Emergent

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**Emergent: defined;**

I like the word: emerge. What it conjures: Motion. Risk-taking. Ideas on the verge.

adrienne maree brown wasn’t the first to highlight emergence for me, but her 2017 book *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* rooted me in the concept’s importance to teaching, writing, and being in these charged times. Emergent strategy originated as a business model in the 1970s meaning “a pattern of action that develops over time in an organization in the absence of a specific mission and goals, or despite a mission and goals” (Rivera). brown says that her engagement with the concept began with her reading of Black science-fiction author Octavia Butler’s notion of change as small, decentralized, and intentional. In brown’s introduction to “intentional adaptation,” she quotes Butler: “We are Earthseed / The life that perceives itself Changing” (46). From there, brown grew the idea to describe myriad forms of brokenness and transformation needed for a more just world.

“Emergent” also aptly describes the pedagogical interventions in this volume, where scholar-teachers take risks and adapt as they develop new curriculums, such as Frances Botkin’s adaptation of the resourceful practice of *tunyuhan*. The word, Botkin tells us, comes from a Jamaican proverb: “tunyuhan (turn your hand) and mek (make) fashion,” or “make the best use of any available resources to create something new.” Or Ivan Ortiz’s evocation of literary séance to make Black voices audible. Ortiz uses texts as mediums and mediations, especially those that crack open history, like M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* (2008) poems broken across pages and centuries. There is also Elizabeth Fay’s emphasis on the violent movement of bodies and selves across the Atlantic, as well as Nicholas Blaisdell’s ability to link eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholarship “to our present.” And Sean Gordon’s amplification of “dehiscence,” a practice described by Fred Moten as a Black studies “emergent poetics” (1743).

Clearly, these examples show how an emergent strategy can vitalize the teaching of Romantic literature in 2024 and beyond. In the years before I read brown, I was drawn to anthropologist Kathleen Stewart’s idea of emergence, aligned with the changes in my scholarly work and my teaching some years ago. In her 2007 book *Ordinary Affects*, Stewart wrote about the “emergent present,” the shifting, fragmented, heightened moments of the everyday. Her book indexes potent encounters that we can’t quite categorize, intimate moments that merge with public issues and then evaporate like a mist only to reappear later in another form. Such moments, she says, “will shift people’s life trajectories in some small way, change them by literally changing their course for a minute or a day” (12). More often than not, I will add, emergent moments transform us as they remake the ghostly past in the embodied present.

**Emergent: as fragment;**

In June 2013, I was at a house party in Chicago’s Belmont district, mingling with people in a leafy backyard. These were people I didn’t see at my university; founders of arts programs and alternative newspapers and activist organizations. A little Scotty dog dashed around. Everyone except me knew his name. The guests, hip and creative, wore mismatched stockings and skirts, asymmetrical hemlines, and bright earrings. They seemed cool, and I wanted to join in, but when I edged into a circle, people spoke past me. Hot dampness hung in the air, evoking a longing feeling, an ache for the experiences I didn’t have with these people but which they had with one another.

The yard was crowded and sweaty, and I moved inside. Only one other person sat in the dimly lit living room where a melancholy tune of trombones and violins played. I drifted over and sat next to Marvin, as he later introduced himself. He raised his beer and smiled. The heat inside was suffocating yet Marvin wore a long black leather jacket and bowler cap, as if he’d come from a distant country where it was always cold. I didn’t want to bring up the weather because my eyes kept drifting to his cap, so I asked where he worked. “I don’t work now,” he said. There was something about this party that suppressed my normal social instincts. In any other context I would have talked about my job and family. But all I seemed to be able to do was listen.

While Black and white people mingled outside, inside Marvin and I connected over parenting. I noticed he had a way of smiling that seemed new, as if he’d just rediscovered those muscles around his mouth. He told me how his daughter grew up while he was locked up, how he was getting to know her for the first time. He’d had a hard time finding a job since he got out of prison, he said. It was hard when you’d been in prison for so long. You had to toughen yourself up, and that made you awkward around people. He rubbed his eyebrow shyly. He had just bought his daughter a house with the compensation he received for being wrongfully accused.

I thought of my own daughter as Marvin talked. She and I were estranged at the time. I had desperately tried to contact her to no avail. Forced alienation from a daughter, one of the deepest human hurts—it was a feeling I could touch. But as I looked into Marvin’s intense eyes, my internal screen went blank. How could I know wrongful conviction and forced separation from a child, from an entire family, in the context of the experience he related to me? I couldn’t. But he was telling me his story, and I listened.

**Emergent: and the Romantic period;**

One of the most striking features of this volume is how the pastness of the British slave trade, abolition, and emancipation emerge in current poems, novels, plays, songs, and movies, across the internet, on the streets, and, crucially, within schools and classrooms. Patricia A. Matthew acknowledges that although early abolitionist texts are not “documentaries that teach us about the past,” they can speak to current race issues. Her students discuss slavery and abolition at a historic and geographic remove and yet feel the issues press closely on their lives as they learn to adapt one era’s practices to their own.

Adaptation is central to Botkin’s method as well. She puts Marlon James’s contemporary novel *The Book of Night Women* (2009) in dialogue with Romantic literature. James’s dizzying historical remix, Botkin says, features graphic scenes of trauma, which unsettle what students think they know about enslavement. At the same time, it informs their current experience. Likewise, Fay reveals that for her students, the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 gave writers like Olaudah Equiano and Mary Prince “a new legitimacy” unheard of in previous generations of students. And Gordon, in an “Ethnic American Literature” course he designed in 2015, boldly led students to question their assumptions about “the ‘pastness’ of slavery, the progressiveness of liberal democracy, and the putative postracialism of the Obama administration.”

Surely my conversation with Marvin held so much import for me because of how the past emerged in the present. For twelve of the years Marvin was in prison, I spent almost every waking moment steeped in literature of the slave trade, abolition, and emancipation during the British Romantic period. I wrote about that history in neat explications, complete with historical contexts and pages of citations, and bound in scholarly journals and books. But it was only when I stepped away from literary criticism and all I had learned that the meaning of that awful history started to emerge in a different way, rushing into my life in fleeting, transitory moments, informing and complicating the present. The Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery with one major exception: slavery remained appropriate punishment for a crime. The Virginia Supreme Court defined convicts as synonymous with enslaved people.[[1]](#endnote-1)

**Emergent: as signifying;**

I set upon the topic of the slave trade, abolition, and emancipation through a chance encounter with Henry Louis Gates Jr., when I was a meek graduate student at the University of Arizona. I had read Gates’s book *The Signifying Monkey* (1988),which had recently come out, and *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave* (1831) in a postcolonial literature course, and was excited that he was giving a talk at the university. Gates spoke about race and the literary canon and about recovering texts written by formerly enslaved men and women. There was a dinner after the talk, and to my astonishment, I ended up seated elbow-to-elbow with the great scholar with the smiling eyes. He was casual and friendly, fluffing out his napkin and pouring me a glass of water before filling his own.

In my time as a graduate student, I’d never read anything like *The Signifying Monkey.* I still recall being mesmerized by how Gates harnessed the African American vernacular tradition and the double-voiced Yoruba trickster Esu to develop the “signifyin’ figure” who danced through the pages of African American literature. “To rename is to revise,” Gates wrote, “and to revise is to Signify” (xxiii). Revise the method for my project, and maybe even shift the canon a bit, was what I wanted to do. The book emerged from the hundreds of others on my Ph.D. reading lists, not just because of Gates’s ideas, brilliant as they were, but because of how he himself had written a scholarly work so alive, multiplicious, and full of intellectual trickery. It struck me as, well, not entirely academic in style. How did he do it?

In my eyes Gates may as well have been a movie star (and he would go on to become a TV celebrity and witness in free speech court proceedings). I was too nervous to utter a word, so I just stared at his nice old-fashioned wristwatch that fit the persona of someone with schedules to keep. But Gates must have asked what I was working on, because I distinctly remember telling him, in a stumbling monologue full of ums and ahs, about Romantic literature and how only a shred of scholarship about the slave trade and abolition had been produced. I had pored over Eva Beatrice Dyke’s 1942 book *The Negro in English Romantic Thought*. I had attended Alan Richardson’s 1990 MLA panel. I was drawn to the topic, I told him, but I confessed my worry. As a non-Black person, did I have a right to pursue this research? Was it my story to tell? Perhaps I was also afraid to confront the culpability of my own European ancestry.

Gates’s eyes grew serious through huge glasses resting on his cheeks. “Absolutely!” he said. I must “absolutely choose this topic” for my dissertation. Was I going to the archive? Texts, voices, needed to be brought to light. Though my work might never “signify,” I understood, it could have significance. Or maybe, as a white woman writing about the atrocities of Europeans, my work could signify on early white men and women.

**Emergent: and police violence;**

A few months after I met Marvin, I had lunch with Alice, the woman who had hosted the house party. I told her about my conversation with Marvin. Though the conversation had lasted an hour at most, he kept surfacing in my thoughts. Was he okay? What had happened?

Chicago cops were the worst, Alice said through frowning eyes and pursed lips as she told me his story. Some twenty years earlier, two women and three children were found dead in what appeared to be a house fire. The police questioned suspects, and their evidence suggested a family member had committed the murders and started the fire as a cover up. Instead of pursuing that lead, the police arrested two innocent men, Marvin and another man, Ronald Kitchen, who happened to live nearby.

Alice pointed me to some online articles, and I later found more on my own.[[2]](#endnote-2) Marvin and Ronald’s injustice started with Chicago police detective and commander Jon Burge, who spent eighteen years leading a campaign against innocent Black men. Before his crimes were exposed in 1990, Burge targeted some two hundred Black men, torturing, imprisoning, and killing many of them for crimes they did not commit. Burge had learned his craft in the Army during the Korean War, first as a military policeman and then in combat, facing a foe of a different race (Conroy). Burge unleashed his crimes unchallenged and even received numerous honors, including a Bronze Star. Today his career stands as one of the most egregious examples of serial police violence against Black men in U.S. history.

When Marvin was exonerated in 2009, media stories emerged. In an interview with Marlene Martin of the Campaign to End the Death Penalty, Marvin told how police broke down the door to his sister’s house, kidnapped him, and then beat him. I felt the intensity of the injustice when, in the interview, Marvin related tender stories of his formative years growing up in a housing project. Though the buildings are now gone, he recalled a courtyard of flowers where he used to hang out. His favorite memory was a camping trip. A local pastor had organized the trip for him and a bunch of neighborhood kids. “He made sure we went on this weekend camping trip to show us another side of life,” Marvin said. “I’ll never forget that—it made such an impression on me” (Martin).

I’ll never forget how at the lunch meeting, when I mentioned Marvin’s name, Alice smiled so wide, the lines around her eyes sprawled across her temples and down the sides of her face. Her face drew me in like a force. She nodded and peeked cautiously from over her glasses, as if the thought of him gave her a feeling of deep fondness with agony mixed in. Even after we parted, her expression appeared before me, slowly gathering resonance rather than settling something.

**Emergent: and orality;**

The authors of the essays in this volume rightly champion firsthand accounts. Fay argues that “for some students of color . . . firsthand accounts can be empowering.” Ortiz shows how ballads are oral forms migrated to print, and how these forms now act as mediums for Black voices. Yet even in canonical literary works by non-Black writers, Black voices can be heard, as Toni Morrison points out in *Playing in the Dark* (1992), giving expression to “social decay and economic division” of white culture (63).

I spent what felt like a lifetime examining the documents of British antislavery, following trails, uncovering metaphors, reading works by mostly non-Black authors—the court cases, the tracts and polemics, the debates, the newspaper articles, the dubious scientific theories, the iconography, the mounds of antislavery poetry and plays and novels, and the thousands of travel texts. I was tireless in my research, mesmerized by how one source led to another and then another, by the physical act of filling out the request forms in the British Library, the Cambridge University Library, the University of London, and farther-flung archives in cities like Liverpool, Bristol, and Hull.[[3]](#endnote-3)

I remember the feeling of heaviness created by the sheer number of documents in dark rooms guarded by stone-faced librarians, and I often fell ill thinking about how antislavery writings and contemporary literary theory rarely let the people taken from Africa or born into the system of enslavement speak for themselves.[[4]](#endnote-4) I became increasingly concerned with finding those voices, even if they were often mediated through white institutions and scribes. I read the letters of the Sierra Leone settlers, which were scattered in libraries across England and the United States. In one collection, I stumbled upon a small account of enslaved women—mothers and daughters—wresting control of a plantation. In London a series of slave complaints emerged from the House of Commons Parliamentary papers dating to 1816. In select colonies including Berbice and Demerara, as I learned, the enslaved could report abuses to a British officer—called a “Fiscal”—who took down their words and filed them with the House of Commons. These complaints highlight aspects of Black culture hidden from most other accounts. I learned about working conditions, living quarters, the amount of food, clothing, and other supplies people had access to, and about their resistances and rebellions.

One afternoon in the British Library I found myself reading the account of Tommy, a story that stays with me to this day:

February 19, 1819. Negro Tommy, belonging to William Fraser: —Says, he is a cooper by trade, and employed as such by his master on plantation Goldstone Hall; that on Friday morning last he went in the boiling-house for nails, and there saw another cooper heading up sugars; Tommy went to one of the casks and took a lump of sugar for the purpose of sweetening three gallons of hot water; did not hide the same, but proceeded with it in his hand from the boiling-house; was met by his master, Mr. Fraser, who inquired where he got the sugar, Tommy informed him of his having taken it, and for what purpose, his master immediately ordered him to be laid down, tied to stakes, put two drivers over him, and one hundred lashes inflicted upon him. Mr. Fraser went to Tommy’s house and searched it, found in his tool chest a quantity of old nails, among which were also a very few new ones; Mr. Fraser went to the trouble of weighing them, there were fourteen pounds.[[5]](#endnote-5)

It took years for me to unravel the meaning of this testimony. Tommy’s actions replayed in my imagination until I saw his self-determination in every word of his complaint. By stealing sugar—the product of his own labor—Tommy was subverting capitalism, which slave labor made possible. Subverting but also using. By collecting a great quantity of nails, Tommy was exploiting capitalism. The fact that Fraser weighed the nails implies that he suspected Tommy was selling them.

The account continues beyond the segment I’ve included here. In it, Tommy complains of not enough food and clothing, and of being harassed by Fraser, but his primary objection is the hundred lashes, when the legal limit was forty-one. The court interviewed various witnesses, each claiming Tommy received a different number of lashes. Finally, the court asked Tommy to “exhibit his posterior,” and he had very little sign of being lashed. Tommy explains: “I was favored by the drivers who threw the whips over me.”

Between the lines, I saw, Tommy was complaining to the court about harassment and torture, but he was also announcing agency over the plantation system. When he said he was favored by the drivers, he was issuing a warning. Drivers were enslaved men who received larger food and clothing rations. They commanded other enslaved people, which made it dangerous for planters to upset a driver’s authority once it was established. Drivers could be mediators, cops, or potential rebel leaders.

For me, what mattered most about Tommy’s story was how his firsthand account bubbled up through the testimony recorded by colonists. Although, at first glance, the court’s order for Tommy to remove his clothing might seem degrading, it also offers Tommy a chance to reveal how he has been able to retain his agency. Tommy proved how the drivers favored him by “exhibiting his posterior.” With that act, he was literally mooning them (and mooning is a word and concept dating back to 1600). “Kiss my ass,” he was saying. Most importantly, although Tommy was probably illiterate, he staged his action in a way that would be recorded in the colonial discourse for centuries to come. In other words, by showing the court his backside and letting them know he wasn’t powerless, he was signifying on the institution that sought to oppress him.

**Emergent; as geometry;**

My years of research across continents piecing together Britain’s antislavery project and searching for voices like Tommy’s and listening to stories like Marvin’s changed me. At Washington State University, I taught entire courses on the subject, highlighting the rebellions and revolutions in Jamaica, Saint Domingue, and elsewhere, as well as the many ways the enslaved survived, resisted, and overturned. I stood over photocopy machines and heavy-duty staplers creating handmade booklets for my students of these defiant texts. In the geometry of my classroom, we gathered in a perfect circle and read them aloud. As students took the words inside their bodies and made them live, we heard power shift from the institution of slavery to a group of Black women taking charge of a plantation or to a household servant poisoning an abusive white man.

But my old-school ways were not nearly as inventive as the methods adopted in this volume. Methods like Botkin’s Zoom dialogue with Maroons or Fay’s triangulations, a practice she adapted from nautical strategy and scholar Christina Sharpe. Blaisdell also triangulates his work—reading Ottobah Cugoano, Mary Prince, and Friedrich Engels together helps him understand the relationship between nineteenth-century problems of unfree labor, free labor, and capitalism.

“Emergence,” brown writes, “is our inheritance as a part of this universe; it is how we change” (3). She consults nature for lessons on teaching, organizing, and taking care of one another and oneself: birds flocking, earthworms burrowing, leaves decaying, roots going deep offer different instructions. But one of nature’s most fascinating forms—the fractal—is for brown the geometry of transformation. “What we practice at a small scale can reverberate to the largest scale,” she reminds us (42). I found this self-similar, iterative process evident across the essays of this volume, each piece unfolding like an offering for how to teach an abolitionist Romanticism.

**Emergent: and abolition;**

A few years ago, I read a review by Carvell Wallace in the *New York Times* of “The Good Lord Bird,” a TV miniseries about the nineteenth-century American abolitionist John Brown, produced by Ethan Hawke. “Can a white person ever usefully tell a slave story,” Wallace asked, “or, more specifically, can they tell a story that is useful to the descendants of the enslaved, rather than to their own egos or cinematic fantasies?”

I felt a bright sting. Though the great Henry Louis Gates Jr. had once encouraged me to tell the stories of Black lives, I continue to wonder—can I? I sometimes doubt my ability to write about the stories of enslaved people by Romantic-era authors. I decided I would not watch the series.

Yet I kept returning to the fact that abolition and enslaved people were the most pressing topic of the British Romantic period. At the time I started my research and writing, nothing could have been clearer to me. Several authors in this collection cite Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s sermon on abolition in 1795 on the steps of the Bristol docks in the heart of that city’s slave business; Equiano’s and Cugoano’s fierce agitation for abolition; and Prince’s narrative told to the London Anti-Slavery Society. Not to mention the millions of pages of antislavery writings by Black and white activist men and women.

Antislavery was pursued with such intensity, it shouldn’t come as a surprise to find abolition, albeit much transformed since the Romantic period, emergent among some young activists today. Syrus Marcus Ware, a transgender scholar and artist, urges academics, writers, poets, activists, performers—everyone—to “approach abolition as the most loving thing that we can do for one another” (Ware). Last year I attended Ware’s workshop on abolition, in which participants listened to Angela Davis while we imagined futures full of love and freedom and justice. As Petra Kuppers, the workshop organizer, put it:

This personal sensation of a white cis queer disabled woman feels far away from the project of ending slavery’s long reach, I know, and I feel immediately the concern of projecting my own sense of unfreedom, being denied access to my range-giving wheelchair, onto the experiences of people racialized as Black. But that’s what Syrus is offering to me here: charting my experience, my sense, from wherever I come from. Grounding a sense of justice in a personal felt, lived experience, in connection. So I let it stand, that moment of loosening the armor, and I touch into it to be present.” (Kuppers)

The experience was visceral, uncomfortable, on the verge of something new for many of the participants.

Many of the teacher-scholars in this volume embrace abolition. I see a wonderful, complementary rhythm between Ortiz’s call to listen to Romantic “sounds we would otherwise block out because they are too raucous, inarticulate, or inconvenient” and Ware’s invitation to embody the sounds of a world rooted in liberation and self-determination. I’m moved by Matthew’s account of how when students learn an “abolitionist Romanticism” they are also learning “about the intricacies of society, protest, and revolution.” As Alan Richardson observes in his response here, I too am heartened by Blaisdell’s report of being inspired by Granville Sharp working shoulder-to-shoulder with Equiano and Cugoano. Such collaborative abolitionism prompted Blaisdell to found a community tutoring center. Reading about his actions also brought to mind Ware’s words: The “abolitionist struggle . . . is 500 years strong,” he writes, and “now is a time to reflect on the history of the abolition movement and what the future could look like if we reach abolition in our lifetime” (Ware).

I’ve also understood that the backward glances, missteps, doubts, and mistakes I make when writing and speaking about abolition are part of the fractal nature of learning. Shortly after I read the *Times* review about “The Good Lord Bird,” one of my African American students who writes eloquently about *The History of Mary Prince* called me by Zoom and said, completely unsolicited, “You should watch that series!” The coincidence captured meant I had to respond.

“But can a white person really tell that story?” I told her about the review.

She shrugged. “Different people have different views,” she said. “I like it.”

**Emergent: as collectivity;**

“What does it mean to function as a group in a changing environment?” asks Alexis Pauline Gumbs in *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Animals* (2020), part of the Emergent Strategy series (51). Gumbs consults sea life, animals adept at fluidity, for teachable moments and parallels to the current work of abolition. Mothering and gathering in super pods are dolphin strategies just as communities of care and cooperatives have been part of the Black Diaspora for centuries.

Caregiving. Collectivity. These ancient principles are emergent in this volume’s classroom practices. For instance, the way Matthew begins her courses with “a conversation about the various ways civic groups try to effect broad change and a low-stakes free-association exercise about the word *sugar*.” The way Gordon encourages crosstalk by assigning student support groups for writing and responding. How Blaisdell had his students enact a letter-writing campaign against unjust school dress codes, where they learned “that the power of social change begins and is sustained through collective civic action.” And how MaMa G, the elder featured in Botkin’s essay, envisions opening a “borderless university,” rooted in Jamaica but developed online, to unite local and global communities in the growth and dissemination of Indigenous knowledge.

Young Black feminist theorists and embodiment scholars like Gumbs, brown, Ware, and Kuppers—poets, memoirists, artists, scholars, and activists—also offer new cooperative models. Gumbs, for instance, collaborates with sperm whales—breathing, stretching, finding intentionality. Further, her brilliant book *Spill* (2016) is a cross-generation, trans-temporal partnership with Hortense Spillers that calls to mind collaborations with history like Philip’s *Zong!* poems, where meaning is “not to be ‘made’ but, rather, felt” (Wah), and the *Lost Privilege Company, or the book of listening* (2016), an assemblage from the archives of California’s Eugenics Records Office between 1910 and 1925 by an anonymous poetry collective.

**Emergent: *see also* emergency;**

Marvin, the man I met at the Chicago house party, spent twenty-one years in prison while his friend Ronald Kitchen was sentenced to death. I never saw Marvin again, and I lost touch with Alice, but I didn’t forget them. The tangle of connections and resonances remained emergent for me, demanding my continuing attention.

I learned that while Ronald was in prison, he became one of the “Death Row 10,” Black men tortured and wrongfully accused by Burge and his gang of corrupt cops. Ronald went on to write his story in his 2018 book *My Midnight Years: Surviving Jon Burge’s Police Torture Ring and Death Row*. In a 2019 interview, he and one of his coauthors, Thai Jones, spoke about the police brutality that called to mind so many descriptions in British antislavery writing. They also spoke about the importance of storytelling.

Marvin and Ronald may never have been exonerated if activists on the outside, including Ronald’s mother, and, it turns out, Alice and some of the people at her house party in June 2013, had not made their innocence a major story in Chicago. The activists’ work centered on building narratives around Martin and Ronald and other wrongly convicted Black men. “It was storytelling that really did work this amazing revolution in people’s consciousness,” said Jones (Kitchen). The stories eventually engaged the news media, lawmakers, and people like Jesse Jackson, finally forcing Chicago to pass a reparations package, the first of its kind in the country. The legislation provides compensation, restitution, and rehabilitation services for those tortured by Jon Burge.

Recently, Marvin joined Alice for a presentation of Alice’s co-edited book, *The Long Term: Resisting Life Sentences, Working toward Freedom* (2018). The book contains an essay by adrienne maree brown. Ronald is now an activist speaking out against police brutality and corruption. Even so, police continue to harass him. Whenever he’s back in Chicago visiting relatives, as he explained in the 2019 interview, police stop him numerous times, a reminder of the ruthless stop-and-frisk policies he grew up with on the South Side.

Now, however, the routine is different. When the police pull him over, Ronald signifies. He always says, “Officer, why are you pulling me over?” The officer will reply: “Your seatbelt.” But Ronald has tinted windows, and he points this out. Finally, the officer says, “Is this your car?” “Yes, it is,” Ronald says in a calm, steady voice. “Where did you get this Mercedes Benz?” the officer demands. “Well, officer,” Ronald says, “you all bought this for me” (Kitchen).

**Emergent: and the future**

What does the future of Romantic pedagogy look like? The essays in this volume offer some direction. In the spirit of multiplicity and nonlinearity, Botkin reports, “I incorporated interviews, images, and films to complement and challenge the conventions of literary historiography.” Gordon includes the speculative mode, teaching authors like Mat Johnson, Celu Amberstone, and Octavia Butler, while Fay focuses on Afrofuturism with the film *Black Panther* (2018) and N. K. Jemisin’s “How Long ’til Black Future Month?” Such texts, she says, present a way of talking about the future in terms other than intergenerational trauma and posthumanism.

I am grateful to Joselyn M. Almeida and Amelia Worsley for editing this powerful constellation of essays and for inviting me to respond and giving me room to offer a few of my own pedagogical practices. To begin with, I want to advocate for new ways of writing scholarship and assigning student work. Part of the power of brown’s *Emergent Strategy*, after all, is its form. An assemblage of narratives, memories, theories, spells, poetry, lists, assessment sheets, oral histories, questions, anecdotes, guiding quotations, icons, images, and Afro-futures. Such an approach to Romantic scholarship and classroom work can help liberate the field. I wholly support Kathleen Stewart’s argument that generalized terms like “neoliberalism, advanced capitalism, and globalization . . . do not in themselves begin to describe the situation we find ourselves in. The notion of a totalized system, of which everything is always already somehow a part, is not helpful (to say the least) in the effort to approach a weighted and reeling present” (5). Equally, I’m in line with brown’s recommendation that we need to “give each other more time to feel, to be in our humanity” (105).

The center of my pedagogical practice today compels students to experiment with modes of expression and to co-create with whatever texts we’re discussing. I present them with dozens of forms, written and otherwise: letters, manifestos, photo essays, short films, fragments, artist books, mixed media collages, erasure poetry, assemblage poetry, catalogs, almanacs, and indexes, to name a few. I ask them to experiment on even the most scholarly projects. I also encourage them to feel. I value experience over explication of literary works, ordinary affects over totalizing systems. In my own writing, I’ve pursued an emergent scholarship, one mixed up and messy, nonlinear and adaptive, rooted in feeling and imagining as much as thinking. Which is why, these last years, I’ve been compiling a catalog of emotions to use as a resource. Not big, singular emotions like fear or shock or sudden love, but the complex, contradictory, ambivalent churning inside us as we try to find stability in an unstable universe, as we try to put past and present in place, as we try to find new forms and expressions for the emergent present.

And then, suddenly, some appear from a corner of the world, and we are moved, as when Amanda Gorman stood at the podium during the presidential inauguration on January 20, 2021, and her words, emerging, held us all—not just America, but the world:

We will rebuild, reconcile and recover

and every known nook of our nation

and every corner called our country,

our people diverse and beautiful will emerge . . .

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1. Thanks to my colleague Aaron Oforlea for inserting this sentence and offering other insights in early drafts of this essay. See also Alexander (2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See especially Baer’s recent *Beyond the Usual Beating* (2021). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. This archival work became the basis of the eight-volume *Slavery, Abolition, and Emancipation: Writings in the British Romantic Period*, published by Routledge (then Pickering and Chatto) in 1999. I served as co-general editor with Peter J. Kitson. Individual volume editors were Sukhdev Sandu, David Dabydeen, Alan Richardson, Jeffrey Cox, Srivinas Aravamudan, and Alan Bewell, with Anne K. Mellor and James Walvin as advisory editors. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. As Saidiya Hartman keenly observes in “Venus in Two Acts,” the archive of slavery is a scandalous place where “infelicitous speech, obscene utterances, and perilous commands give birth to the characters we stumble upon in the archive. Given the condition in which we find them, the only certainty is that we will lose them again, that they will expire or elude our grasp or collapse under the pressure of inquiry” (6). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. This quote was lightly edited for clarity; the full account is republished in the 2004 volume I co-edited with Alan Richardson, *Early Black British Writing* (337–40). I’m especially grateful to Richardson for his pioneering work on antislavery and Black writers during the Romantic period and for mentoring me during my career. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)