Gender and Agency Lecture

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Global Entanglements and Gendered Agency in Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* and Robert Wedderburn’s *The Horrors of Slavery*

13. Mai 2019 / 19.00 Uhr

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ReWi-Hörsaal
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Ever since Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism* was published in 1993, much has been made about the “dead silence” on the topic of slavery in Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814). How are postcolonial and feminist scholars supposed to (re-)read the text today and how are gendered and racialized forms of agency imagined in the text? In extension of, but also in distinction from, Said’s famous conception of “contrapuntal reading” which emphasises the influence of the colonies on metropolitan lifestyles, I propose that the emergence of modern Britishness was shaped globally already in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century before the high time of imperialism, and I suggest reading narrative texts as part of an entangled (rather than contrapuntal) literary history of the rise of the British novel. In fact, transatlantic and canonical authors made use of similar aesthetic strategies that I describe as entangled tonalities. Accordingly, Robert Wedderburn, the radical orator and author of *The Horrors of Slavery* (1824), will also be read as entangled in the new emotional discourse on affective individualism that depends so strongly on normative conceptions of the family and regulates gendered agency. Reading Wedderburn and Austen with and against each other shows how familial feeling increasingly becomes accessible to subjects from the margins of the colonies and Britain’s class-bound society simultaneously. This focus on their entanglement resists a clear-cut spatial binary of the colonial periphery versus the cosmopolitan centre and links questions of class mobility with the new imperial ordering of Britain in the course of the nineteenth century.

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