Privacy and Slavery. Artistic and Scholarly Perspectives on an Urgent Issue

Book of abstracts

Panel 1: Belief

Chair: Francis Ethelbert Kwabena Benyah

1. *Privatizing Knowledges and Unmasking Archival Silences: The Afterlives of Slavery*

Afe Adogame (Princeton Theological Seminary)

Religion is a latecomer to the emerging discourse on privacy and secrecy. While the interdisciplinary nature of privacy and secrecy is now less contentious, scholarly attempts to theorize secrecy as a broader, cross-cultural, and comparative phenomenon remain scant. At the same time, the discourse on religious secrecy remains theoretically undeveloped. First, my lecture will examine the intersection of religion and privacy through the prism of arcane and esoteric epistemologies, the dynamics of transcendental authority, intentionality, manipulation of autonomy, subversion and the ethics of disclosure. Second, I will interrogate how privacy and secrecy are tied to broader social, political, religious and historical interests. Thus, the privatization of knowledge and the quest to unmask archival silences are intricately connected to the politics of silencing the past, that is, the very act of forgetting to remember and remembering to forget. It is against this backdrop therefore that I probe how the intentionally ignored religious dimensions of slavery and its afterlives might help us to interrogate, critique, and unpack the profound consequences of enslavement for contemporary politics, aesthetics, cultural, and religious life. I argue that the ambivalence(s) of privacy and secrecy enable a proper grasp of the politics of representation, and the complexities and subtleties of relation between what data, information, artefact, and history is kept hidden or private and what is revealed and disclosed. Unpacking this intersectionality also helps us to comprehend the nature of that relation as a relation of power, in this case the coloniality of power. Thus, the tendency to silence the past reflects inequalities of power not only in knowledge of the past, but also in the negotiation, (re)production or the intentional manipulation and erasure of history.

2. *Privacy in Conjugal and Sexual Restrictions? Implementing Lutheran Morality among Enslaved people in the Danish West Indies*

Benedikte Emilie Thorup Steensgaard (University of Copenhagen)

This paper examines how the eighteenth-century Danish state mission in the West Indies sought to regulate the conjugal and sexual lives of the enslaved and free Afro-Caribbean members of the mis-sion congregations – and how individual members navigated or resisted such interventions. Using hitherto unexplored archival material from the Danish National Archives, this paper offers insight into how Danish missionaries attempted to impose Nordic Lutheran moral behaviour on the enslaved con-verts.

The sources reveal a sustained effort to suppress practices of polygamy and promiscuity, which was labelled as "vices" and connected specifically to people of African descent. By the late 1780s, the missionaries began to record the sexual relationships of the congregation members, thereby enforcing disciplinary measures to secure monogamous unions. In 1790, one missionary even proposed cor-poral punishment for "fornication and moral laxity", though this was never formally adopted. These initiatives illustrate how privacy such as marriage, sexuality and intimacy became sites of colonial governance, where church discipline intersected with racialised ideas and structures of enslavement.

At the same time, the sources – though written by white male authorities – offer glimpses of how enslaved converts carved out pockets of privacy within or against these restrictions. Their choic-es and evasions suggest that intimate life and relations could function both as a terrain of missionary control and as a space for agency, autonomy, and quiet resistance. By examining the entanglement of Lutheran mission and morality, enslavement, and privacy, the paper contributes to broader discussions about how private life is regulated under systems of coercion, and how enslaved people asserts forms of privacy within environments of surveillance.

3. *Silence and Wealth: Installation Art and the Collective Knowledge we Need now*

Veronica Hodges (independent artist)

We are living in a moment when the structures that organised the modern world are opening themselves to question. Wealth has long been the lead star — the organising principle of what we build, what we value, what we pass on. And so it is time to ask what that wealth is made of, who built it, for whom, and at what cost. Every accumulation leaves a remainder. Every archive has an outside. Every city built on trade carried bodies — willingly or not willingly.

SUGAR is a large-scale installation created for Christianskirken, a church in the heart of Copenhagen's historic harbour district — a neighbourhood built on the wealth of colonial trade.

Thousands of hand-formed paper forms — white, fragile, suspended — fill the room. The work carries a question about what it means to inhabit a city whose wealth and architecture grew from Atlantic sugar production and the lives of enslaved people — people denied the most fundamental privacy: the private body, the private bond, the private self. The right to an inner life that belonged to no one else.

Drawing on Diana Taylor's understanding of embodied knowledge that lives outside the archive, Édouard Glissant's thinking about relation after colonial rupture, and Victor Turner's concept ofcommunitas — this paper proposes the installation as a site of inquiry where questions about privacy, embodiment, and collective knowledge can be felt before they are formulated.

The installation proposes a space where collective consciousness has room to form around a different set of values. Where beauty becomes an act of return — to the earth, to the unnamed, to an understanding of human life built on something other than extraction and accumulation. Where visitors can remain in the room together, long enough for something to shift.

This paper asks whether installation art can shift the way we understand the world we live in — and whether beauty, collectively experienced, has the capacity to heal it.

Panel 2: Space

Chair: Bastian Felter Vaucanson

4. [Title TBA]

Kevin Osepa (independent artist)

5. *Surveillance of the enslaved and its limits – examining multiple archives in eighteenth century Bengal*

Titas Chakraborty (Duke Kunshan University)

Eighteenth century Bengal is best understood as a mosaic of various state entities with jurisdictions which jostled with each other. It is safe to say that enslaved people were present in almost all these jurisdictions. Multiple archives, both European and non-European, with a variety of provenances allow us to comprehend the nature of surveillance that weighed on the lives of enslaved people as well as the limits of surveillance when all archives are read simultaneously. Most importantly reading archives simultaneously also allows us to question whether slavery as a condition over-determines or under-determines a subject in a specific context under the scrutiny of a historian. Focusing on one region of south Asia in the eighteenth century, this paper will chart out the methodology of reading multiple archives simultaneously in understanding enslavement, the constraints of enslavement, constraints of archival legibility of enslavement and alongside the antinomian, abundant legibilities of the enslaved.

6. *The Political Economy of Privacy and Secrecy on the Plantation*

Sihle Motsa (University of Cape Town)

This paper presents the privacy/secrecy dyad as an occasion to contend with the incommensurability of slavery and privacy as a feature afforded the proper subject of modernity. In particular it positions the sexual violence within the domestic as the site where this dyad operates most significantly and with heightened discursive resonance. This paper is founded on the premise that through observing the functioning of privacy and secrecy we might interrogate how the reproduction of slavery, through black sexual and maternal availability and how this availability is indexed to the availability of slave as commodity and collateral exposes the enduring political salience of the domestic sphere. It also apportions an opportunity to think of the libidinal scaffolding of the plantation and imbrication of the slave within this scene replete with questions of desire, sexuality, seduction, perceived complicity, violence and of course secrecy. Given that of privacy is the preserve of the proper subject of modernity (the

master) and secrecy the underside of this privilege which is maintained by the slave, the domestic sphere becomes a key site of theorizing the patriarchy as a political and intimate relation that determines similarly the economic possibilities and kinship structures realizable on the plantation. It comparatively positions the Cape and the Antebellum South as sites for engaging the privacy/ secrecy dyad and its pertinence to the racial economic viability and legibility of the plantation.

Panel 3: Poperty

Chair: Hannah Katharina Hjorth

7. *“There Is No Sphere of Your Existence Outside My Right of Capture”, the Museum says*

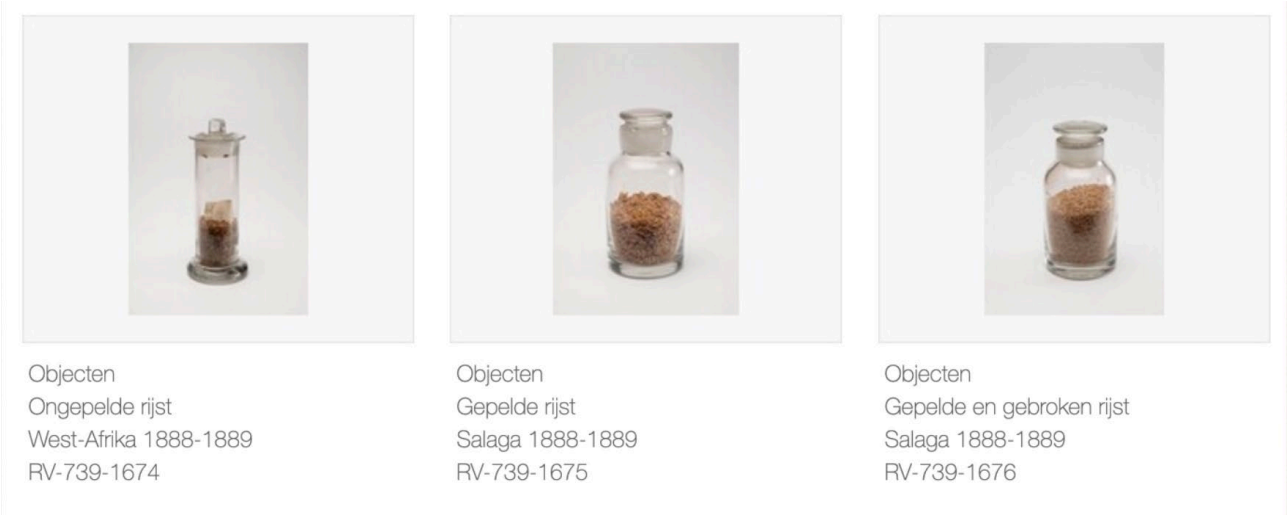
Suelen Calonga (TU Berlin)

Some years ago, when I first read the Sarr-Savoy report on the restitution of African cultural heritage, I was struck less by the description of the looted treasures, stolen thrones, ritual instruments, magical artifacts, or private possessions than by a bean pod from Southern Africa.



71.1910.6.6	Gousse et graines	avant 1910	7 x 19 x 0,9 cm, 46 g	fruit	Afrique > Zambèze Afrique > Afrique australe > Lesotho	**Donateur** Frédéric Christol **Précédente collection** Musée de l'Homme (Afrique)	3	non	

More recently, while organizing links from the Wereldmuseum Leiden for my PhD research, I encountered a similarly disturbing juxtaposition: on the same page as Ashanti gold figurines, three small jars containing husked rice, peeled rice, and broken peeled rice collected in 1888 in West Africa.



This work tries to organize my emotional short-circuit after that shock while trying to answer to myself why such seemingly minor objects can feel more violating than monumental spoils.

I argue that ethnographic collections preserve and normalize a form of slavery’s afterlife: the maximum dispossession of the right to exist outside the dominant gaze. The bean pod and the jars of rice do not signify value in the conventional sense of treasure, rarity, or artistic mastery. Their violence lies elsewhere, and crosses an almost indescribable boundary of privacy. They expose a colonial will to penetrate and inventory ordinary life itself, not only land, labor, or

sacred objects, but habits, practices, and the intimate material textures of everyday existence. To see three jars of rice in a museum is to hear the colonial sentence: there is no sphere of your existence outside my right of capture.

By bringing privacy studies into dialogue with histories of slavery, ethnographic collecting, and contemporary data extraction, this paper proposes privacy not as bourgeois seclusion but as the threatened right to opacity, to unrecorded life, to forms of domestic, spiritual, and material existence that should remain beyond capture. I read the museum jar as a scene of obscene exposure, a fetishistic objectification of the ordinary, through which the devouring of privacy becomes visible. What is violated here is not only property, but the possibility of living, eating, handling, and reproducing life without being turned into specimen, evidence, archive, or data.

8. *The Enslaved Body as a Site of Permanent Identification: Rethinking Lifelong Deprivation of Privacy through an analysis of the VOC Plakkaat in Formosa (April 1643)*

Lap Kan Au (National Taiwan Normal University and Leiden University)

This study examines a *plakkaat* (ordinance) issued by the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in Formosa (April 1643), analysing how a three-stage punitive structure transformed the bodies of runaway slaves into permanently public "notice boards." Through it involved branding on the right cheek, amputation of both ears, removal of the hair with a knife, and a permanent prohibition against covering the head, the ordinance punished not only the runaway individual but also compelled enslaved bodies to continually "produce" and display the status of enslavement within the everyday life of the settlement.

Privacy in this context was treated as a threat to the VOC's order, and any form of concealment was criminalised. Through a chain of responsibility involving private owners, officials, and strangers, supported by reporting and reward mechanisms, the promulgated *plakkaat* circulated throughout society and formed a network of reproduction. This *plakkaat* demonstrates that the core of the slave system lay not merely in its economic form, but in the comprehensive deprivation of privacy. Ultimately, when the bodies, behaviours, and very existence of enslaved people were recorded and made public, even their silence could not shield them, their bodies themselves were forced to become legible objects, continuously controlled and read.

9. *Knowledge as Private Property in Latin American Colonialism: Medicinal Knowledge between Owning and Belonging*

Natacha Klein Käfer (Lund University and Centre for Privacy Studies)

This paper will address the different ways in which medicinal knowledge became private property in colonial Latin America. By looking at historical sources from medical journals, medicinal treatises, and colonial archives, in contrast with surviving practices among maroon communities today, I will show the different relationships between communities and knowledge ownership, particularly within the context of slavery. The presentation will introduce varying systems in which medicinal knowledge was protected or exposed, the role of privacy in these processes, and the consequences for enslaved communities as knowledge agents dealing with illness and injury.

Panel 4: Archives and Surveillance

Chair: Felicia Jantina Fricke

10. *Allegory of Error - Shadowboxing in the Surveillance Economy*

Andreas Albrectsen (independent artist)

For the conference on privacy and slavery, I will discuss the concept of data colonialism, which, in short, is defined as the extraction of personal information regarding human bodies, labour and behavioural patterns in enormous quantities as raw material without resistance. Through subscriptions and targeted advertisements, the historical power imbalance between the global south and north is maintained by a Western conglomerate of private tech companies that monopolises public access to information and communication online.

In my paper, I will use arguments from the article *"I've Got Nothing to Hide" and Other Misunderstandings of Privacy*, written by Prof. Daniel J. Solove, on how the aggregation of small pieces of personal data can be combined into a comprehensive, in-°©-depth analysis of any individual, based on their fragmented online activities, to predict their future behaviour patterns. I also want to introduce the thinking of James Williams, an Oxford-trained philosopher and former Google advertisement strategist, who in his book *Stand Out of Our Light* writes that technology has become distractive by design and has robbed us of our searchlight, daylight and starlight.

Inspired by Williams's philosophical observations, I will use the ephemeral metaphors of light and shadow to describe the contrast between the enslavement of distraction caused by technology and why the drawing medium has never been more relevant in the age of digital surveillance and attention economy. In this context, I will introduce my own artistic practice of reclaiming and appropriating user interface design and online Turing tests.

To connect the conceptual antitheses of Tech and drawing, I will use Jacques Derrida's writings from *Memoirs of the Blind – 'The Self Portrait and Other Ruins'* as a prism to look at blindness – an aporetic condition he states to be a fundamental premise of the drawn line, which is created

in the attempt to recapture the presence of the visible in absentia through memory. Juxtaposing Derrida's reading of Plato's allegory of the cave with today's generative A.I. models that use diffusion to create synthetic images based on available surface scrapings of the Internet, it is tempting to associate Plato's fireplace as the all-consuming image-rendering apparatus of Big Tech, that pacifies its audience with skin-deep representations of the visible world.

11. *Between Surveillance and Secrecy: Archival Violence and Practices of Privacy in Caribbean Slavery*

Wendeline Flores (Wereldmuseum, NL)

This paper examines the paradoxical relationship between surveillance and secrecy in the context of Caribbean slavery, foregrounding privacy as both systematically denied and actively produced. Colonial regimes generated extensive administrative records—such as slave registers, plantation inventories, and fugitive advertisements—that sought to render enslaved individuals fully visible, legible, and controllable. These archives functioned as technologies of surveillance, structuring a regime in which privacy was effectively nonexistent and the intimate lives of enslaved people were subject to constant scrutiny and commodification.

At the same time, this paper argues that such archives inadvertently contain traces of practices that eluded and resisted this imposed visibility. By reading these sources "against the grain," it explores how enslaved people carved out forms of privacy through hidden networks, nocturnal mobility, spiritual practices, and intimate relations that remained partially opaque to colonial authority. In this sense, privacy emerges not as an individual right, but as a relational and collective practice of survival and resistance.

Drawing on case studies from the Caribbean and informed by curatorial and archival perspectives, the paper also reflects on the afterlives of these records in contemporary heritage practices. The ongoing digitization and circulation of slavery archives raise urgent ethical questions: how can we make these histories accessible without reproducing the original violence of exposure? What does it mean to care for the "privacy" of those whose lives were systematically documented without consent?

By bringing together historical analysis, methodological reflection, and curatorial insight, this paper contributes to current debates on privacy, power, and the politics of visibility in both past and present contexts.

12. *Panopticon in the midst of plantation field: intrusion of privacy and outbreak of mental health tragedy among Indian indentured labourers in South Africa*

Sathya D. and Sudarshan R. Kottai (Indian Institute of Technology Palakkad)

At the beginning of 2026, the publication of the book “The Crown’s Silence” accelerated global demand for Britain to issue a formal apology for its role in the transatlantic slave trade. While historical documents proclaim that 1833 was the year of the abolition of slavery, it was actually replaced with the infamous indentured labour system—1.6 million Indian indentured labourers were uprooted from their homeland and transplanted to many former plantation colonies in the world. South Africa was one of these colonies (1860-1911), and most recruits were drawn from marginalised communities that suffered from socio-economic and political distress, especially in the wake of famines in India.

In the host colony, labourers were subjected to a regime of "neo-slavery" characterised by low wages, long hours of work, criminal trials, substance abuse, heavy workloads, corporal punishments, limited rations, lack of proper medical care, prone to diseases and poor living conditions. Their daily lives were subjected to direct surveillance—plantocracy, state, jail administration and early psychiatric institutions often aligned together to suppress labourers who were unproductive and control their personal space and erase their privacy. Plantation fields merely acted as a panopticon without a structure. Labourers were considered human machines for capital production, and their bodies and minds became state property.

The ultimate tragedy of this structural privacy erasure was the outbreak of many mental health issues, including high suicide rates among the indentured labourers. Even spanning a century and a half in South Africa, one of the highest suicide rates was reported among the descendants of Indian indentured labourers (a similar scenario was reported in almost all postcolonial indentured colonies in the world), while modern clinical perspectives often attribute it to individual failures rather than historically rooted structural issues. Hence, this paper explores the historical and intergenerational connections of mental health issues by utilising archival sources and employing Foucauldian concepts of surveillance, discipline, and productivity, alongside subaltern perspectives.

Panel 5: Fugitivity

Panel chair: Mikkel Bogh

13. *"This Rose Was Made by Muhammad 'Ārifī": Ottoman Ornament, Privacy, and Self-Expression in an Inquisitorial Prison*

Marco Pomini (Johns Hopkins University)

In 1708–1709, an enslaved Muslim man from Damietta, Egypt, was tried by the Roman Inquisition in Malta for practicing magic. During his imprisonment, he carved three Ottoman vegetal motifs — a carnation, a rose, and a cypress — into the limestone walls of the Inquisitor's Palace in Birgu, signing them in Arabic: "This rose was made by Muhammad 'Ārifī." (fig. 1). This paper reconstructs the conditions and meanings of this act of making by combining the graffito with 'Ārifī's Inquisitorial trial record, that I have identified in the Mdina Metropolitan Archive.

I argue that 'Ārifī's ornament constitutes a rare and intimate instance of enslaved privacy within a carceral space designed for total surveillance and control. I examine three registers in which the graffito functioned as a space of private interiority under captivity and incarceration. First, as a domestic act: Ottoman floral ornament was part of the visual fabric of 'Ārifī's life in Egypt, and its reproduction in the prison cell was a way of reconnecting, momentarily, with home from which he had been twice severed — by enslavement and then by incarceration. Second, as a political act: enslaved individuals sought contact with political authorities from their country of origin to solicit ransoming. Through the reproduction of a ubiquitous element in the Ottoman empire, 'Ārifī cultivated his relationship with the main political actor that could guarantee his escape from captivity. Third, as a devotional act: the ornament's placement beside a praying figure carved by another prisoner, and its resonance with Ottoman mosque decoration and prayer books, suggests that the cell became a space of Muslim worship.

Drawing on Nicole R. Fleetwood's framework for understanding artmaking in carceral spaces, my paper argues that 'Ārifī's ornament exemplifies the ways enslaved people created private worlds — emotional, political, devotional — within spaces designed to deny them.

14. *Valentina's legal battle over access to her son: child rearing, slavery and freedom in Cuba during the time of the Moret Law (1870-1880)*

Ida Vos (Erasmus University of Rotterdam)

Children born from 17 September 1868 onwards to enslaved women in Cuba were officially freed with the 1870 Moret Law, which aimed to gradually abolish slavery with this method. However, this same law also specified that these children were to remain under the control of

their mothers' enslavers until the age of 22. This means that in the decade between the establishment of this law in 1870 and abolition of slavery in Cuba in 1880, enslaved and formerly enslaved mothers navigated this new legal landscape in attempts to regain and regulate access to their children.

In 1878, an enslaved woman named Valentina was engaged in a legal battle with Tomas Justiz. About ten years prior, Valentina had placed her free son Luis with Justiz, with the agreement that Justiz would educate Luis and teach him a trade. Unsatisfied with Justiz's treatment of her son, Valentina wanted to remove Luis from Justiz's custody. Luis was free independently of the 1870 law, which meant that Justiz held no legal right to any control over Luis. However, Justiz argued that in compensation for the costs he had incurred raising Luis, he should be entitled to the rights he would have had had Luis been subject to the regulations of the Moret Law.

Using this case study, this paper will examine Cuban enslaved or formerly enslaved women's ability to regulate access to their children and make their own decisions about child rearing during the period of the Moret Law. Being able to make personal decisions about one's own children and especially about who has access to those children will be interpreted as an aspect of privacy.

15. *The Sensuous Ways of Knowing*.

Jeannette Ehlers (Center for Practice-based Art Studies)

In these hands are a language unspoken

tightly bound in rebellious manes

spirits secrets slept in every braid woven

heard gently over the clankering chains *

Privacy during slavery takes multiple forms as a survival strategy:

In my video work *Coil: The Sensuous Ways of Knowing*, I explore how hair culture within the African diaspora is embedded with encoded practices of secrecy, intimacy, and resistance. Hair operates as a carrier of privacy, both concealing and transmitting knowledge, helping people navigate and resist slavery and colonial systems of control. At the same time, it becomes a symbol of unity, power and collective endurance.

The work focuses on the intimate gesture of a mother braiding her daughter's hair, accompanied by a voice-over by Fiona Compton reciting her poem *Coil*. Within this sonic and visual landscape of tenderness and resistance, Yemoja, the Orisha (a deity within Yoruba cosmology) associated with fertility and nurture appears alongside other Orishas rooted in the same cosmological tradition.

Preserved and transformed through syncretism in traditions such as Candomblé and Santería, and echoed across African diasporic cosmologies, these spiritual systems also serve as ways of carrying knowledge, intertwining privacy, spirituality, and survival.

Through moving image, voice, and gesture, *Coil: The Sensuous Ways of Knowing* makes use of artistic practice as a method for reflecting embodied and speculative forms of knowledge production.

For the conference, I will present this work and discuss how these different practices of privacy and survival continue to echo and endure within the ongoing coloniality of power, forming part of my practice-based PhD, *The Middle Passage as a Figure for Decolonial Knowing*.

*From the poem Coil by Fiona Compton created for the video *Coil: The Sensuous Ways Of Knowing* by Jeannette Ehlers, 2022.

Panel 6: Identity and Belonging

Chair: Anne Julie Arnfred

16. *Looking for Life*

Emil Elg (independent scholar)

In his 2013 article "Subjectivity and Slavery in Portraiture", art historian David Bindman notes the oxymoronic friction that arises when the institution of slavery is combined with portraiture as a genre. He writes: "The terms 'slave' and 'portrait' constitute together an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms, for a portrait [...] has as its defining purpose the affirmation of the sitter's subjectivity, autonomy, and integrity."

Taking Bindman's observation as its point of departure, this paper examines the methodological and ethical challenges involved in looking for the lived experiences of enslaved individuals in early modern paintings. Focusing on representations of enslaved Africans and Afro-descended page attendants in European portraiture, it asks what happens when images produced within and through systems of enslavement are approached as sources for recovering real lives, individual identities, and human subjectivity.

The desire to find traces of lived experience in historical images is understandable, particularly in relation to enslaved people whose voices and biographies have often been obscured by archival absences. Yet this paper argues that such a search demands careful restraint. Early modern representations of enslaved figures were not neutral records of individual lives, but visual constructions shaped by racial ideologies, social hierarchies, and the expectations of their viewers. To approach them as windows onto the private worlds of the individuals they depict risks granting evidentiary weight to images structured by stereotype and domination. In doing so, the (art) historian may inadvertently transform racist representations into biographical presence, reinscribing the very forms of objectification these images once served to produce. The challenge, then, is not only to look for traces of life, but to remain critically attentive to the limits of what such images can bear witness to – and to the interpretive desires that animate the search itself.

17. *Promiscuity in repressive archives: the case of Timotheo da Fonseca, an enslaved man accused of sodomy in 1647*

Camille Le Brettevillois (Radboud University of Nijmegen)

Formally established in 1536, the Portuguese Inquisition has mainly targeted Jewish people and cristões novos ('new Christians') on its European soil. In addition to them, any people

suspected of heresy, witchcraft and immoral behaviours were potentially arrested and condemned by the inquisitorial institution. Enslaved people coming from Africa, the Americas and Asia were also easy potential targets. Many of them have been the subject of a trial of the Inquisition, as we can see in the sources preserved in Portugal but also India, Brasil and other parts of the world (Maria do Carmo Jasmins Dias Farinha 1990; Miguel Rodrigues Lourenço 2016; Ribeiro da Silva 2017; Castelnau-L'Estoile 2019, Ribeiro da Silva & Antunes 2020). The trials of the Inquisition of Lisbon, preserved in the National Archives of Portugal, provides direct declarations from the enslaved people themselves. Without eluding the repressive dimension of those documents, they can stress and reveal the agency of enslaved population who had lived in Portugal during the early-modern period.

In 1647, Timoetheo da Fonseca, an enslaved man living in Lisbon, has been imprisoned and interrogated by the Portuguese Inquisition. He was accused of sodomy by 4 different men, all of them confessing having had sexual relationships with him. If Timotheo had to appear in front of the court, there is no evidence that his denunciators underwent through a trial too. The case of Timotheo da Fonseca shows, on a hyper-local level, how neighbours and acquaintances tried to control but also used and abused an enslaved man's privacy and how this man tried to react to these threats with his own social connections. The case of Timotheo da Fonseca is not isolated but highlights a crucial aspect of the Old Regime societies: the power of neighbourhoods and the household, and how enslaved population, at the margin of it, tried to get out of their vulnerability.

18. *ACCRA—one50: Identity and Belonging in a City*

Kwabena Agyare Yeboah, Efia Serwah Barning, Elizabeth Johnson (Foundation for Contemporary Art—Ghana)

ACCRA—one50 is an ongoing research project that interconnects art with architecture, literature, urban planning, and community histories in observance of 150 years since Accra was formally declared the capital of the Gold Coast colony, now Ghana. Launched in March 2026 by the Foundation for Contemporary Art—Ghana and its collaborators, the project espouses a combination of artistic, archival, spatial and academic research modules that address the city's past, present, and speculative futures.

This presentation examines three branching nodes of the ACCRA—one50 project (epistemology, language, botany; discipline, education, control; and archives/memory, intellectual infrastructure, nationalism) as a site for rethinking what privacy has meant—and for whom—under colonial and postcolonial conditions. Privacy is usually theorised as a protection, a right to withhold, to control disclosure, to remain unseen. In the colonial archive, however, privacy operated in reverse; a mechanism through which African bodies and

knowledge forms were collected, ordered, and made to cohere with the imperial/colonial state. The panel asks how power has operated and acted on privacy anxieties.

Contributions include a first-person lecture performance staging an encounter between a historian and Kwabɛ Dwea, a plant otherwise re/named Thonningia Sanguinea Vahl (1798) by the Danish botanist Martin Vahl, based on Peter Thonning's specimens collected on the Guinea Coast during the final years of the Atlantic slave trade; an artistic dialogue analysing how Christian missionary education in colonial Accra transformed privacy into a site of discipline, surveillance, and religious erasure with a focus on the Basel Mission institutions; and a presentation exploring the context of post-independence shifts and educational reforms that have—and continue to—affect the study, preservation, and definitions of Ghanaian and African identities through the establishment of the Institute of African Studies (1963) at the University of Ghana.* Collectively, the presentation explores identity and belonging in a country moving towards 70 years of political independence and its capital city through ACCRA—one50.