Tunyuhan: From the Field to the Classroom

Frances Botkin (Towson University)

Abstract

This essay introduces strategies for reading and writing about Romantic-era antislavery literature in efforts to animate colonial textuality with Afro-Caribbean creative expressions. In this process, I am guided by the Jamaican concept of *tunyuhan* (“turn your hand”), or the practice of using available resources or materials to fashion something new and sustainable. My fieldwork in Jamaica and my collaboration with the Charles Town Maroons have informed my research methods, and I bring these inventive, dynamic practices into the classroom. Interweaving Romantic-period writing with contemporary, nonliterary, and occasionally disturbing texts, we consider ways that in reframing the past and interrogating its brutal aftermaths, we might imagine a better future.

Reading literature about slavery gives students a glimpse into Black lives in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but that’s not enough. Romantic-era accounts of slavery can whitewash the harrowing realities of plantation life, and even some authors of these texts acknowledge the ways their work has endured the interventions of their editors or imagined audiences. Whether excerpted, edited and “mard” (John Gabriel Stedman), transcribed or “pruned” (Mary Prince), “styled” (Olaudah Equiano), or “soiled” (William Earle), these texts bear the marks of the literary and social institutions and cultures that produced them. My pedagogical approach relies on introducing students to other kinds of texts beyond Romantic-era narratives to animate colonial textuality with the creative expressions of Afro-Caribbean culture, which, in revising the past, imagines and nourishes future worlds. Inspired by Afro-Jamaican “tun yuh han mek fashion” techniques of improvisation and sustainability, I work with these materials, often contemporary and nonliterary, to refashion studies in Romanticism.

Gaama Gloria Simms (she goes by the honorific “MaMa G”), a Trelawny Maroon and Rastafarian, taught me about *tunyuhan*. The term refers to the Jamaican proverb “tun yuh han (turn your hand) [and] mek (make) fashion,” or to make the best use of available resources to create something new and sustainable. Afrocentric and inherently revolutionary, tunyuhan, as Kaiton Williams argues, “is tied up with the multiple and evolving sources of income and pastimes from which we source our identity” (par. 5).[[1]](#endnote-1) MaMa G, for example, plans to create and market a line of clothing and accessories made from repurposed materials as part of a therapy program for abused or vulnerable women to give them emotional and economic support. She aims also to establish small farms for self-subsistence, thus empowering Jamaican women and their communities. Taking her social and intellectual work abroad through invited lectures and workshops, MaMa G envisions opening a “borderless university,” located in Jamaica but developed online, to unite local and global communities in the project of disseminating indigenous knowledge. MaMa G’s financial circumstances—in part a rejection of modern capitalism—have inspired her to create alternative modes of survival that rely on resourcefulness, improvisation, and adaptability. Inspired by MaMa G and intrigued by the concept of tunyuhan, I try to apply its inventive, collaborative practices to my teaching and research.

<Figure 1 here. Caption: MaMa G. Author’s collection.>

**Tunyuhan in the Field**

I first met MaMa G through my research on the notorious Jamaican fugitive Three-Fingered Jack (Jack Mansong), as I tracked stories about the Maroons who killed him. Looking back, I realize that our first meeting taught me to (try to) relax into a kind of nonteleological, suspended (sometimes surreal) state, very different from the structure and solipsism of archival pursuits. “Everyday life is our classroom,” MaMa G has explained to me, and “if you are not living it, you are so far from it [knowledge].” Fieldwork in Jamaica has taught me to find knowledge everywhere, reveling in what Paul Youngquist calls “ambient knowledge” (218).[[2]](#endnote-2) I have found it in the “yards” (homes) of contemporary Maroons, in conversations with taxi drivers, with fellow passengers on buses, in rum shops, at music events, on road trips, and etched in the landscape of the island; I’ve had conversations about Three-Fingered Jack in kitchens, in farmyards, on hiking trails, in rivers, on mountains, and in bat-filled caves. Cooperative, networked, improvisational, and dynamic, these perspectives have helped me to, as Bob Marley would put it, “lively up” my research.

The connections I’ve made in Jamaica took time and tunyuhan to evolve into collaboration. My fieldwork began with the Maroons of Charles Town, when their remarkable colonel, the late Frank Lumsden, introduced me to his community and, indirectly, to MaMa G.[[3]](#endnote-3) I first met Colonel Lumsden at Kingston’s Red Bones Blues Café in 2008, upon his delivery of one of his paintings to its proprietor and our mutual friend, Evan Williams. We had been hearing about each other for months. Over cold Red Stripe beers, I asked Colonel Lumsden if I might visit Charles Town to interview him and others about Three-Fingered Jack. As it happened, Colonel Lumsden had been looking for an academic to organize an international conference in Charles Town to fulfill his vision of a global indigenous community. We struck a deal, and this relationship continues to enrich and beautifully complicate my life, even after his death in 2015. I traveled to Portland, Jamaica, in June 2009 to help establish the first International Charles Town Maroon Conference, and in those summer months I spent time with Colonel Sterling of Moore Town, Marcia “Kim” Douglas (now Acting Colonel of Charles Town), Lynette Wilkes, Worries McCurbin, Brother Isaac Bernard, Keith Lumsden, and other Windward Maroons, building relationships that have grown since.[[4]](#endnote-4) It took another two years for me to meet MaMa G, entirely by chance, through Colonel Prehay of the Scots Hall Maroons.

I met with Colonel Prehay in the temporary office of a visiting Maroon official in uptown Kingston. I found the space (with some effort) in a residential building adjacent to the wedding-cake-shaped Devon House, an estate built in 1881 by Jamaica’s first Black millionaire. In their distinctive hand-crafted coconut hats, Col. Prehay and MaMa G sat patiently in the waiting area amidst the pastel décor of the mysterious office, and I awkwardly asked questions about Three-Fingered Jack. Neither had much to say about him. But MaMa G did have quite a bit to say about Indigenous women, the Trelawny Maroons, and the power of improvisation for sustainability. I didn’t get information for my book that day, but I decided to follow my instincts, realizing when she invited me to her home that I had an opportunity to learn from this wise woman.

A few days later and after some logistical mishaps, I arrived at MaMa G’s East Kingston home with what would become my customary offering: a pineapple, four Red Stripes, and an orange juice for her granddaughter, Cookie. MaMa G’s East Kingston “yard” provided a shady, breezy haven, with multiple signs of her community involvement in evidence. I wasn’t sure exactly what I was doing there because MaMa G had expressed a marked lack of interest in Three-Fingered Jack. But I felt drawn to her energy, and our initial conversations focused on her frustrated departure from the social-work program at the University of the West Indies and her subsequent commitment to grassroots community organizing. That afternoon MaMa G introduced me to the concept of tunyuhan as she carefully stitched an elaborate hat wrought with coconut husk and recycled thread, a creation she would proudly wear as she delivered a talk to the United Nations several years later. Instead of extricating facts about Three-Fingered Jack, I developed strategies for acquiring knowledge beyond the archive. I learned to slow down, listen, wait, and even let go of (or at least defer) my intended goals. I found that knowledge should be about exchange rather than extraction and that it requires openness, creativity, and improvisation. These skills help in the classroom, too.

**Tunyuhan in the Classroom**

I teach at a large public university, and most English professors have limited opportunities to teach classes in their areas of specialization because the number of majors has been declining, as part of a national trend. When we offer Romanticism or the long eighteenth century, we face extra pressure from students to keep it fresh and relevant to our increasingly diverse student population. I use tunyuhan to make available a more textured and topical understanding of Romantic antislavery texts. Motivated by my Jamaican research and the interdisciplinarity of the Maroon conference, I use the resources available to me, borrowing from other fields, experimenting with different genres, and branching into other centuries. I used this approach in an upper-level seminar for English majors that focused on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century representations of slavery.

I designed the course to interweave colonial and postcolonial literary and nonliterary texts. With tunyuhan’s multiplicity in mind, I incorporated interviews, images, and films to complement and challenge the conventions of literary historiography. Organized chronologically, the class began with travel writing (Lydia Maria Child’s *Narrative of Joanna; An Emancipated Slave, of Surinam* [1838], extracted from John Gabriel Stedman’s narrative of his military expedition to Surinam) and transitioned to Eurocentric fiction (John Earle’s *Obi; or, The History of Three-Fingered Jack* [1800] and Victor Hugo’s *Bug-Jargal* [1826]). We followed fiction with the voices of formerly enslaved people (Mary Prince’s *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave* [1831] and Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* [1789]). And we finished with contemporary Jamaican fiction (Marlon James’s *The Book of Night Women* [2009]). For the purposes of this essay, I will discuss only my classroom use of Child, Earle, Prince, and James, situating these texts within larger cultural and creative contexts. The Maroons played a significant role in my course partly because they are so often neglected, but also because their cultural and spiritual practices emphasize the connections I want to make between past, present, and future. Each unit also included the creative expressions of contemporary Afro-Jamaicans, disrupting the linearity of the syllabus to suggest the ways that the past leaves its mark on the present, as well as the ways that reimagining the past can inspire future generations.

Tunyuhan practices will vary in the hands of different teachers and scholars because the method involves the creative pursuit of individual interests and inspirations. One makes the best use of the available resources, whatever they may be for that person. Rather than following a list of suggested texts, videos, or websites, the teacher/scholar will experiment with unique combinations of texts or ideas. Dynamic and inventive, tunyuhan opens up possibilities and connections.[[5]](#endnote-5)

My work with the annual International Charles Town Maroon Conference and Festival has increasingly informed my teaching as well as my research. Set in the Asafu Yard—once a communal space to prepare for battle—it combines academic panels with drumming, dancing, wellness workshops, and sacred ritual. Interdisciplinary, intergenerational, and collaborative, this event takes academics out of their comfort zone and creates connections with contemporary Maroons, local Jamaicans, and other international scholars. Researchers meet the descendants of the people they study and teach; they hear their voices, listen to their stories, and dance to their music. Literary scholars mingle with geographers, geneticists with poets, and Maroons with ethnomusicologists.

Many of the visiting scholars fold archival time into this trip, and their research shifts as they move through experiences with people that, unlike archival records, speak to and with them. Experiencing alternative models for the production of knowledge, participants return to their campuses with more than the photocopies and facts that serve the archival imperative and its hierarchies. I’ve worked to bring this kind of knowledge into my classroom by using (filmed, digitized, or recorded) Maroon stories, songs, rituals, and artwork, for example, to enliven the print texts. This “undisciplined” mode of assembly responds to the call for what Christina Sharpe terms “wake work” and attends to “the largeness that is Black Life, Black life insisted from death” (17). These materials can also show the limitations, porousness, and vulnerabilities of logocentric knowledge.

Stedman, author of *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (1796), bemoaned the editorial intrusions that “mard” his narrative (as cited by Stedman, xlix). An officer in the Dutch army deployed to the colony of Surinam to quell the revolt of the Maroons in 1772, Stedman submitted his narrative to a London publisher and bookseller, Joseph Johnson. The 1796 published version, much to Stedman’s irritation, differed significantly from his original account, particularly in its representation of Joanna (documented in Richard and Sally Price’s 1998 transcription of his 1790 manuscript). I won’t rehearse here the fascinating intricacies of what Dustin Kennedy has termed the “Stedman Archive,” though I did begin there with my students.[[6]](#endnote-6) I chose for my course text, however, not Stedman’s narrative but Child’s extraction of it, *Narrative of Joanna; An Emancipated Slave, of Surinam,* first published in an 1834 gift book, *The Oasis.*[[7]](#endnote-7)I wanted to track different kinds of mediations that feature in writings about slavery, even when produced by white men with relative power.

Child appropriated Stedman’s narrative for her own abolitionist purposes, but not without ideological contradictions. For example, she admires the domestic affections of Stedman and Joanna, yet she insists that abolitionists do not “induce anyone to marry a mulatto, even should their lives be saved by such an one” (3). Her concerns with propriety and miscegenation extend to her visual choices. Johnson’s edition includes illustrations by the British engraver and portraitist Thomas Holloway. Among them is an image of a bare-breasted Joanna; Child replaced this image with a more modest one by a Boston engraver, George Girdler Smith. We studied both, which prompted one irritated but engaged student to ask, “What’s up with her boobie?” A good question. It’s a cover-up. Jenny Sharpe has suggested that cloaking Joanna’s breasts desexualizes and yet emphasizes her role as wife and mother, registering the gender politics of women abolitionists like Child (85). My students and I agreed that it also covers up the violence visited upon enslaved women, whitewashing the realities of sexual exploitation in the colonies. In addition, Child almost entirely excludes the Maroons with whom Joanna had family connections and whose rebellions brought Stedman to Surinam in the first place. I had the students read a few Maroon-focused chapters from Stedman’s narrative with some Maroon historiography, which sparked their interest in the history of these self-emancipated Afro-Caribbean peoples.

Improvising, I introduced some additional background on the Maroons of Suriname and Jamaica and showed them a video of MaMa G’s enstoolment (installation) by the Okanisi Maroons as the first woman Gaama, the highest political position among the Maroons of Suriname (“Installation”).[[8]](#endnote-8) A historic ceremony performed in Charles Town by spiritual leaders of the Surinamese and Jamaican Maroons, it showed how Afrocentric rituals are preserved, honored, and practiced in the Caribbean today. Because the ceremony took place at the Maroon conference, students witnessed the interactions between the local community and visiting scholars at this particularly moving event, showing them a different kind of scholarly method.

Next, the class viewed a short docudrama about Nanny of the Maroons, *Queen* *Nanny: Legendary Maroon Chieftainess* (2015), featuring MaMa G in a dramatization of the title character. Overtly addressing the dearth of archival material about Nanny (only four sources), Roy T. Anderson’s film features oral histories, music, and dance, and it includes interviews with Maroon leaders, Olympic athletes, politicians, and historians. My students especially liked the footage of a group of scholars and Maroons hiking to the remote former military stronghold of Nanny Town. As one student wrote in a response paper: “The expedition to Nanny Town up in the mountains shows that even now islanders still hold to these ancient places and honor the spirits of the past there. I was surprised to learn that many of the places in Jamaican folklore still exist such as Nanny Town to remember a leader who took down the British, a kick-butt woman who could catch bullets in her butt.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

The students enjoyed the film, so I showed them additional video clips of contemporary Jamaican Maroons performing or explaining their lifeways (“Colonel Frank Lumsden,” “Charlestown Maroons,” and “Charlestown Drummers”). Another student wrote that “hearing from local Maroons such as Colonel Frank Lumsden and Delano Douglas gives the world a better idea of Maroons as lovers of nature and defenders of their cultural history in comparison with racist, colonialist generalizations that we read.” Other students agreed that the paratextual materials “made Maroon history real” for them, and when they returned to the course texts, they better understood the brave rebels omitted almost entirely from Child’s text.

Earle’s epistolary novel *Obi* likewise elides the role of the Maroons in his account of the fugitive from slavery who was captured and killed by them in 1780. Earle’s novel falls short of its abolitionist reach, and though it misrepresents the free status of Maroons, it reveals the complex dynamics of a colonial state that pitted Afro-Jamaicans against one another. The weepy, unreliable narrator, however, inspires little confidence, especially in his repetition of the phrase “I am no author” (118). Famously overwrought and ideologically incoherent, Earle’s “sentimentalist abolitionism” (50), though brilliantly edited and annotated by Srinivas Aravamudan in the 2005 Broadview Press edition, has never been a crowd-pleaser for my students.[[10]](#endnote-10)

I can’t blame the students for their frustration with Earle’s *Obi*,against which we (much more to their interest) explored contemporary images of Jack and the Maroon who killed him. First, we studied the Jamaican artist Omari “Afrikan” Ra’s extraordinary painting of Three-Fingered Jack (n.d.), and the class listened to my recorded interview with the artist, who spoke of the influences of revolutionaries Makandal and Dutty Boukman. The students used Ra’s image to imagine a more nuanced picture of the infamous outlaw. They commented on his hard, intense stare and the words etched around his neck, perhaps suggesting the ways he’s been imprisoned by print. The students also found it interesting to think about Jack’s relationship to Quashie (also called “John Reeder”), the Maroon who took off Jack’s fingers and later killed him. Colonel Lumsden’s stunning painting of Quashie, in white face paint and rendered in “ambush,” depicts the complexity of this underrepresented figure in Jack’s story.[[11]](#endnote-11) One student commented, “The depth and intricacy of Quashie’s eyes and the surrounding patterns of greenery remind us that, in the end, Quashie is still a Maroon and that he would make his own ruthless decisions” (Fig. 2). These Afrocentric images of Jack and his killer usefully trouble Eurocentric textual accounts of colonial Jamaica with their depictions of proud Black warriors forced into opposition with one another by a brutal system.

<Figure 2 here. Caption: Colonel Lumsden. *Quashie.* Oil on canvas. Circa 2009. Lumsden family collection.>

To conclude the Three-Fingered Jack unit, we watched clips of dancehall/reggae artist Buju Banton’s “Long Walk to Freedom” tour. This self-identified Maroon was released from a U.S. prison in December 2018, reminding my students that the prison-industrial complex functions as an extension of plantation slavery (Kreps). Buju Banton represents a potent expression of Black agency, harnessing the legacy of the island’s first freedom fighters. Putting Earle’s *Obi* in conversation with contemporary Jamaican art and music amplifies Jack’s militant legacy of uncompromising resistance.

***The Book of Night Women***

In 2009, the same year Buju Banton was sentenced to ten years in prison, Marlon James published *The Book of Night Women,* a grisly reimagining of Jamaican plantation slavery that insists upon and complicates Black agency in a system that rewards accommodation. James’s novel links thematically and geographically to Earle’s *Obi* (and to Buju Banton), and it also echoes and revises key moments from *The History of Mary Prince,* which the class had read just before James.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Much like Child’s *Joanna*, Prince’s antislavery narrative underwent a complex editorial process, one that continues into the twenty-first century (Sinanan). Prince’s sponsor, Thomas Pringle (secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society), claimed that the illiterate Prince herself suggested to him the “idea of writing [her] history” so that “the good people in England might hear from a slave what a slave had felt and suffered” (3). Though Pringle claimed in his preface to Prince’s account that “no fact of importance” had been omitted or “a single circumstance or sentiment” added, his significant supplement offers materials that at once substantiate and contradict his defense of her character and the validity of her antislavery narrative.[[13]](#endnote-13) Subject to the Anti-Slavery Society’s notions of decency, Prince’s account itself (like Child’s *Joanna*) reveals only insinuations of her sexual encounters, solicited and not, after it was transcribed and bowdlerized by the Methodist abolitionist Susanna Moodie and “pruned” (3) by Pringle.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Prince’s narrative alludes to sexual assault by her “indecent” enslaver but goes no further than describing his “ugly fashion of stripping himself quite naked” and ordering her “to wash him in a tub of water” (24). When she resisted, he would beat her severely, once prompting her to run away until the next morning. Prince’s account interweaves silences about rape with acts of resistance. Yet even as Prince censors her narrative to protect herself from allegations of promiscuity, Pringle included in his supplement a letter that mentions Prince’s sexual relationship with an unnamed “Capt.” and noted that “such connexions are so common” as to be almost universal (51). Pringle’s ambiguating supplemental materials gave my students the tools to piece together a version of her experience that reveals Black agency and exposes some of the truths (the “common connexions”) concealed by a white literary culture. But it was James’s deployment of Prince’s narrativein *The Book of Night Women* that students most fully engaged with. In his riveting novel, James adapts Prince’s bathtub incident to foreground rather than silence the violence of rape on the plantation, imagining, too, how revenge might look.

In *The Book of Night Women,* the mixed-race protagonist, Lilith, spills hot soup on a visitor while serving dinner and endures daily lashings and a gang rape as punishment until her enslaver sends her to be seasoned by his future parents-in-law. At her new post, Lilith’s rage boils over, and when Massa Roget demands his bath-time sexual servicing (clearly evoking Prince), Lilith drowns him and sets fire to the house to hide the evidence, killing all its inhabitants, adults and children, enslaved and free. Despite this act, Lilith resists joining plans for a multi-plantation rebellion engineered by the enslaved head domestic, Homer, and Lilith’s half-sisters, the titular “Night Women.” Instead, Lilith becomes mistress to the new overseer, Robert Quinn, because she needs his protection from her previous tormentors. Already scarred with a “quilt” on her back, Lilith fears the fate of Homer, who once ran away, and when caught by Maroons, underwent a public flogging: “She cover up in scar big like animal stripe, her titties chop up and scar up so that is only nipple left to tell you that she born to suckle” (382). Under Quinn’s protection, Lilith suspects she can keep her own breasts intact and (like Joanna) covered. Ambivalent and with divided loyalties, Lilith at once accommodates and undermines the plantation system, oblivious to the contradictions that link her to the Maroons, whom the novel frequently criticizes for their collaboration with the British.[[15]](#endnote-15) James suffers no cover-ups.

*The Book of Night Women* reveals the brutalities as well as the contradictions of plantation slavery, a system that rewards accommodation. Even the rebellious Homer wrangles considerable power as head domestic, a position from which she gained access to literacy. When she teaches young Lilith to read, she explains, “Every time you open this [a book] you free” (57). Skilled in the spiritual as well as the literary arts, Homer practices obeah and myal, and she guides the Night Women in African-descended rituals that challenge European systems of power and knowledge. Homer works the system, using all tools available, and she, like Lilith, has thus become entangled with the power structure they resist.[[16]](#endnote-16)

*The Book of Night Women* performs the tensions between literary and vernacular culture, invoking the dual relationship that Sylvia Wynter identifies between the “plantation” (the educated artist) and the “plot” (folk), particularly in its revelation of Lovey Quinn, Lilith’s daughter, in the final pages.[[17]](#endnote-17) Lilith schooled Lovey with a reading list that includes Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), Henry Fielding’s *Joseph Andrews* (1742), and Edward Long’s *The History of Jamaica* (1774). Lovey remarks that Lilith taught her to write—“the most forbidden of thing”—so that “when the time come to write her song she have somebody true to be her witness” (426–7). Lovey uses her literacy to document the Night Women’s brave battles and violent deaths, learned through Homer and Lilith from songs devised and disseminated by Lilith’s half-sister, Gorgon; these songs celebrated the Night Women and scorned the white creoles, who tried but failed to contain their circulation.[[18]](#endnote-18) In large part a text about textual memory (as the title suggests) and its relationship to its folk counterpart, James’s narrative probes the complexities of telling stories about slavery, then and now.

The inclusion of *The Book of Night Women* on my syllabus raised some eyebrows. Indeed, contemporary debates about content warnings in the classroom have in some cases prompted institutional resistance to exposing the gruesome details and residues of the Atlantic slave trade. Yet the study of texts about slavery should, with all due respect and sensitivity toward the experiences or traumas of students, confront and illuminate the historical realities that have shaped the anti-Blackness and structural racism of current cultures. My “note on content” in my syllabus acknowledges that these texts touch on the lived experiences of some students more than others, demanding respect and tolerance as we move through difficult material. James’s unapologetically graphic language and violent imagery understandably disturbed the students, but it also extended and enriched our ongoing conversation about the sanitization of representations of slavery.

Many of the students wrote their seminar papers about *The Book of Night Women*, because, they explained, they found it strangely compelling and unlike anything they had ever read. Almost every page reveals some devastating detail of slavery as James harrowingly pursues the elisions and ambivalences sometimes found even in overtly antislavery texts. James has been dubbed the “literary Tarantino” (the class also watched Quentin Tarantino’s *Django Unchained* [2012]), and as a gay Black Jamaican, James explains that he tries to complicate rather than ignore the island’s past and present violence, writing instead about “a Jamaica that never gets written” (as cited by Cain, n. pag.; see also Akbar). As an academic (a professor at Macalester College) and a Booker Prize–winning author, James occupies the space of the archive, but he uses that access to disrupt it, fully and critically aware of the contradictions therein.[[19]](#endnote-19)

Critics have convincingly written about the “Power of the Neo-Slave Narrative Genre” and its ability to simultaneously attend to the past and future (Anim-Addo and Lima 6).[[20]](#endnote-20) I find James’s novel an especially useful though unsettling way to reconsider the history of slavery and its Romantic-period representations. Even arguably antislavery texts and politically aware interpretations of them reflect the structural racism of the institutions (nineteenth-century British plantation and/or literary culture and twenty-first-century academia, for example) that participate in the cultural production of race. In putting the creative expressions of contemporary Black culture in conversation with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literary texts, I hope to move beyond glimpses of Black lives under slavery into broader landscapes that privilege Black agency, resistance, and life.

Interweaving different kinds of texts in new combinations, I conjure the spirit of tunyuhan and its commitment to creating new things from old materials. This idea is not new to Romanticism. Mary Shelley, for example, writes in her introduction to *Frankenstein* (1831) that invention is borne out of chaos and “consists in . . . the power of moulding and *fashioning* ideas suggested to it” (viii, emphasis added). As her novel shows, people tend to fear what they view to be “dark” or “shapeless,” but the modern academy generally, and the field of Romanticism particularly, could benefit from some creative if uncomfortable admixture to animate existing materials. Bakary Diaby has asked Romanticists to “do the work” to change the way we study Blackness in Romanticism (249). Until we have a new system (and I’m not holding my breath), we can experiment with and refashion the one we have.

**Coda**

In the spring of 2020, I was going to take a group of students on a study abroad program to Jamaica, bringing my classroom into the field. Like most research and all conference travel that year, “Histories of Resistance in Jamaica” was cancelled by Covid-19. Instead, my institution asked me to develop a four-week online course that would give my students the Jamaica experience (!). Improvising with the medley of materials available to me (some from the class I just described), I created the course, including a public event using Blackboard Collaborate Ultra that featured MaMa G. Instead of the activities she and I had planned for my fifteen Jamaica-bound students, she gave an interactive workshop for forty students and faculty titled “Re-awakening the Knowledge and Wisdoms of Indigenous Women in Times of Covid-19.” With the (occasionally blurry) Ultra phone app and the Blue Mountains misting over the Asafu Yard, MaMa G created a unique virtual space for student engagement.

In a conversation that invoked the creative invention and adaptability of tunyuhan, MaMa G emphasized “Maroon principles of survival,” grafted from “knowledge [we] brought from Africa, learned from the [indigenous] Taino, and even now it continues” (Simms).[[21]](#endnote-21) Calling for a “shift in consciousness,” a “reawakening,” she urges a return to indigenous knowledge that values other cultures and respects the natural environment from which “we can always find a solution.” Wellness, she concluded, “comes from communication between body, earth, mind, spirit, and land—it’s all part of our healing.”

As teachers of texts about slavery, we can show students that its aftermaths are ongoing and interrelated, as demonstrated in part by the racism, police brutality, and unrest during the 2020 Covid-19 crisis, a public health catastrophe particularly critical for underserved Black communities. The creative and exciting global responses to these events signaled, as MaMa G suggests, an outcry and an opportunity for change. We can remake Romanticism, changing our approach to texts about slavery not only to confront and illuminate their violence and amnesia but also to incorporate and celebrate the “largeness that is Black life” (Christina Sharpe 17). If we want our institutions and disciplines to survive, we need to work with the materials we have to create something new and sustainable. Tun yuh han mek fashion.

**Bibliography**

Akbar, Arifa. “Marlon James: I Don’t Believe in PG Violence.” *The Independent*, Oct. 15, 2015. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/marlon-james-i-don-t-believe-in-pg-violence-a6694431.html>.

Anim-Addo, Joan, and Maria Helena Lima. “The Power of the Neo-Slave Narrative Genre.” *The Neo-Slave Narrative Genre, Part 2*, edited by Anim-Addo and Lima. Special issue, *Callaloo* 41, no. 1 (2018): 1–8.

Bilby, Kenneth. “Maroon Autonomy in Jamaica.” *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2001). <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/maroon-autonomy-jamaica>.

———. *True-Born Maroons.* U of Florida P, 2008.

Cain, Sian. “Marlon James: ‘Writers of Colour Pander to the White Woman.’” *Guardian Online*, Nov. 30, 2015.<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/nov/30/marlon-james-writers-of-colour->pander-white-woman-man-booker-event-brief-history-seven-killings.

Campbell, Mavis C. *The Maroons of Jamaica*, *1655–1796.* Bergin and Garvey, 1988.

Carey, Beverly. *The Maroon Story: The Authentic and Original History of the Maroons of Jamaica, 1440–1880.* Agouti, 1997.

“Charlestown Drummers and Dancers.” YouTube, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4b5slqO6Rtc.

“Charlestown Maroons—Delano Douglas.” YouTube, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5QLnpA9rJ8Q>.

Child, Lydia Maria, ed. *Narrative of Joanna; An Emancipated Slave, of Surinam: From Stedman’s Narrative of a Five Year’s Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* [1838]. Forgotten Books, 2017.

“Colonel Frank Lumsden on Freedom.” YouTube, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NszKY-8wRY0>.

Craton, Michael. *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies.* Cornell Univ. Press, 1983.

Diaby, Bakary. “Black Women and/in the Shadow of Romanticism.” *European Romantic Review* 30, no. 3 (2019): 249–54.

Earle, William. *Obi; or, The History of Three-Fingered Jack.* Edited by Srinivas Aravamudan. Broadview, 2005.

Equiano, Olaudah. *The Interesting Narrative* *and Other Writings.* Penguin Classics, 2003.

Ferguson, Moira. “Introduction to the Revised Edition.” *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave, Related by Herself*, edited by Moira Ferguson, 1–51. Univ. of Michigan Press, 1997.

Gwilliam, Tassie. “‘Scenes of Horror,’ Scenes of Sensibility: Sentimentality and Slavery in John Gabriel Stedman’s *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*.” *ELH* 65, no. 3 (1998): 653–73.

Harrison, Sheri-Marie. “Creative Rewritings of Early Caribbean Texts.” Vol. 1 of *Caribbean Literature in Transition*,edited by Evelyn O’Callaghan and Tim Watson, 359–74. Cambridge Univ. Press, 2020.

———. “Marlon James and the Metafiction of the New Black Gothic.” Special issue edited by Michael A. Bucknor and Kezia Page. *Journal of West Indian Fiction* 26, no. 2 (2018): 1–17.

“Installation of Gaama Gloria Simms 2014.” YouTube, June 22, 2014. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0pXhVHCFELA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0pXhVHCFELA)).

James, Marlon. *The Book of Night Women*.Riverhead, 2009.

Kennedy, Dustin. “Going Viral: Stedman’s *Narrative,* Textual Variation, and Life in Atlantic Studies.” *Circulations: Romanticism and the Black Atlantic*. Edited by Paul Youngquist and Frances Botkin. *Romantic Circles* *Praxis* (2011). <https://romantic-circles.org/praxis/circulations/HTML/praxis.2011.kennedy.html>.<RC URL>

Kopytoff, Barbara Klamon. “Colonial Treaty as Sacred Charter of the Jamaican Maroons.” *Ethnohistory* 26, no. 1 (1978): 45–65.

Kreps, Daniel. “Buju Banton Released from Prison after Serving Seven Years on Drug Charges.” *Rolling Stone*, Dec. 9, 2018. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/buju-banton-prison-release-766623/>.

Lane, Jhordan. “Re-evaluating Religion and Superstition: Obeah and Christianity in Marlon James’s *The Book of Night Women* and William Earle Jr.’s *Obi, or The History of Three-Fingered Jack.*” Special issue, edited by Michael A. Bucknor and Kezia Page. *Journal of West Indian Fiction* 26, no. 2 (2018): 1–17.

Marley, Bob. “Lively Up Yourself.” *Natty Dread*. Island/Tuff Gong, 1974.

Prince, Mary. *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave.* Edited by Sarah Salih. Penguin, 2004.

Puri, Shalani. “Finding the Field: Notes on Caribbean Cultural Criticism, Area Studies, and Forms of Engagement.” *Small Axe* 17, no. 2 (2013): 58–73.

*Queen* *Nanny: Legendary Maroon Chieftainess.* Directed by Roy T. Anderson. Action 4 Reel Filmworks, 2015.

Ra, Omari “Afrikan” S. *Excavation: Head of Jack Mansong.* n.d. Artist’s possession.

Rediker, Marcus, and Peter Linebaugh. *The Many-Headed Hydra: The Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic.* Beacon, 2001.

Roberts, Neil. *Freedom as Marronage.* Univ. of Chicago Press, 2015.

Robinson, Carey. *The Fighting Maroons of Jamaica.* Collins and Sangster, 1969.

Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*.Duke Univ. Press, 2016.

Sharpe, Jenny. *Ghosts of Slavery: A Literary Archeology of Black Women’s Lives.* Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2002.

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein* [1831]. Dover, 1994.

Simms, Gloria (MaMa G). “Reawakening Practices and Wisdom of Indigenous Women in Times of Covid-19.” Blackboard Collaborate Ultra meeting for English 316, hosted by Frances Botkin. Towson University, May 6, 2020.

Sinanan, Kerry. “The ‘Slave’ as Cultural Artifact: The Case of Mary Prince.” *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 49, no. 1 (2020): 69–87.

Stedman, John. *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* [1795]. Edited by Richard Price and Sally Price. Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1998.

Todorova, Kremena. “‘I Will Say the Truth to the English People’: *The History of Mary Prince* and the Meaning of English History.” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 43, no. 3 (2001): 285–302.

Williams, Kaiton. “Tun Yuh Han Mek Fashion: Jamaican DIY and the Making of a New World.” Nov. 2012. <http://not.somu.ch/writing/jamaican-diy-critical-making.html>.

Wilson, Kathleen. “The Performance of Freedom: Maroons and the Colonial Order in Eighteenth-Century Jamaica and the Atlantic Sound.” *William and Mary Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (2009): 45–86.

Wynter, Sylvia. “Novel and History, Plot and Plantation.” *Savacou* 5 (1971): 95–102.

Youngquist, Paul. “Accidental Histories: Fieldwork among the Maroons of Jamaica.” In *Methods, Reflections, and Approaches to the Global South*, edited by Shalini Puri and Debra Castillo, 213–34. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Zips, Werner. *Black Rebels: African-Caribbean Freedom Fighters in Jamaica*. Markus Weiner, 1999.

1. Williams associates tunyuhan with the “DIY mentality” that defines the Jamaican response to “material absence” and also sees it as “a way to repair a break in the continuity of people and culture sustained in the creation of our New World” (par. 8). She writes, “All those revolutions, rebellions and projects of independence continue to be as much about making our world as about remaking our relation to it,” proposing also that Jamaican multiplicity “is central to our curious embrace of freedom: our expression of our soul and its determination” (par. 3). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Shalani Puri has proposed that we consider what she calls “fieldwork in the Humanities” for access “to knowledge and expression unavailable in print; to disallowed or delegitimized knowledges; to localized or vernacular rather than globalized knowledge and memory” (59). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Colonel Lumsden was elected in 2004, remaining in office until his death. Jamaica has four, arguably five, existing Maroon villages: Charles Town, Moore Town, Scots Hall, Accompong, and, controversially, Trelawny/Flagstaff. Maroon communities are self-governing, and in each of the Jamaican Maroon towns, the community elects a colonel or chief, who governs with the assistance of a council. However, the Jamaican government periodically challenges the economic, social, and political autonomy of the Maroons (Bilby, “Maroon Autonomy”). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The Maroon villages are traditionally divided into Windward (on the east side of the island) and Leeward (on the west side). Windward Maroon villages include Charles Town, Moore Town, and Scots Hall; those in the Leeward group are Accompong and Trelawny. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. A reviewer of this essay thoughtfully asked me what the tunyuhan approach would look like in different hands than mine, wondering, too, how or where to meet people like MaMa G. In short, every person will have a different approach based on their interests and resources. My collaboration with the Maroons and MaMa G grew from my interest in their history in relationship to my project on Three-Fingered Jack. It took years to cultivate these relationships, but the honor of their acquaintance led me to other opportunities too. The International Charles Town Maroon Conference and Festival, for example, continues to offer opportunities for professors and graduate students to engage with and learn about Maroon culture from contemporary Maroons and Indigenous peoples and scholars from around the world. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. In addition to Kennedy, see also Jenny Sharpe (2002) and Gwilliam. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. This first version was titled *Joanna, or the Female Slave: A West Indian Tale* (1834)*.* In the second version (1838), Child replaced “female slave” with “emancipated slave,” though Joanna remained enslaved until her death. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Also spelled Ga’aama, Gaa’man, and Gaa’mang. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. All student authors quoted have given permission for their statements to be shared. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Aravamudan observes that Obi “is written with a view to eliciting the feeling tear or the melancholic sigh of the sentimentalist reader and the abolitionist activist” (8). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. “Ambush” refers to the Maroon tactic of camouflage for the purposes of surprise attack. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. See Harrison (“Marlon James”) for a thoughtful reading of James’s work. She discusses James’s use of Prince’s account of Hetty’s beating to describe that of Dulcimena; she also notes some parallels to Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966)*.* In the same special issue of *Journal of West Indian Literature*, Jhordan Lane reads Earle’s *Obi* alongside James to argue that “*Night Women* reveals that colonial views on and representations of obeah were not monolithic, but rather differed a great deal depending on their opinions on the division between the natural and the supernatural” (51). See also Harrison (“Creative Rewritings”). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. When her enslaver, John Wood, refused to sell Prince her manumission, the Anti-Slavery Society petitioned Parliament (without success). The publication of her account prompted two pro-slavery attacks and a subsequent series of civil suits. See Jenny Sharpe (2002), Ferguson, and Todorova for discussions of the Prince archive. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Only in her later testimony in the court case that her former owner, Wood, brought against Pringle (and won) did Prince speak of her sexual relationships with the free Black man Oyskman and the white Captain Abbot. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. In a process that involved written documents and the ritual oath of drinking blood mixed with rum, the British negotiated a treaty with the Maroons in 1739. The British and Maroons held completely different notions about the treaty. The British viewed it as the means to control the Maroons, and the infamous ninth clause commits the Maroons to returning fugitives and putting down island rebellions. For Maroons, the treaty celebrated their victory over the English after eighty years of war. Many non-Maroon Jamaicans view the Maroons as traitors because of the treaty, not unreasonably, driving anti-Maroon sentiment in Jamaica today. MaMa G views the treaty as a “trick,” informing my view of it as yet another example of English methods of divide and conquer, pitting Afro-Jamaicans against one another. For accounts of Maroon history, see Bilby, Campbell (1988), Carey (1997), Craton (1993), Kopytoff, Rediker and Linebaugh (2001), Roberts (2015), Robinson (1969), Wilson, and Zips (1999). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. New research on Ajami script shows that writing was available as a technology in Africa since the seventh century C.E. With this in mind, she suggests, one could argue that Homer is reclaiming the written word from an African tradition and not a Western one, complicating the binary between orality and literacy that is often posited in the archive. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. In “Novel and History, Plot and Plantation,” Wynter argues that the history of Caribbean society “is that of a dual relation between plantation [the elite] and plot [the folk], the two poles which originate in a single historical process” (99). In doing so they created a folk culture that persists in resistant “secretive” histories, expressed, for example, in folk songs, kumina practices, or myal rituals (101). Wynter maintains that Caribbean literature registers the ambivalence between the plot and the plantation but sees the ambivalence as at once “the root cause of our alienation” as well as its “salvation” (99). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Lilith and Homer live out their post-rebellion lives neither free nor enslaved. During the rebellion, Lilith saves her father instead of participating in the destruction of the plantation, and afterward she remains in the house and “live[s] like a free negro” though she is not free (422). Injured almost to the point of death, Homer survives to live in the shadow of the plantation, leaving behind her scent of lemongrass, hiding forever after in the bush. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. James has blamed rejections of his work on the popularity of “cultural ventriloquism” in fiction, where white authors write “in a ‘palatable’ way about countries and cultures of which they have no experience” (as cited by Cain, n. pag.). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. See Anim-Adda and Lima’s special issue of *Callaloo* for a fantastic conversation about the genre. Invoking Stuart Hall, they urge us to consider identity as a dynamic, always-constitutive “production” (6). Their introduction (and the issue itself) nicely theorizes and performs the power of the neo-slavery genre, calling attention to its particular relevance to Black British writing as it revises “the way in which British history is understood and remembered . . . [by exploring] the continuing legacies of slavery into twenty-first-century realities—economic and social inequity, racism, and the impossibility of fully belonging—which suggests that it is only by the full avowal of the past of slavery that the present might be understood and the future imagined” (2). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. To protect students’ privacy the video capture of the Blackboard Collaborate workshop is not publicly available; quotations in the text were transcribed by the author. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)