



## *Romanticism on the Net*

### **Introduction to Imperial Intimacies in *The Woman of Colour*: A Black Studies & Romanticism Cluster**

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#### **Biographical Note**

Kerry Sinanan is Assistant Professor in pre-1800 Global Literatures at the University of Winnipeg. She specializes in the Black Atlantic, transatlantic and Caribbean slavery, and Black and Caribbean diasporic writing.

1. In the introduction to a published roundtable on *The Woman of Colour* (1808), I wrote, “The power of the novel, then, lies in the promise it holds to reach forward into a more multicultural future in which gender and race might not be such oppressive structures as they are in 1808” (Sinanan 39). We chose Hazel Carby’s new book *Imperial Intimacies* as a co-text and a framing narrative for discussing *The Woman of Colour* in this cluster of essays because Carby poses deep questions about racialized identity, gender, and nation that were mobilized by imperial and plantation histories, the intimacies of which are denied by dominant accounts of British, European, and indeed colonial history. During her time in England, Olivia—heroine of *The Woman of Colour*—who is the daughter of an enslaved woman, Marcia, and the enslaver, Fairfield—gains full independence and the wealth that enables her to return to Jamaica as a free person. The plot is conveyed by a packet of letters that, like its antecedent Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740), has been published by a

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fictional editor. Unlike *Pamela*, *The Woman of Colour* contains no editorial preface. Instead, we have a concluding dialogue in which the fictional editor tells “a friend” that the purpose of the novel is to show how “virtue, like Olivia Fairfield’s, may truly be said to be its *own reward*” (189). And so *The Woman of Colour* explicitly resituates eighteenth-century female virtue in an independent, legally unmarried woman—a woman of colour—who leaves England for her home in Jamaica to pursue a better life. While the novel remains in many ways trapped within the plot conventions and raced and gendered norms of the Romantic period, it simultaneously rejects them and offers trajectories of emancipation that unsettle gender, race, and nation. White hierarchies of moral superiority and liberal ideals are less immutable than they appear.

2. Carby’s political, historical memoir illuminates the trajectories of race and power so well mapped out in *The Woman of Colour* over two hundred years later. Born to a Jamaican father, Carl, and a Welsh mother, Iris, Carby tells of how her intimate domestic relationships, and her own understanding of identity and (un)belonging, go back to Jamaican plantation slavery. Carl, having grown up in Kingston, Jamaica, became an RAF serviceman in World War II, and Iris grew up on a farm in rural Wales. Carby notes that both her parents “grew up poor” in parts of Britain separate from each other and from the controlling metropole. Each had different access to twentieth-century narratives of Britishness because of race. Of her immediate family, Carby says:

Iris and Carl assumed that after the war their offspring would belong to, and be an integral part of, British culture, but their intimate coexistence at the centre of empire

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created a series of problems that originated with their marriage and multiplied with the birth of a child. . . . Their duality, their coupling, did not contribute to the reproduction of white manhood, guardian and conduit of imperial, patriarchal power, the *raison d'être* of colonial life. . . . The marriage of Iris and Carl in the metropole was a provocation, their domesticity conspicuous, a distasteful reminder of proscribed but commonplace interracial sex in the peripheries, sex regarded not only as evidence of colonial degeneracy, but also as a threat to the regulation and governance of empire. (76–77)

The contradictions and entanglements of these official, imperial structures with the intimate and personal, the consequent devastations, and the possibilities of new futures, are the focus of both *Imperial Intimacies* and *The Woman of Colour*.

3. We dedicate this cluster to those descendants of the Windrush generation who are being illegally deported to the Caribbean and to all descendants of these arrivants.

**Works Cited**

Sinanan, Kerry. "Introduction—A Roundtable on *The Woman of Colour* (1808): Pedagogic and Critical Approaches." *Studies in Religion and the Enlightenment*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2021, pp. 39–40.