Introduction: Slavery Now

Slavery occupies a complex and paradoxical space within inseparable discussions of cultural consciousness, historical memory, and academic study. The incredible horror of slavery, as well as its position within national identity, history, and culture, creates multiple fundamental needs: to represent its violence, to understand its place in history and identity, to bear witness to its trauma and to the continuing impact of this trauma on contemporary life, and to pursue paths of intervention, healing, and commemoration. In essence, this study is characterized by a singular drive to make meaning out of the horror, historical significance, and traumatic memory of slavery.

As a result, slavery as a subject of study has been approached from a nearly unprecedented range of disciplines, methodologies, and critical perspectives, including anthropology, sociology, history, archaeology, trauma studies, African-American studies, feminist and womanist theory, and comparative slavery studies. The result of this multidisciplinary research has been significant in its collective impact, generating a body of work on slavery that remains critically necessary to our understanding. Interestingly, what reverberates throughout this vastly productive project of research and theory devoted to the study of slavery is a persistent and resistant sense of incomprehensibility. What is often articulated within these diverse approaches is the way the horror, trauma, and memory of slavery fundamentally exceeds representation. It would seem there is, as these scholars often attest, something inherently unspeakable about slavery, something in its essence and its extreme violence that is outside knowability. In this way, the study of slavery is paradoxically bound up both in a singular drive to represent and make meaning out of slavery, and in a persistent sense that something of the essence of slavery fundamentally resists this project.

This second issue of the Digital Literature Review, which takes on the theme of “Slavery Now,” aims to contribute to these complex discourses surrounding slavery as a subject of study. Devoted to the examination of historical and contemporary slave systems and their representations, this edition speaks to both the study of slavery and the paradoxical project of its representation. In the articles and film analyses collected here, the authors featured in this edition theorize historical and contemporary forms of slavery from a range of critical perspectives, as well as explore representations of slavery in art, literature, film, and within other sites of cultural memory and commemoration. Throughout the issue, several questions are of critical importance to this work. If something of the trauma and violence of slavery resists articulation, if something of the essence of slavery is unknowable and cannot be spoken, how do we bear witness to it and understand its representation? In addition, how can the study of historical and contemporary representations of slavery alongside and in conversation with one another deepen our understanding of its historical and modern forms? In a similar vein, how can an understanding of slave systems, including their dynamics of power and violence, allow us to theorize other forms of violence and oppression? Finally, out of this work, how can we construct paths of healing, intervention, and justice on behalf of victims, both in the past and in the present?

The articles in this issue each draw upon one or more of these critical questions, engaging them in direct as well as circumventing ways. Several articles in this edition consider the ways that modern entertainment, particularly television and film, often utilize the depiction of slavery
as an object for spectacle and consumption. Because of the gravity of the topic, any use of slavery in entertainment must be met with a critical eye. In “Children in Chains: On the Productive and Exploitative Tendencies of Representation in Law and Order: Special Victims Unit,” author Kathryn Hampshire analyzes the use of the child slave as subject matter in the popular television show, exploring the depiction of child slavery in terms of both exploitative spectacle and its potential for raising awareness about the realities of modern trafficking. Similarly, the co-authors of the film analyses included in this edition explore the critical conversations surrounding recent films about slavery and discuss the implications of recreating scenes of slavery on film. In “Reviewing the Critical Conversations About Django Unchained,” co-authors Daniel Brount, Mercadies Brown, and Alex Selvey explore the politics of humor in representations of slavery, as well as the trope of the white savior. In “A Critical Introduction to 12 Years a Slave,” co-authors Kathryn Hampshire, Bryce Longenberger, Ramona Simmons, and Esther Wolfe analyze the film’s representations of violence and slave suffering, as well as its explorations of the politics of suicide and the intersections of race and gender in the experiences of slave women.

In addition to discussing depictions of slavery in television and film, several authors examine representations of slavery in sites of commemoration and memorialization. These articles analyze the relationship between sites of public memory and complex histories of colonialism, racism, and white supremacy, and raise challenging questions about the ways in which practices of reenactment and exhibition are implicated in the replication of these structures of power and violence. In “Speaking the Lacuna: The Archaeology of Plantation Slavery as Testimony,” author Esther Wolfe examines plantation archaeology as a form of bearing witness to the historical trauma of slavery. Analyzing the rhetoric of forensic and archaeological methodology used in the archaeological excavation of plantation sites, the author explores the ways in which the material testimony of plantation archaeology embodies a “lacuna” of witnessing, and may replicate historical dynamics of violence. In “The Human Zoo: A Critique of Brett Bailey’s Exhibit B,” author Mercadies Brown investigates whether or not Brett Bailey’s controversial art exhibit provides a critique of racism and colonialism, and discusses the problematic exposition of Bailey’s modern and public recreations of slavery.

Articles featured in this edition also explore the ways in which an understanding of comparative slave systems can be applied to contemporary systems of slavery and the representations of slavery in contemporary popular culture. In “The Desensitization to Violence and the Perpetuation of Oppression and Slavery in Suzanne Collins’s The Hunger Games Trilogy,” author Bryce Longenberger utilizes the historical context of Roman slavery and gladiator fighting to analyze the representation of slavery in the popular book series. By reading a modern representation of slavery against a specific historical context, the author illustrates how this dialogue can also enrich our understanding of contemporary systems of human trafficking and the socioeconomic variables that make certain groups vulnerable to victimization. In “The Opposing Viewpoints of Slavery in Nineteenth-Century American Poetry: An Anthology,” author Madison Yeary compiles a collection of poems representing both pro-slavery and abolitionist sentiment and debate generated during the 19th century. Through this collection, the author recreates a cultural debate and deeply conflicted sense of American national identity that continues to impact our contemporary context.

Authors in this edition also think toward paths of intervention and resistance that pursue
justice and healing for victims of slavery. In “The Power of Language in and Following Moments of Trauma: An Analysis of A Stolen Life,” author Morgan Aprill analyzes the use of language in the contemporary slave narrative of Jaycee Dugard, exploring how Dugard’s use of language allows her to communicate the trauma of slavery to readers and call them to prevent similar crimes from happening in the future. In “Hidden Slave Narratives: The Power of Empathy in Children’s Literature,” author Elisabeth Wilkes examines hidden narratives of slavery in children’s literature and explores how these slave narratives can be used to teach young people to combat apathy surrounding human trafficking.

The work of this edition also extends beyond the articles themselves to include the images selected for the journal’s publication. In Daniel Brount’s cover photo, flowers rest against a row of bars. In visual culture, images of slavery often portray the suffering and subjugated slave body, or replace the slave body entirely with instruments of torture meant as signs to signify the tortured slave body. The image of flowers set against a row of bars displaces this objectification and fetishism often imbedded in the visual archive of slavery, replacing images of subjugation and instruments of torture with an image of profound loss as well as hope. In Isabel Vazquez’s back cover photo, the viewer’s gaze is directed through a dark tunnel, with a mouth that opens onto bright water and light. The image of the tunnel evokes the nature of trauma and the memory of slavery, with parts of the image remaining always out of frame. However, the image of the tunnel also contains movement toward physical and emotional liberation, a passage from darkness into light that implies material freedom as well as resolution and understanding. In this way, the image of the tunnel evokes the trauma of slavery, as well as the promise of liberation and a process of healing.

In our second edition of the Digital Literature Review, we hope to build upon and deepen the work we began in our inaugural issue last year. With the theme “Slavery Now,” the Digital Literature Review seeks to contribute to the current discourse surrounding slavery and theorize methods of intervention, justice, and healing for victims of slavery both past and present. It is also our hope that this edition will engage with our audience in a way that inspires readers to take on a similar project of investigating slavery in order to work against trafficking and victimization in our contemporary world. Fundamentally, this edition aims to do the deeply necessary and potentially transformative work of attempting to understand systems of violence and to actively imagine different futures free from systems of violence and oppression. Inherent to and imbedded within the study of slavery is a process of world-building and a praxis of liberation.