



Romanticism on the Net

Introduction

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Biographical Note

Kate Singer is the Mary Lyon Professor of Humanities in the Department of English and affiliated faculty in the Department of Critical Race and Political Economy at Mount Holyoke College. She is the author of *Romantic Vacancy: The Poetics of Gender, Affect, and Radical Speculation* (SUNY Press, 2019), coeditor, with Ashley Cross and Suzanne L. Barnett, of *Material Transgressions: Beyond Romantic Bodies, Genders, Things* (Liverpool University Press, 2020), and coeditor, with Omar F. Miranda, of *Percy Shelley for Our Times* (Cambridge University Press, 2024). She is working on a second book that explores tropes of shapeshifting in the Romantic period and beyond and currently serves as president of the Keats-Shelley Association of America.

1. The essays in this special issue made their public scholarly debuts as conference papers during the [Black Studies & Romanticism virtual conference](#), which took place June 24–25, 2021. This conference came about from two interlocking situations. One was the resurgence of, or the resurgent attention to, Black Lives Matter in 2020. Conversations that I was a part of in various organizations were both productive and completely unproductive: more space was clearly needed for a continuous conversation that was informed by various threads of colonial and contemporary histories. At the same time, studies of Romanticism still lacked substantial encounters with the long lineage of Black studies thinkers. There has certainly been historical work in our period on the institution of slavery, abolition, and enslaved peoples, but Romanticism as a field, and as an abstract concept—defined in myriad ways—had yet to grapple fully with questions of the fungible enslaved body, the

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subject of the unthought, social death, and the implications of Afropessimism for the field's concerns. There was important work, new or incipient then, to move from—including Patricia Matthew's spring 2022 *Studies in Romanticism* special issue on "Race, Blackness, and Romanticism," essays and forthcoming books from our plenaryists and those in the Bigger Six Collective, to name a few—but the pandemic threatened to cloister and clique us further, closing off larger, field-questioning conversations. As a white person, I was not in a position to lead that conversation, but one thing I could do was use my resources to create a space for the right people to lead and for all to participate.

2. Here is how the Call for Papers put it:

Hortense Spillers suggests that a new "grammar" for thinking and instigating Black liberation from white history is necessary. With this conference we offer a platform, one virtual but intimate, for people interested in seeking what new grammars we in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and present centuries need to learn from Black studies in our period-bound disciplines. Our hope for the conference is that it will address the white power structures that support anti-Blackness in the larger world and in the field of Romanticism very broadly understood. Romanticism entails a history of promised but failed revolutions, a history that terrorizes as much as it transforms. While the field has long been shaped by histories and discourses of whiteness and patriarchy, this conference avows and solicits new and ongoing scholarship on race, anti-slavery, abolition, and indigeneity.

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Because some of these ideas question the very nature or definitions of Romanticism, it seemed important not to house these conversations within spaces already constructed by “Romanticism.” For me, this conversation in large part began in the classroom with amazing and brilliant students who were not burdened by Romanticism per se, but who were interested in thinking about ecology without nature, about the ungendering of enslaved bodies, about the pleasures and violent perversions of sympathy, about the nature of white subjectivity as constructed by a necro-colonial system, about the arts in response to the promises and failures of emancipation and revolution. All this to say, even though Mount Holyoke is itself a white institution that suffers from the burden of its history, including its location on stolen Nipmuc lands, I hoped the conference would become a space where we could let our work on the Romantic period, in its various shapes and forms, encounter Black studies earnestly with the goal of becoming different scholars amid different scholarly landscapes that we continued to change.

3. What resulted was a two-day conference with two collaborative plenaries; a keynote by Zakiyyah Iman Jackson; over fifty conference papers; six panels of undergraduate, asynchronous, veritable conference presentations; and more than two hundred people in and out of Zoom sessions over the two days, which were punctuated by awkward but friendly “happy hours.” The “collaborative plenaries” are here published in their original recorded form—including Q&A—so you can experience them in their first virtual instantiation. The idea behind these “collaborations” was to give a space for the plenary to take shape in whatever way its authors saw fit—whether a conversation, a scripted exchange, or something more creative. The hope was that adjusting the format would better

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suit the virtual medium and likewise give a break from the individualist, professing, “Romantic genius” shape of usual plenaries. The first group of scholars was assembled from several scholars with exciting, recent work in (or very closely adjacent to) the Romantic period—Kerry Sinanan, Eugenia Zuroski, and Matt Sandler, and they decided to talk about “Citation, Appropriation, and Abolition.” The second group was organized by Bakary Diaby, who reached out to scholars working on longer nineteenth-century Caribbean history, particularly to those who might not identify as “Romanticists.”

4. This special issue is both a record of that moment and the continued conversation of some of its scholars. The first cluster, organized and edited by Kerry Sinanan, draws from one of the conference highlights—a panel that brought together *The Woman of Colour* (1808) and Hazel Carby’s own experimental prose: *Imperial Intimacies: A Tale of Two Islands* (2019). These two texts, and the essays working between them, distressingly and miraculously think about growing up and living within the spaces and affects stretched between Jamaica and Britain. They probe the romance narratives of multiracial marriages and families, Black/white/Brown mothering and Karenism, as well as the span between the human, the animal, and alternative genres of the human that might be found amid both texts. I want to make special mention of the exceptional editing and revising work that has gone on to bring these essays—as individual pieces and as parts of a whole—to fruition. It is rare to be a part of true, ongoing intellectual discussion through the exigencies and frequent microaggressions of peer review. The scholars in this cluster have epitomized to me what iterative critical conversation on the page might be, and I am indebted to them for

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that. A second, forthcoming cluster, will explore an array of other methodologies presented at the conference, with special voice given to early career and emerging scholars.

5. With the publication of these contributions, I continue to hope that this work above all might help to create a safe space that encourages real community, for all scholars of the Romantic period, but especially for Black scholars, Asian, Latinx, Palestinian, queer, and disabled scholars. Especially given our sociopolitical climate now, I hope that we remember how academic spaces are structured as white, ableist, straight spaces, and that we can work together to undo any hallways of oppression, including traditional academic modes of individualistic riposte, rebuke and ego-driven inquiry, as well as harmful hierarchies and interactions. This conference and its essays were designed to unsettle our norms in academia, including big “R” Romanticism, and to offer challenges to current theoretical and critical models. This unsettling is vital for transformation.

6. As I said at the conference itself, I especially would like to thank Kerry Sinanan for her help and copious advice throughout the course of putting together the conference and the special issue. I want to thank all of the plenary speakers, our amazing keynote, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, and especially all of the conference speakers and attendees for “doing the work” during such an unstable time as was the summer of 2021. Many thanks to the Mount Holyoke Department of English, the Mount Holyoke Critical Social Thought program, as well as MHC Latinx Studies, MHC Africana Studies, and the Dean’s Office for their financial and intellectual support through the RERA Grant and a Davis Educational Foundation Grant (for supporting the interdisciplinary teaching related connected to this

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project). Thank you to Mount Holyoke's Media Services for helping to organize and record the Zoom plenaries, and above all, my RA Kate Turner and the students of my spring 2021 "Revolution in the Age of Necropolitics" seminar, whose Zoom class conversations and professor-inspiring conference papers made all the work worthwhile.