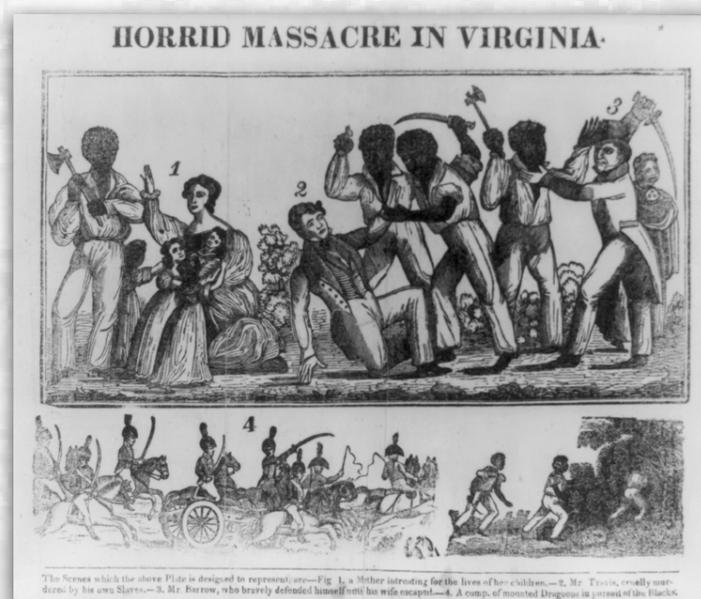




Rumors of Slave Insurrections in the American South, 1783-1865

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Since the American Revolution, the institution of slavery created a hybridity of racial and cultural uncertainties in the American South. Rumors were an expression of both hopes and anxieties. For slaveholders the news about **slave revolts** (e.g. in Haiti) was a reason to fear the revolutionary potential of their 'servants.' For the latter rumors and gossip about uprisings were ways to explore alternative modes of living.



Book illustration about a slave insurrection in Virginia, 1831

Research Questions

What were the ways, arenas and actors of spreading rumors about slave revolts?

In which situations did instances of 'revolutionary' knowledge spread?

How did uncertain knowledge about slave insurrections contribute to the production of cultural 'identities' such as blackness?

Did rumors allow for spaces of resistance and alternative modes of behavior?

Research

So far mainly sociologists and psychologists have focused on situations of 'uncertain knowledge' in order to avoid the spread of rumors and gossip. Historical analysis has to go beyond **'problem solving'** and a mere **verification** approach towards rumors. Their analysis allows to interpret broader structures of communication and concepts of power.

Theories and Methods

Rumors 'flourish' in times of **informational uncertainty**. They are collective and public, but also very clandestine and individual. Thus, they often reveal information about social taboos and (self)evidences. In order to analyze the **'micro physics'** of rumors it is necessary to carry out a comparative micro-study on a local basis with a limited number of cases of 'uncertain knowledge.'

Materials

Rumors are a shy prey. Thus, a study on uncertain knowledge has to hunt in multiple arenas to locate them within an ensemble of different media, that could possibly grasp written and oral materializations of rumors:

Court Files
Newspapers

Diaries and Personal Letters
Slave Petitions