RUMORS OF REVOLT: UNCERTAIN KNOWLEDGE OF SLAVE INSURRECTIONS IN THE ANTEBELLUM SOUTH

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During the nineteenth century, many whites in the slave-holding American South feared violent resistance from their “servants.” Indeed, fear of insurrection and the expectation of a general slave uprising were not an exception but an integral part of everyday life in the antebellum South. To Southerners, evidence of imminent rebellion seemed ubiquitous, yet knowledge about conspiracies remained scarce. Cautious slaveholders frequently interpreted everyday occurrences such as foot-dragging on the part of their slaves or the breaking of a tool as a sign of resistance or of an insurrectionary mood. In this setting, rumor functioned as a major source of information.

My project focuses on rumors of slave revolt and of abolitionist activities in the antebellum South. Historians have been rather reluctant to incorporate everyday practices of knowledge such as rumormongering, gossiping, and giving misinformation in their research. Rumors and gossip are not merely annoying background noise, however, that threaten to distract historians’ efforts to grasp “what really happened.” If you go beyond mere fact-checking, they are, rather, an indicator of social dynamics and one means people used to make sense of their environment. Rumor and gossip are forms of what I call “uncertain knowledge.” Individuals relied on overlapping information coming from sometimes dubious sources. For reassurance, they relied on specific practices of clarification and turned to sources they regarded as trustworthy, whether institutional, like newspapers, or personal, like neighbors or friends. This perspective regards knowledge more as a dynamic process than as an entity.

Against this theoretical background, my project focuses on three aspects of uncertain knowledge of slave revolts:

1.) the discourses and practices of communicating uncertain knowledge and the ways in which they influenced the structures of power in the South;
2.) the media that were used to communicate and represent forms of slave violence (linguistic, symbolic, performative, emotive);
3.) the individual room for maneuver created by the production of uncertain knowledge of slave revolts (e.g. denunciation or strategic misinformation).

The question whether there was any substance to rumors of insurrection is only a side aspect of my research. Talk of rebellious slaves assumed a powerful presence in the everyday actions of Southerners, regardless of whether rumors of brewing uprisings turned out to be true. To analyze the realities of uncertain and unsettling knowledge, I use three different types of source materials. Personal papers (e.g. personal correspondence, diaries) open up perspectives on the manifold subjectivities and interpretations of uprisings. The authors were active persons insofar as writing was not only a means to convey information but also a way to apply meaning to experiences and to cope with emotions like fear. A second type of archival material helps to understand the spread of uncertain knowledge of slave revolts. Newspapers in the nineteenth century, in contrast to today, were not necessarily seen as a reliable source of objective information. Readers constantly compared and evaluated newspapers and checked them against other sources. Prominent among those sources were official documents, the third type of material I am using. Documents such as trial records, government reports, and governmental correspondence show official practices that reveal categories that served to produce solid and trustworthy knowledge. These three types of document cannot be analyzed independently of one another but must, rather, be viewed as an ensemble. To analyze the spread of news, it is necessary to interpret these documents in their local context and also as instances of transregional information exchange. They help us to understand communicative entanglements and complicities that helped to make knowledge of slave revolts both more solid and more uncertain.