CHAPTER 3

"A Chamæleonic Race"
Shelley and the Discourses of Slavery

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"Poets, the best of them – are a very chamæleonic race," Shelley observed in a letter to John and Maria Gisborne in July 1821; "they take the colour not only of what they feed on, but of the very leaves under which they pass" (*Letters* II: 308).[1] This chapter explores the ways in which Shelley's poetry is colored by contemporary practices of racial enslavement and adjacent discourses – anti-Black prejudices propagated by the pro-slavery West India Interest as well as by abolitionists and liberal thinkers. It is no coincidence that the same decades that witnessed the apex and later abolition of the transatlantic slave trade also produced Romanticism, a literary movement in so many ways centered on the celebration of individual, imaginative, and creative freedom. Yet the relations between racial politics and liberatory poetics have historically been neglected by scholars of Romanticism. In attempting to situate Shelley's poetry and poetics against a deliberately broad notion of "discourses of slavery," I do not mean to suggest that Shelley was explicitly intervening in the debates about the rights and wrongs of enslaving Africans, but rather that his valorization of liberty should not be read in isolation from the historical context of transatlantic slavery.

I begin by linking Shelley's comment on poets being chameleons to his view of the relation between the poet and his time before focusing on a number of his works: the prefaces to *Adonais* and *Laon and Cythna*, the dramas *The Cenci* and *Hellas*, as well as "A Discourse on the Manners of the Ancient Greeks Relative to the Subject of Love," written as a preface to Shelley's translation of Plato's *Symposium*.[2] Spanning a range of genres, none of these pieces is about racial slavery, yet they offer telling indications of Shelley's own complicity with this system. That being said, the point is not to accuse Shelley of being a racist. Rather, my aim is to gain purchase on what Shelley might mean *for our times*, firstly, by unpacking his own conception of the relation between poetry and history and, secondly, by analyzing how his writing is embedded in its historical

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present. In highlighting how Shelley's work reflects the racial prejudices of the Romantic era, I hope to call attention to how our own critical engagements with his work reflect the prejudices of ours. Critics are, after all, no less chameleonic than poets – we, too, take our colors from the materials we feed on and the time we live in. For this reason, this chapter includes some autobiographical recollections from my own early career as a critic of Romantic poetry that would normally be outside the purview of criticism. I introduce them here because it is only by foregrounding the relation between writing – be it poetic or critical – and the historical present of composition that we can begin to explore the historicity of writing as such: how texts are both of the moment in which they are written *and* of the moment in which they are being read.

Shelley's assertion that poets are "a very chamæleonic race" was an invitation to trace echoes of Goethe's *Faust* – which Shelley had been reading together with John Gisborne – in his recently completed *Adonais*. The poem is one of Shelley's most densely intertextual works: in addition to *Faust*, its allusions range across European literary history from the ancients (Bion, Moschus, Plato, Theocritus, Virgil) to the great moderns (Milton, Spenser) and to Shelley's contemporaries – first and foremost Keats who is the subject of Shelley's elegy. Shelley's suggestion that the poem's intertextuality is "chamæleonic" is the more apt because it can be associated with Keats's own poetics. It recalls a letter that Keats wrote in late October 1818 in which he describes himself as a "camelion Poet" who has "no identity" and "no self."[3] For Keats, poetic chameleonism implies a receptive fluidity, an ability to embody other subject positions. "When I am in a room with People," he continues, "then [I am] not myself home to myself: but the identity of every one in the room begins to press upon me that I am in a very little time annihilated."[4] Such receptiveness may be admirable as an aesthetic principle, yet from a political viewpoint it is problematic – a chameleonic approach to social questions threatens to collapse into a politically irresponsible or apathetic stance: the poet as turncoat parroting the most popular opinions of their day.[5]

This latter is a prospect that worries Shelley. Throughout his career, he attempted to define the relationship between poetry and the contemporary, often by seeking to extricate poetry from the political entanglements of its time. His most extended statements on this question appear in *A Defence of Poetry*, which defends the art with reference to its timeless beauty and truth. "A poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one; as far as relates to his conceptions, time and place and number are not," he confidently asserts (*SPP* 513). But the *Defence* is a history as

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well as a theory of poetry, tracing the form's development from earliest human society. Whenever Shelley addresses the work of any specific poet, he is forced to acknowledge that even the best of them are incapable of transcending the moral prejudice of their time and place – so his favorite poets Dante and Milton, for example, are destined to "walk through eternity enveloped and disguised" in the "distorted notions" of Christianity that dominated the worldview of their time (526). In another passage, he speaks of poets being "infected" with the "gross vice or weakness" of their contemporaries (520). This means that, although Shelley considers poetry to be timeless, he also recognizes that the poets who write it are inevitably shaped by their historical moment. Poets are "chamæleonic" in an additional sense: they take on the colors of the time they live in regardless of whether they consciously agree with them or not. His solution to this double bind (between historical contingency and timelessness) is offered in the concession that "a poet considers the vices of his contemporaries as the temporary dress in which his creations must be arrayed, and which cover without concealing the eternal proportions of their beauty" (516). In other words, the poet is a moral chameleon, writing eternal poetry that is nonetheless colored by the vices of their time. Shelley speaks of poets, yet it is hard to see how any writer could be excluded from this condition: philosophers, historians or critics are no less chameleonic than poets when it comes to reflecting contemporary prejudices. This means that, if we wish to analyze Shelley's relation to his time, or his relevance for ours, we must also attend to our own chameleonism with regards to the moment that we live in. Moreover, and this is the main contention of this chapter, when it comes to anti-Black racism, critics writing in the early twenty-first century are still sharing in the vices of Shelley's contemporaries. In *The Romantic Ideology*, Jerome McGann famously indicted Romanticists for uncritically accepting the philosophical positions of the Romantic poets whom they would criticize. This chapter explores a comparable problem: the extent to which scholars of the Romantic era unwittingly accept the anti-Black discourses that were generated throughout the eighteenth century to justify the enslavement of Africans. These discourses can be found among abolitionists no less than slavery apologists, and of course also in the works of the great poets.

Shelley was already in Italy when Keats wrote the "camelion Poet" letter, and while the two poets may of course have discussed the matter, it seems more likely that Shelley's formulation echoes Godwin's flattering description of a "man of talent" in his essay "Of an Early Taste for Reading": "When I read Thomson, I become Thomson; when I read

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Milton, I become Milton. I find myself a sort of intellectual camelion, assuming the colour of the substances on which I rest."[6] Godwin argues that genius manifests itself in a child's capacity for literary absorption. Shelley's suggestion that a poet is a chameleon effectively transposes the mimetic imagination of a young reader to the adult poet. For Godwin, the opposite of the man of genius is not the dull and plodding man (although such a man is outlined at the start of the essay) but the slave, as becomes clear in the warning that he issues at the close of the essay:

> But what is most to be feared, is that some adverse gale should hurry the adventurer a thousand miles athwart into the chaos of laborious slavery, removing him from the genial influence of a tranquil leisure, or transporting him to a dreary climate where the half-formed blossoms of hope shall be irremediably destroyed. That the mind may expatiate in its true element, it is necessary that it should become neither the victim of labour, nor the slave of terror, discouragement and disgust. This is the true danger[.][7]

"Of an Early Taste for Reading" was published in 1797 and has evidently absorbed the abolitionist rhetoric of its time – the transportation of a thousand miles (across the Atlantic, presumably) from freedom into slavery, from a genial to a dreary clime, from innocent leisure to hopeless toil: all these are staples of abolitionist imagery. Although Godwin makes no mention of skin color, his choice of rhetorical tropes evokes a person who has been kidnapped from Africa. The image is clearly a warning to his readers of what happens to the young person who does not cultivate their intellectual talents – but why does Godwin need to evoke the transatlantic slave trade to bring this point across? Does he really think that his readers are in "true danger" of ending up enslaved on an overseas plantation? Or does the image of an enslaved African serve another apotropaic purpose: suggesting complete intellectual denigration, everything that his readers would seek to avoid for themselves and their children? Although Godwin's statement clearly condemns slavery, its rhetorical power rests on a contrast between "man of genius" and "slave of terror" that reinscribes a racial hierarchy that places free whites and enslaved Blacks at opposite ends on the scale of intellectual refinement. In this gesture, Godwin's argument, chameleon-like, takes its color from the racial assumptions of the 1790s.

The chameleon poet metaphor allows for both conscious and unconscious use of source materials. Whereas Keats emphasizes how the poet responds to his social environment, and Godwin considers how precocious children respond to reading, for Shelley, its primary import lies in the relations that it establishes between works. The notion of poets as chameleonic dovetails with his belief that all poets are collaborating on a single

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work, which he in the *Defence* describes as "that great poem, which all poets, like the co-operating thoughts of one great mind, have built up since the beginning of the world" (*SPP* 522). And yet *Adonais* is very firmly anchored in a specific historical circumstance: it is an elegy for Keats that takes vengeance on hostile reviewers. "I have dipped my pen in consuming fire to chastise his destroyers," he informs Claire Clairmont in a letter announcing the poem's completion (*Letters* II: 302).[8] The poem grows out of the squabbles taking place in the literary magazines of Shelley's day. The preface contrasts the timeless value of Keats's poetry with the inferior compositions lauded by his critics, taking particular aim at the *Quarterly Review* and one of its associates, whom he calls "a most base and unprincipled calumniator."[9] This could be a reference to Henry Hart Milman (on June 11, 1821, he wrote to Charles Ollier that he had "discovered that my calumniator in the Quarterly Review was the Rev[d]. Mr. Milman") or to Robert Southey, whom he considered to be behind attacks on his own and Keats's work (*Letters* II: 298–299).[10] Between poem and preface, *Adonais* embodies the poet's split temporality: at once enmeshed in the parochial concerns of his time and contributing to a great poem that transcends any given historical present. A poet may participate in "the eternal, the infinite, and the one," but he also engages in bickering and petty point-scoring with his contemporaries (*SPP* 513).

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The archive is the material interface in which past and present are conjoined. Timeless poems are embodied in aging manuscripts and books. Several of Shelley's poems are explicitly rooted in archival documents: *Prometheus Unbound*, for instance, rewrites a lost drama of the same name by Aeschylus (and his copy of Aeschylus, allegedly found in his pocket after he drowned, is now archived in the Bodleian Library, Oxford); the plot of *The Cenci* is taken from a "manuscript copied from the archives of the Cenci Palace at Rome"; "Julian and Maddalo" is an oral history record of a conversation with Byron; *Hellas* takes another Aeschylean drama, *The Persians*, alongside Shelley's reading of newspaper reporting on the Greek War of Independence as its sources. *Queen Mab*, with its copious notes citing an eclectic mix of authorities – Bacon and the Bible, Rousseau and Lucretius, Holbach and Hume, Pliny and Spinoza, to name a few – is another kind of archive, capturing young Shelley's reading habits. Drawing on archival materials in the composition of a work serves to tether that work to history in a particular way. It is an assertive gesture, symbolizing not merely a lack of better inspiration but an appropriation of the past

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in the service of one's own creative project. It also reveals the proximity between poetic creation and critical interpretation: Shelley's rewriting of *Prometheus Unbound* is also an analysis of what bondage meant for the Greeks and for Shelley's own post-Napoleonic generation.

In *No Archive Will Restore You*, Julietta Singh offers a personal meditation on the relation between a writer and their archive. The following passage describes the experience of budding critics trying to gain a foothold in the academic marketplace.

> We were graduate students in a small cultural theory program, plummeting deeper and deeper into debt, which is in a sense its own hellish kind of archive. We were hoping to be one of the rare exceptions that would be plucked into that almost mythical land of tenure-track work. […] Why *did* we stay on, with the odds so stacked against us? I don't blame the archive per se, but it undoubtedly held out a kind of promise for each of us that kept us tethered to academia. The archive was an elusive hope of our individual salvation. If we could find the right archive, the right stash of materials that was sexy enough to sell ourselves, we could be spared the depression, the anxiety attacks, the pre-mid-life crises that would come when, one by one, we realized we were not going to be chosen. When, in the face of that brutal rejection, we had no idea what the fuck to do with ourselves. If only we could stumble upon the right archive, the secrets that no one else had yet discovered, we might still be one of the chosen ones.[11]

To me it seems possible that Shelley, who spent much of his career fussing over the lack of popular acclaim, would recognize himself in Singh's recollection. If *Queen Mab* displays his youthful ambitions, signaling philosophical erudition and political credentials, later works like *Adonais* or *Hellas* demonstrate Shelley's mastery of the literary canon, his right to a place among the timeless poets. "It is absurd in any review to criticize Adonais, & still more to pretend that the verses are bad," he wrote high-mindedly when the poem failed to attract the praise he had anticipated (*Letters* II: 388).[12] From the start to the finish of his *oeuvre*, Shelley's citations and intertextual allusions reveal his "archive" (in Singh's sense): the source materials that he gathers in the hope of being plucked into the mythical land of eternal poets.

For us, coming to his works as critics, Shelley's own work is the archive. I encountered it subject to that precarious condition outlined by Singh, hoping for it to be sexy enough to allow me to secure a foothold in the academy. At first, in my student days, I defined "sexy" as canonical: dead white poet, philosophical complexity, revolutionary politics, proto-feminism, cosmopolitan lifestyle, and an epic death story to boot (that shipwreck: an accident? a suicide?). Working with Shelley would give

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me the gravitas to compensate for being a young woman of color from a migrant background with little social or cultural capital. But today, more than a decade later and in light of the various crises and reckonings that shake our present, the definition of academic "sex appeal" is shifting, becoming more attuned to questions of social and racial justice. Sadly, this attunement has come at the cost of human lives: most dramatically the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 that sparked global Black Lives Matter protests and focused attention on legacies of enslavement and colonialism and how they determine structural inequalities in our own time. Suddenly, confessional books on everyday racism by Black authors were topping the bestseller charts while universities and subject associations hurried to proclaim their solidarity. Saidiya Hartman summed up the mood perfectly in the following observation:

> What we see now is a translation of Black suffering into white pedagogy. In this extreme moment, the casual violence that can result in a loss of life – a police officer literally killing a Black man with the weight of his knees on the other's neck – becomes a flash point for a certain kind of white liberal conscience, like: "Oh my god! We're living in a racist order! How can I find out more about this?"[13]

For me, in a deeply problematic way, the translation of Black suffering into white pedagogy has entailed a translation of structural disadvantage into a career opportunity. In the English department of our time, as a living Black woman, I am suddenly more sexy than dead, white Shelley. Although academia has long operated under the "color-blind" pretense that critical labor is objective and impersonal, it has never *not* mattered that I am a Black woman working on Romanticism – often the only Black person in the room. Here are some examples from my experience at university:

The first supervision for my undergraduate dissertation:

ME. I am interested in British and German Romanticism.

DISSERTATION SUPERVISOR. Have you considered writing about Toni Morrison?

As a PhD student making small talk over conference coffee with other PhD students:

RANDOM PHD STUDENT. So what do you work on?

ME. Shelley.

PHD STUDENT. Oh, how interesting! I didn't realize that Shelley wrote on slavery.

At a formal dinner in a Cambridge college:

ME. My postdoctoral project is about Shelley.

PROFESSOR EMERITA. How curious for someone of your complexion to work on such a canonical poet.

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It is embarrassing to bring this up, yet it is perhaps more absurd to pretend that the color of my skin and my "most peculiar" name (that's a quote from another encounter with an established academic) do not affect my professional life. "Your silence will not protect you," as Audre Lorde famously put it.[14] So perhaps it is not surprising that my search for "the right archive, the right stash of materials that [is] sexy enough to sell" increasingly brings me to myself, my own "authentic" voice and experience. This is one reason why my answer to the question of what Shelley might mean *for our times* is as much about my own historical situation as it is about Shelley: critical interpretation cannot be abstracted from the person who offers it and the time in which they live.

Introducing my lived experience of academia into an academic text is a form of resistance against the unconscious (white supremacist) biases of the academy: an environment historically developed for privileged white men to prosper. Allied modes of resistance come from all possible directions: Black, feminist, queer, Indigenous, decolonial and other anti-normative theories and practices have served to challenge how knowledge is produced and circulates in the academy. "Where do you know from?" Eugenia Zuroski asks in an exercise for graduate students that calls attention to the contingent nature of knowledge production.[15] In part, the interest in personal experience reflects the state of identity politics in an age of influencers, selfies, and 24/7 social media performance, but, equally importantly in this context, it is rooted in Romantic notions of subjectivity. In the *Defence*, Shelley celebrated poetry's ability to dispel "the dull vapours of the little world of self," but in private correspondence he acknowledged the impossibility of escaping its microcosm: "So much for self – *self*, that burr that will stick to one" (*SPP* 525; *Letters* II: 108–109).[16] Indeed, being preoccupied with the self is something of a Romantic malaise, from Wordsworth's fourteen-book epic on the growth of his own mind to Byron's self-mythologizing Oriental tales or Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* that purports to settle "the true nature of poetic diction: and at the same time to define with the utmost impartiality the real *poetic* character of a poet" through an autobiographical narrative.[17] For the Romantics, a reflective engagement with the specificity of their own experience unlocks the truth of poetry as such – yet the very notion that such a transition from individual self to universal truth is possible rests on a set of beliefs about personhood that is, in and of itself, premised on the historically specific philosophical context of Romanticism. So how do I, as a Black woman of the twenty-first century, even begin to approach this allegedly timeless and impartial truth when the experience through which it is formulated differs so much from my own?

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Shelley did not have much to say about racial slavery. When I state this to experts in the field, they tend to be quick to point out that he did not take sugar in his tea, as if this biographical anecdote is enough to counterbalance the fact that his lifelong engagement with the politics and poetics of freedom is completely silent on the subject of the plantation. For him, the political problem of emancipation crystallized in the bloody Terror that followed the French Revolution, including how to avoid its repetition. In the preface to *Laon and Cythna*, a poem that processes this history, he places the blame for the Terror squarely on the shoulders of the oppressed masses:

> Could they listen to the plea of reason who had groaned under the calamities of a social state, according to the provisions of which, one man riots in luxury whilst another famishes for want of bread? Can he who the day before was *a trampled slave*, suddenly become liberal-minded, forbearing, and independent? This is the consequence of the habits of a state of society to be produced by resolute perseverance and indefatigable hope, and long-suffering and long-believing courage, and the systematic efforts of generations of men of intellect and virtue. (*Poems* II: 36–37, emphasis mine)

In short, the French were not ready for the liberty they suddenly gained during the revolution. The implication is that men should bear their chains with "resolute perseverance and indefatigable hope" – in other words, nonviolent resistance – until they are ready to be freed. But let's pause to consider Shelley's choice of the phrase "trampled slave." Taking its color from the discursive landscape of the 1790s, the phrase evokes abolitionist sentimentality: the poor slave is to be pitied, but he may by no means take his emancipation into his own hands. This figure is a rhetorical construct with little relation to actual enslaved people, people whose legal status was that of chattel, which is to say personal property with no more right to self-determination than possessed by a chair or a brick. In other words, Shelley uses the concept of slavery as an abstract political metaphor – comparable to the neo-Lockean sense in which the American revolutionaries of the 1760s and 1770s argued that "taxation without representation is slavery"[18] or Mary Wollstonecraft compared the lot of white middle-class British women to that of enslaved Africans. "Is one half of the human species, like the poor African slaves, to be subject to prejudices that brutalize them," she demands, surely intending to startle her reader into feeling the outrage of reducing white women to the abjection of Black slaves.[19]

The ethical shortcoming of the preface to *Laon and Cythna* is not just that it draws on the language of slavery that suffused the political discourse

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of its time but that it offers the very same argumentative strategies that the West India Interest mobilized to defend slavery: slavery cannot be abolished because the enslaved are not ready for freedom. If they were to be emancipated, they would at once pursue violent and barbaric revenge against their former masters. Even William Wilberforce, whose twenty-year-long parliamentary campaign for abolishing the slave trade has made him the poster boy of abolition in mainstream historiography, was *against* emancipation of the slaves themselves. Speaking in the Commons in 1805, Wilberforce referred to enslaved Black people in the Caribbean as "a degraded race of beings, actuated only by a brutal impulse" and clarified that, while he might ultimately hope for their eventual emancipation, it could not possibly take place until "a period, the distance of which ha [*sic*] had never attempted to calculate" – a future so distant that it may never come.[20] Hansard records the continuation of Wilberforce's speech as follows:

> [H]e felt that the immediate emancipation of the n----es in the West Indies could not be expected, for that before they could be fit to receive freedom it would be madness to attempt to give it to them yet he owned he looked forwards, and so he hoped did many others, to the time when the n----es in the West Indies should have the full enjoyment of a free, moral, industrious, and happy peasantry.[21]

Leading abolitionists subscribed to the same racist stereotypes about Black people lacking in aptitude for self-governance that slavers used to defend the institution.

Shelley's analysis of the French Revolution therefore takes its colors from the contemporary elite's patronizing attitude towards the rights of the laboring classes. He employs the same modes of reasoning in outlining why the workers of pre-revolutionary France were not ready for freedom as contemporary pro-slavery advocates used to justify the continued enslavement of Black people. This is why pro-slavery sentiments can be so seamlessly parsed in Shelley's terms: enslaved Africans cannot "suddenly become liberal-minded, forbearing, and independent," and emancipation must be postponed until such a date when "the systematic efforts of generations of men of intellect and virtue" – this could be read as a reference to the English missionaries and clergymen who were responsible for Christianizing the slaves – have rendered them sufficiently civilized to deserve freedom. What is even more troubling is the stance that Shelley takes in this conflict. When he writes of "men of intellect and virtue" whose task it is to civilize the masses, he is referring to himself and other progressives like himself (an arc that potentially includes twenty-first-century "woke" academics),

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whose writings will prepare oppressed people to be able to handle freedom – as if all people do not have an inborn right to freedom and self-determination without such efforts at civilization.

As the proximity between Shelley's explanation of the Terror and pro-slavery rhetoric shows, the disturbing thing about this mode of reasoning is that it is essentially about excluding certain groups of people from what Hannah Arendt has termed "the right to have rights" unless they comply with certain conditions: being "liberal-minded," "forbearing," "independent" – and above all not demanding reparations or retribution for past wrongs.[22] Yet, as Arendt makes clear, denying someone's right to have rights amounts to their "expulsion from humanity altogether."[23] While Arendt is concerned with the Holocaust, Orlando Patterson identifies a comparable mode of excluding people from the concept of the human in chattel slavery. He terms the condition of the enslaved a "social death."[24] Along similar lines, Hartman has noted that "the slave is neither civic man nor free worker but excluded from the narrative of 'we the people' that effects the linkage of the modern individual and the state," and so it follows that the "everyday practices of the enslaved occur in default of the political, in the absence of the rights of man."[25]

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Shelley returns to the question of who is entitled to and who is excluded from the domain of rights more directly in his representation of Beatrice Cenci, for which reason we can read Beatrice as a proxy for the enslaved. Most critics begin their reading by noting Beatrice's entrapment in a society governed by a patriarchal "triple entente" of Father, Pope, and God in which, as a woman, Beatrice has no legal avenue to seek redress for the crime she has suffered – being raped by her father.[26] "What have I done?" Beatrice demands after the act,

> Am I not innocent? Is it my crime
> That one with white hair, and imperious brow,
> Who tortured me from my forgotten years,
> As parents only dare, should call himself
> My father, yet should be! (III.i.70–74 [*Poems* II: 781])

Beatrice interprets the rape as punishment, although her only crime is the tautological fact of having been born her father's daughter. A person kidnapped or born into slavery faces a similar predicament: their life is one long punishment though their only crime is having been born of a certain skin color. Furthermore, Shelley repeatedly emphasizes Beatrice's exclusion from the law: "is it that I sue not in some form / Of scrupulous law,

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that ye deny my suit?" she asks the noblemen of Rome during the banquet scene at the end of Act I (I.iii.135–136 [*Poems* II: 757]). The gendered violence propels her insight into her position outside the patriarchal law of Papal Rome: "in this mortal world / There is no vindication and no law / Which can adjudge and execute the doom / Of that through which I suffer" (III.i.134–137 [*Poems* II: 783]). She exists outside of the sphere of rights. This is also true of enslaved persons who were subject to violations that remained expressionless within the legal code of the British Empire, which defined them as chattel devoid of legal personhood. Even in the rare cases when a Black – free or enslaved – person's testimony was admitted in court, a fine-grained calculus governed how much it was worth compared to that of a white man.

Being excluded from the domain of rights, Beatrice cannot expect retribution through the usual legal means. "I pray / That you put off, as garments overworn, / Forbearance and respect, remorse and fear, / And all the fit restraints of daily life," she says to her lover Orsino and stepmother Lucretia in a scene after the rape (III.i.207–210 [*Poems* II: 788]). Her words in effect conjure a space outside the law where the conventions of social interactions do not apply – this can be understood as the domain of chattel slavery, a life lived in the absence of the right to have rights. Beatrice goes on to explain why her being wronged in this space necessitates an extrajudicial justice: "I have endured a wrong, / Which, though it be expressionless, is such / As asks atonement" (III.i.213–215 [*Poems* II: 788]). When Beatrice takes the atonement into her own hands, the action can be read as an instruction to the oppressed masses. After having "prayed / To God, and […] talked with [her] own heart," Beatrice sentences her father to death – "Mighty death! / Thou double-visaged shadow! Only judge! / Rightfullest arbiter!" (III.i.218–219, 177–179 [*Poems* II: 788, 786]). Read as an allegory on slavery, Beatrice's actions advocate a summary execution of all slave traders and plantation owners. However, if the play suggests analogies between Beatrice's parricide and a people's regicide or armed self-emancipation, Shelley's preface condemns the thought: "Revenge, retaliation, atonement, are pernicious mistakes," he unequivocally states (*Poems* II: 730). Such pernicious mistakes may make good tragedy, but Shelley clearly does not recommend violence as political principle. Instead, he prescribes forgiveness, "the fit return to make to the most enormous injuries is kindness and forbearance" (*Poems* II: 730). This is emancipation on the model of the Wedgwood medallion; "Am I not a man and a brother?" the kneeling man demands. The image has such a hold on the white imagination that, over time, it has congealed into the

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mainstream view of abolition according to which the heroic Wilberforce liberated the poor, pitiful Blacks. This is a history that erases the repeated uprisings, revolts, and rebellions by enslaved Caribbeans that made the fear of successful Black self-emancipation into one of the most potent forces in eighteenth-century colonial politics.

Shelley's preface to *The Cenci* reveals the naiveté of his political imagination: ultimately, to practice forbearance is to acquiesce in your own oppression. A more fruitful way of reading *The Cenci* as an allegory on chattel slavery emerges if the drama is placed in constellation with M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*, which is one of our time's most haunting confrontations with the afterlife of the Middle Passage. Like *The Cenci*, *Zong!* is based on an archival record of true historical events. The poem is named after a slave ship whose captain, Luke Collingwood, decided to throw circa 150 Africans overboard so as to claim compensation for lost "cargo." A large part of the tension in both works arises from the fact that they deal with a crime too horrible for words: in Beatrice's words, this is "a wrong so great and strange […] / Ask me not what it is, for there are deeds / Which have no form, sufferings which have no tongue" (III.i.139–142 [*Poems* II: 784]). Such crimes exceed representation and can only be manifested negatively, as a reticence, the failure of speech. Early critics remarked on Shelley's foolhardiness in centering a drama on an act that could not have been performed, and barely even openly talked about, on a London stage in 1819, but this is precisely the point. Paul Endo sees this as an example of the Shelleyan sublime:

> Shelley often *stages* silence, choosing not to mediate. The namelessness of *The Cenci* is just such an instance: it is not symptomatic of a daemonic, pathological "incapacity," but must be regarded as a calculated attempt […] to *postpone* naming and the propagating of a high sublime meaning or "moral purpose."[27]

The very namelessness names a region of justice that exists in default of the judicial system of its time. Philip uses a comparable technique to delimit a notion of justice that is in default of the legal code in which the court case of the *Zong* was conducted. The case was brought because the insurers refused to pay compensation for the murdered Africans and solely hinged on this destruction of property being willful. "There is no telling this story," Philip repeatedly insists in the "Notanda" accompanying her elegy: words are not able to convey the magnitude of the crime. Yet the story must be told and *Zong!* does the telling, or "un-telling."[28] It starts from a report on the court case: every single word in *Zong!* originates in that

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archival document. Philip unmoors the words of the report, loosens them from the grotesque formality of that courtroom, and lets them spill over the page as fragments of sentences, further fragmenting into pure sound before, finally, they sink into the page – the final section is printed in fading grey ink so as to reinforce visually "the un-telling of what cannot, yet must, be told."[29] Philip's "un-telling" helps us read Beatrice's repeated insistence on the nameless, wordless, expressionless nature of the wrong that she suffers. Where Philip decomposes language, Shelley repeatedly spells out language's inability to bear witness or achieve redress. Which is to say that, despite their differences, *Zong!* and *The Cenci* are related because they thematize the failure of language to represent certain forms of violence: both Philip and Shelley take an archival record describing an unspeakable crime and turn it into poetry. These historical documents are most palpable in the silences and absences at the core of each respective work, a speechlessness that places a demand on any critic seeking to interpret these works – a demand to face the ethical implications of writing about imaginative works that deal with real historical atrocity. How do we speak about past injustices without appropriating them for our professional archive? Without converting someone else's suffering into an opportunity for professional advancement? Without speaking over when we try to give voice to the dead?

*

With *Hellas*, Shelley faces a new revolution – the Greek War of Independence – and another challenge with combining the eternal value of poetry with contemporary politics. In the drama's preface, Shelley proudly informs his readers that the "*Persae* of Aeschylus afforded me the first model of my conception" but also that "Common fame is the only authority which I can allege for the details which form the basis of the poem, and I must trespass upon the forgiveness of my readers for the display of newspaper erudition to which I have been reduced" (*SPP* 430–431). The work is thus an amalgam of the daily news and timeless tragedy. In addition, *Hellas* is a piece of propaganda writing, intended to stir his fellow Englishmen to intervene in the Greek War. "What little interest this poem may ever excite, depends on its *immediate* publication," he wrote to his publisher Charles Ollier shortly after completing it, a statement quite at odds with the timelessness that Shelley usually ascribes to poetry (*Letters* II: 365).[30] "If *Hellas* is filled with atemporal ideals," Mark Kipperman comments on this letter, "they had timely urgency for Shelley."[31] Aligning Shelley's treatment of the Greek War to his comments on the French

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Revolution, Michael Erkelenz reads the drama's ending in pragmatic terms: what "begins as a celebration of Greek battle victories ends as a call for mercy and a warning of the consequences of revenge. *Hellas* […] everywhere addresses the dangers that the modern Greeks may only repeat the mistakes of other revolutionaries before them."[32] Timothy Webb has similarly suggested that the play's "revolutionary optimism is tempered by the recognition that revolutions which are based on blood will, in their turn, give rise to other revolutions and further bloodshed."[33]

Despite these cautionary caveats about potential violence, Shelley's preface is assured in its representation of the Greek War of Independence as one of the great political events of its time: Shelley links it to revolutionary upheavals in Spain, France, and Italy and closes with an assertion that the "world waits only the news of a revolution of Germany to see the Tyrants who have pinnacled themselves on its supineness precipitated into the ruin from which they shall never arise" (*SPP* 432). In other words, *Hellas* is the herald of a liberated Europe and, as so often in this period, Europe stands for the world at large – so Shelley does not pause to consider how the upheavals in Spain, France, and Italy interacted with anti-imperial unrest in their overseas colonies. This Eurocentrism explains why the small-scale guerrilla warfare of the Greeks has world-historical ramifications. As much as dramatizing a particular conflict, Shelley conceives of the drama as a series of "lyric pictures" in which he has "wrought upon the curtain of futurity which falls upon the unfinished scene such figures of indistinct and visionary delineation as suggest the final triumph of the Greek cause as a portion of the cause of civilization and social improvement" (430). The drama has a complex relation to its own historical moment. It creates its archive – creates itself *as* an archive – by assembling ancient materials (Aeschylus's *The Persians*) and contemporary newspaper sources in order to write a future in which the Greeks are free and Shelley's present is past. While, in the *Defence*, Shelley described drama as "a prismatic and many-sided mirror" reflecting its own present, *Hellas* anticipates a *future* moment in which Shelley's readers will be able to see their own time reflected in Shelley's drama (520).

Yet as I read the drama in the present of Shelley's future, his ambitions for *Hellas* seem to have misfired. At the time of my reading, the most urgent political development in the Romantic period is neither the conflict in Greece nor the power plays between European monarchies but rather imperial expansion fueled by an ascendant white supremacism. The period witnessed the growth and consolidation of a racial capitalism that helped finance an industrial revolution in Europe even as it fed into further

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colonial extraction and expansion across the globe. *Hellas*'s entanglement in British empire-building comes into view more clearly when the vision of Greece presented in one of its choral passages is read alongside a poem that has become a centerpiece in the culture wars of the early 2020s: "Rule, Britannia!" Both James Thomson's poem and Shelley's chorus begin with an account of how the two states emerge out of the sea: "When Britain first, at Heaven's command, / Arose from out the azure main," are the opening lines of Thomson's poem.[34] Shelley's Greece arises with a similar command: "'Let there be light!' said Liberty, / And like sunrise from the sea, / Athens arose!" (682–684 [*Poems* V]).[35] Although Shelley substitutes Liberty for God, his adoption of the phrasing "Let there be light!" from Genesis 1:3 indicates the divine nature of this decree. This also makes Britannia/Athens indominable. "If Greece must be / wreck," Shelley writes, "yet shall its fragments reassemble / And build themselves again impregnably […] above the idle foam of Time" (1002–1006 [*Poems* V]). Thomson expresses the same confidence in his Britannia: "Thee haughty tyrants ne'er shall tame; / All their attempts to bend thee down / Will but arouse thy generous flame."[36] Both nations are like those roly-poly dolls that always get up again: any attempt to subdue them will inevitably result in a reassertion of their glory.

A more disturbing feature that *Hellas* shares with "Rule, Britannia!" is the assumption that enslavement is a moral failing of the enslaved: their nation is not so blest by God, their hearts not "manly" enough to guard it from invaders.[37] The victim-blaming attitude permeates *Hellas*. As one of the choral interludes puts it:

> O Slavery! thou frost of the world's prime,
> Killing its flowers and leaving its thorns bare!
> Thy touch has stamped these limbs with crime,
> These brows thy branding garland bear,
> But the free heart, the impassive soul,
> Scorn thy control! (676–681 [*Poems* V])

As with the many references to enslavement that punctuate the drama, this passage does not refer to real enslaved bodies – this "branding garland" has no relation to the actual marks with which Europeans stamped Africans to claim ownership over their bodies – but drifts into allegory. Its real purpose is to show how physical bondage does not make slaves of those who carry freedom in their heart. Rather than attacking the logics of enslavement, Shelley introduces the concept as a foil to the freeman whose heart and soul scorn its debasement, much like contemporary portrait artists would introduce a Black page to highlight the whiteness of

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their aristocratic sitter. Outwardly branded but inwardly free, the Greeks may be defeated, but they shall never be slaves. This sentiment is captured in a description of the battle at Wallachia offered by Hassan. In the preface, Shelley asserts that the Greek "defeat in Wallachia was signalized by circumstances of heroism, more glorious even than victory"; in the drama, this heroism is manifested as rejection of enslavement (*SPP* 431). Here is Hassan's account of the Pacha's offer to the defeated Greeks at Wallachia:

> then said the Pacha, "Slaves,
> Render yourselves—they have abandoned you,
> What hope of refuge, or retreat or aid?—
> We grant your lives"—"Grant that which is thine own!"
> Cried one, and fell upon his sword and died!
> Another—"God, and man, and hope abandon me;
> But I to them and to myself remain
> Constant"—he bowed his head and his heart burst.
> A third exclaimed—"There is a refuge, tyrant,
> Where thou darest not pursue and canst not harm
> Should'st thou pursue; there we shall meet again."
> Then held his breath and after a brief spasm
> The indignant spirit cast its mortal garment
> Among the slain;—dead earth upon the earth!
> So these survivors, each by different ways,
> Some strange, all sudden, none dishonourable,
> Met in triumphant death (385–401 [*Poems* V])

This increasingly fantastical series of suicides – spontaneous combustion of the heart, a brief spasm of held breath – breaks with the visceral violence characteristic of the drama's battle scenes. The Greeks at Wallachia do not die from physical as much as moral wounds: their free deaths symbolizing their triumph over enslaved life. *Hellas*'s repeated representations of slavery all roundly condemn the enslaved. Like Thomson's Britons, Shelley's Greeks "never will be slaves!"

*

Shelley's idealization of ancient Greece is another way in which his work, chameleon-like, takes on the colors of its time. David Ferris argues that the Romantics defined their own modernity in a differential relation to ancient Greece – Athens becomes the standard against which modern times have to measure themselves and invariably come up short. In other words, Romanticism constructs Athens as an ideal that it cannot achieve.[38] And yet there is one respect in which Shelley considers the moderns to have advanced on antiquity. In "A Discourse on the Manners of the Ancient

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Greeks Relative to the Subject of Love," intended as an introduction to his translation of Plato's *Symposium* (the first complete English translation that did not censor the discussion of sex between men), Shelley seeks to explain Greek sexual practices by contextualizing them in the society of their time. "One of the chief distinctions between the manners of ancient Greece and modern Europe, consisted in the regulations and the sentiments respecting sexual intercourse," he writes. "The fact is, that the modern Europeans have in this circumstance, and in the abolition of slavery, made an improvement the most decisive in the regulation of human society."[39] And yet, far from having abolished slavery, Europeans of Shelley's time were simply practicing it offshore, in their colonies; if this counts as an "improvement" in "the regulation of human society," the improvement seems to consist primarily in the geographical separation between production and consumption, the exploitation of labor and enjoying the fruits of that labor. In other words: the advent of global capitalism.

In either case, the question of slavery occupies a marginal position in Shelley's "Discourse": the thrust of his argument is to explain why Greek men preferred to have sex with other men. He does so with reference to the subjugation of women:

> Among the ancient Greeks the male sex, one half of the human race, received the highest cultivation and refinement: whilst the other, as far as intellect is concerned, were educated as slaves, and were raised but few degrees in all that related to moral and intellectual excellence above the condition of savages.[40]

The "slaves" referred to here are of course not the kidnapped Africans of his own time but the victims of the domestic slavery that existed in ancient Athens. Nonetheless, the premise of Shelley's reasoning is clear: uncultivated and unrefined women, slaves and savages are all equally undesirable. This explains why Greek men had to turn to other men for erotic satisfaction – a practice that Shelley here describes as a "gross violation in the established nature of man."[41] Whatever we make of Shelley's homophobia, it is curious to note how readily he dismisses what he perceives as violations practiced in Athens. While he acknowledges that "personal slavery and the inferiority of women" caused a "diminution" in "the delicacy, the strength, the comprehensiveness, and the accuracy of their conceptions, in moral, political, and metaphysical science, and perhaps in every other art and science," he does not hesitate to proclaim the overall superiority of the ancient Greeks.[42]

The best part of modernity still carries traces of this ancient superiority. In the preface to *Hellas*, Shelley proclaims that "We are all Greeks – our

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laws, our literature, our religion, our arts have their root in Greece" (*SPP* 431). For Shelley, modern Europeans are Greek by virtue of our participation in the afterlife of Greek culture, but the statement implies that – like the Greeks – we can also let our civilizational virtues cohabitate with the oppression of women and "savages." That is, we need not be troubled by the existence of slavery when celebrating ancient Greek liberty: the fact that the philosophers could spend their days chatting in the agora because they had slaves to do the work for them. Such a cavalier attitude towards the victims of slavery has survived from Shelley's time into our present – and, like chameleons, we take our colors from it, for instance, when we create curricula that cordon off Black History from British History; the poetry of Romanticism from the historic records of the transatlantic slave trade. "Still today," Achille Mbembe has noted, "it is not obvious to the eyes of all that the enslaving of the Negroes and colonial atrocities are part of our world memory; even less that this memory, as common, is not the property of the sole peoples that suffered these events, but of humanity as a whole."[43] This ensures that the history of Britain's involvement in the trafficking and ownership of Africans, rather than being the common heritage of all Britons, remains the purview of the descendants of the formerly enslaved – hence the easy assumption, in the small chat over conference coffee, that, being Black, I must work on slavery. Because, indeed, is it not much more pleasant to agree that we are all Greeks than to assert that we are all slavers because "our laws, our literature, our religion, our arts" have developed in symbiosis with centuries of racialized slavery and colonial exploitation?

To assert how the legacies of enslavement affect our life is not about generating guilt, an emotive response that is not productive to critical engagement. Christina Sharpe offers an alternative way of relating to history in her remark that, in engaging with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century materials from around the Atlantic rim, we are working with "the archives of a past that is not yet past."[44] Such an acknowledgment does not provoke guilt; rather, it underlines the continuities between historic and present-day manifestations of racial injustice: the vices of Shelley's contemporaries are also our own. "That history and that destruction – both of which, it bears repeating, are ongoing – are very much at the center of our thinking," Jared Sexton has noted, "as are the questions regarding how one might inhabit that history and that destruction."[45] Placing something at the center of one's thinking is not the same as offering an answer: how to inhabit the history we have inherited will remain an open question so long as that history remains an open wound. This is why it is imperative to resist

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the tidiness of a conclusion, a satisfactory sense of closure that encourages you to turn the page and read the next chapter. Instead, I would like to finish with an invitation, borrowed from Dionne Brand, to close the book and take a moment to reflect, observe, feel, sit in the room with history:

> One enters a room and history follows; one enters a room and history precedes. History is already seated in the chair in the empty room when one arrives. Where one stands in a society seems always related to this historical experience. […] How do I know this? Only by self-observation, only by looking. Only by feeling. Only by being a part, sitting in the room with history.[46]

Notes

1 Percy Bysshe Shelley to John and Maria Gisborne, July 16, 1821.
2 The sections on *Hellas* and "A Discourse on the Manners of the Ancient Greeks Relative to the Subject of Love" have previously been published in Mathelinda Nabugodi, "Old Anew: Hellas," *European Romantic Review* 33.5 (2022), 639–652.
3 John Keats to Richard Woodhouse, October 27, 1818, *Selected Letters of John Keats: Based on the Texts of Hyder Edward Rollins, Revised Edition*, ed. Grant F. Scott (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 195.
4 To Richard Woodhouse, October 27, 1818, *Selected Letters*, 195. In this regard, the "camelion Poet" exercises what Keats elsewhere calls "negative capability." Critics have taken various approaches to squaring Keats's renunciation of individuality with his own highly individual style. See Julie Camarda, "Keats's Chameleon Poetics, Or, the Natural History of 'Ode to a Nightingale'," *Keats-Shelley Journal* 68 (2019), 40–71, for a recent overview of scholarship on Keats's chameleonism as well as a reading that anchors Keats's comments on the "camelion Poet" in contemporary literary and scientific understandings of the chameleon.
5 William D. Brewer provides a useful survey of how the "chameleon" metaphor operates in the Romantic period in the introduction to his *Staging Romantic Chameleons and Imposters* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
6 William Godwin, "Essay V: Of an Early Taste for Reading," in *The Enquirer: Reflections on Education, Manners, and Literature* (London: Robinson, 1797), 29–35, 32, 33. Nicholas Roe has suggested that Keats's "camelion Poet" letter alludes to this passage of Godwin's essay in *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 247.
7 Godwin, "Of an Early Taste for Reading," 35.
8 Percy Bysshe Shelley to Claire Clairmont, June 16, 1821.
9 Preface to *Adonais*, in Michael Rossington and Jack Donovan, eds. *The Poems of Shelley*, 4 volumes to date (London: Routledge, 1989–), IV: 235–330, 260–261. Unless otherwise indicated, Shelley's prefaces, poetry, and dramas are quoted from this edition, hereafter abbreviated *Poems*.

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10 Percy Bysshe Shelley to Charles Ollier, June 11, 1821.
11 Julietta Singh, *No Archive Will Restore You* (Santa Barbara: punctum books, 2018), 21–22.
12 Percy Bysshe Shelley to John Gisborne, January 26, 1822.
13 Saidiya Hartman, interview by Catherine Damman, *Artforum*, July 14, 2020, www.artforum.com/interviews/saidiya-hartman-83579.
14 Audre Lorde, *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (London: Silver Books, 2017).
15 Eugenia Zuroski, "Where Do You Know From? An Exercise in Placing Ourselves Together in the Classroom," *MAI Feminism*, January 27, 2020, https://maifeminism.com/where-do-you-know-from-an-exercise-in-placing-ourselves-together-in-the-classroom/.
16 Percy Bysshe Shelley to Leigh Hunt, August 15, 1819.
17 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*; *or Biographical Sketches of my Literary Life and Opinions, in Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. H. D. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 157.
18 For the use of "slavery" as political metaphor in pre-revolutionary America, see Zachary Mcleod Hutchins, "The Slave Narrative and the Stamp Act, or Letters from Two American Farmers in Pennsylvania," *Early American Literature* 50.3 (2015), 645–680.
19 Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012 [1792]), 330.
20 Hansard, House of Commons, February 28, 1805, 1st series, Volume III, col. 672–673.
21 Hansard, House of Commons, February 28, 1805, 1st series, Volume III, col. 673.
22 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1962 [1951]), 296.
23 Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, 297.
24 Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).
25 Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 65.
26 The formulation "triple entente" is from James Rieger, *The Mutiny Within: The Heresies of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (New York: George Braziller, 1967), 114, but the analogy appears in various guises throughout criticism on the play. For example, Michael Scrivener, *Radical Shelley: The Philosophical Anarchism and Utopian Thought of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 193–194; Young-Ok An, "Beatrice's Gaze Revisited: Anatomizing 'The Cenci,'" *Criticism*, 38.1 (1996), 27–68, 55; Stuart Curran, *Shelley's Cenci: Scorpions Ringed with Fire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 134. See, however, Michael Kohler for a refutation of this argument, "Shelley in Chancery: The Reimagination of the Paternalist State in 'The Cenci'," *Studies in Romanticism*, 37.1 (1998), 545–589.
27 Paul Endo, "The Cenci: Recognizing the Shelleyan Sublime," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 38.3–4 (1996), 379–397, 393.

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28 M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong! As Told to the Author by Sataey Adamu Boateng* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 189.
29 Philip, *Zong!*, 199.
30 Percy Bysshe Shelley to Charles Ollier, November 11, 1821.
31 Mark Kipperman, "History and Ideality: The Politics of Shelley's *Hellas*," *Studies in Romanticism* 30.2 (1991), 147–168, 151.
32 Michael Erkelenz, "Inspecting the Tragedy of Empire: Shelley's *Hellas* and Aeschylus' *Persians*," *Philological Quarterly* 76.3 (1997), 313–337, 330.
33 Timothy Webb, *Shelley: A Voice Not Understood* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977), 200.
34 James Thomson, "Rule Britannia!," in *The Complete Poetical Works of James Thomson*, ed. J. Logie Robertson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1908), 422–423, ll. 1–2.
35 Volume 5 of *Poems* is in press.
36 Thomson, "Rule Britannia!," ll. 19–21.
37 Thomson, "Rule Britannia!," l. 30.
38 David Ferris, *Silent Urns: Romanticism, Hellenism, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 54.
39 Percy Bysshe Shelley, "A Discourse on the Manners of the Ancient Greeks Relative to the Subject of Love," in Richard Holmes, ed. *Shelley on Love: An Anthology* (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1980), 101–112, 105.
40 Shelley, "Discourse," 107.
41 Shelley, "Discourse,"108.
42 Shelley, "Discourse," 106.
43 Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics,* trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 126.
44 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 73. The formulation describes Philip's *Zong!*.
45 Jared Sexton, "Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word," *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge* 29 (2016), §17.
46 Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (Toronto: Vintage, 2011), 25.

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