Romanticism and the Abolitionist Turn

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Abstract

This essay reflects on the process of revising Romanticism courses in response to student curiosity about how race, primarily Blackness, operates in the period. It includes a discussion of how teaching texts by William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Amelia Opie, Robert Southey, and William Wordsworth reveals to students how the period connects race to issues of representation, authorship, gender, and social contracts. Sparked by observing how students debate race and representation when it unexpectedly appears in their readings from the Romantic period, this essay makes two claims: (1) taking up race and representation in the Romanticism classroom is not simply about including texts by people of color but is also about recontextualizing the period as a whole; and (2) cultivating student interest in Romantic-era racial politics offers them a model for how to think about race, representation, and politics in the twenty-first century.

My decision to design a class that focuses on Romantic-era abolitionist literature was sparked by a student debate about how to interpret William Blake’s “The Little Black Boy.”[[1]](#endnote-1) It was in the spring of 2006, the semester before my tenure file was due and just a few years before the United States elected its first Black president. Students were reading the poem in my fairly traditional Romanticism survey course, one that focused on canonical poets (i.e., the “Big Six”) along with Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) and *Valperga* (1823). The course paid very little attention to critical discussions about how these same writers responded to debates about England’s participation in the transatlantic slave trade, and for the first three years that I taught Blake’s poem, no student had challenged the line that we ended up discussing for a full 75-minute class period: “And I am black, but O! my soul is white” (line 2). On a handout that included the poem and a few warm-up questions, a student circled the line and wrote: “WTF??!!?” next to it.

A rambunctious debate that I wasn’t quite prepared to moderate followed. As a specialist in Regency- and Romantic-era fiction, I knew enough about Black figures in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature to help students understand the presence of Black people in Romantic-era England.[[2]](#endnote-2) I did not, however, know enough about the politics of race during the Romantic period to help my students think as carefully as I wanted them to about this line. Working through what my students needed to contextualize the line and sorting out how to cultivate the same analytical energy in response to their other readings contributed to this “abolitionist turn” in my teaching of Romanticism. In what follows I show how I made this transition in my undergraduate and graduate courses. I discuss critical essays that have been most useful for students and assignments that can potentially take the work of the class beyond the university classroom.

Threaded through this reflection is an evaluation of how much of the success of these curricular revisions is because I responded to students’ unusually animated response to how race operates in the Romantic period. As I explain in my essay “Academic Freedom: Students and the Problem with Labels,” I expend a great deal of energy preserving class discussions as a space where students feel free to wrestle with complex ideas, free from expectations that they reflect a specific political point of view. I aim for what bell hooks calls “a central goal of transformative pedagogy”: making the classroom “a democratic setting where everyone feels a responsibility to contribute” (39). Teaching Romanticism with a focus on abolitionist culture has made this goal easier to reach. I have found that in learning about an abolitionist Romanticism, students are not only studying historical texts and their connection to a literary movement they had not recognized as infused with racialized imagery and philosophy but are also learning more about the intricacies of society, protest, and revolution.

When I started this process, I faced two obstacles. First, my graduate training, which in 2006 was still the foundation for teaching Romanticism, did not bring questions of race or Blackness to bear on Romanticism. Additionally, as a new professor, I was anxious to teach Romantic poetry in a way that was legible to senior British-literature faculty, especially those who looked askance at my decision to include novels in a course they believed should focus only on poetry. I was also facing a short tenure clock and an institutional environment hostile to faculty of color, realities that left me little time substantially to revise the course I was hired to teach. As a result, my first instinct was simply to add more texts that explicitly included mentions of Black figures or referred to slavery or abolition. This, however, felt like a superficial response to a pedagogical project that required nuance not only in texts I might add to the syllabus but also how those additions would alter students’ understanding of the Romantic period as a whole. To put it simply, would it matter if I added Ottobah Cugoano without thinking about how to reframe “The Little Black Boy” or Blake and his contemporaries?

In response to this set of concerns, my initial impulse was to read articles and book chapters that focus on how the writers already on the syllabus thought about the slave trade, abolition, amelioration, and emancipation. I also experimented in the undergraduate classes I regularly taught (“Introduction to Theory”; “Art of Fiction”; and “The Novel to 1900”) by introducing new primary texts. I started with just a few texts (primarily fiction) and then planned short units that included abolitionist literature reflecting the overall themes of the courses. A course on women in nineteenth-century literature, for example, included a unit on marriage and chattel slavery. I then offered a “special topics” course that explicitly focused on abolition and the nineteenth century. By 2014, when my department added a new required course, “Writing for the Major,” designed for new English majors, I had the materials to plan an entire course that focused on the writers included in my Romanticism syllabus and their contemporaries, and this provided an opportunity for students to think about race, abolition, and freedom as essential to how we read literature, regardless of the time period from which it emerges. My goal was to bring this lens to the period not only for special courses but also as a matter of course.

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My student’s visceral response to “And I am black, but O! my soul is white” (or as I came to call it, the “WTF” line) was prompted by a few elements in the poem and gaps in their knowledge about its author. The poem begins, “My mother bore me in the Southern Wild” (line 1). Students reading poems written in the first-person voice often conflate the speaker in the poem with the poem’s author. It is also likely that they had not read the biographical information about Blake included in the anthology. This meant that they did not know who Blake was and whether or not the poem was directly about him. They also did not know if Blake was Black. What follows the “WTF” line shocked students who read it as an exceptionally explicit affirmation of white supremacy: “White as an angel is the English Child / But I am black as if bereaved of light” (lines 4–5). For some students, particularly students of color, a Black author writing these lines reflected a self-loathing. Those same students struggled with a white author comparing white children to angels while denigrating Black skin. Other students read the line as innocuous. They either did not see the problem of the racial hierarchy that the poem promoted or saw such beliefs as historical relics. These initial responses reflect the dominant racial mythologies that held sway in 2006. A diverse group of students in a class on British literature taught by a Black professor were prepared to think that racist ideas prevalent in the nineteenth century had been eradicated by the Civil Rights Movement.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Students who assumed that the author of the poem was Black because of its title interpreted the statement as a sign of self-loathing. They saw a Black speaker denigrating his skin color and valorizing whiteness as the ideal. Other students were willing to allow that attitudes about race in the Romantic period were less enlightened than they imagined them to be in the twenty-first century; however, they also understood that whatever informed nineteenth-century attitudes about race did not mitigate the troubling racial hierarchies the line signified. Barack Obama and the backlash to his candidacy had not entered their field of vision, and, unlike students who studied abolitionist literature with me in subsequent semesters, many of them had not yet been required to confront a world that included the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and to process what the protests in Ferguson, Missouri revealed. Donald Trump was not yet legible to them as a political threat. As I discuss below, Romanticism’s racism felt more contemporary near the end of Obama’s presidency, but in 2006 students turned to historical context and information about Blake and his contemporaries to interpret the line, and they wanted to understand whether the language in the poem signified to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century readers what it meant to them at that particular time.

Students also asked the same question about Blake that critics defensive of their chosen authors ask when questions of race and racism arise: If the line is racist, should we hold Blake responsible for ideas that were widely, uncritically circulating in the 1800s but unacceptable now? They were also, then, intensely curious to see how his contemporaries wrote about this—if Blake was in step, out of step, or prescient. When I explained that the poem was published at a particularly active time in Britain’s abolitionist movement, students wanted to know which “side” he was on, leading to what, to my mind, was and remains the most important critical point of discussing abolitionist politics. As I explained during that debate and continue to emphasize in my teaching, the terms used in the discussion about the transatlantic slave trade—abolition, emancipation, amelioration, freedom—do not necessarily correlate to notions of antiracism, equality, and equity. It is, I made clear, entirely possible for Blake to be opposed to slavery and still cling to racial hierarchies.

David Bindman’s “Blake’s Vision of Slavery Revisited” proved an especially useful follow-up to these questions about the poem. Although more recent readings of Blake and race have been published, Bindman’s essay offers a compelling, accessible history that answers students’ questions about Blake’s understanding of race and how consistent it is with the period. Bindman argues that Blake’s poem returns to debates about “the relationship of body to soul that, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, had divided scientists from theologians in the discussion of racial differences,” though he also notes that the “notion that a black body might contain a white soul is expressed at least as early as the third century” (374). Bindman points us to work by Christopher Miller about how skin color was perceived in the Greco-Roman world. Miller cites a third-century C.E. epitaph for an enslaved Ethiopian: “Among the living I was very black, darkened by the rays of the sun, but my soul, ever blooming with white flowers, won my prudent master’s good will” (as cited by Miller, 374). The essay therefore models for students what is required to credibly reach the understanding that Bindman offers near the end of his essay, when he writes that the texts he discusses do not “cast doubt on the sincerity of Blake’s opposition to slavery,” but they do “suggest that Blake was unable to free himself—*no more than anyone else at the time*—from the complex and often contradictory web of ancient and modern beliefs that had settled around Africa and Africans in the late eighteenth century” (382; emphasis added). While I might quibble with the aside that I italicize above—and I share my disagreement with my students—I nonetheless have found Bindman’s essay exceptionally useful in showing students what they might need to think about and the kinds of research they might need to do when considering nineteenth-century representations of race.

Bindman’s article has been a mainstay whenever I teach Blake, and I pair it with Kwame Anthony Appiah’s “Race”—an essay that succinctly traces how race functions as a social construct in the nineteenth century and clearly explains that despite its constructedness, it still carries social weight: “For, however mythical the notion of race seems to be, we cannot deny the obvious fact that having one set of heritable characteristics—dark skin, say—rather than another—blonde hair, for example—can have profound psychological, economic, and other social consequences, especially in societies where many people are not only racialists but racists” (285). Appiah’s assertations here about “heritable characteristics” made some students uncomfortable: those who felt implicated by the idea that the characteristics they were born with have social capital and those who chafed against the idea that their characteristics may not overcome the obstacles they believe can be dismantled with education. My students are wary of the idea of “white privilege” because they associate it with economic wealth, but Appiah in this moment articulates what the “privilege” looks like, quite literally.[[4]](#endnote-4) Despite their discomfort, students responded well to the accessibility of Appiah’s analogies and, as a result, were better prepared to do the more difficult conceptual work it takes to understand how he lays out the consequent process of nation building and understandings of race: “the dual connection made in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century thought between, on the one hand, race and nationality, and, on the other, nationality and literature”; thus “the nation is the key middle term in understanding the relations between the concept of race and the idea of literature” (282).

Appiah also addresses the impact of the idea of race as a social construction, an idea that too many of my students have turned to as a way to dismiss racism. In the “Writing for the Major” course, students also watched his interview with the editor of *Foreign Affairs*. His observations in the interview prompted open and productive conversations about race and racism in which students’ curiosity about the history of race and earnest desire to understand how racism work overcame some of the defensiveness and anxiety they felt about a topic that became increasingly fraught as their understanding of the world as racially just was undermined by national events.

Although the “Writing for the Major” course began with “The Little Black Boy,” and other readings included poetry and prose by William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Robert Southey, the class was less explicitly about Romanticism as a literary period and more about the uses of literary analysis and research to understand the relationship between literature and political movements. The goal was for students to consider how poets and novelists contribute to and shape national debates by paying attention to the rhetoric that abolitionists used to persuade their fellow citizens to support abolition, amelioration, or emancipation. I organized the course around a set of themes that often overlapped: consumer culture, gender, and religious ideology. In addition to reading “The Little Black Boy,” the course began with two exercises: a conversation about the various ways that civic groups try to effect broad change and a low-stakes free-association exercise about the word *sugar*. The exercise involving sugar initially struck them as odd because the commodity they most associate with slavery is cotton. However, in addition to preparing them for the way that the sweetener was integral to abolitionist politics, the free-association exercise helped them understand how a consumable object morphs into the imaginary and metaphoric. Without fail, each time I taught the class the free association began with “honey” and invariably ended with students listing songs that mention “Sugar Daddy” in their titles or lyrics. This conflation of commodity, commerce, and desire prepared them for a discussion of Mick Jagger and Tina Turner’s 1988 performance of “Brown Sugar.” This song, originally released on the Rolling Stones’s 1971 album *Sticky Fingers,* was still familiar to most of them as one they grew up hearing. They may never have seen the Turner-Jagger performance, but they recognize the opening chords and know the start of the chorus. Students watched the video without the benefit of having the lyrics in front of them and then listened to the song again while reading the lyrics. The conversation sparked by what the lines reveal was not as angry as the debate about Blake, but it was intense:

Gold Coast slave ship bound for cotton fields

Sold in the market down in New Orleans

Skydog slaver know he’s doin’ all right

Hear him whip the women, just around midnight.

I want to be clear here that the point of this exercise was not to hunt for moments of popular culture and vet them for their politics. Instead, I wanted to show students the long reach of the tropes that they were about to encounter. Still, in each class some sort of debate ensued. Some students felt guilty for liking the song. In one class, a few of the Black women tried to convince their classmates that Jagger is satirizing and mocking English history, while others were unsure of what to make of Turner’s full-throated participation in the performance. These early class exercises primed students to push past any neat assumptions about race and abolition in the Romantic period and in contemporary representations of Black women in literature, visual culture, and film. It also prepared them to think along with Christina Sharpe when we listened to her response to Kara Walker’s art installation, “The Subtlety.” Sharpe not only provided a pointed critique of Walker and her use of the Black female form but also offered a model for students about how to ask productive questions from the texts they read and see.

In addition to “The Little Black Boy,” the primary texts in the class included Coleridge’s 1795 lecture “On the Slave Trade,” Southey’s six-sonnet sequence “Poems on the Slave Trade,” Amelia Opie’s “The Black Man’s Lament; or, How to Make Sugar,” Wordsworth’s “The Mad Mother,” and Hannah More and Eaglesfield Smith’s “The Sorrows of Yamba,” a poem that students found particularly compelling when they were assigned an excerpt from Alan Richardson’s essay about its creation, “‘The Sorrows of Yamba,’ by Eaglesfield Smith and Hannah More: Authorship, Ideology, and the Fractures of Antislavery Discourse.” The excerpt I used from Richardson’s essay was particularly generative. Students read the poem over two class periods. In the first class, their work with the poem was a mix of their initial reactions and my lecture on motherhood and infanticide. On the second day, I used the excerpt from the essay to take students back to the primary text and asked them to identity what in the poem supports Richardson’s claim that he “will establish the dual authorship of the Cheap Repository ‘Sorrows of Yamba’ on the basis both of external evidence (including new evidence that I discovered in the course of preparing a collection of British antislavery poems) and internal evidence,” and that “a crucial part of the argument—for the priority and relative integrity of Smith’s version of the poem—depends almost wholly on internal evidence, but of an unusually persuasive kind” (par. 4). This exercise was particularly rewarding for students who had completed the reading before class and followed my recommendation to mark passages they found intriguing and/or troubling. Those who read the poem carefully reported a “feeling” about how it sounded. They couldn’t quite articulate what was happening in the poem until we discussed Richardson’s analysis in class. Having Richardson affirm their initial thinking about the poem not only rewarded their close reading but also opened a dialogue between students and Richardson that didn’t require my guidance.

Richardson’s analysis was also a useful way to show students the limits of thinking about our primary texts as infallible historical documents. One risk of a course such as this, especially when students start the semester completely unaware of England’s connection to the slave trade, is to read the literary as an historical account of the experiences of the enslaved. My students tended to forget this, but it was especially important for them to think carefully not only about the difference between fact and fiction but also about how the idea of specific audiences shapes the way information is constructed. For example, as they read Olaudah Equiano’s and Mary Prince’s narratives about slavery, I asked them to be mindful of the fact that these histories were written for a white audience.

These opening exercises gave students a set of signposts to look for as they read, making it easier for their initial encounters with the assigned texts. This made even the most tedious poems, like Opie’s “How to Make Sugar,” manageable, but it didn’t help much with Coleridge’s “Lecture on the Slave Trade.” That essay needs a great deal of glossing to help students understand the many references to people and places they don’t know, and it is written to be heard rather than read. I had to develop a rhetorical map to help students understand it. Many of them believed that Coleridge’s recitation of pro-slavery arguments that he later dismantles were actually his own beliefs and ideas, so we read the lecture as much for the structure of his argument as for his thoughts about the slave trade. Students analyzed the tonal shifts in the essay—from its bombastic opening, to its almost clinical recitation of the arguments for slavery that he is challenging, to its use of poetry. I noted that he is a preacher, a parliamentarian, and a poet all in one lecture and then asked them to identify which moments in the lecture fit under those categories.

Coleridge provides a useful introduction to Southey’s antislavery sonnet series. In the preface to the six sonnets that grow increasingly violent in tone, Southey speculates about the necessary conditions for the slave trade to end and points to what will happen with sugar specifically. After briefly describing the 1792 anti-sugar campaigns, he predicts: “There are yet two other methods remaining, by which this traffic will probably be abolished. By the introduction of East-Indian or Maple Sugar, or by the just and general rebellion of the Negroes; by the vindictive justice of the Africans, or by the civilized Christians finding it in their interest to be humane” (31). Students read Coleridge and Southey about midway through the semester, and Southey’s predictions about the conditions necessary for abolition offered a prompt for them to revisit the question of what mechanisms are required for meaningful societal change.

When it came to student work in this course, I aimed to develop a series of assignments that reflected how my students imagined their lives after college. When I was a new professor, my writing assignments did not offer students enough options. But a course titled “Writing for the Major” required me to consider new ways to think about what the work of writing does for students and to imagine ways to encourage student agency about their education. In his chapter “Anassignment Letters,” Fred Moten writes to his students about the inherent contradiction of cultivating their intellectual work while imposing institutional structures on them in the form of a series of assignments. The nature of assignments, he explains, neutralizes whatever revolutionary ideals he might hold, leaving him as “nothing other than an overseer even if what [he teaches] appears, at the level of its content, to resist the actually existing political-economic order” (229). Moten wants to mitigate the tension between the coercive practices he sees himself as imposing on his students and his belief that his primary job is to support them as they cultivate and refine their intellectual practices. What this has meant for my praxis is to think of assignments as preparing students to make a choice about how they present their analytical work. Roughly a third of my students have plans to teach English, primarily in high school. Working with them to develop a research-based lesson plan was a useful, organic way to assess how they took primary readings, class discussions, journal articles, and their earlier papers and restructured parts of them for their future students. “The Little Black Boy” lesson plans, for example, took what in a university classroom ends up being two 30-minute class discussions and broke it down into three or four days for younger students.

It was also an instructive glimpse into how my students processed material with an eye toward what they needed from me. They tended to be more interested in providing the “history” around the poem, and they learned how important it is to spend time debunking the myth that historians are simply offering a fixed report of the past. Giving students choices about their work also amplified their interest in the course readings. They understood that assignments which at first glance felt like busy work actually helped them think about their analytical processes for their final project. The assignment that required them to read two refereed journal articles made more sense to them because it was not simply offering them “context” but also showing them how to engage with complex representations and ideologies.[[5]](#endnote-5)

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The graduate seminars I teach in my department’s M.A. program are a mix of students planning for doctoral studies, teachers seeking the Master of Arts in Teaching, and students interested in a graduate-level engagement with literature. The course I planned for this group in 2018 provided an opportunity to bring primary texts into dialogue with critical race theory, feminist literary criticism, and emergent Romanticist critical discourses that reimagine the postcolonial project. Here is the full description from the syllabus:

Students in this course will consider how our understanding of nineteenth-century Britain shifts when we take into account how much of the culture that gave us [Percy Bysshe] Shelley, [Jane] Austen, and, eventually, the Brontës relied on the transatlantic slave trade. Our work will focus on Romantic-era writers who shaped, reflected, and contributed to England’s abolitionist movement. We will read antislavery writing by canonical poets (Blake, Coleridge, and Wordsworth); consider the rhetorical moves in Ottobah Cugoano’s *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evils of Slavery* [1791] and Olaudah Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* [1789]; and read novels and novel fragments that tell the story of mixed-race heroines, including *The Woman of Colour, A Tale* [1808] and *Narrative of Joanna; An Emancipated Slave, of Surinam* [1838]. We will also read a few antislavery poems and lectures with an eye towards thinking about how representations of people of color are shaped by generic conventions. The abolitionist movement is one of the first political events British white women organized themselves around, so we will pay special attention to nineteenth-century women writers including Jane Austen (*Sanditon* [comp. 1817]), Maria Edgeworth (“The Grateful Negro”), Amelia Opie (*Adeline Mowbray* [1804]), and Mary Wollstonecraft (excerpts from *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* [1792]). In addition to these primary texts, we will also consider the period’s material and visual culture and spend time thinking about how antislavery ideologies are reinterpreted in popular culture. We’ll read these primary texts in the context of Critical Race Theory, feminist literary criticism, and emergent Romanticist critical discourses that reimagine the postcolonial project.

In the first few classes, students reacted to this course in a number of ways, almost all of which resisted its premise. Some of this was, I suspect, the natural performance of skepticism that graduate students bring to courses as they feel their way through the dynamics of the class. Some of the resistance was based on how much this course differed from how they had been taught Romanticism as undergraduates. However much they had read of the period before they took my course, these students tended to understand it as a period where there are no Black people or people of color, no questions about identity, race, and citizenship, and where the only revolutionary activities took place in France. Even students sympathetic to the idea of race and representation in the period were skeptical about the seminar, thinking that my approach to our reading was a theoretical or temporal sleight of hand. This was one of the reasons I didn’t begin this course with Wordsworth’s “To Toussaint L’Ouverture.” With its “whistling rustic” and “common wind,” Wordsworth’s sonnet reads to students as consistent with Romantic tropes in general and the aesthetics of his work. When we did read the poem later in the semester, we followed it with C. L. R James’s *The* *Black Jacobins* (1938),which helped reorient students to the geographies of slavery and abolition.For students trained in African American studies, this class was a revelation that invited them to revisit the “trans” in “transatlantic slave trade.” For so many of them the history of the transatlantic slave trade has elided England’s role in it and the hollowness of “emancipation.”

The most animated class discussions were sparked by *The Woman of Colour, A Tale* (1808). Even though they preferred reading novels to poetry, graduate students loved and hated *The Woman of Colour* in equal measure. The novel, which tells the story of the daughter of an enslaved Black woman and a planter with family in England, disrupts their expectations of both the “tragic mulatto” narrative and the courtship novel. Many students confessed that they wanted the heroine, Olivia Fairfield, to recover from her marriage to a bigamist by marrying an early suitor in the novel and wrestled with their own need for a happy ending that concludes with nuptials rather than the independence that comes with being a wealthy woman who returns with no master—chattel to no man, free from her father’s bizarre will requiring her to marry a distant cousin in order to inherit, emancipated from the racist strictures of British society—to her home in Jamaica. In response to the revelation that Olivia’s supposed husband, August Merton, already has a wife, her servant Dido announces that she “*has no* master” after the biracial heroine discovers that her husband is an accidental bigamist (141). Dido is not only furious about how her mistress has been treated by her husband’s family but is also frustrated to find herself demoted from a grand home to a more modest cottage. We thought about the idea of a “master” in multiple registers—as the titular head of a wealthy English home and, given that Dido is from Jamaica and marked linguistically as other, as a man who bought and sold captured African women and men or could claim legal ownership from birth. We also thought about Dido’s body and the space she and Olivia occupy materially and imaginatively in the novel. The text’s inflections of marriage and/as slavery and women and/as chattel underscored our discussions of all the fiction we read. We compared Olivia to Wollstonecraft’s description of ideal women in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

Student resistance to the course’s central goal diminished as the semester progressed, but it was replaced by an intellectual sentimentalism that I found reductive. In my essay on a similar subject (“Jane Austen and the Abolitionist Turn”), I talk about the collegial but earnest tug-of-war I have with graduate students who want to make the work of reading about race and representation in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain into a cause. While I admire the intentions behind this idea, I find I am ambivalent about some of the projects that emerge from this stance. This is in part a reaction to the way such an approach is framed. Projects that work to question our assumptions about Romanticism and its entanglements with race and representation make sense. These interrogations tend to stay tightly focused, and they rely on the kind of archival thinking that a scholar like Rebecca Schneider deploys in her essay “‘He says he is free’: Narrative Fragments and Self-Emancipation in West Indian Runaway Advertisements.” I worry about an approach that treats these works as ways to “humanize” people of color by reading the primary texts (the literary and the historical) as documentaries that teach us about the past. They don’t. They show us select representations of the past. As Marcus Wood observes in his study of visual representations of slavery, “The experiences of millions of individuals who were the victims of slavery is not collectable; it is unrecoverable as a set of relics. There can be no archeology of the memory of slavery that corresponds to an emotional identification with a lost reality” (7). Those representations certainly influence our contemporary notions of race, but Britain’s abolitionist project feels too complex to be read as a template for what we can and cannot do in the twenty-first century. It is a viewpoint that is appealing to students who are less interested in literary analysis and more invested in sociological projects. The problem with this approach is that it replicates the same problematic assumptions about who we read, so that writers are good or bad depending on how they feed into our notions of social justice. As I discuss below by way of conclusion, this is different than the connections my undergraduates make between abolitionist-era politics and this contemporary moment. Despite reading many of the same texts, undergraduates tend to identify structural similarities between the two periods, especially the way that British abolitionists construct themselves in relationship to the Black figures they claim to support. Graduate students, especially women of color and white women, tend to see in the struggles of the past their own oppressive experiences.

One way this is evident is in reactions to Olivia Fairfield in *The Woman of Colour*. Whereas, as I note above, graduate students wrestle with wanting a traditional, heteronormative ending for Olivia, undergraduates are exasperated with her for not confronting the bigotry she encounters. They tend to have no interest in the idea of her marrying. They see that legal and social contracts have failed her, and their focus tends to stay on that fact. The different responses certainly reflect when and how students engage with this material. Undergraduates are still developing the analytic skills that graduate students are refining on the way to planning longer projects that will make critical interventions into existing discourse. Their different reactions also reflect the readings that students bring to the class. In the graduate seminar, most of the students were very familiar with Regency-era literature and read it by choice. I think that for them Olivia Fairfield was a brown version of the white heroines they read for pleasure and for escape. Undergraduates encountered her in the context of abolitionist debates. As a result, they see her as yet another person of color navigating nineteenth-century racism. Generally speaking, perhaps both groups are simply projecting their own values onto the text, and I prefer the projection that aligns with my own thinking. I get excited when I see my students recognizing patterns of structural violence and nervous when they individualize what they read in my classes. The latter seems to me more a starting point than the end of an intellectual project. This seems a good pedagogical problem to have; in both cases students are animated about and engaged with the work of understanding an ecosystem that they still see as operating today.

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For all that, I want students to see my class discussions—indeed, my class as a whole—as a place to work out ideas and a space free from punitive critique and the pressure to perform a particular politics. I have been gratified when they make connections between our reading and the contemporary political landscape, and I have been relieved when they feel they can talk about their political concerns in my class. What I admired about the student’s “WTF??!!?” has happened in classes again, in more muted but no less intense ways. After the 2016 election, many of the students who enrolled in my section of “Writing for the Major” did so because they saw it as a space where they could talk about the racist violence they saw in the country. The words “Black Lives Matter” were never spoken. But Black students in the class were very open about the fear they felt. I will always remember the Black woman who said, “I feel like I have to fight the same battles my ancestors already won.” The white students around her were visibly shocked by her candor. With no prompting from me, students in the class were more likely to choose research projects that connected representations of violence in abolitionist culture to violence they were reading about in the news. One student, for example, wrote a research essay about Equiano’s description of psychological violence and the case of Kalief Browder, wrongly imprisoned after police suspected him of stealing a backpack. Another student prepared a research presentation that traced depictions of Black women’s bodies from Sarah Baartman to the present, revisiting Christina Sharpe’s discussion of Kara Walker. Among themselves, students started discussing the challenges and risks of confronting racist moments in their lives away from school. Ava DuVernay’s documentary *13th* was released in October 2016; by 2017 some of my students had watched the film, and they brought it up enough in class discussions that their peers watched it, too.

There were difficult debates, as well. Smart, thoughtful students asked earnest questions with racist overtones, and I had to walk a fine line. I had to moderate those discussions without giving students who were asking troubling questions the impression that they were being dismissed, and while also protecting the sensibilities of other students who would feel those questions most keenly because of their “heritable characteristics.” In those discussions, Coleridge’s lecture was quite helpful. He lays out five pro-slavery arguments and then debunks them. In more than one class, skeptical students benefitted from our close attention to what underscored the pro-slavery debates that Coleridge references.

In the scant ground of a course reading list, it can be particularly challenging to include new authors, especially if one wants to go about the work with care. As Miriam Wallace and I noted in our *Romantic Circles* special issue (2008), Annette Kolodny is right when she describes the challenges of changing what and how we teach: “Radical breaks are tiring, demanding, uncomfortable, and sometimes wholly beyond our comprehension” (12). But I think the outcomes are worth the effort, and no one taking on this work is doing so alone. There are so many resources available and models to follow. I am thinking especially of the *Undisciplining the Victorian Classroom* digital humanities project (2020). The site is a repository of peer-reviewed syllabi, recorded discussions about teaching, and sample units for faculty use. Similar projects are in the works for eighteenth-century studies as well. An abolitionist Romanticism course captures most students’ imaginations because they tend to think of slavery and abolition as uniquely American. Thinking about race, racism, and slavery in a British context gives them space to work out knotty, unnerving questions about these complex issues. At the same time, it helps them read contemporary progressive movements in more nuanced ways. I have found that in learning about an abolitionist Romanticism, students are not only studying historical texts and their connection to a movement, they are also learning more about the intricacies of society, protest, and revolution.

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1. I am grateful to Amelia Worsley and Joselyn M. Almeida for their work on this essay and to Manu Chander, Tina Iemma, and Deanna Koretsky for reading recommendations. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. On this topic see also Newman (2021), Gerzina (1995), and Olusoga (2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. I am fully aware that some students were surprised because they had not completed the reading for the day. This meant they encountered the poem for the first time in class. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For notes on how to talk about white privilege with undergraduates, see my blog post “Afro-Pedagogy: The Poetry of Race and Privilege.” [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Coleman’s “Conspicuous Consumption” was very popular, especially for students looking for a way to understand what ungirds women’s participation in abolitionist discourse. By far the most popular was Brown’s “Olaudah Equiano and the Sailor’s Telegraph.” Students tend to find Equiano particularly compelling, and Brown’s reading of the memoir points to moments of community and egalitarianism that I suspect appeal to their need for hopeful moments of solidarity in a violent ecosystem. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)