



German Abolitionism and The Bourgeois Tragedy: Toward an Intersectional Approach to Reading *Slave Plays*

FEBURARY 20, 2020

LOCATION:

Student Union Memorial Center
Agave Room

TIME:

4:00 pm



This presentation highlights the educational function of *Die Negersklaven, ein historisch-dramatisches Gemählde: in drey Akten* (1796: *The Negro Slaves: A Dramatic-Historical Painting, in Three Acts*) by German author August von Kotzebue (1761–1819) and brings it into conversation with Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's (1729–1781) bourgeois tragedy *Emilia Galotti* (1772). Both works are contextualized by the German eighteenth-century discourse on ethical education and the emergence of essential humanistic ideals. In line with an awakening bourgeois consciousness, Lessing centers his works on bourgeois protagonists and foregrounds the sentimental and socio-critical educational function of theater. Thus, the bourgeois tragedy is reflective of distinct literary strategies and thematic discussions. These themes and strategies also resonate with those exhibited in the German eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century dramatic genre *Sklavenstücke* (slave plays). Analyzing the slave play *The Negro Slaves*, which arose within the framework of the bourgeois tragedy, I argue that these plays articulate a critique of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. They also bear witness to an early German-language discourse indicative of abolitionist currents. Drawing on Ashraf H. A. Rushdy's conceptual framework of intertextuality, which posits that cultural productions emerge from and simultaneously contribute to social conditions, I discuss the continuation of the bourgeois tragedy within *The Negro Slaves* as a transnational abolitionist literary production. In addition, I allude to the portrayal of female characters across both genres as being reflective of a critical interrogation of the role of women in the described societies. This would necessitate an intersectional feminist approach to reading slave plays that considers the intersections of race, class, and gender.



OBENEWAA ODURO-OPUNI

Obenewaa Oduro-Opuni is a Ph.D. Candidate in Comparative Culture and Language at Arizona State University. She received her Master's in German from the University of Alabama with a thesis on the representation of Africa, Africans, and Black Germans in German literature, from medieval to contemporary literature. Her dissertation, *Modes of Transnationalism and Black Revisionist History: German Understandings of Slavery, The Transatlantic Slave Trade and Abolition in 18th and 19th Century Literature*, weaves together postcolonial theory, critical race theory, gender and sexuality studies, theories of transnationalism, intellectual history, and diaspora studies. Oduro-Opuni explores the German eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century dramatic genre *Sklavenstücke* (slave plays). These plays bear witness to an early German-language discourse indicative of abolitionist currents. She has recently published an article titled "German Abolitionism: Kotzebue and the Transnational Debate on Slavery" in a special issue of the *Journal of Transnational American Studies*, on "Transnational Black Politics and Resistance: From Enslavement to Obama." As a scholar activist, Oduro-Opuni is actively involved in community-based programs, such as German for Hire – Germany Visits American Classrooms program by the Goethe-Institut, the Diversity and Inclusion Science Initiative at ASU, and the ASU Immigration Lab (where she serves as a student mentor). She is also a member of the Black Graduate Student Association (BGSA), which aims to increase and advocate for the Black presence on ASU's campuses.