Beyond the Romantic Chronology

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Reading through this collection of original essays, I have found myself struck again and again at the ingenious and telling ways contributors have chosen to deploy, disorder, and invert chronology. The inversions begin with the trenchant introduction by the editors, Joselyn M. Almeida and Amelia Worsley, who move strategically backward from the racist assaults on Black lives in the present-day United States, through a series of twentieth- and twenty-first-century interventions in Romantic scholarship, before leaping back to the British Romantic era itself. I will take a somewhat different tack (or rather, series of tacks) through the timeline, beginning almost thirty-five years ago before moving to consider the six essays that follow Almeida and Worsley’s lead.

In 1990, then, I put out a call for papers for a special MLA session on “Africa in the Romantic Imagination”—so far as I knew, or yet know, the first session of its kind. The call mentioned not only representations of sub-Saharan Africa, but also of race, of slavery in the Americas, of antislavery writing, of the African diaspora in England. I cast the net widely. To small avail. Although I issued the call at the earliest possible time, over the months of waiting I received a single unsolicited proposal. Working my network of friends and colleagues in the profession, I managed to drum up one other and then added a proposal of my own, an early version of the article that introduced the topic of obeah to Romantic studies (Richardson, “Romantic Voodoo”). The session was accepted by the MLA convention committee. It drew a small but, as I choose to remember it, an appreciative audience.

No one could read through the introduction to the present collection, let alone the essays that follow, without understanding the Romantic era—let’s call it 1780–1838—as the chronological period that saw the height of the British slave trade, a growing British colonial empire fueled by slavery, a burgeoning Black population in Britain itself, mass movements advocating abolition and emancipation (the first mass political movements in British history), an outpouring of antislavery writings of many kinds, and a series of slave uprisings and rebellions in the British “sugar islands.” And so it was. And yet, in 1990, all this had long remained virtually invisible to mainstream Romantic scholarship to date: hardly unthinkable, but rarely thought of. That same year, I published an essay on William Blake’s “The Little Black Boy” in relation to issues of race and colonial slavery (Richardson, “Colonialism”). Researching that piece I found, much to my amazement, that no one had ever thought to publish such an essay before, and that Blake scholars had not bothered to ask what Blake meant by the “southern wild” or what had brought this imagined Black boy into contact with his “little English” counterpart. How, I wondered, was this astounding lack of interest—not to say intellectual responsibility—even possible?

Folding this particular, and particularly glaring, absence into a larger evasion of history and politics characteristic of Romanticism as it was long taught and studied will not do. As David Perkins demonstrated in detail some time ago, what came to be called the “Romantic Movement” had been tightly linked with the energies of the French Revolution as early as 1802 (by Francis Jeffrey), a linkage that had become a “critical commonplace” by the Victorian era (88–90, 99–103). Between William Wordsworth’s “levelling muse,” Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s notorious radical-to-conservative arc, Lord Byron’s consistent (his only consistent) ideal of “liberty,” and Percy Bysshe Shelley’s outspoken radicalism, Romantic scholarship never forgot the impact of European revolutionary politics for long. But the slave trade, colonial slavery, the antislavery movement and its vast literature, the contributions of Black writers: this history long remained invisible.

Not because the relevant information and trustworthy pointers to the archival record would have been hard to find. One needed only turn to Eva Beatrice Dykes’s *The Negro in Romantic Thought* (1942) and Wylie Sypher’s *Guinea’s Captive Kings* (1942)—yet for half a century practically no one did. David V. Erdman’s *Blake: Prophet against Empire* (1954), the most prominent book to challenge the field’s aversion to issues of race, slavery, and colonialism, did not penetrate very far out of the tight circle of Blake scholarship and, even there, remained eclipsed by the mythopoeic approaches of Northrop Frye and Harold Bloom until rediscovered during the new historicist turn of the 1980s and 1990s. And, even then, Romantic scholarship lagged behind its neighboring fields: eighteenth-century scholars like Moira Ferguson and Victorianists like Patrick Brantliger were publishing important studies on antislavery writing, British exploitation of Africa, and the rise of modern racism by the mid-1980s, at a time when Henry Louis Gates Jr. began drawing critical attention to (as well as republishing) early Black British writers like Olaudah Equiano and Mary Prince (both included in Gates’s 1987 volume, *The Classic Slave Narratives*).

How else, then, to account for the history of erasure that I and, as it turned out, a few scattered Romanticist colleagues found ourselves confronting in 1990? Diagnosing a different set of erasures—of the sensibility and sentimental modes so crucial to the emergence of anything meaningfully called “Romanticism” and, in particular, of the female poets who helped develop them, Jerome McGann noted how a history of “reading romanticism through its most conservative venues” had effectively repressed critical attention to the “poetics of sensibility” (2). So effectively, indeed, that Romanticists had not only failed to read these poets and poetic modes but had lost the ability to meaningfully read them at all. From the perspective of 2024, we can add that influential constructions of Romanticism, from the Victorian era through nearly the end of the twentieth century, were not only masculinist in tendency but racist and white supremacist as well. Whatever the Romantic archive held, whatever the various (and often changing) views espoused by the literally thousands of writers active during that fraught half century, one retrospective version of the field after another, in anthologies, in literary histories, in critical studies, in class syllabi, rendered the Black lives of the era invisible, including the millions of Black lives sacrificed to kidnapping, the Middle Passage, colonial slavery, and early death. None of this mattered.

An essay that came out in 1989 both diagnosed and illustrated the problem. In a critical examination of Wordsworth’s apathetic response to the movement against the “traffickers in Negro blood” (1805 *Prelude* 10.206), Mary Jacobus located a “historical repression” of the slave trade endemic to “high Romantic discourse” (69, 90). But Jacobus failed sufficiently to note that “high” Romanticism was and always had been a retrospective construct, the culling of a few hundred “essential” texts from a vast archive, a selection, as we have noted, motivated in part both by masculinist and racist agendas. Hence “high” Romanticism could by definition never include the era’s significant outpouring of antislavery literature, a great deal of it contributed by women writers. This reification of a purely contingent canon and construction of the field operated well into the twentieth century (when “high” Romanticism had, in retrospect almost bizarrely, become confined largely to selected works by six male poets). Perversely enough, the same reification even informs the first book-length study of Romanticism and slavery to appear since Dykes’s 1942 book, *Mind-Forg’d Manacles* (1994), in which the author, Joan Baum, pointedly differentiates “propaganda” verse from the “essential contribution of the Romantics,” whose “*genius*” was to “*avoid palpable or overt*” moral engagement (xi, 69, caption to figure 13). Case closed.

So the academic field of British Romanticism, in 1990, badly needed reconstruction: a project that would take decades of critical work, the latest phase of which this volume embodies. Earlier phases—still far from complete—have involved several related strategies. One has concerned a combination of archival research and the republishing of works long kept out of circulation, as a necessary corrective to both the progressive narrowing of the Romantic canon and the field’s longstanding refusal to account for Black voices and Black lives. *Slavery, Abolition, and Emancipation: Writings in the British Romantic Period* (1999), the capacious eight-volume set assembled by Peter Kitson and Debbie Lee, stands as the major accomplishment along these lines to date. I would note here as well the collections of early Black British writing and the anthologies of antislavery verse listed by Almeida and Worsley in their introductory survey. Most of these works needed not simply to be republished (in print or online) but edited and introduced—made usable to scholars and students encountering them for the first time. This effort, as I can personally attest, has often involved a good deal of primary research, as even some of the most basic questions of authorship, publication history, and early reception had remained murky for over a century and a half. Important Romantic-era authors like Ottobah Cugoano, Mary Prince, Mary Birkett, and Edward Rushton, for example, had become little more than names attached to titles in rare books collections before Romantics scholars began undertaking this work of recovery in earnest in the 1990s, building on research by pioneers in other fields like Gates, Ferguson, and David Dabydeen.

A second strategy has involved moving “beyond formalism” in a double sense. As part of breaking away from notions of a “high” or “essential” Romanticism virtually untethered from its human context, the field needed to recruit new reading methodologies not only from the “new” historicism but, in this case, from such fields as colonial discourse studies, critical race theory, cultural criticism, and postcolonial studies as well. The imaginary (not to mention arbitrary and unstable) line between literature and ideology, “poetry” and “propaganda,” needed to be repeatedly challenged. And “beyond formalism,” as well, in Geoffrey Hartman’s sense that formalism (as in the American New Criticism) had not been “formalistic enough” (542). New reading strategies could reveal new tensions, contradictions, and interventions in texts that had been robbed of their full ideological force through interpretative methods designed to yield up well-wrought, “organic” poetic wholes. In the case of my own work, this doubly post-formalist poetics meant, for instance, locating the play of distinct voices in Blake’s “The Little Black Boy”—the Afrocentric voice of the mother, the jarring voice of internalized oppression, the emergent yet highly fragile ideological consciousness of the child speaker himself—and noting the possibilities arising from the contradictions among them. Or locating the stylistic and ideological fractures in “The Sorrows of Yamba”—a popular text for recent republishing efforts—that ultimately revealed the hand of two distinct authors (Richardson, “‘Sorrows of Yamba’”). These two strategies for moving past formalism can effectively complement one another in the classroom, as several essays in this volume attest.

From one perspective, such strategies reflected a willingness to bring the ethical and political concerns of the present to bear on the histories and literary artifacts of the past. And, indeed, some of us were accused at the time of critical “anachronism,” of the “condescension of the present,” as though Romantic-era writers like Cugoano had never advanced cogent antiracist arguments, as though literally thousands of pamphlets, broadsides, and poems had not been written condemning slavery and the slave trade, as though even a conservative like Hannah More had not denounced the capture and forced transport of millions of Africans on the grounds of “human rights” (*Slavery, a Poem*, line 260). Yet, from a different perspective, such work might be seen as a corrective to and thickening of the traditional Romantic chronology. Adding in historical dates like 1772 (Mansfield’s *Somerset* decision), 1781 (the *Zong* massacre), 1788 (the first great outpouring of antislavery agitation, petitions, and writings), 1791 (the Haitian Revolution), 1795–96 (the second Maroon War in Jamaica), 1807 (the abolition of the slave trade), 1823 (the Demerara slave revolt), and 1831 (the “Christmas” rebellion in Jamaica). Adding in literary dates like 1773 (Phillis Wheatley Peters’s *Poems*), 1782 (Ignatius Sancho’s *Letters*), 1786 (Thomas Clarkson’s *Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*), 1787 (Cugoano’s *Thoughts and Sentiments*), 1789 (Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative*), 1817 (Robert Wedderburn’s *Axe Laid to the Root*), and 1831 (Prince’s *History*). Asserting, as the end date to the “Romantic period” construct itself, the claims of the Emancipation year 1838, marking the abandonment of the “Apprenticeship” program and the effective end of slavery in the British West Indian colonies.

Yet thirty years of such remedial work—filling in gaps, adding texts and authors, reading more historically and more critically—have only done so much. As Almeida and Worsley note in their introduction, while we now have a “somewhat” expanded canon, antislavery writing still occupies at best a “marginal position” in Romantic pedagogy, with just a few (increasingly predictable) additions to course syllabi and too little attention to innovative classroom interventions. And so, to return to my initial impression of this volume’s own series of interventions, the Romantic chronology needs not just filling in but creative disruption, rearrangement, inversion, juxtaposition. Strict chronology—despite attempts to render it more faithful—has gone out of date.

Again, we see the first gesture toward rethinking chronology in the editors’ decision, in their introduction, to work backward and “explore how the present moment informs the ways that students might currently receive Romantic texts.” This should not be viewed as an attempt to make our courses more “relatable” (and perhaps increase our market share of bodies in the classroom), although that might prove a kind of side-effect of our revisionary efforts. Rather, we would be doing our students an acute disservice, and allowing ourselves to appear aridly out of touch, were we to pretend that issues of racism, racial violence and oppression, Black agency, and the value of Black lives were somehow *not* living and pressing matters. We would also be robbing our students of a chance to study the genealogy of our critical situation today in events, practices, and ideologies that were salient in the period we study and teach—however long they remained repressed from our field’s scholarly consciousness. If this is “presentism,” it is a frank acknowledgment of our present concerns and perspectives that better reveals, rather than distorts, the long-occluded record of the Romantic past.

Patricia A. Matthew, in her essay on “Romanticism and the Abolitionist Turn,” aptly characterizes the classroom sense of the Romantic era passed on to my own generation of scholars: “a period where there are no Black people or people of color, no questions about identity, race, and citizenship, and where the only revolutionary activities took place in France.” And she argues forcefully that no merely chronological approach to the past as somehow disconnected from these questions as posed in our own moment will suffice to reorient our, and our students’, attention. As Matthew stresses, primary texts do not “teach us about the past” but rather “show us select representations of the past”; historians as well can never offer a “fixed report of the past” but only a reconstruction inevitably informed by living concerns and debates. By insisting throughout her essay on past documents and timelines as *representations*, Matthew offers another way to contest positivist notions of history and implicitly white supremacist accounts of the field.

Nicolas Blaisdell provides first-person evidence of how encountering antislavery writing in a college classroom setting can stimulate and inform social justice activism in the present, which then in turn feeds into more robust antiracist pedagogical strategies. In keeping with this volume’s frequent recourse to chronological inversion, Blaisdell begins with an incident from July 2020, an encounter between a group of Black Lives Matter activists and officers from the Peabody, Massachusetts police department: a beginning that immediately suggests continuities between then and now, and a porousness between “academic” pursuits and action in the world. Intriguingly, Blaisdell traces his political activism back to his classroom exposure to two early Black British writers, Cugoano and Prince, along with the critique of early Victorian laissez-faire capitalism developed by Friedrich Engels. Key to Blaisdell’s own critique is his view of slavery not simply as a past artifact to study but as a tradition of racialized oppression persisting in such twenty-first-century forms as “unfree prison labor, unfree migrant labor, and unfree international labor.” Just as significantly, Blaisdell traces the emergence of his own antiracist activism to the inspiration of texts and events from the Romantic past, when abolitionist groups organized “unprecedented petitions, protests, legal proceedings, and other forms of civic action.” His story bears powerful witness to the dynamic potential residing in the encounter of the artefactual past, the current pursuit of racial and economic justice, and the college classroom.

In his meditation on “Teaching Antislavery,” Sean Gordon draws on theories of Afropessimism to drive home a comparable insistence on the continuities between the Romantic era and the moment we find ourselves in today. “I wanted students to engage with this continuum,” he writes, “to question their assumptions about the ‘pastness’ of slavery, the progressiveness of liberal democracy, and the putative postracialism of the Obama administration.” To this end, Gordon stretches inherited notions of Romanticism both geographically and chronologically. Geographically—by including a late Romantic American author like Edgar Allan Poe and by implicitly acknowledging the pointlessness of trying to circumscribe so cosmopolitan a writer as Equiano within a British, American, or transatlantic tradition: his career in fact exposes the arbitrariness of such categories. Chronologically—in bringing out the dialogue between Romantic texts and various later texts that demonstrate, in their own ways, the presentness of the past, including Mat Johnson’s twenty-first-century response to Poe in *Pym*, as well as fiction by Octavia Butler, Samuel Delany, and Celu Amberstone. Because the Black protagonist of *Pym* begins the novel as an English professor, Gordon’s syllabus also helps break down any imagined sense of “college” as a cloistered space somehow insulated from the racist ideologies and the incidents of racially motivated violence swirling all around it—and, as Gordon’s opening demonstrates, within it. As we attempt to track the major dates we transit through in Gordon’s essay—2014, 2015, 2011, 1838, 2004, 1995, 1966, 1789—chronology becomes not a series of beads on a string distantly linking then and now but a flexible story line, with flashbacks and fast-forwards, foreshadowings and back projections. Freed from the remorselessness of chronological succession, Gordon’s students can make their own dynamic connections among current, past, and personally experienced events and the literary texts that variously represent or refract them.

Chronological inversions can involve a matter of years or a matter of centuries, as Elizabeth Fay’s essay makes clear. Teaching Prince’s *History* (1831) in advance of Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* (1789), while “achronological,” encourages students to encounter Equiano’s more distanced, “rhetorically sophisticated” narrative only after registering the powerfully visceral impact of Prince’s account. (Fay also exposes her students to first-person historical accounts to increase their chances of sensing the “gut-level pain” of colonial slavery.) Fay’s pedagogy, like Gordon’s, also extends chronology beyond the present, including “Afrofuturist” works like Ryan Coogler’s *Black Panther* film (2018). And, as Ivan Ortiz demonstrates in an especially resonant essay, chronology can be pushed backward as well. Asking what it might mean to sing an antislavery ballad to the tune of “Admiral Hosier’s Ghost,” Ortiz invites his students, and us, to hear the “haunting” of abolitionist verse by prior, colonialist voices, a “white noise” that may function to obliterate the otherness of the enslaved subject. His hauntological analysis helps us understand the limits of sympathy—now as then—which may forestall rather than facilitate an “authentic encounter with human otherness.”

Expanding on what Fay calls her achronological strategy, Frances Botkin, borrowing from Jamaican Creole, develops a critical and pedagogical approach she terms *tunyuhan*. Following the Jamaican Maroon practice of making do (*mek fashion*) with what comes to hand (*tun yu han*, turn your hand), Botkin draws on an eclectic array of materials—“borrowing from other fields, experimenting with different genres, and branching into other centuries”—to fill in the silences and reveal the distortions endemic even to Black British writing, highly mediated as it was, in the Romantic era. Her resources include living Maroon oral traditions—and living Maroon speakers and activists. Botkin exposes her students to “knowledge beyond the archive” in an effort to incorporate living voices and ultimately “remake Romanticism.”

It might be said that every generation of Romantic scholars and teachers remakes the field, but not often, and perhaps not ever, so radically as over the past thirty-five to forty-five years of canon revision and critical reorientation. Women writers are now, for the first time, well represented in anthologies and teaching syllabi. Black writers and antislavery writing remain marginal to the field as a whole, yet the reparative work begun in the 1990s continues and the present volume does much to advance it. And recent events have shown just how urgent and how vital such work has grown.

I first read these essays at around the time of the now infamous attack on the U.S. Congress as it met to ratify the electoral college results of the 2020 presidential election on January 6, 2021. A large mob of right-wing rioters broke into the Capitol Building, seeking to disrupt the count, perhaps to murder any number of Democratic legislators, and bearing with them Confederate flags, Crusader crosses, nooses, and other white nationalist emblems, while sporting an odd combination of tactical apparel and Trump campaign gear. It was an attempted coup motivated by racist and white supremacist ideologies and egged on by the outgoing (at last) President himself. In the aftermath of this brazen attack on American democracy, no one any longer has an excuse for branding efforts such as those offered in this volume as “presentism” or as performative “wokeness” or as some passing academic leftist fad. All of us are now called to examine the racism and white supremacism operative, subtly or not, in our professions and workplaces, our political and religious organizations, our most seemingly casual encounters; in our own words and writings and acts and, not least, in our classrooms. I take heart, in a desperate time, from the voices resonating throughout this collection—the essayists’ voices to be sure, but also the voices reclaimed from the archive, and the living voices of students and activists and “oracles” quoted so liberally throughout. We will need at least another thirty years of remaking Romanticism as a more historically accurate, truly representative, and ethically responsible field. This volume points the way.

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