Introduction
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Despite its utterly inhumane contours, slavery is a wholly human endeavor, an exploitative relationship between an extractor of labor and a producer of labor. At the same time, as an institution endemic to capitalism’s expansion, it suffuses global systems of exchange, consumption, and desire that are so often and so ironically touted as inherently liberatory. As an expression of power and control, in the sphere of both the market and the intimate, slavery appears to have existed for all of human history and may very well continue to exist as long as humans continue to commodify labor. Indeed, despite it being considered morally reprehensible and legally illegitimate in practically every society today, slavery still infects our global supply chains, our battlefields, and our domestic spaces.

This very human injustice is thus unsurprisingly an underlying current in global literatures from the Caribbean to the Middle East, from Africa to Asia. Local in its iterations but global in its trajectories, slavery produces its own grammar of violence that is in turn shaped by its interpersonal scenes of subjection. Writers throughout literary history have grappled with slavery’s footprint on both the intimate spaces and the planetary circuits, depicting both our capacity to subject one another to the most hideous tortures and our indomitable capacity to rise up against the worst forms of oppression.

The literary treatment of slavery in North America – from Wheatley to Whitehead – has been celebrated and analyzed for decades. From the early 1970s, rediscovery of the vast body of thousands of first-person testimonies of the formerly enslaved to the exposure of slavery’s afterlives in the language of twenty-first-century African American satire and neo-slave narratives, the field of slavery studies has engaged in active conversation about the literary representation of slavery for nearly a hundred years. The Cambridge Companion to Slavery in American Literature highlights some of the most significant analytical approaches to the literature of slavery in the United States. Unfortunately, American scholarship on antebellum
transatlantic slavery dominates scholarly conversations and often obscures or ignores the intersecting and intertextual global literary currents in respect to slavery. Even Paul Gilroy’s provocative call to a more globalized approach to slavery in *The Black Atlantic* nearly exclusively ponders American depictions of the transatlantic trade.\(^3\) Furthermore, theoretical and critical approaches to slavery have often focused on the era and destination geographies of the transatlantic slave trade and hardly reached any further, rarely even to trace the origination locations, effects, and afterlives in the literature of slavery in Africa.\(^4\) The essays collected in this volume, *The Cambridge Companion to Global Literature and Slavery*, pursue new itineraries for scholarship in the field of slavery studies, suggesting a more inclusive turn, in both the geographical and the temporal. These studies of global literature depicting slavery have taken an area studies approach, performing deep-dive analyses on national or regional literary traditions typically overlooked in the study of literature and slavery, and they reflect on the diverse range of unfreedoms depicted therein. Literary scholars of China, Central Asia, and the Middle East recognize, analyze, and represent slavery and its legacies in regions of the world where slavery does not always take on the form of racialized chattel slavery of people of African descent that is so familiar to Western scholars. Even when the authors take on genres or geographies familiar to those who study transatlantic slavery, such as slave narratives, for instance, the authors reconfigure our worldview, subordinating the transatlantic or undermining the European and American dominance over the discourse, even as they often reveal the way black African bodies and experiences have come to stand in for a wide variety of forms of labor exploitation in the global imaginary. Other scholars are rejecting the Eurocentric mythology that slavery was effectively abolished in the nineteenth century to analyze the slave narrative and other representations of slavery as they have been developed to account for twenty-first-century forms of unfreedom and forced labor.

*The Cambridge Companion to Global Literature and Slavery* is designed to highlight the shifting terrain in literary studies of slavery and collectively challenge the reductive notion of what constitutes slavery and its representation. The essays contained herein provide original scholarly arguments about some of the most trenchant themes that arise in the literatures of slavery – themes that seem to transcend time and suggest that slavery encodes its own language, structures, and grammars in our representations of it. While discussing vastly different archives, literatures, and cultures, these articles return time and again to themes of
authentication and legitimation; ethnic formation and globalization; dis-
placement, exile, and alienation; representation and metaphorization; and
resistance and liberation. Contributors to this volume repeatedly reflect on
the failures of law to provide protections of rights, such that even after
emancipation – by law or by escape – formerly enslaved people tend to
experience a sense of not-yet-freedom, physically freed but not quite fully
recognized by law or even interpellated within society as entirely human.
Their contributions suggest the myriad ways literature has approached the
daunting historical reality – and seeming inevitability – of forced labor
in the era of the rise and flourishing of global capitalism. Collected
together, they are as much a contemplation of our human endeavor for
freedom as they are of the human capacity to enslave.

It would be impossible to have sufficient coverage of slavery’s many
avatars or its locations across all of human history. Instead, these essays are
shaped by scholars who present ideas that are global in perspective even
when local in their articulations. The essays address forms of slavery that
have developed contemporaneously with the transatlantic slave trade as
well as those that long postdate it. Contemporary forms of forced labor,
human trafficking, and other bonded labor are contemplated both as and
in relationship to slavery, depending on the location and reflecting literary
writers’ own approaches to these forms of unfreedom. Thus, representa-
tions of slavery as diverse as those that have emerged in South, West,
North, and East Africa; China, Mongolia, and Central Asia; India; the
Middle East; and the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean worlds are all
represented here. These varied geographies, many of which have been
defined at least in part by the routes of commerce and thus slavery that
cross them, are considered not only in terms of how writers contend with
the existence of slavery but also in terms of the way the legacy of slavery
continues to dominate corporate and personal relationships long into the
twenty-first century. In some cases, those legacies are represented through
metaphors for contemporary exploitation; in others, slavery is evoked as a
literal and practical description of the very real circumstances of the
present. Those representations are both engaged for their explanatory
power and critiqued for their potentially problematic and global
political implications.

Read together, these essays pursue some of the thornier questions
confronting slavery studies at this moment. The authors contend with
the definition of slavery as it has changed over time and migrated across
continents. They interrogate the way the literary representation of slavery
has reemerged as both a trope and a weapon in our current globalized
discourse. They identify the way American forms of racialized chattel slavery and its legacies have informed racialized practices as far away as Iran or South Africa. They pursue the effects of the representation of slavery, including the ways it sometimes allows both the oppressive practices inherent in slavery and the opportunities of resistance to it to resonate across borders. To understand the contours of this vast field of discourse, we have opened the doors to an interdisciplinary group of scholars interested in questions of slavery’s representation and communication and who work not only in literary studies but also in history, philology, anthropology, and linguistics.

The collection opens with two pieces that establish some of the contested terrain upon which the rest of the essays travel. In Chapter 1, Alexandra Moore argues that contemporary global literatures of slavery contend with and critique exclusionary, Eurocentric narratives of human rights discourse that emerged in response to nineteenth-century slavery and that continue to obscure the reality of rights violations today. Through a reading of Mahasweta Devi’s short story “Douloti the Bountiful” and Chris Abani’s Becoming Abigail, Moore situates the seemingly familiar genre of the slave narrative within the context of international human rights and anti-slavery legislation to show the way contemporary global figurations of slavery decolonize the genre and thereby defamiliarize the reductive and colonial logic of slavery and freedom that are inscribed in two centuries of supposedly liberatory anti-slavery legislation. Largely ignorant of such critiques, a renewed “abolitionist” movement has sprung up in the last twenty years as awareness of contemporary forms of global slavery has risen. In Chapter 2, Wendy Hesford moves the conversation to the contemporary figurations of slavery promulgated by conservative groups in the United States that coopt the gravity of rights discourse and humanitarian tropes to amplify their conspiratorial agendas that are xenophobic, sexist, and racist. She performs a literary-critical exegesis of the discourse of contemporary anti-slavery to suggest that the “field of contemporary slavery studies scholarship needs to become more attuned to the powerful grip of humanitarian politics in order to more effectively counteract its parasitic logics and violence perpetrated in its name.”

With those cautions in mind, the contributors in Part I engage with the genres and tropes of slavery, in contexts more and less familiar to slavery studies. In Chapters 3 and 4, Matthew Omelsky and Kwabena Opoku-Agyemang present contemporary genre fiction as the literary space in which West African authors have chosen to extend African experiences of enslavement beyond the narrow frame of the transatlantic to contend
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with the radical dispossession of contemporary life. Omelsky’s chapter on slavery in African speculative fiction is a tribute to the long history of the struggle for freedom in worlds, minds, and bodies dominated by slavery’s shape-shifting forms. His chapter moves inward, to the continent’s interior and into the interior spaces of the mind and body subjected to slavery, where there is room for both dissent and liberation, dissociation and revolution. Opoku-Agyemang’s chapter turns outward to the streets, where disconnected youth in Ghanaian microfiction are attempting to dodge the exploitative labor systems that prey on their poverty. West African writers employ the accessibility of flash fiction and digital journals to explore marginalization and servitude through an interplay of isolation and conflict in order to communicate to broad audiences about new forms of slavery that emerge from the radical inequality experienced in the region. These chapters together reveal the way the narrative of slavery moves away not only from the transatlantic but also from the first-person narrative and into the genres most widely consumed by readers, creating a popular counter-discourse to the exploitative structures that are depicted in their pages – whether they’re describing Oxford Road in Accra today or a distant planet in the twenty-second century.

In a counterpoint to the reimagining of slavery’s familiar tropes in new genres, Chapters 5–7, about literary representations of slavery in Asia from the medieval period to the nineteenth century, serve to broaden the scope of the archive of slavery studies, introducing tropes and discursive strategies at once familiar and differently imagined. In Chapter 5, David Brophy turns to two genres – hagiography and folk tale – to understand the experiences of slavery and resistance in seventeenth- to nineteenth-century Central Asia, in what is now known as East Turkestan or Xinjiang. He zooms in on the famous legend of Nazugum, a young woman who successfully fled slavery and captivity, and describes how this and other acts of resistance have echoed through the ages to shape contemporary Uyghur imaginations of the struggle against colonial oppression. In Chapter 6, Johanna Ransmeier focuses her analysis primarily on one of the world’s most famous novels, The Dream of the Red Chamber, to discover the tropes by which slavery is encoded in Chinese cultural representations and traditions, even as it remains hidden in the subtext. Her excavation of the figures of enslavement in the text reveals characters who are at once the lynchpins upon whom all action depends and the invisible mirror counterpoints to those who are ostensibly in power. Her analysis reveals a dynamic of slavery that is potentially universal – the reliance of slaveholders upon those they enslave, both for their practical
needs and for the definition of their own subjectivity. In Chapter 7, Samuel Bass takes a linguistic approach, tracing the shifting language of slavery back to the oral traditions of the medieval period in Mongolia and into epic literatures to reckon with the way the language both reflects and refracts cultural practices. Metaphorized at times, representations of slavery existed as both recognition of practices of captivity, bondage, and forced labor and, at the same time, a means of imbuing power in or critiquing social relations. As Bass points out, mobilizations of the language of slavery change over time and context and can be interpreted in some contexts as indicating appropriate behaviors for subordinate classes and at other times be deployed to describe the injustice of contemporary leadership.

Slavery influences our cultures, practices, interpersonal relationships, and institutions, even long after it has been abolished. Recent scholarship and political advocacy campaigns have identified the legacies of American chattel slavery in the unequal distribution of resources, in the project of mass incarceration of black lives, in health disparities between the races, and in many other forms of systemic racism that plague the United States. The same can often be said in other countries where slavery was institutionalized and remains salient in institutions generations after it has been abolished. In Part III, on afterlives and legacies, contributors look to the literatures of Iran, northern Africa, the Indian Ocean, and Nigeria to examine how the literary evocation of the history of slavery can illuminate the crises of the contemporary period. In Chapter 8, Parisa Vaziri reveals the literal blackness and the literary blackface of a well-known mythological figure in Iranian culture to argue that the character both reveals and obscures the fact of slavery in Iranian history. Her chapter undermines the notion of the “happy slave” in that context and at the same time critiques scholarship that congratulates itself for hearing the voice of the enslaved, even when that voice is entirely silenced or silent. Her consideration of the archive as a perversion that undermines the historiographical claim to truth provides an important context for the chapters that follow. In Chapter 9, for instance, Martino Lovato traces the contemporary representations of the ninth-century Zendj revolt that has been celebrated as a triumph for egalitarianism in the Arab-Islamic world. Lovato analyzes Jamel Eddine Benchechik’s 1998 novel *Rose noire sans parfum* and Tareq Teguia’s 2013 film *Révolution Zenj* that appropriate the history of Zendj rebellion and the figure of its leader to contemplate the radical inequality in contemporary Algeria. The powerful mythology of the originary revolutionary figure can obscure present-day realities, but the authors evoke these rebels as models of discontent, a usable past that can be mobilized to
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Critique contemporary inequalities. The allegories of the films pinpoint not a shared history of regional egalitarianism but instead “a historical presence” that reveals “a shared history of slavery, racism, and oppression.” In Chapter 10, Nienke Boer focuses on what is spoken and what is silenced in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Indian Ocean literature by placing it in contrast to the Black Atlantic archive. She writes, “If the anglophone Black Atlantic, then, is a sphere of autobiographical speech and legal silence, the Indian Ocean world of enslavement can be seen as one of autobiographical silence, but legal speech.” The enslaved voices of Indian Ocean slavery and the counter-narratives they produced survive only in court testimonies and thus shape how contemporary Indian Ocean writers, such as Yvette Christianse, Amitav Ghosh, and so many others, render “slavery” and “indenture” – sometimes risking collapsing the two related but not quite equal systems of exploitative labor – in a kind of fictional erasure of contractual differences that exclude the enslaved entirely but provide mobility for the indentured. Boer’s chapter unpacks the way the archive destabilizes truth in both the historiography of the period and in contemporary debates regarding forms of unfreedom. In Chapter 11, Supriya Nair reflects on author Uwem Akpam’s short story about twenty-first-century human trafficking in Nigeria to reveal the way in which the emphasis of the archive of transatlantic slavery has so dominated discourses of slavery that it obscures other geographies and other experiences, including those in West Africa. Akpam’s work asks us to shift attention away from the Afropolitan, Nair argues, and toward more local contexts where the experiences of the most marginalized – in this case, impoverished and exploited children – point to a continuum of precarity between past and present that is largely silenced by the archival obsession with the transatlantic.

In Part IV, contributors ponder the role of literary and intellectual migrations in the shaping of our understanding of slavery across borders. These chapters together provide a re-visioning of the tropes of transatlantic slavery from a Global South perspective to quite different ends. In Chapter 12, Jason Frydman centers the “cosmopolitan grandeur of African history” in nineteenth-century African writer Edward Wilmot Blyden’s work. Frydman reveals how Blyden’s traversal of the Muslim world allowed him to collect slave narratives written in Arabic by Muslim victims of the transatlantic trade, whose works “emerge as bids to reclaim a sacred, cosmopolitan subjectivity, a pious breath of freedom, across the rupture of the Middle Passage.” Blyden’s amplification of the experience of enslaved Muslims, while far from condoning slavery, nonetheless maps out
an alternative vision of blackness and even slavery for his English readers, upending the power of racial categories and undoing the binary of enslaved vs. free. Documenting a more nefarious trajectory for intellectual migrations, in Chapter 13, Kirk Sides provides a close literary-critical reading of the sociological and ethnographic/academic literature from South African architects of the then-emerging Apartheid system to reveal the ways American slavery and Jim Crow segregation helped them define (in relief and in contrast) a set of racialized policies and also desires that formed the ideological bedrock of Apartheid. Sides argues that the South African social experiment of Apartheid reveals the power of American chattel slavery in the imagination of slavery and blackness. The United States serves “as a testcase; a laboratory for the testing and development, and subsequent dissemination to the larger colonial world of racial/ist technologies designed and implemented around the enslavement of ‘Black peoples.”’

Chapters 14 and 15, which almost feel like a generative conversation between Subha Xavier and Ewa Macura-Nnamdi, situate the recent migration of African people across the Mediterranean within the ambivalence of agency in border crossings that so often result in exploitation and even death. Both chapters remind us that, as Xavier puts it, “migration, especially in today’s climate crisis, is above all else a human impulse that challenges the logic of inequality that slavery and colonialism have cast upon black lives, offering up movement as the dynamic imperative of life today.” And yet, as Macura-Nnamdi points out, journalistic and scholarly representations so often emphasize black bodies’ proximity to death rather than life. She points out the way mythologies of saving and rescuing black bodies are legacies of the historic slave trade and have migrated into the discourse of migration itself. In Chapter 15, Macura-Nnamdi cautions us that those narratives of refugee rescue go no further than the boundaries of the sea, revealing a callous disregard for the systemic injustice that mobilizes migrants in the first place and that meets them on the other side if they survive the journey. Nonetheless, Xavier suggests that we reject the notions of migration as vulnerability and suffering that are legacies of the transatlantic trade and instead embrace migration as a defiant logic grounded in not only agency but also a dynamic human impulse to move.

Together, this diverse collection of scholarly essays is meant not only to provide readers a grounding in the field as it stands today but also to be a force in shaping the field of global literary studies of slavery. It puts in conversation those scholars who have worked within the established traditions and geographies of slavery studies with those who are forging a path for the study of slavery in other regions of the world right up to the present...
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moment. Readers who come to the volume expecting to find discussions of the transatlantic trade in literature will find innovative turns in that subfield, but the collection seeks to expand the imagination of the wider temporal and geographic scope of literary representations of slavery. In this way, we hope the companion can serve both as a reflection of the field and a beacon of light for potential future itineraries.

Notes

