

Authoring Slavery - Forms and Conditions for Narrating Slavery

Call for papers for seminar

Aarhus University, June 18-19, 2024

The experience of enslavement 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 always 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. And even when there is silence this does not necessarily mean that nothing is being said or done. Silence can also be a strategic choice, which can serve as a means for ‘protecting one’s identity from pathologization’ (Bayo Holsey 2008, 235).

To address alternative sources informing us about the experience of enslavement, it is therefore crucial to consider a wide variety of forms of expression and to investigate how these forms are used to frame and create agency, since literacy has often been understood as synonymous with agency, as it is for instance presented by Frederick Douglass. In this seminar we focus on *authoring* as a term for a process in which individuals or groups position themselves in relation to written or oral texts, but also visuals and other forms of artistic expression (film, tattooing/scarification, dress, song and so on) in an ongoing struggle for forms of rhetorical, personal and political agency in what can be described as a non-continuous and complex ‘series of [...] *practices of the self*’ (Achille Mbembe 2001, 272). The focus includes an awareness of authoring as the multiple, repeated and sometimes veiled or negated placing of a text in social space.

This is important not least to counter the tendency in the field to focus on singularly authored ‘works’, neglecting the vast material on slavery found in other forms, including oral tales and so-called grassroots literacy, film, visual and bodily culture, humanitarian discourses, court cases etc. This entails discussing not only the origin and social conditionality of texts, but also the many ways in which texts are dispersed and maybe altered after their origin. We therefore invite papers that address any of the many ways in which literature relating to slavery has been written, disseminated, read, and discussed. Areas of particular interest include but are not limited to:

- Questions of agency and political subjectivity in relation to authorship. How do we situate narratives on slavery 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, African-American and 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 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.

Please send 300 words abstract to Mads Anders Baggesgaard (madsbaggesgaard@cc.au.dk) no later than March 1, 2024.

Support for travel and lodging will be available for a limited number of participants. If you wish to apply for this, please enclose a budget for travel expenses with your message. Only researchers who do not have possibilities for funding from their home institution will come into consideration.

The seminar is part of the research project Authoring slavery: [Authorship and agency in narratives of slavery in Ghana](#) and is hosted by the [Centre for the Study of the Literatures and Cultures of Slavery](#) at Aarhus University.

The seminar also relates to the publication of volume 3 of *Comparative Literary Histories of Slavery*, eds. Mads Anders Baggesgaard, Madeleine Dobie and Karen-Margrethe Simonsen in the series of literary histories made by CHLEL (Coordinating Committee for Literatures in European Languages) under the ICLA (International Comparative Literature Association) Publishing House: John Benjamins Publishing. Volumes 1-2 are currently being published and vol 3. bears the title *Slavery, Authorship and Literary Culture*. You will find a separate call for this volume here and we encourage participants in the seminar also to submit a proposal for this volume.