on Zoom

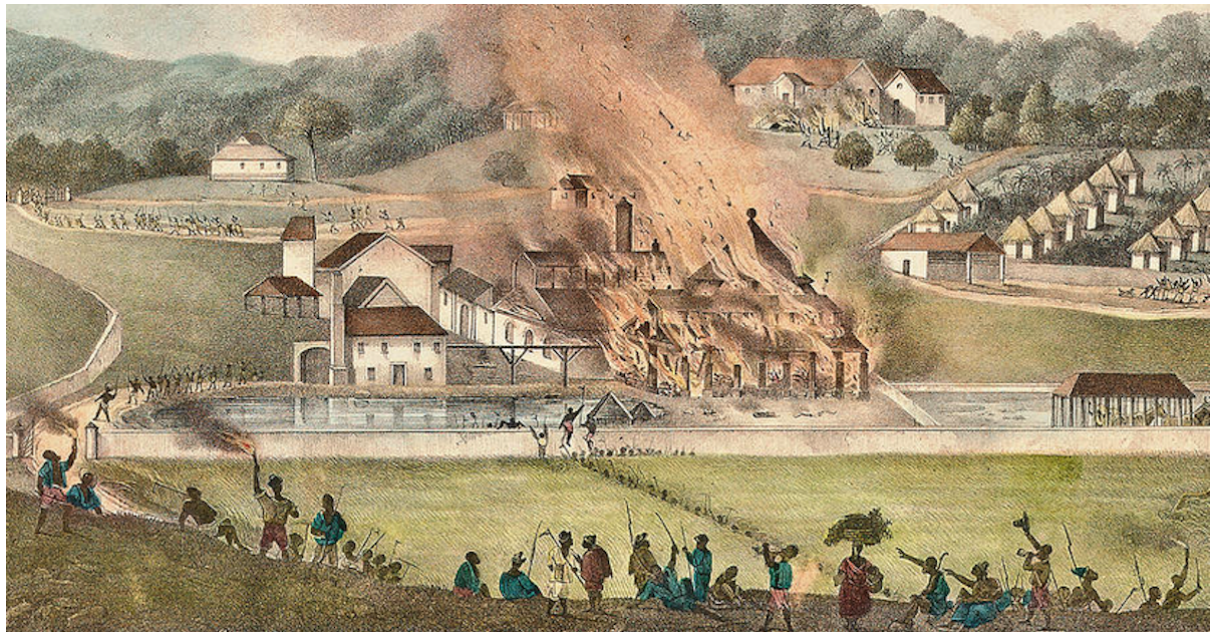
25 February 2021 from 10.00 – 14.30

(9.00 am – 1.30 pm GMT)

Send me an e-mail if you want to sign up, and I will send you the zoom-link:

stephanievolder@cc.au.dk

The seminar is funded by Uses of the Past and Centre for Nineteenth-Century Studies



Through four presentations on Caribbean literature, slavery, revolution and the Gothic genre, this seminar seeks to address the role of Caribbean literatures, and particularly the transatlantic Gothic genre, in representing and reflecting on European and Caribbean revolutionary events and slave uprisings.

In 1800 the Marquis de Sade famously linked Gothic fiction to the political violence of the revolutionary era when he called Gothic novels the “necessary fruits of the revolutionary tremors felt by the whole of Europe”.

The revolutionary uprisings of the Age of Revolution shook both Europe and the West Indies in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. What part did Gothic literature play in imagining and making sense of the revolutionary events in France, Saint-Domingue and Jamaica?

Presenters

Brycchan Carey (Northumbria University)

Marie Mulvey-Roberts (University of the West of England, Bristol)

Katrine Lohmann (University of Copenhagen)

Stephanie Volder (Aarhus University)

Programme

25 February, 2021

10.00 – 10.30 Stephanie M. Volder: Slavery and Gothic sensibility: the politics of form in accounts of Jamaican slave rebellions

10.30 – 10.45 Discussion

10:45 – 11.00 Coffee break

11.00– 11.30 Brycchan Carey: Hell on Earth: Enslavement as Damnation in Abolitionist Writing

11.30 – 11.45 Discussion

11:45 – 12.00 Coffee break

12.00 – 12.30 Marie Mulvey-Roberts: Teaching a new university module on Slavery and the Gothic in the Age of Revolution

12.30– 12.45 Discussion

12.45 – 13.15 Lunch break

13.15 – 13.45 Katrine Wonge Lohmann: On the Dangers of Reading Novels: an Example from Radcliffe's Copycats

13.45 – 14.00 Discussion

14.00 – 14.30 Online reception

Abstracts

Slavery and Gothic sensibility: the politics of form in accounts of Jamaican slave rebellion

Stephanie M. Volder, Aarhus University

In recent years, Charlotte Turner Smith has been recognized as a central figure in studies of Romanticism, and scholars have engaged with her influence on male Romantics like Wordsworth and Coleridge (Erinc Özdemir 2011, Labbe 2011). Moreover, recent scholars have argued that Smith's cosmopolitan inclinations stand in contrast to the nationalistic tendencies of many British writers in the reactionary climate of the post-French Revolution

(Craciun 2007, Alliston 2009). This paper argues, however, that Charlotte Smith's account of colonial slavery in *The Story of Henrietta* (1800) discloses the limits of her imagined transnational community of feeling.

Smith's novel is both read as a radical critique of slavery (Nordius 2010) and a painstakingly racist account of the Jamaican black population (Boulukos 2007). These contradictory readings, I argue, are the result of Smith's self-conscious engagement with genre devices. Smith combines conventions of Gothic terror and the sentimental epistolary novel's moral sentiments and sensibilities. Smith shows how sympathy becomes morally ambiguous in the colonies because sentimental outward-looking identification with the sufferings of the enslaved often turns to self-pity. The Gothic protagonists lament their own misfortunes. Slavery is used as a metaphor for the plight of white women and the figure of the prosecuted and exiled male European.

The novel depicts racial difference through a Gothic demonization of race which poses a limit to Smith's vision of social reform through emotional labour. At the time of Smith's writing, the humanitarian reform of plantation slavery through amelioration had become a popular vision for the future of slavery. Smith's account of West Indian slavery, however, goes against this optimistic view of gradual reform as a realistic possibility. In her critique of the corrupted civilization of Europe and the New World, Smith portrays both the West Indian planters and the enslaved as "savages" unfit for self-governance.

When Smith's work is read in dialogue with contemporary writers like Matthew Lewis and William Earle, we see how the middle ground between anti- and pro-slavery writing is a slippery terrain of abstract ideals and everyday pragmatic and economic interests. In the works of these writers, the fears that emancipation would lead to revolt and social unrest are weighed against the emotional arguments for the humanitarian duty to alleviate the sufferings of others.

Bio

Stephanie M. Volder is PhD fellow in Comparative Literature at Aarhus University. In her project, Stephanie explores Gothic images of slavery and rebellion in the transatlantic print culture of Jamaican slavery in the early 19th-century. The project investigates the relationship between the popular Gothic genre and representations of slavery in the colony of Jamaica to ask how Gothic images of slavery and slave rebellion took part in the dispute over the meaning of freedom and emancipation in the early 19th-century European and colonial slavery debates.

Hell on Earth: Enslavement as Damnation in Abolitionist Writing

Brycchan Carey, Northumbria University

Literary critics, following Ronald Paulson (1981) have long recognised that the sudden popularity of Gothic fiction in the 1790s was correlated with the 'Terror' of the French Revolution. Later critics, especially Markman Ellis (2000), have argued that the Gothic literature of the period was also associated with public interest in another terror, the terror of plantation slavery. While the influence of revolution and slavery on Gothic literature is now

well established, Gothic's influence on abolitionist writing is less clear. Abolitionist writing from the 1770s and 1780s abounds with scenes of chilling horror and sublime terror, but it is difficult to argue that it is directly inflected by the tropes and narratives of the newly emerging Gothic genre. This paper argues, however, that a longer literary tradition of terror informs much early abolitionist literature. In numerous pamphlets, poems, and other writings, enslavement is represented as a form of damnation and plantations and slave ships as a type of Hell. These representations draw on widespread cultural understandings of the notion of Hell as well as on the image of Hell depicted in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667–72) and, through it, the Inferno of Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1306–20), itself inspired by the underworld of Virgil's *Aeneid* (29–19 BCE). At the same time, both *Paradise Lost* and the English slave trade were products of the Restoration period, and both can be understood in the context of the English Civil War, or 'English Revolution' as some historians characterise it. This paper accordingly looks both at the seventeenth-century context and at antislavery literature from the 1770s to the first decade of the nineteenth century, including writing by Thomas Day, Olaudah Equiano, and William Roscoe, to show how *Paradise Lost* directly inspired abolitionist writers to portray enslavement as the closest thing available to Hell on Earth.

Bio

Brycchan Carey is Professor of English at Northumbria University, United Kingdom. He has twin specialisms in the cultural histories of slavery and abolition and the cultures of natural history in the period 1650 to 1850. He is the author or editor of several books including a monograph on slavery and sensibility in literature and another on the rise of Quaker antislavery. His most recent editorial work includes an edition of Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* and a collection of essays on birds in eighteenth-century literature. He is (from January 2021) President of the British Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies. He is a former President of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment UK and Ireland, and also of the Literary London Society.

Teaching a new university module on Slavery and the Gothic in the Age of Revolution

Marie Mulvey-Roberts, University of the West of England, Bristol

This presentation will reflect upon the teaching of a new undergraduate module on slavery and Gothic literature, which focuses upon the historical legacy of the city of Bristol, once Britain's leading slaving port. It will evaluate how students responded to the tutor's own research on the relationship between slavery and Bristol in connection with Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* and involve a reading of the novel as a disquisition on the various controversies and debates surrounding emancipation. Two conflicting views of the creature were investigated, on the one hand, how he is demonised as a rebellious slave and, on the other, his representation as a fictional recreation of the abolitionist slogan, "am I not a man or a brother?". In addition, comparisons were made between *Frankenstein* and the treatment of

slavery and race in Charlotte Dacre's Gothic novel, *Zofloya*. Students also studied the rhetoric of various Bristol poets, including the Gothic poet Thomas Chatterton and Robert Southey, whose plaque was organised by an UWE English Literature colleague. This became the starting point for a discussion on memorialisation and the ongoing initiative led by the city's black mayor to rename parts of the city linked to the slave trade. This survey was triggered by the toppling of the statue of Edward Colston, which has had a world-wide impact. The legitimacy of this action raised questions for student discussion as to why Colston, a key player in The Royal African Company responsible for transporting around 80,000 slaves to plantations in the Caribbean and the rest of the Americas, has been commemorated so widely throughout the city. In view of the momentum of Black Lives Matter and Bristol's ongoing struggle in coming to terms with its dark legacy, the launching of the module this year, albeit with the challenges of online teaching, has been a timely intervention on the curriculum.

Bio

Marie Mulvey-Roberts is Professor of English Literature at the University of the West of England, Bristol. She has produced over thirty authored, edited and co-edited books, including *Global Frankenstein*, *Literary Bristol*, and *Dangerous Bodies*, winner of the Allan Lloyd Smith Memorial Prize. She is the co-founder and editor of the quarterly journal, *Women's Writing* on historical women writers, for which she co-edited a special issue on Mary Shelley. Her interview on *Frankenstein* and religion was broadcast on *Beyond Belieffor* Radio 4 and she has made two short films on Mary Shelley and her links to Bristol and Bath, which are accessible on a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) entitled Writing the West: Writers of the South West.

On the Dangers of Reading Novels: an Example from Radcliffe's Copycats

Katrine Wonge Lohmann, University of Copenhagen

The aim of my talk is to discuss the danger of novels like the seven 'horrid' ones mentioned in Austen's *Northanger Abbey*. These novels were part of the Gothic literature published by William Lane at the Minerva Press in London from 1790-1820 and were among the bestselling fiction of its day. Though contemporary critics considered Lane's novels to be substandard, the Minerva Press was responsible for a third of new novels published in London in this period. Lane's adjacent circulating library was likewise the largest in the nation, and he meticulously set the blank pages at the end of his novels, advertising upcoming publications. Many of these were imitations of popular Literature's bestselling authors, such as Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis. Lane, for example, published titles such as 'The Sicilian' (1798) and 'The New Monk' (1798) modelled on Radcliffe and Lewis, respectively. My point, which I base on original archival research, is that these imitations all promote a certain narrative connected to England; a point that has not been made before by critics.

Where Radcliffe and Lewis set their novels in continental Europe, Lane's novels all take place within Britain. This change proposes new possibilities for characters and landscapes, which now become paramount to the narrative. Lane's novels were strongly critiqued, but no critic ever actually commented on the 'Englishness' that Lane promoted in his novels. In light of this, I will present a new analysis of the Minerva archive that focuses on the actual danger related to reading these novels.

Bio

Katrine Lohmann is PhD fellow at the University of Copenhagen, Department of English, Germanic and Romance Studies, where she focuses on William Lane and the Minerva Press. In her project, she examines three major questions. First, what elements the Minerva Press changed in Gothic Fiction in this period; second, the extent to which Lane's publications promoted a certain narrative or political agenda; and third, to what extent the publications promoted a new sense of Britishness.