

STAGING SLAVERY AROUND 1800

PERFORMANCES OF SLAVERY AND RACE FROM AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Ghent, September 18-20, 2019

Through the lens of popular white performance and theater, this conference explores the ways in which slavery and race were imagined and debated in the metropolises in an age of significant intellectual and political change (1770-1830). As empire is strongly connected to a nation's individual past and identity, researchers of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theater have studied performances of slavery in specific French, German, British, American, Spanish, Portuguese and Dutch contexts. Albeit with attention to important geopolitical specificities, this conference aims to investigate the implications of boundary-crossing discussions about this theme and to move beyond the national framework of analyses that otherwise narrow the understanding of our colonial past and present.

Being the most popular venue of its time, the theater around 1800 was a political arena in which topical matters were discussed. Not only did theater reflect contemporary social and political dynamics, it was a site where alternative narratives were invented and broadcasted. Coinciding with the sentimental episode in Europe, antislavery theater developed strategies to evoke empathy and raise awareness of suffering in order to stimulate audiences to direct opposition to the institution of slavery. Plays such as *Inkle and Yarico* in London (George Colman, 1787), *L'esclavage des noirs* in Paris (Olympe de Gouges, 1784), or *Monzongo, of de koningklyke slaaf* in Amsterdam (Nicolaas S. van Winter 1774) challenged authorities and had a lasting impact on their audiences. Reading these plays today, however, reveals how abolitionism went hand in hand with (underlying) notions of black inferiority and white supremacy.

We invite contributions concentrating on the role of theater and performance culture in the spread of abolitionist ideologies and narratives, but also on how these productions (re)established colonial power relations and how theater became proxy for blatant racist and imperialist exploitations of the colonized and enslaved body. Submissions may seek to explore the following research areas/questions:

- How was the enslaved body represented through national and international theatrical conventions;
- In what ways was theater itself shaped by global politics and events in the colonies (e.g. slave uprisings or antislavery politics);
- What was the role of theater and performance in the migration of abolitionist ideologies and narratives across national borders;
- What were the dramatic functions of characters of color and what was their relationship to evolving assumptions on race and empire;
- How did the practices and meanings of blackface performance expand and modify over time; what was the relationship between blackface ridicule and abolitionism;
- In what ways were slavery and race performed outside the playhouse (e.g. at slave auctions, fun fairs, the parliament);
- Can performance theory and postcolonial studies help us in investigating these theatrical representations of race and slavery?

Please submit your proposal (300-word abstract) for a 20-minute paper no later than March 15, 2019. Proposals should include your name, academic affiliation and a brief curriculum vitae, and be sent to the conference organizers sarah.adams@ugent.be and wsutherland@ncf.edu.

