Triangulating (Textual) History: What Early Black British Narratives Teach Us about the Future to Come

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Abstract

When we teach our students about the slave trade and the abolition movement, an Atlantic studies perspective that involves the circum-Atlantic trade of goods and persons is necessary to disrupt a white Anglo-American dialogue of historical persons and texts with a more fluid set of networks and relationships. In order to situate an Atlanticist pedagogy, I enlist the historical nautical strategy of triangulation between Africa, the Caribbean, and Britain in its metaphorical sense: the triangulation of three narratives within contextual materials; the triangulation of literary interpretation with historical and current interpretive concepts and methods; the triangulation of Atlantic coasts and land entities; and the triangulation of the strategic terms “fluidity,” “circulation,” and “movement” borrowed from nonliterary fields of study. Effectively, an Atlantic approach has the depth and breadth to put history, economic trade, political movements, and maritime realities in relation to rhetorical and figurative analysis of literary texts.

Romantic period studies has tended to focus on those literary and cultural concerns that apply to Anglo-American relations in terms of a transatlanticism belonging to a determinate timeframe. However, the Romantic period was an age of global capitalism, plundered resources, and cross-contamination; therefore, enlarging the Anglo-American dialogue of public voices and efficacious texts more expansively makes sense, as Bernard Bailyn and Joselyn M. Almeida have argued in separate contexts. Although I will be focusing here on the triangular relation of Africa, Britain, and British holdings in the Caribbean, folding into that relation the French colony of Saint Domingue and the American city Philadelphia for two of the texts discussed, the same argument for expanding the field of analysis holds for colonizers, the colonized, and brutalized or enslaved peoples of other territories within panatlantic land masses. The point of engaging with these histories, the ideologies that produced them, and the testimonies of survivors is that the concerns of the Atlantic world remain central to the concerns of today’s Atlantic and global reality. Historically, too, a more expansive treatment of the Romantic-era Atlantic world could put the trading circuits of the West Indies and the East Indies in dialogue; or one might make the connection for students between the working of West Indian plantations and the not-too-different circumstances of the diamond mines today in mineral-rich countries like the Democratic Republic of the Congo, nations whose people see no profit from the rapacious mining of their land by others. In terms of the transatlantic, this more expanded perspective is the interdisciplinary domain of Atlantic World studies, which involves a deep sense of history from plate changes in the ocean’s bottom to human geography (which, for example, examines migration patterns over centuries, death tolls among enslaved people, and movement between Caribbean islands and plantations).[[1]](#endnote-1)

The dilemma of what can be crammed into a class discussion arises when the materials concerning the sites of literary production and dissemination (important for emphasizing the precarity of narratives and testimonials of enslaved peoples) can be enriched through contextualizing documents, such as those of charity organizations or Parliamentary records of abolitionist and other conservative documents. Yet I want to argue instead for a more engaged Atlanticist lens to broaden how we situate and affirm the complexities of Atlantic life for students, the malleable nature of Atlantic identity, and its opportunities for self-reinvention.[[2]](#endnote-2) To think pedagogically using such a lens has allowed me to think more broadly geographically and temporally in order to situate the revolutionary aspects of Atlantic life in the Romantic period. My main strategy is one I adapted from the nautical strategy of triangulation to teach literary interpretation of narratives and testimonials of enslaved persons, historical texts or information, related texts and websites in groups of three, and to apply Atlantic studies concepts and methods in connection with literary analysis. The strategy of triangulation has been richly explored in the work of Bailyn, Jeremy Smith, Almeida, Rebecca Cole Heinowitz, and others.[[3]](#endnote-3) Against the Anglo-American oppositional model, triangulation is not just adding a middle term to create a dialectical engagement; rather, it involves the fluid movement of dynamic relationality among multiple and variable subjects. In this way texts can be revisited several times to re-see them, and the strategic terms “fluidity,” “circulation,” and “movement” help students approach the revisiting as necessary and deepening rather than repetitive. This strategy has helped me unpack with my students a vitally mobile and contingent arena in which texts embodying this dynamic can be read against those stemming from empire, against each other, and within a network of unstable conditions and circumstances.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Moreover, broadening the historical horizon from an Atlantic World perspective allows students to view the slave trade, abolition, and radical politics during the Romantic period as conversant with our contemporary politics. The courageous voices of those enslaved during the Romantic period take on a new legitimacy for my most recent students, compared with the way earlier student cohorts had responded to such texts; current students can more readily hear and empathize with the outrage of those from so long ago. This outrage responds to the authority of lived experience. While students understand that the value of *this* singular life made clear in individually voiced accounts was politically important to the abolitionist cause, the personal and communal resilience that such accounts express was necessary then and comes across all these many years later to be heard in all its dignity. These voices, then, can be further complicated (rather than polarizing them against the claims of colonists and politicians) with the biographies of figures like Baron de Vastey, who Marlene Daut has argued was signal for the development of a “[B]lack Atlantic humanism.” In counterpoint to Toussaint L’Ouverture’s rhetorical promotion of brotherhood across color lines, Vastey, a Haitian of biracial descent and Toussaint’s contemporary, critiques colonial dependencies on slavery. The slave trade and the high morbidity of slave labor, Vastey unceasingly argued, reveals that a free-market economy is merely an ideological justification for the inexcusability of racism.

Using material like Daut’s *Baron de Vastey and The Origins of Black Atlantic Humanism* (2017) to set the triangle trade within cosmopolitan humanism, as well as other globalizing contextual materials (the competition between goods produced in the East Indies and the West Indies, for instance), expands the horizon of how we teach the transatlantic and the Atlantic world, but only if those singular voices are heard as integrated with larger contexts. Accounts of formerly enslaved persons are important for our students because, although mediated for a white audience, they make disclosures about lived experience that novels can only gesture to, especially for those students who resist the empathy necessarily involved in reading actual accounts, and worse, the documentation of abusive planter practices.[[5]](#endnote-5) While I rely on the arguments of Mark Salber Phillips for understanding historical distance through the narrative function, that gut-level pain is also interpretatively valid. To make connections between textual accounts in a way that makes for meaningful interpretation, I have found that starting with an emotionally rather than physically painful event can translate what students may be feeling into something we can discuss and then extend to other connections between the texts that are more politicized, and therefore more rhetorically inflected.

For instance, in my recent course offering, I asked students to look at a similar event in Mary Prince’s and Olaudah Equiano’s narratives, and then to contrast it with Toussaint’s experience.[[6]](#endnote-6) Prince’s account of the end of childhood, when her mistress sends her to work at another house, is charged with the distress of the twelve-year-old girl; but the moment when her mother has to take her and her sisters to the slave market to be sold after the death of her mistress, despite the distance of years at the time of writing, is suffused with emotional pain at confronting this final separation from family and home. Beginning with the day before, she writes: “Oh dear! I cannot bear to think of that day,—it is too much.—It recalls the great grief that filled my heart, and the woeful thoughts that passed to and fro through my mind, whilst listening to the pitiful words of my poor mother, weeping for the loss of her children” (3). In describing the next morning, Prince uses funereal language to depict the emotional death she and her mother feel at this moment: “The black morning at length came. . . . Whilst she was putting on us the new osnaburgs in which we were to be sold, she said, in a sorrowful voice, (I shall never forget it!) ‘See, I am *shrouding* my poor children; what a task for a mother!’” (3). This chilling moment, in which the mother has to sell her own children at the slave market, is heartrending in itself, while Prince’s use of language and word choice feels authentic rather than rhetorically distant (“I shall never forget it!”); the imagery of a funeral rather than a marketplace symbolizes the death of the subject-self that being sold is meant to create. But the exclamations and the never-forgotten emotion reveal, just as surely, that Prince has held on to her subjectivity in a way that students can now see is revealed throughout her narrative; Prince is a strong woman, one who can advocate through her story, and so provide a heroic model of fortitude in the face of extreme suffering.

Equiano has a similar and compelling story to tell about the rending of a family. Although his begins with his sister’s and his abduction by African “slavers,” his parents never to be seen again, their strong sibling bond sustains them until the fatal moment when they are broken apart.[[7]](#endnote-7) I ask students to closely examine the two scenes, Prince’s and Equiano’s, to compare the affective impact of their uses of rhetoric.

One day . . . I saw one of those people come into the yard of our next neighbour but one, to kidnap, there being many stout young people in it. Immediately on this I gave the alarm. . . . But alas! ere long it was my fate to be thus attacked, and to be carried off, when none of the grown people were nigh. . . . But alas! we were soon deprived of even the small comfort of weeping together. . . . [F]or my sister and I were then separated, while we lay clasped in each other’s arms. (62)

Rhetorically, the “But, alas!” repetition has a lot of work to do, but for a modern reader, it can’t carry the weight of the experienced trauma in the way that Prince’s “Oh dear! I cannot bear to think of that day,—it is too much.—” still does. If Equiano’s response to the loss of his sister is different from Prince’s and perhaps strikes the reader as pathos-filled rather than grief-stricken—so that students try to locate the difference in experienced pain contextually—I’ve found it helpful to shift their attention to seeing that the way the story is told can change the emotional register, and that the way emotion is being put to use should not influence us to value or devalue one person’s pain over another’s, given our historical biases. Critical context thus informs students’ understanding of the disruptive force of the Atlantic trade during this period and the valuation of bodies in a marketplace that took no account of pain.[[8]](#endnote-8) Equiano openly states that his own father owned enslaved people, a repugnant fact for many students; he also explains the practice of African enslavers in terms of kidnapping and domestic servitude and in opposition to the brutality of the triangle slave trade. This sometimes leads students to dismiss Equiano’s narrative. But by getting students to look for resemblance rather than difference, they can then see that like Prince, Equiano also tries to find a sense of home when he is with kinder people, and yet whereas she finds her real sense of “home” in her own strong sense of self, he continually remakes himself, transforming himself fluidly through the circulations of ship voyages he participates in. He makes himself into an Atlantic identity, so that he’s at home everywhere—on shipboard, in Philadelphia, in London, and so on—whereas we sense that Prince is never at home except within herself. And his rhetorical style is not just due to the temporal distance between the act of writing and biographical events; Equiano is becalmed as he writes his narrative, stilled by the land he now inhabits and the perhaps unyielding political audience he addresses.

In his *The Black Jacobins* (1938), which tells the history of St. Domingue and Toussaint L’Ouverture’s extraordinary transformation of the colony into a free state by 1803, C. L. R. James refuses the fiction of historical objectivity; students immediately respond to his passionate engagement with his story and his protagonist, and the book is filled with his exclamatory asides. Toussaint suffers none of the rending of family that Prince and Equiano experience, and so James’s indignation is focused on the abuses endemic to slavery and those historians who had covered it over. “A venal race of scholars, profiteering panders to national vanity, have conspired to obscure the truth about abolition,” he rails (51). By contrast, Toussaint “was so genuinely kind to the whites in their distressful condition that they could not fail to appreciate it” (157). James cannot but revel in the man’s political acuity and gracious use of political speech acts and his tolerance as a political leader for everyone in St. Domingue; his voice and message are clear in quotations from letters and speeches: “Learn, citizens, to appreciate the glory of your new political status. In acquiring the rights that the Constitution accords to all Frenchmen, do not forget the duties it imposes on you. Be but virtuous and you will be French men and good citizens. . . . Work together for the prosperity of San Domingo . . . [to] assure public well-being” (205). I point out to students how this passage, and Toussaint’s worry over “the fate of some unhappy whites who have been victims in this business” (157), is in stark contrast to James’s own assessment of white treatment of Blacks: “The difficulty was that though one could trap them like animals, . . . and beat both [man and animal] with the same stick, . . . they remained, despite their black skins and curly hair, quite invincibly human beings” (11).

To situate James’s passionate history, I ask students to read Sylvia Wynter’s article on James, “Beyond the Categories of the Master Conception,” which clarifies her own theoretical adaptation of James’s Afro-Caribbean-based theory of capitalism as a colonial-based rather than a trade-based economy, one requiring enslaved labor rather than wage labor. The bourgeois development of capitalism that overthrew a monarchy-based economy depended on the development of a colonial scheme built on unpaid labor from colonists, indentured servants, and enslaved persons. The monarchial symbolics of blood (blood lineage, vassalage, war), as Wynter explains, was replaced by a symbolics of skin color, the effects of which still reverberate today. Wynter posits the human condition of “becoming [B]lack” to explain the way that discourse co-produces social experience along with colonial capitalism for anyone who, we could say, has not undergone “becoming white.”[[9]](#endnote-9) Discourse produces the knowledge that one is becoming Black in a repetition of experience that daily announces this condition, whether the year is 1800 or 2024.

For students, then, firsthand accounts put the entire phenomenon of the slave trade into perspective, and for some students of color, especially those who are African, African American, or Caribbean American, firsthand accounts can be empowering, while secondhand accounts like James’s can reinforce that self-empowerment. These firsthand narratives give students a sense of what self-determining voices like Prince’s, Equiano’s, and Toussaint’s sounded like. The inner strength and the courage to simply live a life, or to trade up one’s own life-value, or to liberate a people, comes through in these narratives. Romantic literature gains a special meaning for these students, one that speaks to them in today’s contexts; it can also give them a history of strength, endurance, and courage. Texts from the more recent past, such as James’s, and from today’s headlines or popular genres add resonance to making personal connections with such a history. Identifying with texts from a different time and culture has resulted in multiple end-of-the-semester research papers on Equiano and women’s slave testimonials, as well as a comparative treatment of women’s escape narratives in the period. Recently a student has also used information from short lectures I gave on the slavery and human trafficking practices at this time on the Barbary Coast and in the Ottoman Empire to develop a paper on Equiano that sets him in a wider context of slaver practices historically and within the period.

In using an Atlanticist lens to teach this material, I try to return our focus to the networks of colonialism wherever this approach makes sense, because more was at stake in the triangle slave trade than the economy of bodies. The forward trajectory of the larger stakes surely begins with the population decimation of northwestern Africa and the overpopulation of the West Indies, but they include the monoculture practices of Caribbean plantations (and continuing today with Caribbean banana plantations, for instance), which—concurrently with the rise in Western national gross products—also changed the natural resource structure of Caribbean terrain. Through increased commerce in peoples, animals, plants, and goods, the slave trade also grossly heightened the effects and pace of anthropocenic change, giving students a sense of how disastrous history can affect worlds as well as peoples.[[10]](#endnote-10)

But the textual analysis I’ve been putting forth still does not suggest the economy of movement that Atlantic life involves, and metaphor is a helpful intervention here, specifically the chronotope of the ship.[[11]](#endnote-11) That the ship should also be understood literally through viewing the virtual slave ship on the SlaveVoyages.org website gives the metaphor powerful resonance in its suggestion of mobility and flexible use. To image fluidity, movement (a term encompassing more than human mobility and displacement), and circulation of the Atlantic world, the metaphor of the Atlantic-ranging ship is perhaps unsurpassed. Whereas both fluidity and circulation take into account the stagnation of being becalmed, Equiano’s autobiography underscores how thriving among aquatic conditions requires understanding oneself, or at least one’s life, in terms of the vessel that sails such waters. Living in and on the Atlantic waterways requires at the very least having an abiding interest in shipping news and port landings; in order to flourish, however, of more value would be possessing a working knowledge of the vessel and, indeed, the classificatory terminology used for distinguishing vessels and their component parts. These, as Equiano’s life story reflects, were key not just to ship life but also to life itself: ship life *was*, in a sense, Atlantic life. And learning to navigate—as Equiano does—requires a more flexible thinking, one based on a triangulating impulse that can reconcile oppositions through adjacencies and affiliations.

Triangulation—not just the juxtaposition of three terms but the fluid and dynamic movement between them—is key, I argue, to teaching Romanticism in terms of Atlantic movement, whether we are working with the binaries of the Anglo-American transatlantic or with the multiple triangulations of the Caribbean islands and Atlantic littoral that are always in play or potentially so. Putting the Atlantic ship metaphor and triangulation together, we might consider what the triangle slave trade has culturally produced as our heritage, the disturbed flow of water and lives that Christina Sharpe argues in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016) is demonstrably ongoing. The “wake” figures a disruptive dimension in the lives of African Americans that began with a cut across what had been, the ship cutting across the ocean’s own waves as it cuts into lives, cuts off lives, and changes human relations in monstrous ways. In this sense, the United States is in relation not only to Britain and the West African coast but also in relation to the ocean and its human footprint on land, an ongoing relation of turmoil. Understanding the West’s impact on the West Indies during this period gives students a way to place Romanticism within their twenty-first-century perspective, not only as a chapter in the difficult history of enslavement but also as part of an aspirational identity, of a heroism born of struggle that is evidenced in the narratives of formerly enslaved persons, where singular voices, accounts of uprisings and attempted uprisings, and the hopes and aspirations that fueled abolition and emancipation can be found.

To think Atlantically allows me to pose one regulative idea—that of the world as a centered experience that affirms the uniqueness of the white enfranchised self that is supported by peripheral others, in contrast to the disenfranchised (the world, in other words, of the colonial economic system)—against another regulative idea of the Atlantic as a fluid world of multiple and mobile players. It allows me to keep my students focused on the dynamic, fluid relation between center and periphery, larger and local contexts, and what is counted (money, bodies, trade items) and what does not count (lives). These are also the problems of sovereignty, and what in years past Romantic studies mainly focused on; they have only been transformed, but not displaced, in the slave trade economy and are the problems that Equiano marshals so well for his tale of self-recovery, innovation, and reinvention.

The triangulation of texts, contextualized through websites on the histories of abolition and the slave trade, as well as a web-video of life on a virtual slave ship, a reconstruction of *L’Aurore* (see also Rediker), allows students to connect to the voices that so clearly and emphatically tell their story or the stories of others. Most recently, the three chosen texts were those of Prince, Equiano, and James, which when triangulated situate the African, West Indian, and St. Domingue experience in a deeply involved perspective that includes the newly independent United States.[[12]](#endnote-12) Thus Equiano’s, Prince’s, and Toussaint’s achievements (self-improvement, self-liberation, and the liberation of a people) participate in the very conditions that fueled the French Revolution, financed by France’s slave-trade-enriched bourgeoisie, and the English abolition movement, which, as James argues, was encouraged by William Pitt as prime minister to deflect other political tensions (53–4). But triangulation requires positioning and revisiting: following Prince’s story with Equiano’s is achronological, but his rhetorically sophisticated style, because it distances and softens raw experience, allows for a more appreciative revisiting of Prince’s rhetorical moves. The clear parallels between Prince’s story of British colonial enslavement and Toussaint’s political speechmaking as he liberates both his fellow slaves and his island from colonial legal, economic, and political control enable students to bring together the three texts through both formal and experiential commonalities and differences.

To balance the firsthand narrative unit on Prince, Equiano, and the Haitian Revolution, I designed a second unit focusing on women’s experience in fictional texts. Beginning with the anonymously authored *The* *Woman of Colour, A Tale* (1808), the students then read Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814), a novel that creates comparisons between women whose wealth makes them decadent and women who regard morality as more valuable. In each case the heroine’s transplantation into a different family depends on a reliance on the wealth generated by exploiting legal and capitalist networks that masked over the horrors of enslavement. Olivia Fairfield is the daughter of a Jamaican plantation owner and the majestic Marcia, a gifted but enslaved African woman. The conditions of Mr. Fairfield’s will are that Olivia is to be married into, or become the dependent of, her relations, the English Merton family. Fanny Price is adopted into her uncle Bertram’s family as a charity case, and in this sense Olivia and Fanny have opposed relations to plantation wealth but are in a chiasmic relation to each other that students can appreciate: the biracial heroine brings wealth with her, the white heroine brings only her poverty. Sir Thomas makes his wealth from his own Antiguan plantations though his family members, like Olivia’s relations in the Merton family, are residents in England. In both novels the women of these families display the decadent lifestyles and egocentrism created by West Indian caste divisions, and so stand in for what Olivia calls “the most die-away lady on the whole island of Jamaica” (73).[[13]](#endnote-13) Both Olivia and Fanny take the role of outside observer, Olivia through her Jamaican birth and biracial identity and Fanny through her parents’ downward social mobility. Both are treated by their adoptive families as different in appearance (Olivia is beautiful and biracial, while Fanny is small and plain) and in kind (Olivia has a Black mother, and Fanny has a disreputable father). And both make observations that explicitly (Olivia) or implicitly (Fanny) compare the women of their adoptive families to the “decadent” behavior of West Indian women.

However, in both novels the authorial insistence on a moral tale to be made of plot and characters enables the Caribbean plantation system itself to be glossed over. In *The Woman of Colour* this gloss is effected through Olivia’s fond remembrances of life on her father’s plantation, her frequent remarks concerning her firm connection to her enslaved brethren, and her affectionate descriptions of her maid Dido, whose race and pidgin English make clear her formerly enslaved status. In *Mansfield Park*, the masking is provided by Fanny’s translation of her uncle’s business concerns into a paternal treatment of his enslaved workers stemming from his moral rectitude. When these two novels are triangulated with Leonora Sansay’s short novel *Secret History; or, The Horrors of St. Domingo*, which like *The Woman of Colour* was also published in 1808, the plantation system’s inequities are unmasked. The white American narrator, Mary, visiting with her sister Clara in 1803, makes frequent criticisms of the behavior and regulation of different castes of women, from “coloured women” in general contrast to “white women,” to distinctions between “Mulatto” women (light-skinned biracial women), Creoles (white women born in St. Domingue, soon to be Haiti), French women (immigrants and visitors from France), and outsiders like Mary. Not only do sartorial distinctions demarcate castes among women in St. Domingue, but “here female virtue is blasted in the bud by the contagious influence of example” (96).

As Sansay presents it, the very Caribbean air taints moral choice since sexual attraction alone determines women’s (limited) agency, so that “the mulatto women are the hated but successful rivals of the Creole ladies,” for they not only appear to be sexier but are also often wealthy: “before the revolution their splendor, their elegance, their influence over the men, and the fortunes lavished on them by their infatuated lovers, so powerfully excited the jealousy of the white ladies, that they complained to the council of the ruin their [“mulatto” women’s] extravagance occasioned to many [white] families, and a decree was issued imposing restrictions on their dress” (95).[[14]](#endnote-14) Contrasted with the decadence of sexually explicit behavior is the novel’s real focus on political revolution; Toussaint’s post-revolutionary reign is looked forward to as utopian in comparison to the invading French forces there to support the white plantation owners. The armed forces’ destructive violence is mirrored in acts of male sexual aggression, exemplified in the rape of Mary’s sister Clara by her abusive husband, St. Louis. Sex and politics come together in *Secret History* in a manner that turns the lens on *The* *Woman of Colour* and *Mansfield Park*: suddenly students can realize how the sexual politics of those novels divide out into sexual aggression, the politics of race, and the loss of any moral compass when wealth depends on the unacknowledged suffering of enslaved laborers.

To provide a component to this fictional unit that ties it back to the real-life narratives of Prince, Equiano, and Toussaint, I include here the first chapter of Sharpe’s *In the Wake*.Sharpe’s meditations on, and theorization of, the historical effects of colonial schemes of skin color symbolism that Wynter analyzes yoke the development of colonial economies based on unpaid and enslaved labor. Sharpe’s reflections on her own and her family’s experience of the colonial symbolics of skin color (registered in Sansay’s delineation of the higher levels of St. Domingue’s caste system) illustrate so clearly how the colonial economy continues to mark the daily life of African Americans now. In the wake of the triangle slave trade, “the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present” (9). Sharpe’s narrative, with its rhetorical insistence on the past’s ongoing harm, does more to make the connections between fiction and real-life narratives than news reports alone can do. As she notes, “Transatlantic slavery was and is the disaster” (5). Adding Sharpe’s critical reflections intermixed with personal narrative has the advantage of pulling the narrative and fictional units together because it enables further conversation about the economic and emotional risks of living in, and in the wake of, the triangle slave trade. This relates to Wynter’s analysis, which allows a conversation about colonial economies as a discourse concerning one’s relative worth.

The question of personal versus fictionalized experience becomes a way to avoid simply comparing different encounters of slave and colonial life, racial prejudice, and degrees of gender violence. Instead this comparison allows readers to triangulate and thus revisit/revise these three elements of the slave trade that the two units raise, allowing additional questions, such as one of inclusion/exclusion: Who is an insider, we could ask, and who is excluded in the system of colonial economy? Prince, Equiano, and Olivia present different kinds of outsider status, for instance. Moreover, female characters’ treatment at the hands of (usually white) men provides a quite different way to think about movement as well as about the stormy violence of the colonial economy and requires thinking harder about the movement through the color caste system in both British and French colonial and postcolonial life.

Regardless of the texts selected to teach students how to see the experience of enslaved persons as belonging to lives that mattered, what has made the most difference in teaching this topic has been to find ways to make historical texts relevant. In order to move beyond that framework, I have begun working with current events and Afrofuturism. A useful supplemental text for exploring Afrofuturism is an essay by the award-winning novelist N. K. Jemisin, “How Long ’til Black Future Month?,” which provides a quick introduction to the main ideas of Afrofuturism.[[15]](#endnote-15) Writers like Samuel Delany and Octavia Butler made science fiction the most significant genre for Afrofuturist literature and film; these are texts that recast enslavers and colonists through the sci-fi tradition of encounter narratives.[[16]](#endnote-16) An easily referenced text for teaching is the 2018 film *Black Panther*,in which the imbrication of past, present, and future is clearly dramatized. In the film, the villain, Klaue, is depicted as an archetypal white adventurer despoiling African resources, but rather than being characterized as European he is clearly meant to suggest a heritage from the two Boer states of colonial Africa, with their brutal treatment of those inhabiting what is now South Africa. The Black Panther, T’Challa, defeats this despoiler and thus revises the historical first encounter with white enslavers; instead, we have a failed encounter that strengthens the progressive futurism of the Wakanda nation. This is not the best example, however, since Klaue should have been colonized by the Wakandan citizens, so asking students why Klaue’s death at the hands of T’Challa is a departure from Afrofuturism helps them see how easy it is to accept more pasteurized versions of Black narratives.

“First encounter” narratives, made standard through works such as H. G. Wells’s *The War of the Worlds* (1898), merge with “second encounter” narratives so that the slave trade and colonial past is the pattern through which alien encounter is perceived, with the alien becoming the colonized victim of such thinking, and yet like the historical enslaved person, a victim who bears gifts. To historical enslaved people’s cultural and ideological gifts, these imagined aliens add technological and politically liberating gifts. Contrasting this model with the plot of *Black Panther* allowed my students to view Equiano’s representation of slavery, kind masters, and British political elites as pasteurized rather than simply self-serving (as students often read his narrative). Most importantly, connecting the texts they are studying with the regulative idea of Afrofuturism—that sovereign nations need the induction of alien life in order to become even more democratic, free, and at peace—allows students to consider the problem of both individual sovereignty and national sovereignty as the product of fluidity and movement. It is not a given, it can be taken away, and it must always be put into conversation with the interrelatedness of ocean and land.

When we revisited Equiano’s narrative after the *Black Panther* exercise, I focused class discussion on the plan for a free Black state in Sierra Leone that Equiano participates in near the very end of his narrative; my students were able to rethink the potential of such an undertaking while also understanding it as a charity project rather than a utopian one (it is planned by “some philanthropic individuals” [242]). Pitting this scheme, devised by white politicians, against the utopian nation of Wakanda also helps us see why Equiano would have been so wary of the project: it lacks Wakanda’s self-determination arising from individual participation *and* the necessary funding and resources (individual sovereignty *and* national sovereignty). Through the contextualizing lens of Afrofuturism, my students came to the recognition that any settlement, however utopian, displaces those who already inhabit the land, disturbing the eco-balance of lives lived for both the established inhabitants and for the newcomers. In other words, the past can’t be undone by charity and welfare schemes; the hard work has to be done here in this place, as both the abolitionist materials and the lesson of Wakanda’s self-determination make clear. A useful discussion point is already provided here in thinking about our own future regarding territorialization practices versus Atlantic fluidity, the circulation and triangulations of persons and things versus the requirement for self-determination and lives well lived.

Just as the slave trade fueled white liberationist politics in both Britain’s American colonies and revolutionary France, so too has it grounded and set the stage for the more expansive empire through an increasingly laissez-faire liberally sanctioned world economy. Students begin to see the relation between things as they are and the horrifying, daily violence of the exchange in enslaved persons as mercantile objects. The necessity of teaching about the slave trade and the experience of enslavement alongside the heroized narratives of abolitionist political labor can be empowering in that it allows for the possibility of thinking about the future otherwise than in a traumatic and posthuman way. Certainly we must ask: What will prevail in the Atlantic world when environmental damage takes too great a toll on human habitations of the Caribbean? Or when the coastal cities and other human developments in the circum-Atlantic are submerged or simply destroyed? But a sense of play through more fluid boundaries allows space for students to imagine a different world-making from the one we have known and that currently goes on without our much noticing. It allows for thinking about different kinds of heroism, different ways of achieving self-determination against the apparently unstoppable weight of globalism. It allows for considering the ship in a stormy sea: fluidity and flexibility are the necessary survival skills, but they must be combined with a persistence to endure, a Mary-Prince-like self-heroism and a Toussaint-like tolerance. It seems to me that Atlanticism is poised to locate such an imagination, if we allow its triangulatory effects room to do this kind of work.

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1. Boelhower’s seminal essay remains foundational for Atlantic studies. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. I also want to caution against restricting ourselves to the British imperial when teaching the Romantic period: the Black Atlantic intersects with the Red Atlantic (the circulation, exchanges, and material productions of indigenous peoples in the Atlantic and coastal regions of the Americas, as well as their travels to Britain, Europe, and Africa), and the Hispanic and Lusophone Atlantic world whose historical importance loomed large in the period, as well as the Francophone Atlantic, all of which extend our teaching about British Empire through these other circulations and imperial networks. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See also Aguirre (2005), Brown (2008), Heinowitz (2010), Robson (2011), Tutino (2016), and Cañizares-Esguerra (2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See in particular Almeida 69, 105–6, 197, 200, 325; and Bailyn (2005). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See Thomas’s excellent *Romanticism and Slave Narratives* (2000),which has greatly helped me in teaching Black British writing, as well as Aljoe’s *Creole Testimonies* (2012),which distinguishes between the testimonial and the narrative in terms of authorial voice and rhetorical strategy. More recently, Chander and Matthew’s “Abolitionist Interruptions” has extended how to think about slave narrative and about antislavery literature as a genre. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. I found Todorova’s essay on Prince and Boulukos’s and Mallipeddi’s essays on Equiano extremely helpful for triangulating these texts for students. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. “Slavers” was the term commonly used in the period for those engaged in capturing or gathering individuals for selling to others. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. The Portuguese created a slave-trade category for the standard measure in valuing Black lives, the “pieza” (“piece”). Drawing on C. L. R. James’s research, Wynter explains that a pieza “was a man of twenty-five years, approximately, in good health, calculated to give a certain amount of physical labor. He served as the general equivalent of physical labor value against which all the others could be measure—with for example, three teenagers equaling one pieza and older men and women thrown in a job lot as refuse” (Wynter 81, as cited by Mignolo, 114). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Mignolo (116). “Becoming white” is my addition so that students understand the concept of race as a discursive formation. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See Carney and Rosomoff’s *In the Shadow of Slavery* (2009).To teach students about the expansiveness of trade networks involving African kingdoms, see Thornton’s authoritative *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World* (1992). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. This is the chronotope that Gilroy, following Bakhtin, explicitly calls attention to in *The Black Atlantic* (1993) (17). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. I find that research on slave testimonials further helps students metabolize the truly painful passages of these texts: both Thomas’s *Romanticism and Slave Narratives* and Aljoe’s *Creole Testimonies* have proved invaluable here. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. When applied to women, “die-away” signified “languorous” and overly sentimental. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Mary doesn’t seem to know that “Mulatto” wealth more usually came from sons inheriting land and money from their white fathers. She also doesn’t acknowledge “Noirs” (persons of African birth, freed by Toussaint’s revolution) or most of the other caste divisions that regulated life in St. Domingue. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. This is also the title of a collection of short stories by Jemisin, who is best known for her *Broken Earth* trilogy (2015–2017), which won three Hugo awards. See also O’Connell. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* (1895), *The War of the Worlds* (1898), and *The First Men in the Moon* (1901) established the tradition. Andre Norton’s *Witch World* series (1963–1968) and Arthur C. Clarke’s *Space Odyssey* series (1968–1997) are well-known first-encounter narratives. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)