Preface

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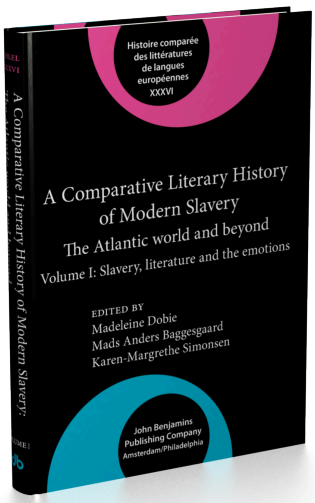

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A Comparative Literary History of Modern Slavery. Volume I: Slavery, literature and the emotions : The Atlantic world and beyond
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Preface

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This collection of essays on slavery and comparative literature comes at a time when institutions, cultural traditions, and even governments are struggling with the problem of dealing with the past in what now appears to be an uncertain future, one in which catastrophic climate change, war, and technological transformations seem to have put the future of the human into doubt. However, this is not the first moment in history that modernity has come to be identified with catastrophe. Despite its association with human progress, the modern period has been underwritten by horrifying events, many of them leading to the annihilation of communities and destruction of bodies. The conquest of the Americas, heralded as the beginning of a new age, was chaperoned by the destruction of indigenous communities; Descartes' meditation on the on the meaning of the human as a rational being took place against the background of the enslavement of Africans; debates on the Enlightenment and the discourse of freedom were shadowed by the experiences of enslavement, conveniently tacked onto the footnotes of leading European philosophers, and the commodities that drove the industrial revolution and the culture of consumption were produced by bonded labor. In fact, if one were looking for a singular event that informs and haunts the modern age, it is not the rule of reason or universal emancipation, but the enslavement of Africans. There might be debates about how modernity and the culture of capitalism came to be structured by enslavement, but there are few aspects of modern culture that are not touched by slavery.

Yet, despite the strong concordance between them, slavery and modern culture have tended to be kept apart, especially in the sphere of art, literature, and philosophy. Scholars in the humanities often cringe at the idea that the imaginative faculty, often associated with beauty and freedom, could have emerged from spaces of violence and death. In this context, the volumes of *A Comparative Literary History of Modern Slavery* are driven by a powerful impulse — to return Comparative Literature, a discipline that has often been associated with European bourgeois culture — to its roots in the materiality of a troubled history. Each of the volumes in this collection touches on the key intersection of forms of writing with forms of social experience informed by slavery, including the work of emotions, the experience and problematic of memory, and the institutions of authorship. The questions raised by the editors and contributors of these volumes are urgent: What does it mean to think about slavery and affect beyond the abolitionist rehearsal of piety and pity? How is memorialization enacted in writing? How has the experience of enslavement shaped forms of authorship and textuality? Approached from broad and comparative perspectives, these questions present new avenues for thinking about acts of dehumanization that demand a particular mode of literary expression across time

and space. The gesture of comparison continuously opens new questions in each volume and respective chapters.

Consider, for example, the issue of emotions, the subject of the first volume in this series. At a first glance, this pairing begs difficult questions: Could an affective community be cultivated in a regime of violence whose goal was to turn the enslaved into chattel property, that is into objects rather than subjects of labor? And what kind of imaginative work, either by the enslaved or their masters, could emerge in conditions of bondage? These questions are necessitated by a paradox at the heart of enslavement itself, the fact that new theories of emotions, and a literature attendant to them, were being developed even as the most brutal instruments and practices were being used to keep slaves outside affective relationships. Many of the contributors to this volume are attuned to the irony of slavery in cultures defined by sense and sensibility. In fact, to engage with the problematic of emotions in its moment of emergence in the eighteenth century is to come face to face with the intersection of the most brutal regimes of labor in the shadow of the most elevated feelings.

As Madeleine Dobie notes in her introduction to Volume I of this series, the culture of slavery and the process of enslavement depended on a powerful marshalling of emotions in the form of a negative sensorium. Enslavement demanded acts of mastery underwritten by contempt and disgust, often enforced by violent acts such as the mutilation of bodies, and a legacy of stigma and shame. At the same time, the cultures of the masters were defined by the cultivation of the most genteel deployment of affective relationships ranging from the coffee houses in European capitals to the serene world of the plantation house. Behind the façade of the Plantation house and the masters' cultivation of affect as a social value were the laboring bodies in the back of the house.

A focus on emotions in the culture of slavery enables a discussion of affect across a range of vectors and actors, including those denied agency. More significantly, putting emotions at the center of debates about the making of modern society, of which enslavement was foundational, is an invitation to students of literature and culture to rethink the nature of modern subjectivity. If fact, debates about emotions are also about who was allowed or disallowed from the realm of the Cartesian subject and a measure of responsibility toward those defined as others. Slavery often pointed to the both the possibilities and limits of affect. The possibility was that an appeal to emotions could move white people of good will to recognize the enslaved as persons. The limit was that this recognition would have to overcome centuries of intellectual thought, law, and custom had defined the enslaved as property. How could one feel compassion for the suffering of the other when the other was not part of their human community? The brilliance of this volume is to be found in its insistence that slavery complicated and transformed the nature of emotions and their utility.

What is the relation between slavery, memory, and literature? Answers to this question, the subject of Volume II of the series, are both simple and complex. The answer is simple because the age of slavery is also the period of the invention and transformation of literary genres. The capitalism that many scholars of the novel have associated with the genre was intimately connected to slavery. It is significant that in one of the earliest European novels, Daniel Defoe's

Robinson Crusoe, the coming into being of a modern, novelistic, subject could not be separated from his demand that he be recognized as a master by Friday, a native reinvented as a slave. The modern individual, the subject who made novelistic genres distinctive, was an enslaver, and this was the basis of his modern identity. The essays collected in this volume remind us of many other connections between slavery and literary genres: Within both the English and French traditions, romantic poetry and sentimental drama were fired by abolitionist sentiments. The inventors of Gothic as a form — William Beckford and Mathew Gregory Lewis — are prominent examples. They were both owners of slave plantations in the Caribbean. Overall, some of the major literary works of the modern period were generated in theaters of slavery either by masters who sought to present themselves as cultured subjects or the enslaved who turned to existing forms of writing to testify to the brutal regimes of labor to which they were subjected. As many of the essays collected in volume II show, some of the vocabularies that have become central to the identity of literature and the way we read it — interiority, subjectivity, sense and sensibility — were developed in relation to enslavement or reaction against it.

Still, as Karen-Margrethe Simonsen aptly notes in the introduction to Volume II, the history of slavery is difficult to write because enslavement is inevitably a painful subject at odds with our notions of pleasure, and because memories of this traumatic experience remain fragile. Despite this fragility — or because of it — memories of enslavement have generated some of the most powerful narratives across regions, periods, and genres. Here again, the act of comparison enables us to see how literature came to be the privileged site of memory and commemoration and how writers became witnesses to the lived experience of enslavement. The volume contains memorable discussions of the formerly enslaved who turned to writing to bear witness and compelling examples of how memories of slavery continue to shape postcolonial writing from New York, Fort-de-France, to Cape Coast.

We know that writing was one of the most important forms through which the enslaved spoke to the world. But how did the cultures of slavery shape the institution of literature in general and cultures of print? It is significant that this question animates the projected third volume in this series for while the study of the cultures of print has been central to literary history in the last few decades, there are few scholarly explorations of how the traffic in slaves affected the material production of literature. How did enslavement or a history of slavery affect the circulation, translation, and selling of books? What was the nature of libraries and printing presses in cultures of slavery? What was the role of the enslaved on the stage? Providing a material context for the writing surrounding slavery and enslavement across geographies and periods, Volume III will provide a space in which the issues raised in the previous two volumes are brought together through the institution of authorship itself and the complexities that arise when the producers of literature cannot take their subjectivity and agency for granted.

Combined, these volumes provide be a vital point of reference for scholars of Comparative Literature and related disciplines. The volumes stand out for their rigorous reflection on the relationship between literature and modern systems of slavery and for providing readers with an unprecedent and expansive range of authors, cultures, and texts. Of note is the editors' broad understanding of modern slavery from the sixteenth century to the postcolonial present.

The geographical range of the volumes is impressive, too. In addition to transatlantic slavery, individual chapters explore forms of enslavement in Africa, the Mediterranean, and across the Indian Ocean. And by insisting on a self-conscious historicist approach, the editors and contributors challenge scholars to rethink the work of literary history and the responsibility that comes with the task of writing and readings in a comparative frame.