Teaching Antislavery: Afterthoughts on a Pedagogy of Dehiscence

Sean Gordon (California State University, Fresno)

Abstract

How, as teachers of the literature and history of slavery, are we to address the fact that our classrooms and campuses are still yet structured by the social relations of slavery? Using an Afropessimist framework that alerts us to the anti-Blackness of the American academy, in particular, and colonial modernity at large, this essay discusses teaching the literature of slavery and abolition as an exploration of “the pathology of Whiteness” and “the Slave grammar of suffering.” As it takes up texts by Mat Johnson, Edgar Allan Poe, Octavia Butler, Samuel Delany, and others, the essay moves toward a pedagogy of “dehiscence” that differentiates itself from liberatory pedagogies by positioning woundedness, anger, and antiromantic selflessness alongside feelings of guilt, redemption, and consciousness-raising.

Black studies is a dehiscence at the heart of the institution and at its edge; its broken, coded documents sanction walking in another world while passing through this one, graphically disordering the administered scarcity from which black studies flows as wealth. The cultivated nature of this situated volatility, this emergent poetics of the emergency in which the poor trouble the proper, is our open secret.

—Fred Moten, “Black Op”

In this dehiscence, this break, this differential inseparability, other motives emerge; what emerges is another motif of selflessness.

—Moten, *The Universal Machine* (2018)

In the Spring semester of 2014, eighteen months prior to the course I describe in this essay, I had begun to study Afropessimism during a graduate seminar on global modernism. The following summer, when officers of the New York Police Department killed Eric Garner, when police officer Darren Wilson killed Michael Brown, when a highly militarized police force intensified its occupation of Ferguson, Missouri, Claudia Rankine published *Citizen* (2014), Black feminist activists founded the Movement for Black Lives, and Sandra Bland died in prison after her arrest following a pretextual traffic stop. Afropessimism offered an analytically rigorous and unflinching account of the paradigm of “ontological terror” (Warren) in which these events had occurred and a framework for reevaluating my fledgling pedagogical practices. Emerging in part from the acknowledgment of a continuum that links racial slavery to the anti-Blackness of contemporary Whiteness, policing, and state violence, Afropessimism challenges conventional accounts of civic reason and historical progress and produces a conceptual break to think through the paradigmatic anti-Blackness of global modernity in “the afterlife of slavery” (Hartman, *Lose Your Mother* 6).

Afropessimism explains the performance of anti-Black racism in higher education as much as it explains the performance of anti-Black policing. As context for the discussion on pedagogy that follows, I will briefly describe a spate of anti-Black violence on the campus of the University of Massachusetts Amherst that took place in the fall of 2014. Though I reproduce some of the language as it appeared on campus that fall, my purpose in doing so is not to transgress Black suffering but to refuse a practice so common to neoliberal institutionality by which systemic racism and structural violence are hushed in the service of a recommitment to the institution. At the time, the incidents I describe here led to the organization of somber events about “standing together against racism,” to sanctimonious acts of “reflection,” to repetitious commitments to “diversity and tolerance,” and to administrative calls to “work together to reaffirm our values of inclusion and respect for all.”[[1]](#endnote-1) There was little institutional recognition, however, of the well-documented history of anti-Black violence as a longstanding tenet of the academy at large, little space or outlet for the expression of Black anger, suffering, or rage, and no answer as to why incidents of anti-Black violence should lead the “community” to *come together* as opposed to *coming apart*. Christina Sharpe comments on how often “the note of a more perfect union, the note of unhearable Black suffering” is struck by leaders on occasions of anti-Black violence: a striking note that “sutures Black suffering to romance and redemption” (par. 6). It is a practice far too common that seeks, by way of anti-Black institutions, solutions to the very problems they give rise to. I therefore describe these incidents in the spirit of an antiromantic and antiredemptive abolitionism in the service of an imperfect disunion.

In October 2014, amidst the cries and lamentations of protestors responding to the killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner that summer, anti-Black hate speech was found written on the door of a dorm room shared by two Black students in Harambee, a defined residential community for African and African American students. One of the students directly targeted, an undergraduate, had recently returned from Ferguson, where he had taken part in “Ferguson October,” a coalition-building social movement later known as “Ferguson Action.” It was written on his door during the fatefully named “Columbus Day” weekend (Odam). That same weekend, someone else had written explicit hate speech ostensibly targeting Mexican and multilingual Spanish-speaking students on the door of another dorm room, and the following week, several more students were targeted by a person later identified as Devin Ayres, who was charged with property damage and arraigned in the local district court, thereby leaving a public record of his “reasoning.” According to testimony quoted in reports, Ayres wrote “n\*” on the door of one student because he knew her to be African American, while he wrote “you guys got nboyfriends” on the door of two White students because he knew one of them to be dating an African American man (Lederman, Vidales). Viewed through an Afropessimist lens, the performance of anti-Black sexual racism is neither aberrant nor anomalous but as banal and procedural as Ayres’s court testimony. In a university context, furthermore, the cop-out of White ignorance should not be allowed its ordinarily stabilizing effect for a multicultural society where education is purported to be the antidote to (rather than the cause of) anti-Black racism. There was nothing unknowing or unintentional about these acts of violence. Their intention, not to mention their effect, appears to have been to restore the order of White institutional dominance.

A year later, in the fall of 2015, I taught an introductory “Ethnic American Literature” course oriented toward transatlantic (anti)slavery literature. The course’s emphasis on the legaciesof (anti)slavery literature engaged constructions of race, gender, and minoritization in narratives of slavery, colonialism, emancipation, and political awakening in a campus climate antagonized by anti-Black violence. Some of the texts, like Olaudah Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* (1789) and Edgar Allan Poe’s *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), were drawn from the era of Romanticism, properly speaking, and animated our discussions of freedom, slavery, persuasion, and subjectivity. Most of them, however, were contemporary texts that take up Romantic-era concepts in a “speculative” framework, like Mat Johnson’s novel *Pym* (2011), Celu Amberstone’s short story “Refugees” (2004), Octavia Butler’s *Bloodchild and Other Stories* (1995/2005), and Samuel Delany’s novella *Empire Star* (1966)—all texts that engage with race, racialization, and the rule of dominance in contemporary (anti)slavery. The course I was assigned to teach, “Ethnic American Literature,” is defined by the University of Massachusetts Amherst English Department as “American literature written by and about ethnic minorities, from the earliest immigrants through the cultural representations in modern American writing,” and the course is traditionally taught as an introduction to immigrant literature, focusing either on historical breadth or on a particular literary tradition (Jewish American literature or Asian American literature, for example). Because the department has no designated undergraduate course in Black studies, however, and because the course description itself implicitly excludes the forced migration of the transatlantic slave trade from the descriptive purview of the “ethnic,” I decided to create a version of the course that would reckon with the apparent unassimilability of racial slavery to the “immigrant” experience. Thus, two other themes drove my choice of the “sci-fi” texts on the syllabus, namely (time) travel and consciousness. More like an introductory (critical) ethnic studies or Black studies course than a survey of ethnic American literature, the course aimed to provoke commentary on race and (anti)slavery through Bildungsromans about characters who awaken to the realities of colonialism, conquest, and displacement.

In the initial course design, Afropessimism provided a framework for understanding the wave of anti-Black terror as a brief moment of disequilibrium in the hegemony of everyday violence held over from slavery, rather than some shocking set of events unrelated to the political structure of the academy. I wanted students to engage with this continuum, to question their assumptions about the “pastness” of slavery, the progressiveness of liberal democracy, and the putative postracialism of the Obama administration. And I wanted them to *get mad*, to feel authorized to *express anger* about what was happening on campus—affects that, under the circumstances, I found preferable to “standing together” or tolerance, romance or redemption, or contrition or magnanimity. In the epigraphs above, Fred Moten speaks to a “dehiscence at the heart of the institution,” seizing on the ambiguity of that odd word to indicate how Black studies attends to the structural vulnerability of critical thought in the academy, where Black studies is furthermore constantly vulnerable to regulation, defunding, and marginalization. A (wound) dehiscence is an opening in a plant that allows seeds to disperse as well as a gaping incision in a body (politic) prone to infection. I did not at the time conceive of my pedagogy as a “dehiscent” one, but upon reflection, I see how teaching (in) the wounds of slavery pushed my class toward shared vulnerability rather than inviolable strength, and how this shifted the goals of student learning from individual mastery to “other motives,” namely humility, questioning, and (as Moten also notes) “selflessness” (*Universal Machine* 118).

As we moved from Johnson’s *Pym* to the text it annotates (Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*), the first half of the course addressed “the pathology of Whiteness,” a subject that animated a wide spectrum of student responses, ranging from sheer delight and selfless auto-critique to reactionary defensiveness and retrenched White supremacy. By producing a class that was vulnerable and conflicted, wounded and antagonistic, the prick and provocation of simply naming Whiteness led us into the second half of the course, which focused on “the Slave grammar of suffering,” a phrase I adopt from the work of Frank B. Wilderson III (*Red, White, and Black* 28 and passim). As I will go on to explain, “the Slave grammar of suffering” disrupts fantasies of social wholeness and historical redress from the ontological vantage point of the slave, inducing disquiet and anger rather than sentimentality or saviorism. Seizing on the double meaning of “dehiscence” as diaspora and wound, the essay then concludes with some afterthoughts on pedagogy: what do students learn and unlearn when asked to sit with the collective and enduring traumas of slavery?

**The Pathology of Whiteness**

*Pym*, Mat Johnson’s third novel, follows protagonist Chris Jaynes, an assistant professor of African American literature, whose desire to uncover “how the pathology of Whiteness was constructed” (14) shapes his obsessive inquiry into the work of Edgar Allan Poe, particularly *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, Poe’s Antarctic expedition tale. Chris is the only Black professor at a small liberal arts college in Manhattan, and as the only professor who specializes in African American literature, he is denied tenure because in teaching courses like “Dancing with the Darkies: Whiteness in the Literary Mind” (an allusion to Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness in the Literary Imagination* [1992]), he refuses to play the part of “Professional Negro” (7). “You were hired to teach African American literature,” explains the college president during a heated exchange. “Not just American literature. You fought that. Simple” (13). Foregrounding the racial politics of literary interpretation from the outset, *Pym* pits the institutional demand for minority representation (“We have a large literature faculty, they can handle the majority of literature. You were retained to purvey the minority perspective” [13]) against Chris’s heroic ambition to “[cure] America’s racial pathology,” which “like all diseases . . . had to be analyzed at a microscopic level” (8).

*Pym* staged a series of questions for us to consider at the outset of the course. Why does the college president say, “*Not just* American literature”? (emphasis added). Is African American literature (or ethnic American literature) *not* American literature, per se? And if the latter category is in fact so specific as to include these others, then why is it unmarked and unraced? Why not just refer to it as *White* American literature? As the novel pursues such questions through a satirical travel narrative that takes Chris and an ad hoc “Creole crew” to Antarctica in search of the fabled island of Tsalal, that “great undiscovered African Diaspora homeland” referred to in Poe’s text (“uncorrupted by Whiteness”), it also begins to answer them (39). Whiteness is a “pathology and a mindset,” Chris thinks, not an “ethnic nomenclature” (33, 31). It is “metaphorical” (30), an “ideology” (30), and a “strategy” (31). Above all, “Whiteness isn’t about being something, it is about being no thing, nothing, an erasure” (225), a claim that is confirmed symbolically when Chris and his crew are enslaved by a “race” of culture-less “snow honkies” called Tekelians who rule the white, windswept landscape of the South Pole (160). When their captivity among the Tekelians appears to be inescapable, Chris’s uncle, Captain Booker Jaynes, tells him, “You can’t run from Whiteness. You have to stand and engage it” (209). For Chris, though, Whiteness is not something “to stand.” From New York to Antarctica, Whiteness is the inescapable background of his every movement.

To facilitate conversation between and among students, I assigned everyone to a small (three-to-four-person) online writing group where they submitted short essays and reading responses and provided each other with written feedback. In addition to my notes on in-class presentations that were also required of every student, this online record of the course is where I’ve drawn the direct quotations and paraphrased commentary that appear throughout this essay.

As painful as it is to see Chris denied tenure, students writing about *Pym* were decidedly more affected by his enslavement, and the gratuitous violence used by the Tekelians to maintain control over their captives, than by the institutional politics of race that led to his firing. One non-Black student of color wrote that they were saddened by the apparent “hopelessness” of the novel, which seemed to suggest that “no matter how hard they [the crew] try, whiteness cannot be escaped.” Yet several students, perhaps feeling uncomfortable sharing this viewpoint with the whole class so early in the semester, confided that they were refreshed by the novel’s reorientation of the “normal” routes of novelistic desire, as *Pym* made the sniveling, nail-biting, blubber-eating white Tekelians repulsive and the Black Creole crew attractive. Indeed, many students became more comfortable analyzing Whiteness while reading *Pym*; and after also reading Poe’s *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, one student concluded that Whiteness is an “idea of unity that, in the case of this novel and perhaps in reality, only succeeds in destroying [rather] than bringing together. It swallows only the ideas that perpetuate its image as salvation, purity, and goodness, and erases all that would tarnish its brilliant color.” However, the criticism of Whiteness engendered by these books also led to some reactionary defensiveness and White entrenchment. In a response essay submitted to one of the online writing groups, one student wrote that Chris’s reference to the indistinguishability of the Tekelians (“they all pretty much looked the same to me” [131]) was effectively a form of reverse racism. This was addressed and, I think, adequately corrected both in their peer group and in the classroom, where we explained that an observer who is enslaved, and who therefore has no material or discursive power, cannot be *racist*, even if that same observer can be provocative. I shared Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s definition of racism as “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death” (28), and we made this one of the running definitions of racism for the course as a whole.

The satirical tone and allegorical humor of *Pym* makes it an accessible index for critiquing Whiteness and engendering generous if sometimes painful (auto)critique. Having read it prior to Poe’s *Narrative*, and along with excerpts from Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark*, students are presented with a persuasive case to study Whiteness as pathology, strategy, ideology. What is additionally generative about these texts is that although they are sometimes misrecognized as saying that “race” is a biological signifier, they also prompt students to think about the evaluative symbolism of “color.” Early on in *Pym*, Chris comments on a passage of Poe’s novel where the narrator observes a river on the island of Tsalal “made up of a number of distinct veins, each of a distinct hue; [whose] cohesion was perfect in regard to their own particles among themselves, and imperfect in regard to neighboring veins” (29). Chris suggests that the description resembles the “racial fantasy” of Booker T. Washington’s “Atlanta Compromise,” a fantasy, in other words, of functional segregation (29). I taught Poe’s imagery as an anti-Black fantasy of (social) control over the distribution of color, however, pointing out that this fantasy is represented repeatedly in both novels.

In *Pym*, for instance, Mahalia Mathis is the great-great-granddaughter of Poe’s “hybrid” character Dirk Peters. Although she appears to Chris to be phenotypically Black, Mathis refuses African heritage. She heads the Native American Ancestry Collective of Gary, Indiana (NAACG), a group that uses DNA testing to prove that their genes have “no kind of Africa”: “I got lots of Indian in me. I got Irish and I got a little French too. I got some German, or so I’m told. I even got a little Chinese in me, on my mother’s side. Matter of fact, I’m sure I got more bloods in me than I knows. But I do knows this: I ain’t got no kind of Africa in these bones” (49). This anti-Black fantasy, which plays itself out in the self-recognition of several “colors” ostensibly excluding “black,” also plays out in the color symbolism of Chris’s Antarctic expedition. After he and his best friend, Garth, escape their captivity among the Tekelians, they flee to an Antarctic BioDome owned by a painter, Thomas Karvel (a parody of Thomas Kinkade, a popular American artist who billed himself as “the Painter of Light”), who provides them shelter while they work a small plantation. True to his moniker, “the Master of Light” is a sovereign of *color*, a monarch over a Disney-like “fantasy of Whiteness” marked by the manufactured monochromatic oversaturation of the BioDome, where the animals are too-white, the grass too-green, the river too-blue, but where nothing is black except Chris and Garth, the interlopers (185). Indeed, Chris complains to Garth that Karvel’s paintings never have Black people in them; even worse, he suspects that in Karvel’s work, “black people couldn’t exist, so thorough was its European romanticization” (184).

In “The Case of Blackness,” Fred Moten writes that “the cultural and political discourse on black pathology has been so pervasive that it could be said to constitute the background against which all representations of blacks, blackness, or (the color) black take place,” arguing in sum that “blackness has been associated with a certain sense of decay, even when that decay is invoked in the name of a certain (fetishization of) vitality” (177). As if throwing their hands up, one student recognized “the absurdity in our world’s thought process that anything, even things of the same nature such as mice and birds, can be separated and classified into greater and lesser categories just because of color.” But Johnson’s *Pym* and Poe’s *Narrative* suggest a politics of chroma that goes beyond irrational absurdity. For if black is theoretically every color, and whiteness is theoretically no-color, *Pym* suggests that “the pathology of Whiteness” lies precisely in this desire to master color itself. Whiteness is an ideology and a strategy because it is an operation that speciates every-color into veins of a river that do not “commingle,” turning inward into monochromatic oversaturation, dividing up into “ethnic” varieties of American literature. Blackness is the chromatic equivalent of refusing this violent speciation, and Whiteness is by definition antagonistic to such a politics.

**The Slave Grammar of Suffering**

In the anti-Black environment in which my students and I moved our way through this course, I was not surprised that some students would perform their Whiteness through reactionary defensiveness and entrenched White supremacist logics. I was heartened, however, that for the most part the White and non-Black students of color in the course allied with the interest of their Black peers (which is to say, with Blackness) and committed themselves seriously to diagnosing “America’s racial pathology.” Questioning the basis of one’s relationship to Whiteness can produce existential crises that overflow what a normative classroom is able to hold, putting students in a position that may be analogous to the one occupied by the person who asked Frank Wilderson, in an online interview, what a White person could do to interpellate Afropessimism without succumbing to a form of reasoning that would lead them to suicide: “As a white person who feels bad about all my race does, what can I do to help besides killing myself?” Wilderson’s answer was swift and to the point. Rather than “kill yourself,” the questioner should get angry and “undo yourself.” Moreover, the questioner should develop “ways and means for your speech and action to be authorized by a Black/slave grammar of suffering rather than the grammar of suffering of subalterns.” Wilderson concluded the answer by remarking on the radical potential of the questioner’s “undoing”: “You are far more dangerous by being committed in this long, protracted struggle than you are or would be if you just check out” (Wilderson, “I Am Frank”). After the first half of the course focused on the pathology of Whiteness, the second half took up “the Slave grammar of suffering.”

What is the difference between the subaltern grammar of suffering and “the Slave grammar of suffering,” and what does it mean to be “authorized” by the latter? In *Red, White, and Black* (2010), Wilderson defines grammar as “the structure through which the labor of speech is possible,” arguing that scripts which view “social turmoil through the rubric of conflict (i.e., a rubric of problems that can be posed and conceptually solved)” (5) represent, on the one hand, a subaltern grammar of suffering in which grievances are submitted and solutions proposed to return aggrieved parties to a condition of prior wholeness. On the other hand, scripts that view social turmoil through a “rubric of antagonism (an irreconcilable struggle between entities, or positions, the resolution of which is not dialectical but entails the obliteration of one of the positions)” represent a “Slave grammar of suffering” that disrupts the dream of repair (5). One of the primary distinctions between a “Slave grammar of suffering” and a grammar of subaltern suffering concerns a text’s relationship to resolution. From the vantage point of the Slave, whose exclusion from civil society is fundamental to the freedom enjoyed by citizens (Wilderson’s terminology includes “Humans,” “Whites,” and “Settlers”), inclusion is a form of “obliteration.” Being authorized by “the Slave grammar of suffering” therefore begins with refusing the “prescriptive gesture” of reconciliation. For Wilderson, it continues (through Frantz Fanon via Aimé Césaire) with “the end of the world . . . the only thing . . . worth the effort of starting” (337).

As literary texts, Celu Amberstone’s “Refugees,” Octavia Butler’s “Amnesty” and “Bloodchild,” Samuel Delany’s *Empire Star*, and Olaudah Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* are all available to interpretation through the grammar of suffering: “Refugees” through a colonizer/colonized dynamic on the fictional planet of Tallav’Wahir; “Amnesty” and “Bloodchild” through the lens of captivity on earth and on the Tlic planet (respectively); *Empire Star* through its plot to emancipate the enslaved Lll; and the *Interesting Narrative* through its autobiographical account of enslavement. Yet as a story about people relocated from a postapocalyptic earth, “Refugees” seems to engage the suffering of the colonized or the migrant subject struggling to reestablish the customs of their homeland; it does not engage “the Slave grammar of suffering,” since through “natal alienation” such resolution is ultimately unavailable to the Slave (Patterson 5). Similarly, by focusing on a human protagonist who translates between human beings and an extraterrestrial lifeform that has colonized earth, Butler’s “Amnesty” is more about structural adjustment and human de-exceptionalism than it is about slavery. “Bloodchild” certainly appears to be about slavery, and many students were certain it was; they were therefore puzzled that Butler herself disagreed (“It amazes me that some people have seen ‘Bloodchild’ as a story of slavery” [30]). However, as one student observed about the gender and reproductive politics of the story, Butler was probably right to call her narrative about the implantation of a male human named Gan with Tlic larvae a “love story,” rather than a slave narrative:

It is interesting that in a society where women get pregnant and have children all the time, it is often called love, but when it is a man being impregnated in almost the same exact way, it can be seen as slavery. Perhaps this happens because sci-fi novels are seen as so drastically different in their own imagined worlds that it is hard to see their similarity to the reality of life on Earth, or it is because of the patriarchal views that have been instilled in the reader that affect how “Bloodchild” is read.

Prompted by such articulate student writing, I wonder, then, when I thought I was teaching about slavery several years ago, if I was not, perhaps, teaching about something else. Recognizing that not all of these texts are engaged with the grammar of Slave suffering places pressure on how I would teach Romantic antislavery literature and its legacies in the future, especially when the topic is “the slave narrative.”

Of all the texts we read together, Delany’s *Empire Star* gets nearest to representing the suffering of the Slave, as it were, grammatically. At the center of this novella about slavery and emancipation in a far-off galaxy is “the suffering of the Lll” (79), a race of world-building beings whose emancipation is seemingly dependent on the delivery of a message to Empire Star by the young protagonist, Comet Jo. As students begin to notice, however, the Lll never speak. They are always described collectively, never individually. And their enslavement seems to be constituted as much by their silence as through the garrulous verbosity of everyone else with something to say about why the Lll should be or should not be emancipated, which is to say, every other “free” character. “Their place in the book is the un-speaking point of conflict,” wrote one student; indeed, “they *are* conflict, not *character*, not *being*. And while they might achieve ‘emancipation,’ they are not free, but remain enslaved to others with a voice.” The world of *Empire Star* clearly depends upon the slavery of the Lll, making their emancipation a political farce and their suffering an antagonism with no redress—pessimistic conclusions frankly confirmed by *Empire Star*’s circular, spiral, and “retrocausal” form (Shephard). Treating the continuum of slavery and emancipation as a formal element of the text, the novella ends exactly where it began, with Comet Jo realizing he has been tasked with Lll emancipation perhaps many times before.

By contrast, Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* appears to end on a somewhat hopeful, solution-oriented note based on free-market liberalism, the British state’s capacity for “justice,” and the good will of “every man of sentiment” (176). Yet if this prescriptive gesture lends itself to an interpretation as a grammar of suffering from a subaltern rather than Slave perspective, the book is nevertheless undoubtedly a narrative that grapples with exposing the grammar, or structure, of Slave suffering. In one class discussion of the *Interesting Narrative*, a conversation that continued in our online discussion forum, I introduced students to the evidence compiled by Vincent Carretta suggesting that Equiano may have been born in Carolina, even though his autobiography tells us he was born in Africa, was captured as a child, and suffered the Middle Passage (see also Youngquist). I explained that Carretta’s evidence included the ship’s log for Equiano’s Arctic voyage as well as the record of his baptism, both of which identified Carolina as his place of birth. I also explained that Carretta’s intent was not to cast doubt on Equiano’s narrative but to raise questions about what literary and political concerns may have motivated Equiano’s fabrication, if it were indeed true. Why would Equiano invent a first-person fiction in the midst of a true autobiography?

The conversation that ensued more or less followed Carretta’s own conclusions: Equiano’s political motivation was to abolish slavery, and an account that included a young child being captured and enduring the Middle Passage was the most likely way to provoke what one non-Black student referred to as a “drama-driven English audience.” Elaborating on a now-foundational connection between the liberal antislavery movement and spectacular representations of Black suffering (Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*), some students were therefore content to understand autobiography as a genre with certain formal needs and capabilities, including “literary devices.” Abolition by any means necessary. Others went so far as to suggest that it was “natural and unavoidable to lie when selling a story,” and that the act of lying “is practically part of the social contract” between writers and readers.

This conversation was enormously productive for changing the mind of at least one non-Black student, who wrote online that before the full unfolding of our class discussion he viewed Equiano’s potential fabrication as a way to disguise his status as an otherwise “privileged slave” who was able to read, write, and build relationships with free Whites. “I thought that it seemed a bit ridiculous that he would make things up and make [a narrative of his capture and the Middle Passage] sound like his own life to rouse sympathy in the readers,” wrote the student, whose classmates were quick to jump on the notion of “privilege” at play. One non-Black peer wrote that they would “hesitate to call a slave privileged, especially since it is clear from the text that Equiano does not define himself this way and consistently refers to any good luck that comes his way as an aberration from a system that is built to deny him any good fortune. He certainly considers himself blessed, mainly in retrospect after being freed, but his narrative is demonstrating how the institution of slavery blocks privilege based on race.” A good point—although it was ultimately not the purpose of the first student to pursue the idea of “privilege.” Rather, in examining why Equiano would fabricate aspects of his autobiography, the student had become interested in whether it was Equiano’s intention “to voice stories of other slaves that do not have the opportunity to.” In other words, was Equiano’s narrative more of a social history than an autobiography?

In *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (2015), Lisa Lowe demonstrates how Equiano’s narrative, given voice through a genre of liberalism (“In a sense, the autobiography is the liberal genre par excellence” [46]), reveals a connection between slavery, subjugation, and “the singular life” (71). In thinking of the *Interesting Narrative* as a kind of polyvocal performance of himself and “other slaves,” then, my student was perhaps moving toward a critique of autobiography: Olaudah Equiano was not only Equiano, he was also Gustavus Vassa, and he was born in multiple places. In attempting to find a grammar requisite to the suffering of the Slave, Equiano/Vassa had to call the genre of the autobiography, the narrative of the singular life, into profound question. Even though the *Interesting Narrative* concludes with a predictable form of prescriptive redress, much of it nevertheless strives toward a “Slave grammar of suffering” that is collective and dispersed rather than selfish, self-made, or individual. The internal differentiation of Equiano’s narrative into that of Gustavus Vassa *as well as* “[those] slaves that do not have the opportunity” leads us to think and imagine antislavery everywhere.

**Toward a Pedagogy of Dehiscence**

In recent years, the field of Black studies has become, perhaps more consciously than ever before, an interdisciplinary mode, a fugitive method, and an intellectual itinerary variously referred to as *black study*, *black* study*, and* black *studies*, which are inseparable but nevertheless distinguishable from the disciplinary study of blackness, Black people, or Black arts and culture. While there are many descriptions of what black study is and does, Moten’s description of it as “a dehiscence at the heart of the institution and at its edge” (“Black Op” 1743) has animated these afterthoughts on the pedagogy of dehiscence in and as a form of wounding that is also a plan of dispersal. Dehiscence is a recurring concept in Moten’s work, where he mobilizes uses of the phrase from Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jacques Lacan with a difference—as in the second epigraph, from an essay on Adrian Piper, where he further elaborates on dehiscence as a “motif of selflessness” against the longstanding association of subjectivity with the inviolability of the possessive individual (*Universal Machine* 118). My understanding of dehiscence as a marginal if animating premise and practice of Black studies postdates the “Ethnic American Literature” course I have described. However, in our attention to “the Slave grammar of suffering” expressed in course materials, in society in general, and on the UMass Amherst campus circa 2014/15 in particular, we were, I think, working toward a pedagogy of dehiscence—a learning environment that takes place in the vulnus or wound of slavery thought to have been closed by emancipation, reconstruction, and civil rights.

My use of the word dehiscence to describe a method of teaching (anti)slavery literature and its legacies thus weaves together Black studies pedagogy with the intellectual and scholarly protocols of Afropessimism, which repeatedly express dissatisfaction with the state of academic knowledge production as civic engagement, politically acceptable modes of reform, and solution-oriented prescriptive gestures for addressing the continuum of anti-Black violence. In the introductory “Ethnic American Literature” course that I have described, it was difficult to address “the pathology of Whiteness” and “the Slave grammar of suffering” in part because students accustomed through education to think of themselves as becoming productive individuals, engaged citizens, and masters of solutions in a context driven by competition against one another are not accustomed to “undoing” aspects of their education rather than advancing their careers. There is nothing that excludes radical forms of care and compassion from a classroom informed by these practices. However, the feelings of woundedness and vulnerability in my class did not immediately lend themselves, nor should they have, to being neatly, cleanly sutured.

In a well-known passage of *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994), bell hooks shares an anecdote about the pain her students feel when they take her classes: “We take your class. We learn to look at the world from a critical standpoint, one that considers race, sex, and class. And we can’t enjoy life anymore” (42). hooks concludes the passage by suggesting that modeling mutual respect for that pain reveals its commonness among students “across race, sexual preference, and ethnicity,” and she writes that through sharing this pain her classes “build community” (42–3). In the “Ethnic American Literature” course I taught, students experienced similar feelings of pain, confusion, remorse, anger, and defensiveness when sitting with the violence of Whiteness and the enduring suffering of slavery’s afterlives, and though I do not wish to disagree with hooks’s optimistic comments about community-building, I do wish to question them. To my mind, a pedagogy of dehiscence does not (at least not at first) end in a reformed community. Instead, in ways much more congruent with recent literature in abolitionist pedagogy (Dunn, Love, Rodriguez, Whynacht), it opens up the possibility of ending “community.” Put another way, a pedagogy of dehiscence does not seek simply to undermine the hierarchical relations of the classroom and build community on disingenuous assertions of equality in the afterlife of slavery. Rather, a pedagogy of dehiscence acknowledges that the classroom continues to be structured by the social relations of conquest, colonialism, and slavery, and accepts that the wound this creates ought to cause one (one? many? who? us?) to pursue the abolitionist endeavor of ending *this* kind of world. Wherever that endless struggle takes us, that’s where we start.

**Bibliography**

Amberstone, Celu. “Refugees.” In *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction and Fantasy*. Edited by Nalo Hopkinson and Uppinder Mehan, 268–306. Arsenal Pulp, 2004.

Butler, Octavia E. *Bloodchild and Other Stories* [1995]. Seven Stories, 2005.

Carretta, Vincent. *Equiano, the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man*. Univ. of Georgia Press, 2005.

Delany, Samuel. *Babel-17/Empire Star* [1966]. Vintage, 2001.

Dunn, Damaris C., et al. “A Radical Doctrine: Abolitionist Education in Hard Times.” *Educational Studies* 57 (2021): 211–23.

Equiano, Olaudah. *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, an African, Written by Himself* [1789]. W. W. Norton, 2001.

Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. Univ. of California Press, 2007.

Hartman, Saidiya. *Lose Your Mother*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006.

———. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford Univ. Press, 1997.

hooks, bell. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom.* Routledge, 1994.

Johnson, Mat. *Pym.* Spiegel and Grau, 2011.

Lederman, Diane. “UMass Student Charged with Racist Messages Must Stay Away from Campus; Police Continue Investigating Other Incidents.” *MassLive,* Oct. 20, 2014. <https://www.masslive.com/news/2014/10/umass_student_charged_with_rac.html>.

Love, Bettina. *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*. Beacon, 2019.

Lowe, Lisa. *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. Duke Univ. Press, 2015.

Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness in the Literary Imagination.* Harvard Univ. Press, 1992.

Moten, Fred. “Black Op.” *PMLA* 123, no. 5 (2008): 1743–7.

———. “The Case of Blackness.” *Criticism* 50, no. 2 (2008): 177–218.

———. *The Universal Machine*. Duke Univ. Press, 2018.

Odam, Josh. “#WrongDoor: Ethno-stress and Racially Charged Attacks on the UMass Campus.” *Massachusetts Daily Collegian*, Oct. 16, 2014. <https://dailycollegian.com/2014/10/wrongdoor-ethno-stress-and-racially-charged-attacks-on-the-umass-campus/>.

Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Harvard Univ. Press, 1982.

Poe, Edgar Allan. *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* [1838]. Melville House, 2013.

Rodríguez, Dylan. “The Disorientation of the Teaching Act: Abolition as Pedagogical Position.” [*The Radical Teacher*](https://www.jstor.org/journal/radicalteacher) 88 (2010): 7–19.

Sharpe, Christina, and Selmawit Terrefe. “What Exceeds the Hold? An Interview with Christina Sharpe.” *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge* 29 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.20415/rhiz/029.e06>.

Shephard, W. Andrew. “‘All Is Always Now’: Slavery, Retrocausality, and Recidivistic Progress in Samuel R. Delany’s *Empire Star*.” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 19, no. 2 (2019): 1–20.

Subbaswamy, Kumble. “Incidents of Racist Vandalism.” Email to members of the University of Massachusetts Amherst campus, 14 Oct. 2014.

Vidales, Santiago. “‘Whose University? Our University’: A Report on Racist Hate Crimes at UMass Amherst.” *Latino Rebels*, 19 Oct. 2014, <https://www.latinorebels.com/2014/10/19/whose-university-our-university-a-report-on-racist-hate-crimes-at-umass-amherst/>.

Warren, Calvin. *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*. Duke Univ. Press, 2018.

Whynacht, Ardath, et al. “Abolitionist Pedagogy in the Neoliberal University: Notes on Trauma-Informed Practice, Collaboration, and Confronting the Impossible.” *Social Justice* 45, no. 4 (2018): 141–62.

Wilderson, Frank. “I Am Frank Wilderson AMA.” *Reddit,* 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/Debate/comments/5al9pl/i\_am\_frank\_wilderson\_ama/.

———. *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms.* Duke Univ. Press, 2010.

Youngquist, Paul. “The Afro Futurism of DJ Vassa.” *European Romantic Review* 16, no. 2 (2005): 181–92.

1. An event called “Standing Together against Racism: A Week of Reflection, a Day of Solidarity” was organized by the Anti-Racism Committee of English Students and Faculty and featured a full-day “Solidarity Read-In” that I participated in on November 4, 2014. The phrase “work together to reaffirm our values of inclusion and respect for all” appeared in a campus-wide email by the university’s chancellor, Kumble Subbaswamy, on October 14, 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)