

Call for papers for “Slavery and Emotion”, a workshop on Martinique, January 6-8 2017.

Literature associated with slavery provokes and often seeks to provoke emotional responses. This has been most widely studied in the context of late 18th and 19th sentimentalism, a key dimension of abolitionism, but emotionality has been present in discourses on slavery since early modernity – in atrocity stories, travel narratives, autobiographical and anthropological reports, dramas and different narrative and aesthetic approaches in prose and lyrics just as it is present also today in a wide spectrum of literary genres, meaning not only traditional literary genres, for instance in historical novels, political drama and poetry but also movies, blogs, life-stories (often ghost-written), a new boost in autobiographical fiction, campaigns against slavery etc.

This seminar examines the sentimental response of slavery across several national, historical and linguistic contexts and also widens the angle of enquiry to encompass recent studies of affect as a component of human rights and humanitarianism. As a first major case of affective politics, slavery paved the way for more recent efforts to not only ‘harness’ emotional responses but also train subjects to experience them.

The categories of emotionality and affect are not as transparent and accessible as they appear. They are immersed in cultural normativity and politics. In the Western tradition, there has often been an opposition between feeling and reason, and a hierarchy between different feelings, for instance cultivated and non-cultivated, private and public, high rank and low rank feelings. Feelings are deeply related to the power structure of a society; they are not beyond social meaning but a form of meaning making (Sara Ahmed, 2000).

In this seminar, we therefore ask not only what emotions are, but also what they do in texts about slavery. Since emotions are dependent on social reality, how do they change and adopt to different political and historical contexts? What kind of genres, tropes, and images invoke emotions in relation to slavery in different literary historical periods? And how is emotionality related to the personal life story, family structures, issues such as gender, race, and power structures?

Understandings of emotionality differ from estimating them to be of no importance at all to ‘real life problems’ (Herbert Ross Brown), damaging for the development of democratic societies, for instance, theatrical emotions (Jean Jacques Rousseau) to being the exact opposite: a key stone in the development of modern democracy and the development of human rights (Lynn Hunt) and of essential importance to the abolition of slavery (Lynn Festa, Christopher Miller, Madeleine Dobie).

Critical discussions of the relationship between slavery and emotions have shown that in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, at the peak time of the development of the sentimental novel and romanticism, the European and American abolitionist movements produced sentimental accounts and images of enslavement in order to advocate for the abolition, either of the Atlantic slave trade or of slavery itself. (e.g, Festa (2006), Hunt (2007), Christopher Brown (2006), Miller (2007) and Dobie (2010)). However, one may ask: did sentiment in fact contribute significantly to the wave of abolitions that stretched from 1794 to 1888, or were economic and political factors more decisive?

And more generally: Is the main function, or effect of emotions positive, in the sense that they promote identification with slaves as subjects or as agents, or do they elicit pity for them as victims? What kind of psychological investment is made by the reader/spectator?

Questions about the role of emotion in social and political activism continue to reverberate in recent arguments about the strategies and rhetoric of contemporary human rights

campaigns. Scholars including Samuel Moyn (2012), Massad (2008), Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman (2009), Lilie Chouliaraki (2012) have raised questions about the political moorings of humanitarianism and human rights discourses, connecting them in various ways to the cultivation of pity for or identification with psychological as well as physical suffering. This body of thought intersects with recent developments in the areas of affect theory and the history of emotions. Scholars including Lauren Berlant (1999, 2011) Wendy Brown (1998), Dean (2010) and Ahmed (2011), have explored the categories of sentiment, emotion, feeling and affect, connecting these disparate concepts to modes of representation and moral and political regimes.

The broad goal of this seminar is to reopen the scholarly conversation relative to literature and slavery to address new work on the use and function of emotion, feeling, affect and sentiment. Looking beyond the category of sentimentalism, the contributions may consider the many different ways in which emotion has been cultivated, projected and normativized in representations of slavery.

The seminar is a first step toward preparing a section on Slavery and Emotion, to be published in the book *Comparative Literary Histories of Slavery*, eds. Mads Anders Baggesgaard, Madeleine Dobie and Karen-Margrethe Simonsen in the series of literary histories made by CHLEL under the ICLA, Publishing House: John Benjamins Publishing.

If you are interested in participating please send 100-200 word abstracts to madsbaggesgaard@cc.au.dk no later than October 15, 2016.

Participants will have to cover costs for travel and lodging. For information on venue and recommended accommodation and other practical matters please do not hesitate to write madsbaggesgaard@cc.au.dk The seminar is hosted by the research project Reading Slavery, see readingslavery.au.dk

Kind regards,

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Madeleine Dobie
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