



Call for Papers

Competing Memories: The Politics of Remembering Slavery, Emancipation and Indentureship in the Caribbean

Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies (BCDSS), University of Bonn, Germany

March 29-31, 2023

International conference organized by Sinah Kloß, Andrea Gremels and Ulrike Schmieder

The Caribbean is a space of dynamic and ever-changing memories. When we consider memories not as something owned but something done, practices of memory-making invite us to reflect on the (a-)symmetrical dependencies and power dynamics involved in processes of remembering, forgetting, memorizing, recollecting and commemorating. Memories are constructed, expressed and transmitted in narratives, art, historiography, literature and film, journalistic media and other kinds of representation. Increasingly, they are digitized and globalized, and are mediated multimodally. Sensory experiences facilitated by social and collective memories may further be constructed in ritual performances or in visual and material culture. Memory-making is present and represented in monuments, archives and museums as well as material vestige of the antagonistic lives of the enslaved and enslavers. As entangled *lieux de mémoire* (Nora 1989) these sites are implemented, removed, contested and remodeled all over the Caribbean, its diasporas and in former colonizing countries.

Here, as elsewhere, socio-political disparities and power imbalances commonly impact the capacity and means to promote specific memories and historical narratives, through which the past is created, adapted and negotiated. These dynamics influence which processes and memories are included or excluded in specific histories and which versions of the past are reconstructed, selected and interpreted. Exemplary for the Caribbean context is the Haitian Revolution, which—as an ‘unthinkable’ event—continues to be silenced in and left out of many accounts of global history (Ehrmann 2022, Trouillot 1995).

Consequently, tensions and conflicts arise concerning voiced and unvoiced claims to ‘truthful’ and ‘authentic’ memories and histories. In this context, practices of unsilencing are a means of claiming (historical) visibility and accessing resources otherwise denied. For example, activists living in the Caribbean or its diasporas today advocate for reparations related to the injustices of slavery, pointing to the lasting legacies of European colonialism and Transatlantic slavery. They identify evidence of capital transfer from slavery and coerced labor to Europe, traces of enslavers and enslaved in historical records, summarizing and promoting their claims to the former colonizing countries. Memories and historical narratives may hence become cultural resources that affect a group’s social status and access to different kinds of capital.

Histories and memories may be declared to be official or unofficial; they may be sanctioned or subjugated. ‘Official’ histories can lead to the monopolization of particular historical narratives and the prioritization of specific memories in favor of others. In the Caribbean, this was the case when for example European colonizers and local elites descending from enslavers actively excluded voices and memories of subalternized or exiled peoples from the making of historical narratives. With regard to nation-building, different (Caribbean) social actors may have made use of and selected specific historical memories to define the official histories of an independent nation, (re-)creating and inventing a suitable past (Hobsbawm 1983).

Although official histories may be reconstructed and transmitted, counter-memories and counter-histories may still circulate and form modes of resistance to dominant narratives. Recent scholarship in Memory Studies has stressed the multidirectional and transcultural dynamics of collective memory formations (Erlil 2011, Rothberg 2009). Taking into account the heterogeneity of the Caribbean, its cultures, languages, peoples and histories, it would be too simplistic to assume that there exist unified claims and unanimous endeavors. Memories and representations related to the different systems of oppression and exploitation that have existed in the Caribbean – e.g. slavery and indentureship – may compete on the national and international levels for recognition and monetary resources.

Competing Memories hence focuses on the politics of memory and the constructions and representations of plural and divergent memories in Caribbean contexts, especially but not exclusively in relation to slavery, emancipation and indentureship. As understandings of ‘history’ and ‘memory’ may vary, we look at the different and strategic ways these concepts are used within and in relation to the Caribbean. Among the questions to be discussed are, for example:

- Which memories compete in the contemporary Caribbean with regard to plantation slavery and the system of indentureship? How are these memories negotiated, shared and contested within the Caribbean as well as on the global level, and how have these processes been transformed over time?
- How do these dynamics reveal symmetrical and asymmetrical dependencies in the co-construction of (historical) narratives in the (post-)colonial Caribbean?
- What are the epistemological challenges and political stakes of memory studies and historiography on slavery, emancipation and indentureship in and on the Caribbean?
- How have individual and collective memories of slavery, emancipation and indentureship been transmitted across different media? How have they been experienced through stories, images, religious performances, art and other kinds of representation in the past and at present?
- In what ways are these memories commodified and/or transferred into cultural and economic resources? Are they used to contest power relations and social status?
- In what ways do representations and practices of remembering differ when comparing the different exploitative systems of slavery and indentureship? Are aspects of ‘postmemory’ (Hirsch 2012) – intergenerationally transmitted trauma – relevant in this context?

The conference will take place on March 29–31, 2023 at the [Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies](#), University of Bonn, Germany. It is co-hosted by the [Society for Caribbean Research e.V.](#) and organized by Sinah Kloß (Bonn), Andrea Gremels (Frankfurt) and Ulrike Schmieder (Hannover). Please submit your abstracts (200–300 words) and brief biographical information by **May 31, 2022** to s.kloss@uni-bonn.de. A limited number of travel bursaries will be available for accepted speakers—please indicate in your application if you wish to apply for a travel bursary. We invite contributions from scholars across the field of humanities and social sciences.