Introduction: Contrapuntal Reading

Joselyn M. Almeida (National Coalition of Independent Scholars; University of Massachusetts Amherst) and Amelia Worsley (Amherst College)

Romanticism as a field has been grappling in recent years with the interrelationship between race, slavery, antislavery, and literature in the space of the classroom since the 2018 roundtable event that prompted this collection.[[1]](#endnote-1) One particularly salient example of this field-changing work is the series “Race, Blackness, and Romanticism: Dialogues,” cosponsored in spring 2021 by the Boston Area Romanticist Colloquium and the University at Buffalo, hosted by Patricia A. Matthew, one of the contributors to this volume.[[2]](#endnote-2) It was followed by a special issue of *Studies in Romanticism* titled *Race, Blackness, and Romanticism* (2022), which Matthew also edited. Several online collaborations have also provided space and resources for colleagues teaching in distant locations to think through questions of pedagogy together.[[3]](#endnote-3) Yet many questions remain about how to recalibrate classroom praxis in light of urgent historical events.

To the degree that the essays gathered here posit contrapuntal strategies in the teaching and reading of the archive of Romanticism and its multiple relations to slavery and to abolitionist and antislavery literatures, they are expanding the turn to contrapuntal reading, a method that Fernando Ortiz, in *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (1940), and Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), advanced independently of each other. In turn, this approach has influenced the work of writers like the Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier as well as critics such as Mary Louise Pratt and Simon Gikandi. In *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (2011)*,* Gikandi uses contrapuntal reading to advance epistemologies and pedagogies that pluralize received hierarchies of knowledge and decenter the idea of an archive coded white—an approach to which our contributors are also committed.

In the Anglo-American academy, scholars and students may be familiar with how Said theorizes the importance of reading “not univocally but *contrapuntally*, with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts” (*Culture* 51). Drawing on music to describe a form of attention to reading novels such as Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814), he writes:

In the counterpoint of Western classical music, various themes play off one another, with only a provisional privilege being given to any particular one; yet in the resulting polyphony there is concert and order, an organized interplay that derives from the themes, not from a rigorous melodic or formal principle outside the work. In the same way, I believe, we can read and interpret English novels, for example, whose engagement (usually suppressed for the most part) with the West Indies or India, say, is shaped and perhaps even determined by the specific history of colonization, resistance, and finally native nationalism. (51)

While Said’s archive was “English novels,” Ortiz applied *contrapunteo* in his anthropological analysis of sugar and tobacco (written roughly fifty years prior to Said’s work) and coined the word *transculturación* (transculturation) by now familiar to critics through the work of Pratt. It should be noted that Ortiz and his generation, which included Lydia Cabrera, the renowned scholar of *santería*, and Carpentier, who turned to the Haitian Revolution for inspiration, embarked on a reassessment of the contributions of Afro-Cuban and African cultures to Cuban identity. Counterpoint becomes both metaphor and method for Ortiz, who emphasizes the musical roots of the contrapuntal while he underscores the Afro-Cuban experience, one that incorporates both music *and* the orality of verse in call-and-response rituals between griot and audience. He writes, “Recordemos en Cuba sus manifestaciones más floridas en las preces antifonarias de las liturgias, así de blancos como de negros, en la controversia erótica y danzarina de la rumba, y en los contrapunteos versificados de la guajirada montuna y de la currería afrocubana” (Let us remember the elaborate manifestations [of counterpoint] in Cuba, in the antiphonal liturgies of Blacks and whites, in the controversial erotics of the movement of the rumba, and in the versified counterpoints of country and Afro-Cuban peoples) (18).

In his novel about the Haitian Revolution, *El siglo de las luces* (1962), Carpentier develops the aesthetics of the “arbitrario contrapunto de vidas” (the arbitrary counterpoint of lives) by considering the different, yet simultaneous, unfolding destinies of his protagonists, which shape and impact individual spheres of action as well as the grand récit of history (47). Carpentier later extends this idea in “Lo barroco y lo real maravilloso,” his essay about the marvelous real, where he again returns to the Haitian Revolution, Henri Christophe’s opposition to Napoleon Bonaparte, and François Mackandal, “que hace creer a millares y millares de esclavos en Haití . . . que puede transformarse en lo que quiera, y promueve con ellos una de las primeras revoluciones auténticas del Nuevo Mundo” (who convinces thousands and thousands of slaves in Haiti . . . that he can turn into anything, and promotes with them one of the first authentic revolutions of the New World) (84).

Gikandi further develops the contrapuntal method when he applies it to reading the archive of Atlantic slavery and antislavery in *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (2011) (xiii). Gikandi synchronizes the spatial, temporal, and interior dimensions of the lives of subjects as apparently disconnected as diarist Anna Larpent and Nealee, the enslaved woman in Mungo Park’s narrative. In other chapters, he considers texts by Francis Williams, David Hume, and Olaudah Equiano, and by Phillis Wheatley Peters, William Beckford, and Thomas Jefferson (among others) in contrapuntal relationship to each other. Gikandi accounts for how “the criteria driving the aesthetic ideology in the eighteenth century—disinterest and virtue, among others—had come to be haunted by slavery” (144). The effect of this more deliberate counterpoint, he observes, is to ensure “a dialectic between the visible subjects of modernity and its invisible actors” (70). Exegesis as an act of resistance exposes the symbolic systems that mediate materiality, disturbing the cognitive and symbolic separations between the violent system of the plantation, secured through empire, and the well-wrought tea set of the drawing room, and thus holds actors accountable for their complicity with such violence.

The oral call-and-response underlying contrapuntal reading moreover gestures to this collection’s origins in a roundtable conversation on “Anti-Slavery Literature, Its Legacies, and the Future of Teaching,” organized in 2018 by members of the Five College Faculty Seminar on Global Cultures of the Long Nineteenth Century.[[4]](#endnote-4) At that moment in time, many of us had been negotiating classroom conversations to which students brought issues raised by the Black Lives Matter movement. In dialogue with Kate Singer and Lily Gurton-Wachter, co-organizers of the seminar, we resolved to bring together four scholars of race and literature—Frances Botkin, Kimberly Juanita Brown, Sean Gordon, and Patricia A. Matthew—to create a safe and respectful space in which faculty and graduate student instructors could engage in dialogue with each other about how they were currently teaching antislavery texts from the Romantic period and how we might imagine teaching them in the future. Two of our speakers were local, and two traveled from different East Coast locations to be with us. The roundtable was transatlantic in disciplinary scope, with scholars representing Caribbean, American, and British literatures. In our invitation, we simply asked our colleagues to speak about approaches to teaching eighteenth- or nineteenth-century antislavery literature in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement. We asked them to share some moments from their own recent experiences in the classroom as well as their subsequent reflections on them. We stressed that the emphasis would be on conversation with the audience, whom we imagined would also find it useful to have a space to share their thoughts on classroom experience.

An unusually large audience was in attendance at the pedagogy panel in the spring of 2018; it was clear that this subject was of interest to students at both the graduate and undergraduate level, as well as to faculty members who more usually made up the audience of the Global Cultures of the Long Nineteenth Century seminar.[[5]](#endnote-5) Several different pedagogical approaches were offered, but the panelists all shared a desire to confront the violence contained in these eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts and the silences of the past and to share epistemologies of social justice, speaking to the present with the future in mind. Though the speakers approached the task of teaching different antislavery texts with different methodologies, each of them gave us an insight into classrooms where students are frequently invited to think about how to connect the past with the present moment. As our panelists discussed a range of approaches to teaching antislavery texts, the question of affect was clearly a central concern, as it had been in the discussion that led to the event. Students often have questions about the violence that these texts present them with, and, in turn, professors and instructors participating in the event had many questions for each other about how to frame that act of presentation. How should one prepare students for the affective responses—the emotions and feelings—that such triggering material is bound to bring into the room? How might we make space for conversation in the classroom about the various ways students might encounter antislavery literatures because of the varied experiences they bring to these texts? How do we support students through challenging readings beyond giving content warnings or making the readings optional?

Several important questions about what it means to teach antislavery literature in the context of courses on Romanticism also emerged that day. As Saidiya Hartman asks in her 2008 essay “Venus in Two Acts,” where the archive is lacking, how can we retrieve “what remains dormant . . . without committing further acts of violence” in our own acts of narration (2)? Kimberly Juanita Brown played music over her own speech as she discussed the power of African American spirituals to invite students to connect to the “auditory dimensions” of the archive, a concept she also explores in her book *The Repeating Body: Slavery’s Visual Resonance in the Contemporary* (2015) (140). Indeed, many of our panelists asked us to attune their ears to detect multilayered channels of communication in antislavery texts. A central theme in our discussion was the question of how to bring to light the things that the texts do not say about the realities of slavery in the period, either because of the blind spots of the authors or because of the constraints placed upon them.

The essays that follow record various answers to these collective questions, and although they arose out of in-person conversations we had in a particular time and place, we hope they will continue to have relevance to a wider audience in the present moment. Three of the original speakers at the panel (Frances Botkin, Sean Gordon, and Patricia A. Matthew) have contributed essays. Although Kimberly Juanita Brown was not able to engage in this iteration of the conversation, the impact of her contributions to the panel nonetheless remains. We have also purposely included essays by participants who were at different stages in their university careers at the time of the event: Sean Gordon was a graduate student at the University of Massachusetts Amherst at the time of his original contribution to the panel, and he is now a professor at Fresno State University. Nick Blaisdell, now Ed.D., was an undergraduate when he attended our seminar. By inviting other participants to join the conversation about pedagogy via the medium of print, we gesture toward the shared frame of reference that the Global Cultures seminar had produced when we met in person. Ivan Ortiz and Elizabeth Fay, who had also spoken in our series, graciously accepted our invitation. We are also grateful to Debbie Lee and Alan Richardson for agreeing to offer responses to the essays. Two decades after they worked together on *Early Black British Writing* (2004), Lee and Richardson offer a retrospective view not only of the shared insights of this collection but also of the changes that have occurred in the field since their groundbreaking critical anthology appeared.

**I. Classroom Counterpoint**

It has been intriguing for us to see that our contributors arrived at a shared methodology regarding how to approach teaching antislavery literatures today organically without a prompt from us and without reading drafts of one another’s essays. Each of them reframes and resituates eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts in new constellations, not only in relation to each other and to art and artefacts from the period but also in relation to texts from Black studies and to twentieth- and twenty-first-century works of fiction and critical fabulation that seek to address the silences of the past. In their commitments to asking students to listen to what remains unsaid in the texts they examine, several authors implicitly convey their commitments to contrapuntal reading.

Patricia A. Matthew draws attention to how her students themselves implicitly enacted a contrapuntal method when they responded to the suppressed context of William Blake’s poem “The Little Black Boy.” Her essay presents a retrospective account of how this moment offered an invitation to continue to explore, in several different settings (both undergraduate and graduate), the effects of centering the topic of race and slavery in the classroom. Matthew invites makers of syllabi to look beyond the question of which single texts to use in a self-contained “unit” of a syllabus on slavery and instead to imagine how Romanticism looks when one centers race, abolition, and freedom on the level of the syllabus as a whole. She criticizes the idea that one can just add a single text about slavery to a syllabus and expect that the topic has been covered, as if a Romantic literature syllabus is a familiar recipe to which one can simply add a new ingredient. Rather than focusing a discussion about Atlantic slavery on a single text in a syllabus, Matthew argues, it should be considered a relevant context in discussions of all Romantic texts, even in texts where it seems not to be present. Matthew describes two different courses that center antislavery literatures and texts about race, including detailed discussions of teaching Blake’s poem, Hannah More and Eaglesfield Smith’s “The Sorrows of Yamba,” Amelia Opie’s “The Black Man’s Lament; or, How to Make Sugar,” Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s 1795 lecture “On the Slave Trade,” and the anonymous novel *The Woman of Colour, A Tale* (1808).

Ivan Ortiz’s method can also be called contrapuntal from several perspectives. Ortiz puts Said’s argument about the silences in Austen’s *Mansfield Park* in dialogue with Lynn Festa’s argument that Austen is also asking readers to listen for “noise.” Ortiz begins by explaining how he uses this principle of “listening for noise” as a method to teach abolition poetry written by white authors. He positions this poetry in counterpoint with music when he asks students to examine the complexity of a situation in which both More’s version of “The Sorrows of Yamba” and William Cowper’s “The Negro’s Complaint” were sung to the well-known ballad “Admiral Hosier’s Ghost,” a tune about white English sailors who had died at sea. He then turns to a text that could itself be called contrapuntal, M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* (2008), which is “composed entirely from the words of the case report *Gregson vs. Gilbert,* related to the murder of Africans on board a slave ship at the end of the eighteenth century.”[[6]](#endnote-6) As students center their attention on the silences that this text exposes, Ortiz writes, they are confronted with the question of “what the fragmentation of language accomplishes that a ballad narrative cannot.”

Sean Gordon extends the contrapuntal method beyond the frame of synchronicity to ask how twentieth-century narratives might also inform students’ understandings of nineteenth-century testimonies. He describes the project of “teaching contemporary texts that take up Romantic-era concepts in a ‘speculative’ framework,” like Celu Amberstone’s “Refugees” (2004), Octavia Butler’s *Bloodchild and Other Stories* (1995), and Samuel Delany’s *Empire Star* (1966), in relation to *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789). To frame his discussion of what it meant to discuss these texts on a campus responding to a series of violently racist incidents in 2014, Gordon centers Fred Moten’s term “dehiscence,” which describes a form of structural vulnerability that allows for productive disordering, as well as the Afropessimism of Frank Wilderson, pointing toward another speculative future, one in which a conversation between scholars of Black studies and scholars of Romanticism will become more common. He also discusses how teaching Mat Johnson’s novel *Pym* (2011) in dialogue with Edgar Allan Poe’s *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838) allowed students to think through the issue of how structures of white privilege are implicit not only in the archive but also in the university itself.

Afrofuturism provides a site of conceptual resistance in several of the essays here. As Terence Dean and Dale P. Andrews explain, “Afrofuturism is an evolving field of study in Black cultural studies. Its theories and scholarship are heavily influenced with particularities in science fiction, speculative fiction, new media, digital technology, the arts, and Black aesthetics all situated and focused on the continent of Africa, the Diaspora, and its imaginaries” (2). Through her syllabus and classroom discussion, Elizabeth Fay stages an innovative conversation between Afrofuturism, Romanticism, and Atlantic studies and challenges students to reinterpret Atlantic history by juxtaposing past and present narratives of the legacies of enslavement. When Fay asks students to compare Olaudah Equiano’s narrative with the film *Black Panther* (2018) and contextualizes this question in relation to N. K. Jemisin’s introduction to Afrofuturism in her essay “How Long ’til Black Future Month?,” she extends the possibilities for the interpretation of “geographical space, conceptual space, and textual space” in Black Atlantic narratives (Dillon 31).

In the broader sweep of her essay, Fay emphasizes “the fluid movement of dynamic relationality among multiple and variable subjects” as she explores various exercises designed to ask students to triangulate narratives of enslavement and post-enslavement. For instance, Fay invites students to consider how Mary Prince’s nineteenth-century rhetorics of suffering and resistance compare with those of Equiano, and then she further complicates the question by asking them to read the rhetoric of Toussaint L’Ouverture’s letters in relation to C. L. R. James’s account of his life in *The Black Jacobins* (1938). Sylvia Wynter’s article on James, “Beyond the Categories of the Master Conception,” also offers students an argument about how James’s work helps to posit a theory of “becoming Black” that, in Fay’s words, is relevant “whether the year is 1800 or 2024.” In another unit of the syllabus, Fay triangulates Lenora Sansay’s *Secret History; or, The Horrors of St. Domingo* (1808) and the anonymous *The Woman of Colour, A Tale* with Austen’s *Mansfield Park*, as she asks students to compare fictionalized accounts of women’s experiences in the period, and she further contextualizes this exercise with references to the work of Christina Sharpe and Wynter.

Frances Botkin also offers many possibilities for students to read contrapuntally when she insists that Romantic-era narratives cannot be taught without a serious commitment to contextualization. Through a theorization of the practice of *tunyuhan* (“to make the best use of available resources to create something new and sustainable”), Botkin uses what she terms an “undisciplined mode of assembly” to consider the value of generative improvisation in teaching, and she explores how contemporary art, film, music, and recordings of interviews with people in Jamaica “animate colonial textuality with the creative expressions of Afro-Caribbean culture that, in revising the past, imagines and nourishes future worlds.” She describes, for instance, how she presents students with Lydia Maria Child’s *Narrative of Joanna; An Emancipated Slave, of Surinam* (1834) (extracted from John Gabriel Stedman’s *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* [1796]), alongside John Earle’s *Obi; or, The History of Three-Fingered Jack* (1800), a painting of Three-Fingered Jack by the Jamaican painter Omari “Afrikan” Ra, and a documentary film by Roy Anderson called *Queen Nanny: Legendary Maroon Chieftainess* (2015). This constellation of works allows students to see how “Child almost entirely excludes the Maroons with whom Joanna had family connections.” When she asks students to read Mary Prince’s *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave* (1831) alongside Marlon James’s *The Book of Night Women* (2009), she puts further pressure on the question of what nineteenth-century writers do not say about the experiences of enslaved people and particularly of enslaved women.

Another way in which the dialogic space can be transformed to create an antiracist classroom is through the acknowledgment of the tension between writing and speech, foregrounding for students the incomplete nature of the antislavery archive. In her focus on “doing the work” of traveling to Jamaica in order to better understand Maroon history, Botkin centers the notion of orality in order to problematize the hierarchy of knowledge that privileges the archive. Her fieldwork and connection to the Maroon leader Gaama Gloria Simms has enabled her to create a contact zone in the classroom where the oral histories of Afro-Caribbean descendants of Maroon communities expose asymmetries of power and the injustices encoded as silence in the written record. The annual conference in Jamaica that she co-organizes with Paul Youngquist, the Charles Town International Conference on Maroons and Indigenous People, reconfigures the spaces and possibilities of knowledge for Romanticists, which brings the “archive” into conversation with living indigenous knowledge.

Nicholas Blaisdell elucidates how counterpoint as exegesis awakens agency, as Carpentier also discovered in *El siglo de las luces*, when Sofía, one of his protagonists, urges, “¡Hay que hacer algo!” (Something must be done!) (410). Blaisdell explores how antislavery writers like Ottobah Cugoano indict capitalism’s use of enslaved labor in the nineteenth century as a global system, anticipating the system’s accommodation of unfree labor through the present era. Drawing on Paulo Freire, he reflects on how the study of antislavery texts, abolitionist networks, and Karl Marx informed not only his development as a social justice activist and organizer of Black Lives Matter protests in Peabody, Massachusetts, but also his work as a high school teacher and an adjunct professor of education. His analysis illuminates how a Freirean pedagogy can translate into greater empowerment for students in educational and civic settings.

**II. Beyond the Anthology**

A brief review of the texts available for teaching the topic of antislavery literature, as well as the history of its anthologizing, may be useful to those planning to embark on teaching it for the first time, as well as to those wishing to think further about the relationship between how developments in research relate to those in their own pedagogy. Indeed, the current moment necessitates a commitment to the continued and critical self-examination of genealogies of antislavery literature. Scholars have long been engaged in the struggle to bring this material into classrooms. Thus, for example, Eva B. Dykes, whose work, as Bakary Diaby has pointed out, should be reassessed, was the earliest critic to call for an expansion of the Romantic canon to include antislavery writings (Diaby, “Black Women”). Dykes’s groundbreaking *The Negro in English Romantic Thought; or, A Study of Sympathy for the Oppressed* (1942), written in the twilight of the Harlem Renaissance and also at the height of Jim Crow segregation in the United States, drew attention to names such as Olaudah Equiano, Ignatius Sancho, Ottobah Cugoano, and Mary Prince, writers not yet present in any anthologies of Romantic-era literature at the time. The reassessment of Dykes’s work seems particularly necessary when one notes that a forty-year silence passed between the publication of *The Negro in English Romantic Thought* in 1942 and 1985, when Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates Jr. published their pivotal anthology *The Slave’s Narrative* (1985), which presented excerpts by Equiano, Cugoano, Sancho, and James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, among others.

It was not until the 1990s that access to antislavery literature became more widespread. Inspired by both the historicist and postcolonial turns in Romantic-era scholarship, scholars in the United States and Britain worked to incorporate Black Atlantic authors into the Anglo-American canon throughout this period.[[7]](#endnote-7) Several classroom anthologies focusing on Black writers appeared in this transformational decade, including *Black British Writers, 1760–1890* (1991), edited by Paul Edwards and David Dabydeen; *Black Atlantic Writers of the Eighteenth Century: Living the New Exodus in England and the Americas* (1995), edited by Adam Potkay and Sandra Burr; *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors in the English-Speaking World of the Eighteenth Century* (1996), edited by Vincent Carretta; *Pioneers of the Black Atlantic: Five Slave Narratives*, *1772–1815* (1998), edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and William L. Andrews. Brycchan Carey’s website, first created in the 1990s, made information on Equiano, Sancho, and antislavery poems available on the web. Anne K. Mellor and Richard Matlak were the first editors of a broader anthology to grant a section to “Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Abolition in Britain” when they included it in their *British Literature, 1780–1830* (1996).

The scholarly recovery of Romanticism’s implication in antislavery and the struggle for abolition was also enormously facilitated by the publication of Peter J. Kitson and Debbie Lee’s eight-volume *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation: Writings in the British Romantic Period* (1999). Following from this, collections such as James G. Basker’s *Amazing Grace: An Anthology of Poems about Slavery, 1660–1810* (2002), Marcus Wood’s *The Poetry of Slavery: An Anglo-American Anthology, 1764–1866* (2003), *Early Black British Writing* (2004), edited by Alan Richardson and Debbie Lee, and *Transatlantic Romanticism* (2006), edited by Lance Newman, Joel Pace, and Chris Koenig-Woodward, also made antislavery texts more accessible than they had previously been. The republication of various novels that pertain to this topic has similarly changed students’ classroom experiences. For instance, many of our colleagues now use the Broadview Press edition of the anonymous *The Woman of Colour, A Tale* (2008), edited by Lyndon J. Dominique. Since it is not possible to anthologize novels in the same way as other texts, A. A. Markley’s overview of lesser-taught novels and plays is a useful resource for those wishing to teach novels that deal with the topic of slavery.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Following in the tradition of C. L. R. James’s *The Black Jacobins* (1938), another foundational work for the study of antislavery literatures in the Romantic period, a growing body of scholarship on the Haitian Revolution and the revolutionary aesthetics of the period has also led to an increased access to primary texts for use in the classroom. We note, for example, the publication of Marcus Rainsford’s *An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti* (1805)*,* edited by Paul Youngquist and Grégory Pierrot (2013),[[9]](#endnote-9) and *Poetry of Haitian Independence* (2015)*,* edited by Doris Kadish and Deborah Jensen, which collects many neglected poems written between 1804 and the 1840s.[[10]](#endnote-10) *Haitian Revolutionary Fictions: An Anthology,* edited and translated by Marlene L. Daut, Grégory Pierrot, and Marion C. Rohrleitner, was published in 2022.

The early critical conversation that grew alongside this editorial work has been nurtured by the interdisciplinary contact zones of Black studies, African American studies, Atlantic studies, American studies, Indigenous studies, and Caribbean studies, as well as history and anthropology. We offer, in the note appended here and the bibliography to this introduction, a preliminary list of important contributions to this conversation as an access point for further research and future pedagogical innovation.[[11]](#endnote-11) Although there is not space here to give a full account of the scholarly literature in this period, we note that our respondents, Debbie Lee and Alan Richardson, not only played key scholarly roles in producing anthologies of these literatures but also helped to define the critical conversation. Richardson’s seminal 1993 article “Romantic Voodoo: Obeah and British Culture, 1797*–*1807” opened the field to Afro-British intertexts in the archive, those within textuality and beyond. Lee’s *Slavery and the Romantic Imagination* (2002) is a fundamental text in any survey of this corpus.

Having said all of this, it is important to acknowledge that course syllabi have been in many cases slow to change—both during the 1990s and today. Zadie Smith and Paterson Joseph have each described the way that their education in the United Kingdom failed to take account of Black history. In a September 2022 article in *The Guardian* written in connection with her foreword to a new edition of Gretchen Gerzina’s *Black England: A Forgotten Georgian History* (2022)*,* Smith remembers the effect that finding Gerzina’s book had on her. She writes, “It’s incredible to think of now, but by 1999 I’d gone through 15 years of formal education, including a three-year English degree, without ever being given a book to study that made any reference whatsoever to the presence of individuals like me in the country in which I was born.” Joseph has also described his encounter with Gerzina’s book as a life-changing one (Sulcis).

The “Bigger Six Collective” was formed in 2017 to resist the narrative that “diversification” or “going global” has done enough to change the field; instead, they have called for the need “to make our field in the image of those whose access to Romanticism has long been and continues to be actively restricted” (140).[[12]](#endnote-12) More recently, Deanna Koretsky has offered a searing indictment of the field’s continuing intransigence: “Scholars of romanticism in its current configuration are all white men, which is to say, we work in a field that was not only built around white bodies and sustained through white critical perspectives but that has explicitly and deliberately been used to maintain fictions of whiteness as transparent and thus universal” (31). Moreover, many critiques of Romanticism remain firmly within the Anglo-American academy, precluding methodologies that reveal alternative positionalities and epistemes. Antislavery literatures—even aside from the larger and more neglected topic of race and Romanticism—still occupy a marginal position in the undergraduate curriculum.

Despite the efforts of many scholars to join in the work of recovery and to redress the biases of twentieth-century criticism and editing of Romantic texts, the topic of slavery and abolition is still frequently framed as an addition to the anthologies that undergraduate classes rely on and in syllabi themselves. Digital searches of databases of online syllabi suggest that a handful of texts, especially in surveys of the period, are being asked to carry a heavy freight. Many and varied obstacles have been put in the way of affirming the contributions of Black and Brown writers from the period in the classroom. The presence of Mary Seacole and Ukawsaw Gronniosaw in anthologies of Black British writers, for instance, does not guarantee them a place on syllabi. Additionally, neither African American writers, such as Jupiter Hammon and John Marrant, nor Plácido and Juan Manzano, from the Hispanophone Atlantic, appear often on syllabi. In “Abolitionist Interruptions,” Chander and Matthew note their “shared frustration with how Olaudah Equiano and his *Interesting Narrative* have served too long as the single abolitionist/antislavery text in Romanticism” (431), a discussion that Matthew extends in her essay for the present volume. The tradition that has elided subjects who historically were denied ontological value and who were silenced through enslavement and racism in the economic and geopolitical system of Atlantic slavery can still be observed today in this disconnect between research and pedagogy.

**III. Some Future Directions**

The project of articulating linkages that connect the teaching praxis of Romanticists with histories of resistance, liberation, struggles against slavery, and the oppression of people of color, goes far beyond the purview of a single volume, and so we wish to note some of the areas for pedagogical inquiry within which our contributors have opened vistas. We hope that the pedagogical experiments detailed in this collection will be useful in practical terms for instructors as a guide to how to begin redesigning their own syllabi and classroom discussions. The larger aim, however, is for the collection to be useful in broader methodological terms as a prompt for readers to imagine their own contrapuntal arrangements of texts and voices. The possibilities for new contrapuntal readings and new constellations of texts go far beyond the specific texts or arrangements listed in these case studies.

Beyond simply adding texts to established syllabi, then, our contributors imagine how to disrupt pedagogical traditions that have been handed down from past generations of scholars. These scholars invite readers to examine the degree to which their own pedagogy reflects transformations in the field, even as they push for further re-examination of the structures on which pedagogical attitudes to teaching antislavery have previously been built. Our contributors tend to agree that because Romantic-era accounts of slavery were conditioned by the period in which they were written, it is “not enough,” as Frances Botkin puts it, to ask them to speak on behalf of the enslaved without other sources to contextualize them. Dykes poignantly draws attention to this paradox at the center of Romantic antislavery literature in the opening pages of *The Negro in English Romantic Thought*. “One of the salient features of the ‘Romantic Movement’ of the latter eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was the love of freedom” (1), she writes, paying tribute to Mary Prince’s famous line, “To be free is very sweet” (27). However, she then immediately notes that Romantic writers could also be “limited . . . by an adherence to traditional forms and conventions,” and notes that antislavery writings did not always depose the hierarchical structure and racism that authorized the triangular trade in the first place (1). Many scholars since Dykes have complicated any simple celebration of the expansion of the Romantic canon to include antislavery texts by exploring the capacity of these texts to sometimes “popularize stereotyped, simplified, patronizing, and (often) degrading images of Africa, its peoples, and their descendants in the Americas and Britain” despite their ethical and civic commitments to breaking the Blakean “mind forg’d manacles” that sustained Atlantic slavery (Richardson and Lee 7). The contributors to this collection extend this project.

Many of our contributors use specific examples to describe a method that could be applied to various texts. The example Matthew gives, for instance, of what it means to read William Blake’s work in dialogue with antislavery literatures encourages pedagogues to look more closely at how canonical texts they have taught without reference to the history of slavery might change when this crucial and yet often sidelined context is brought to bear on them. Similarly, Gordon’s and Fay’s references to Afrofuturist texts invite readers to conduct their own research in this field and to imagine their own conversations between the past and speculative futures. Another question that emerges from this focus on Afrofuturism is whether there might be room for more opportunities for students to encounter examples of Black resistance, humor, joy, and agency in the Romantic classroom. New possibilities for dialogue with contemporary texts will continue to arise as new works of critical fabulation appear. Since we first began to gather this collection, for instance, many of our colleagues have begun to teach texts such as Honorée Fanonne Jeffers’s *The Age of Phillis* (2020) and Joseph’s *The Secret Diaries of Charles Ignatius Sancho* (2022), alongside Wheatley Peters’s poetry and Sancho’s letters.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Our work on this set of essays has prompted us to imagine several future topics for *Romantic Circles* collections on how to engage antislavery literatures in the classroom, for which we would be pleased to see responses. While our contributors engage the question of affect in passing, for instance, our field would benefit from a more sustained conversation about how to acknowledge the range of emotions that the learning process might bring up in classes that consider the history of slavery. Critical work that addresses the personal experience of critics themselves can offer crucial models for students: we eagerly await the publication of Mathelinda Nabugodi’s *The Trembling Hand: Reflections of a Black Woman in the Romantic Archive,* for instance. From another perspective, both Botkin and Ortiz encourage attention to the aural dimension of textuality and its silences, which reveals how orality and the epistemologies it transmits are also major components of the antislavery archive that could be engaged further. Becoming aware of the limitations that govern the textual archive *as text,* with attention to the conditions of its production, will allow for the interrogation of approaches with which Romanticists are familiar, such as historicist, post-structuralist, feminist, postcolonial, and neo-formalist methodologies.

The essays here also enjoin readers to consider important questions that remain on the horizon of this collection about the extent to which discussions of antislavery texts have been made to stand in for larger discussions about race in the Romantic period and how this tendency might be addressed in the future. This connects the work of the collection with Marlon B. Ross’s call to “shift the focus momentarily away from the important question of Romanticism’s self-conscious investment in or diversion from slavery and colonialism to consider *race* itself as an economy of gut-instinctual, senseperceptual, socialpsychological, aesthetic-ideological, and geopolitical commitments,” in his essay “The Race of/in Romanticism: Notes Toward a Critical Race Theory” (26). As Diaby argues, “we must continue working on slavery, but we should not let it be our only engagement with, again, the deeply quotidian, socio-personal ordering of the world we inhabit and have inherited from the long Romantic period” (“Black Women” 252). Diaby himself offers a rare example of what it means to bring the topic of race to bear on texts that have not traditionally been grouped under the heading of those that address the topic of race in the Romantic period in his reading of William Wordsworth’s “We Are Seven” (“Counting the Bodies”). Although several of our authors encourage a more open dialogue between Black studies and Romanticism, a more widespread and sustained dialogue between Romantic literature and critical race theory is clearly necessary in the field at large.

The field of Romanticism, and especially the study of slavery in the Romantic period, still needs to do more to address the divisions it has historically instantiated between Anglophone texts and texts in other languages. The Anglophone focus of the authors examined throughout this collection points to multilingualism and Romanticism as a related area for future research as the plurilingual nature of the histories of African and indigenous resistance comes further into view. As Gillian Sankoff writes, “It is difficult to conceive of another situation where people arrived with such a variety of native languages, where they were so cut off from their native language groups; where the size of no language group was enough to ensure its survival; where no second language was shared by enough people to serve as a useful vehicle of intercommunication; and where the legitimate language was inaccessible to almost everyone” (24).

For some of the writers in the archive of antislavery literatures, the process of translation into English and language acquisition was also a process of living through epistemic violence. Yet the governing assumption in Romantic-era studies in approaching the antislavery archive is that the language of Black British authors is English (Almeida). A similar assumption governs the indigenous archive, as Hessell shows in *Romantic Literature and the Colonised World: Lessons from Indigenous Translations* (2018). Hessell argues that indigenous interpretations of canonical authors are more than “novelties, nor [are they] simple evidence of the global power and reach of Romantic literature” (228) but are “simultaneous expressions of the value of Romantic literature and of the experience of colonization” (230).

While some might respond that the study of British or American literature is Anglocentric by nature, this commitment to monolingualism out of habit robs the field of depth and breadth, since the African diaspora was not limited to English-speaking countries. During and even after the abolition of slavery in 1833, Britain continued to trade with the Global South while at the same time making greater imperial incursions in Africa and India, as scholars such as Robin Blackburn, Rebecca Cole Heinowitz, Omar Miranda, César Soto, Juan Sánchez, Jesse Reeder, and Sara Medina Calzada have shown. Even so, texts from this “second slavery,” as Dale Tomich has called it, have a belated entrance into Romanticism. Such texts include, for example, Juan Manzano’s *The Life and Poems of a Cuban Slave* (1840), translated by the abolitionist Richard Robert Madden, who also testified in the *Amistad* trial, which vindicated the rights of enslaved persons to rise up against their enslavers and was one of the most famous international trials of its time. Nicole Aljoe suggests that the 1848 biography of the enslaved Brazilian Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua is another useful starting point for those wishing to expand their students’ reference points beyond texts written in English (*Creole Testimonies* 111). Aljoe also challenges “the marginal status of West Indian slave narratives within critical discourses of the slave narrative genre, Caribbean and Black Atlantic literary histories” and reveals how abolitionist groups in England, the United States, and the West Indies were in close contact with one another (*Creole Testimonies* 2).

Moreover, monolingualism, when assumed as a “natural state,” prevents a true reckoning with how English functioned as a significant barrier for the millions of people in British colonies who were deprived of access not only to literacy but also to the judicial recognition of their oral testimony in colonial courts, further limiting access to “the legitimate language.”[[14]](#endnote-14) English in its oral and written forms was therefore a second language for many formerly enslaved authors, from Wheatley Peters to Sancho and Cugoano. Acknowledging and considering this duality helps to decenter the assumption of the normativity of English and the nationalist and imperialist subtexts underpinning the idea that it is the language of Romanticism. Doing so disentangles it from the “metaphysical empires” of language that Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o denounces and that his son, critic Mukoma Wa Ngugi, terms “EME” as shorthand for “English Metaphysical Empire” (Wa Ngugi; Mignolo). As much as they are part of the standardization of languages in this period, the creolizations of English and other European languages in contact zones are also part of the Romantic aesthetic (Elfenbein). In the United States, the question of accessibility is compounded by the disciplinary gateway of English as the privileged language of the corpus, since millions of its citizens speak languages other than English that go unrecognized if Romanticism is configured as solely Anglocentric. As we reimagine community in the twenty-first century to create spaces of redress and also of transformation, Romanticist scholars must do more to invite students to imagine new contact zones not only between canonical and non-canonical texts and between or among disciplines but also between the past and the present, between history and historical fiction, between printed and living voices, and between linguistic communities whose ties to each other have been willfully and violently erased.

**IV. Concluding Openly (or An Open Conclusion)**

The genre of writing we asked contributors to engage in as their arguments took shape—something between argumentative prose, critical history, personal narrative, and a practical guide—is one that we are rarely asked to engage in as academics, and we thank the editors of *Romantic Circles* for the room they have made within the field for this kind of reflection. Following the work of exemplary scholars and educators such as Paolo Freire, Stuart Hall, bell hooks, and Edward Said, we are humbled by the task of approaching, alongside our contributors, the question of how our teaching and scholarship can contribute to the advancement of restorative justice. We inhabit a global community where division and injustice toward those structurally submitted to exclusionary regimes is increasing due to economic agendas that put profit over people, wage geopolitical conflict around the globe, disregard climate change, and mismanage the fallout from Covid-19. As Hall sagely anticipated in his seminal 1980 essay, “Teaching Race”:

The really crucial question is how do you begin to make that move away from the level of prejudice and belief? One needs to undermine the obvious. One has to show that these are social and historical processes and that they are not written in the stars, they are not handed down. They are deep conditions which are not going to change if we start tinkering around with them. We must not give our students that kind of illusion. We can however begin the process of questioning what the structures are and how they work. (127)

This collection enters into the spirit of “beginning the process of questioning” with the awareness that there are many more questions to be asked than can be answered in one volume. Because it has emerged out of a call for colleagues within a particular geographically defined network to describe to us what they were already teaching, rather than from an open call for work about the future of our field at large, we cannot make claims for broad coverage. We regret that no essays address Romantic antislavery literatures from Latin America, Africa, Asia, or Australia, or work with indigenous literatures, translation, or multilingualism. We also regret that there is no essay that addresses in detail the question of how to teach the Haitian Revolution, which is clearly foundational in the study of antislavery in the Romantic period. As Nick Nessbit, drawing on Marx, writes in *The Price of Slavery: Capitalism and Revolution in the Caribbean* (2022)*,* such work brings “living labor” to the forefront and its connection to Hegelian historical realization.[[15]](#endnote-15) As the discourse of antiracist approaches to teaching literature of the Romantic period continues to broaden, we hope this volume—a record of one localized conversation—will be a prompt to further discussion.

The essays collected here explore how recent history informs the way students might currently receive Romantic texts, clearing a space for further discussion about how the conversation will continue to change the way Romantic texts signify. As scholars and teachers, becoming conscious of not only how pedagogical praxis might be shaped by developments in research and critical race theory but also how events in the classroom might reshape research is more than a matter of good teaching or meeting the publish-or-perish expectations of the academy. Taken together, these essays encourage scholars to reflect on how both instructors and students must consider the relation between the classroom and the university and its relationship to the imagined community at the national and planetary levels. As Matthew, Gordon, Richardson, and Lee elucidate here, instructors and students must grapple with how structures of white privilege are implicit in the university, the archive, and the discipline so that together they can transform interpretation into a dialogic act of resistance as they deconstruct racialist and exclusionary discourses, thereby creating alternative spaces of interrelational knowledge.

The co-creation of knowledge is one of the paths toward the liberatory potential of education that Freire, a major inspiration for the 2018 panel, describes. Arguing against the “banking concept” of education, a system in which students merely bank information they passively receive from their teacher, Freire challenges the asymmetry of power central to the subject/object dichotomy that is also at the core of the ontological negation that racism relies on. As hooks writes in her meditation on how Freire’s pedagogy informs her own, “Freire’s work affirmed that education can only be liberatory when everyone claims knowledge as a field in which we all labor” (*Teaching to Transgress* 14). Moments of first encounter are often formative: students are coming to texts about slavery from a different historical perspective than their teachers, and this means that students have the potential to teach their instructors things that they have not before seen and that they may find hard to see.

While by no means exhaustive, this conversation offers some specific practices in the attempt to create classroom environments to fashion a place “where both [professors and students] are simultaneously teachers and students” while respecting the intersectionalities of race, gender, and class in our increasingly diverse student body (Freire 72). hooks also cautions that “teachers are often among that group most reluctant to acknowledge the extent to which white-supremacist thinking informs every aspect of our culture including the way we learn, the content of what we learn, and the manner in which we are taught” (*Teaching Community* 25).With this in mind, the discussions here respectfully offer multiple ways to reflect on how we might more consciously acknowledge and evaluate how our own experiences inflect our pedagogical practices and how to work with students to create spaces in our classrooms for this vital dialogue. At a time when events in the United States have inspired civic action and debate in countries across the world, the present moment can no longer be kept outside the doors of a classroom in which Romantic literature is being read. As scholars, it is useful to consider not only how pedagogical praxis might be reshaped by developments in research but also how events in the classroom might reshape research practices.

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1. We must acknowledge, in fairness to our contributors, that the collection was in stasis while the *Romantic Circles* website was rebuilt and concurrent projects were under way. Although some contributors have added references to more recent work for the purpose of citational justice, the majority of these essays were drafted in 2019 and 2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See <https://sites.bu.edu/barc/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See, for instance, P. Gabrielle Foreman’s excellent community-sourced document, “Writing about Slavery/Teaching about Slavery,” for nuanced insights on the language of exegesis in the classroom and in scholarship. Tita Chico founded a series titled “Antiracism: Research, Teaching, Public Engagement,” hosted by the University of Maryland’s Center for Literary and Comparative Studies, which includes several talks by colleagues in our field. The series is ongoing and constitutes a rich pedagogical resource. It can be accessed online at <https://english.umd.edu/research-innovation/clcs/antiracism-series>. Shelby Johnson, Brigitte Fielder, and Kerry Sinanan also spoke at a teach-in on “Race, Pedagogy and Whiteness in the Long 18C,” sponsored by the Keats-Shelley Association of America, the University of Texas San Antonio, and Mills College; a recording of this event is also available online at <https://k-saa.org/race_pedagogy_whiteness/>. The issues raised by Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia J. Mireles Christoff, and Amy Wong in their essay “Undisciplining Victorian Studies” also inflect the study of Romanticism. The Keats-Shelley Association of America posted online a two-part virtual roundtable titled “Toward an Anti-Racist, ‘Undisciplined’ Romanticism,” co-edited by Andrew Burkett and David Sigler (<https://k-saa.org/k-saa-virtual-roundtable-toward-an-anti-racist-undisciplined-romanticism/>). The Black Studies and Romanticism Virtual Conference held online, organized by Kate Singer at Mount Holyoke College, was also a virtual nexus for exchange at a moment when in-person conversations were not possible (<https://commons.mtholyoke.edu/blsandr/>). *Teaching the Eighteenth Century Now: Pedagogy as Ethical Engagement,* edited by Kate Parker and Miriam L. Wallace, was published as our work was in the final stages, and we regret that we could not be in dialogue with these essays. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The Global Cultures of the Long Nineteenth Century seminar was founded in 2012 by Joselyn M. Almeida (National Coalition of Independent Scholars; University of Massachusetts Amherst), Gülru Çakmak (University of Massachusetts Amherst) and Kate Singer (Mount Holyoke College). Daniel Block (Hampshire College) later became a co-organizer. By 2018 it was being led by Almeida, Singer, Lily Gurton-Wachter (Smith College), and Amelia Worsley (Amherst College). The seminar was conceived as a venue in which faculty from five colleges in the Amherst area of western Massachusetts could collaborate with an interdisciplinary group of scholars attentive to the intersections and tensions among the constellations of globalization, cosmopolitanism, migration, and border studies in the nineteenth century. Over the years, faculty from the Five Colleges have met to share their work in progress and have also hosted lectures from colleagues from the surrounding area, which have illuminated the multiple intersections and tensions of colonialism and globalization, Atlantic slavery, cosmopolitanism, migration, border studies, and the digital humanities. Our conversation at the panel in 2018 was shaped by seminars with Simon Gikandi, Manu Samriti Chander, Grégory Pierrot, Laura Doyle, Ron Welburn, Roberto Márquez, Orrin Wang, Joel Pace, Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, and Jared Hickman. Because of funding limitations, our invitations were restricted to colleagues located on the East Coast of the United States, or those traveling through the area. The 2018 pedagogy roundtable, held at Mount Holyoke College*,* built on these shared experiences and emerged from the community that these previous discussions had created. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The panel was originally scheduled for February 17, 2017, but in solidarity with a national strike planned for that day, we decided to cancel it; it then had to be delayed for another year until all of the speakers could reconvene. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Description taken from [www.nourbese.com/poetry/zong-3](http://www.nourbese.com/poetry/zong-3). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. In Romantic studies during the 1990s, Alan Richardson and Sonia Hofkosh’s *Romanticism, Race, and Imperial Culture* (1996) responded to the work of scholars such as Mary Louise Pratt in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992), Moira Ferguson in *Subject to Others: British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery, 1670–1834* (1992), and Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), which exposed how colonialism, enslavement, and resistance to it were intimately bound up with the modernity that writers imagined in the wake of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. For instance, Markley suggests that Anna Maria Mackenzie’s *Slavery; or, The Times* (1792) and Amelia Opie’s *Adeline Mowbray* (1804) offer “a rare view of an African character’s experience of late eighteenth-century England” (par. 15), and that Charlotte Smith’s “The Story of Henrietta,” in the second volume of *The Letters of a Solitary Wanderer* (1800), takes readers “into the heart of plantation life in Jamaica and into the midst of an uprising” (par. 22). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. For more recent scholarship on the Haitian Revolution, see Scott (2004), Nesbitt (2008), Buck-Morss (2009), Ferrer (2014), and Pierrot (2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. For a discussion of many of these poems, see Munro (2021). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. In addition to Dykes, those beginning a study of this field might consult the following selected texts, listed chronologically: Davis (1975), Barker (1978), Fryer (1984), Costanzo (1986, 1987, 1993), Baum (1994), Gerzina (1995, 2020, 2022), Richardson and Hofkosh (1996), Doyle (1996), Carretta (1996), Machow (1996), Hartman (1997), Thomas (1997), Aravamudan (1998), Makdisi (1998), Fulford and Kitson (1998), Richardson (1999), Bewell (1999, 2020), Mellor (1999), Thomas (2000), Linebaugh and Rediker (2000), Wood (2000, 2002), Sussman (2000), Carretta and Gould (2001), McBride (2001), Colley (2002), Lee (2002), Richardson and Lee (2003), Nussbaum (2003), Sharpe (2003), Carey et al. (2004), Ramey (2004), Carey (2005), Coleman (2005), Baucom (2005), Fulford et al. (2005), Carey et al. (2007), Rezek (2007), Brooks (2008), Markley (2008), Matthew and Wallace (2008), Chater (2009), Youngquist and Botkin (2011), Aljoe (2012), Youngquist (2013, 2017), Ross (2013), Olusoga (2016), Botkin (2017), Chander (2017, 2020), Sandler (2017, 2020), Aljoe et al. (2018), Chander and Matthew (2018), Hessell (2018), Carby (2019), Pierrot (2019), Diaby (2019, 2020), Pace (2020), Sinanan (2020) (“Maroon Resistance” and “The ‘Slave’”), Hanson (2020), Nielsen (2020), Joseph-Gabriel (2020), Otele (2020), Matthew (2022), Parker and Wallace (2023). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. On the collective’s origins and aims, see <https://www.bigger6.com/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. In the British Museum event “An Era of Reclamation | Beyond Bridgerton,” also recorded online, participants questioned the effects of the erasure of the history of slavery. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P_fqH2t0x1U0>. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. In 1828, the law was revised to allow “the admission of the evidence of slaves, in those cases only in which they are the actors or the sufferers, excluding their evidence in other cases” (*Slave Law of Jamaica* 216; see also 134–7.) [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. For a consideration of labor in the current moment, see Reed (2020). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)