Introduction

Each suicide is a poem sublime in its melancholy.
—Honoré de Balzac, *Le Peau de Chagrin*

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death.
—John Keats, "Ode to a Nightingale"

The Mind, that broods o'er guilty woes
Is like the Scorpion girt by fire;
In circle narrowing as it glows,
The flame around their captive close,
Till inly searched by thousand throes,
And maddening in her ire,
One sad and sole relief she knows –
The sting she nourished for her foes,
Whose venom never yet was vain,
Gives but one pang, and cures all pain,
And darts into her desperate brain:
So do the dark in soul expire,
Or live like Scorpion girt by fire.
—Lord Byron, *The Giaour*

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Suicide is a complicated response to a broken world. The factors that motivate someone's decision to die are personal and, to a large extent, fundamentally unknowable. But cultural narratives about suicide are ours to read and weigh; they show us what it is to live in this world. This book recalls a historical moment when stories of suicide were used to rouse the racial consciousness of a nation. It is a book about why those efforts failed and how they were eroded by a cultural narrative still in circulation today—one that idealizes certain suicides in service to ideologies of white male supremacy.

In the ubiquity of sentiments such as those expressed in the epigraphs from Balzac, Keats, and Byron, we are reminded that literary romanticism characterized itself by brooding sensuality and irremediable malaise and that these strong emotions often were understood to result in suicide. Nor was interest in suicide limited to "high" literatures during this era. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, English newspapers published suicide notes (some real, others made up for shock value), while politicians debated ancient laws dictating how people who died by suicide should be buried (at crossroads, with stakes driven through their hearts—a gruesome practice finally eliminated in 1822).[1] The subject of the last epigraph, Byron's "Scorpion girt by fire," led the British ethologist C. Lloyd Morgan to conduct a series of sadistic experiments on whether animals consciously kill themselves, using scorpions as his test subjects.[2] Suicide even helped to launch the modern fashion industry: the blue and gold suit worn by the title character of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* inspired one of the first ready-to-wear styles produced for mass market consumption, and a popular perfume of the day was called *Eau de Werther*.[3] With suicide being such a prominent and profitable cultural phenomenon, it is surprising that, among a recent wave of scholarship on the cultural history of suicide, not a single monograph has focused on romanticism.[4]

One reason for this may be that romanticism's role in the history of suicide seems self-evident. There is little doubt as to the relationship between romantic literature and the myth of the tortured artist—implicitly white and almost exclusively male—who is tragically undone by his own brilliance.[5] This myth remains with us even today. One especially clear example is *Savage Beauty*, the retrospective of the work of British fashion designer Alexander McQueen that opened in 2011 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Among the show's most widely publicized pieces were McQueen's intricately constructed coats, many of which were styled for the exhibition so as to be instantly reminiscent of romantic figures like the subject of Caspar David Friedrich's

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painting *The Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*.[6] The show also included pieces influenced by the Flemish masters, the Scottish Highlands, the Tudors, Plato's Atlantis, and others.[7] While McQueen cited inspiration from many historical periods and subjects, the show was organized into sections titled "The Romantic Mind," "Romantic Gothic and Cabinet of Curiosities," "Romantic Nationalism," "Romantic Exoticism," "Romantic Primitivism," and "Romantic Naturalism," effectively rendering McQueen's entire corpus in terms of the aesthetic arguably most explicit in the curation and presentation of his coats. When an expanded version of the show opened at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2015, the association between McQueen and romanticism was scaled back in its promotion, suggesting that in 2011, the heavy emphasis on romanticism was at least partly reflective of McQueen's much-discussed 2010 suicide.[8]

There are good reasons for the myth's endurance. Rendering suicide an extension of someone's art dulls the unsettling violence of the act of ending one's own life. It circumscribes its finality and quiets (however temporarily) questions that can never be answered. This, of course, is precisely the function of myth and part of why this particular myth endures so strongly: it renders the complex and inexpressible somewhat easier to grasp, if not always to accept. Romantic narratives of suicide turn worlds of private pain into something beautiful, something the public can continue to love, or at least consume. In this sense, it's not hard to see why the myth of romantic suicide still remains with us, in every public reckoning with the artist who hanged himself at the height of his success or the rock star who shot up and then shot himself. But the story we keep recirculating about these deaths—the romantic trope of lonely, tragic genius—barely scratches the surface of the lived realities that actually lead people to kill themselves. By the same token, despite its apparent ubiquity at the turn of the nineteenth century, this trope was hardly the only way in which suicide was represented during the historical moment with which it is most associated.

The Argument

Moving beyond conceptions of suicide as an index of romanticism's fascination with tragic or mad genius, *Death Rights: Romantic Suicide, Race, and the Bounds of Liberalism* reads the trope of romantic suicide within preexisting political narratives that engage suicide to index the limits of liberal subjectivity. Suicide first appeared as an explicitly political (as opposed to a psychological or emotional) theme in British

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abolitionist writing. This was no mere coincidence. As the following chapters discuss, it is in the institution of racialized enslavement and its afterlives that liberalism most clearly reveals itself as a system that enables freedom for some people at the expense of others. The trope of suicide was widely engaged by different political and aesthetic projects at the turn of the nineteenth century. While this was often (albeit not always) aimed toward emancipatory ends, this book will argue that these well-meaning efforts more often reflected, and functionally served to maintain, liberalism's foundational inequities. Beginning with literary portrayals of enslaved people's suicides as exemplary assertions of self-ownership, *Death Rights* examines how canonical and lesser-known writers of African and European descent combined suicide with liberal rhetorics of individualism, sovereignty, and natural rights to interrogate notions of propertied self-possession, personhood, sympathy, and the human. The texts and authors brought forward in these pages used suicide to challenge racialized logics of exclusion within a social structure based on selective claims to social legibility. However, insofar as most of these engagements turned on liberal fantasies of integration, they could articulate only fundamentally irrational solutions whereby African-identified people could, theoretically, define themselves as liberal subjects but not as free and living subjects on their own terms.

More specifically, then, this book examines how eighteenth- and nineteenth-century authors in Britain and the Atlantic world engaged the trope of suicide in ways that buttress antiblackness. They did this by rehearsing, in texts espousing emancipatory aims, what Frank B. Wilderson III identifies as the "symbiosis between the political ontology of Humanity and the social death of Blacks."[9] For Wilderson, whose work is foundational for the cadre of Afropessimist and black optimist thinkers with whom this book is also in conversation, the relation between blackness and death is a structural one—not a matter of intercultural antipathies per se but of antagonisms that constitute the very groundwork of the modern world. Wilderson understands blackness as the "position against which Humanity [i.e., the western bourgeois subject] establishes, maintains, and renews its coherence, its corporeal integrity."[10] In other words, the existence and conceptual coherence of the subject of liberal modernity hinges on black death.

Given that the enslavement of Africans, and with it the construction of "blackness" through and as ontological negation, long predates the era with which I am concerned here, it is deeply telling that one of the most popular figures to emerge from British abolitionist discourse is that of the "suicidal slave."[11] This figure appears in texts now long forgotten,

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such as John Gorton's *Tubal to Seba: The Negro Suicide*, and in those that remain significant, such as Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* and William Wells Brown's *Clotel; or, the President's Daughter* (the first known novel in English by an author of African descent). In British literary studies, representations of enslaved people making the choice to die rather than remain in bondage have been widely understood as efforts to establish African-identified people's capacity to reason and, thus, the capacity to become liberal subjects deserving of rights.[12] Complicating these readings, *Death Rights* argues that when the goal is merely to expand, not to explode, the bounds of liberalism, framing the choice to die as a path to freedom only reinforces the structural antagonism between blackness and the human at the core of liberal modernity. Furthermore, *Death Rights* reads romantic suicide—the literary and critical commonplace that extols the singularity of white male genius, even in death—in direct relation to these vexed efforts to expand liberalism's racial and gendered bounds. Even today, as this book will show, the myth of romantic suicide reifies white male individualism. Thus, it is no mere coincidence that it gained in popularity just as the assumed supremacy of the bourgeois subject of liberal modernity was being called into question by abolitionist, protofeminist, and other revolutionary discourses.

Contexts

To understand how a certain narrative of suicide became romantic, we need to understand the role played by suicide in literary and cultural discourses proximate to romanticism. For some readers, no two figures will loom larger here than Thomas Chatterton, the seventeen-year-old poet who died of an arsenic overdose when he failed to achieve literary fame, and Goethe's Werther. Situated squarely within the culture of sensibility (Chatterton died in 1770, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* was published in 1774), both figures exemplify the "man of feeling" trope taken to its most taboo extreme.[13] As this book's conclusion will discuss in greater detail, Chatterton in his own day was widely dismissed as a forger and a hack, only later to be revived as an early exemplar of romanticism's "vague malaise and turbid emotions concerning love, death, and the irremediable human inability to communicate."[14] Goethe's novella, however, had a much more immediate impact.

The fictional story of the lovelorn Werther famously fed real-life concerns over the capacity of literature to sway readers to end their lives. Shortly after the novel's publication, parts of England and North America saw widespread panics over just that possibility (an idea that

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social scientists still refer to as "the Werther effect").[15] Goethe himself argued that the supposed suicide craze was due not to his novel but to the "earnest melancholy" considered endemic to English culture—a view popularized by George Cheyne's 1733 medical treatise, *The English Malady*, which posited that "the suicidal tendencies of the English were tied, on the one hand, to the progress of atheism and the philosophic spirit . . . and on the other, to the melancholy temperament of an island people living in unfavorable geographical and climactic conditions."[16] Recently, Kelly McGuire has suggested that the *Werther* controversy was symptomatic of a different sort of crisis in English national identity. The true threat, McGuire posits, was not suicide as such but rather the "contagion" of foreign influences on an overly sensitive reading public.[17] Indeed, as this book will suggest, when British stories of suicide center an English man (e.g., Chatterton), the motif functions to close the social field not only to foreign influences abroad but also to those already marginalized within England's borders by (re)emphasizing notions of white male "greatness."

Even in the ostensibly apolitical hands of these sad white men, literary suicide is necessarily political insofar as it extends from earlier debates that framed self-killing in relation to individualism, property, and other core tenets of liberal modernity. Eighteenth-century debates about suicide drew heavily from the discourses of natural rights, freedoms, and entitlements that would also animate the French, American, and Haitian revolutions, the abolitionist movement, and early agitation for white women's rights.[18] Historians of suicide have long held to the general thesis that loosening religious strictures led to more open discussions about voluntary death in general, which in turn laid the groundwork for drawing on the idea of killing the self in more abstractly political arguments. Michael McDonald and Terrance R. Murphy neatly summarize this evolution of European thought on suicide:

> Ancient philosophies that condoned and in some circumstances celebrated suicide gave way in the Middle Ages to theological condemnations and folkloric abhorrence. The Reformation intensified religious hostility to self-murder in England and some other European countries. Finally, in the eighteenth century, Enlightenment philosophy and the secularization of the world-view of European elites prompted writers to depict suicide as the consequence of mental illness or of rational choice, and these concepts still dominate discussions of self-destruction today.[19]

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Prosuicide arguments emphasized the idea that people are born free and have the right to live and die as they choose. While nearly every major European thinker of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries weighed in on the suicide debates, David Hume's essay "On Suicide" tends to be singled out by scholars today as the text that made the subject of suicide modern—that is, "secularized, decriminalized, medicalized."[20]

"On Suicide" was published and almost immediately pulled in 1756, not to be made available again until 1777, a year after the author's death. In that brief essay, Hume connects suicide to liberalism's pillars of reason, free will, and individual rights—that is, an individual's right to choose when and how he dies. First, Hume posits that every man possesses "the free disposal of his own life" and may "lawfully employ that power" because "Providence" or "the Almighty" designed it that way.[21] Flying in the face of centuries of religious dogma, Hume effectively suggests that suicide is divinely sanctioned: if "nothing happens in the universe without its consent and cooperation . . . then neither does my death, however voluntary."[22] Next, Hume considers whether suicide adversely impacts society and determines that it does not because "a man who retires from life does no harm to society: he only ceases to do good."[23] Likewise, when he becomes a drain on society, his "resignation of life must not only be innocent, but laudable."[24] Hume reckons that people who consider or complete suicide must fall into one of these categories because "those who have health, or power, or authority, have commonly better reason to be in humor with the world."[25] Finally, Hume posits that suicide can, in some cases, fulfill one's duty to oneself: "age, sickness, or misfortune, may render life a burden, and make it worse even than annihilation. I believe that no man ever threw away life while it was worth keeping."[26] What prevents people from killing themselves, Hume concludes, is the fear of death itself, and when someone takes it upon himself to conquer that fear, he is entitled to noninterference. And others have a duty to get out of his way.

Within the liberal framework in which he meant it, Hume's oft-quoted assertion that "no man ever threw away life while it was worth keeping" affirms the power of the individual will over state (if not also divine) sovereignty. Certainly, this is the sense in which abolitionist, protofeminist, and other "radical" liberal thinkers would engage the idea of suicide later in the eighteenth century. Implicitly left out of Hume's framework, however, are those people denied full ownership over their lives by the social structures of liberal modernity, including enslaved Africans, dispossessed indigenes, non-Christians, white women, the poor, and the list goes on. In different ways, these and other groups stand in

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opposition to "Man," the representative subject of liberal modernity that, as Sylvia Wynter puts it, "overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself."[27]

For Hume, as for many European thinkers credited with shaping the modern world, enslaved Africans represent the absolute limit point against which "Man" defines itself. Hume makes this apparent in the infamously racist footnote he added to his essay "Of National Characters" in 1753. In the first iteration of the footnote, Hume claims that "the negroes and in general all other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation." Though he begins by measuring whiteness against all nonwhite people, the remainder of the statement clarifies his specific target:

> Not to mention our colonies, there are NEGROE slaves dispersed all over EUROPE, of which none ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity; tho' low people, without education, will start up amongst us, and distinguish themselves in every profession. In JAMAICA, indeed, they talk of one negroe man of parts and learning; but 'tis likely he is admired for very slender accomplishments, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly.[28]

John Immerwahr has underscored the significance of Hume's sustained attention to the footnote, noting that the revisions he made to it while preparing the final edition of his works (the same 1777 edition in which "On Suicide" would reappear) indicate "that Hume's racism was deliberate rather than casual."[29] Namely, Hume "changed the target of his attack; the revised argument is directed only at blacks, rather than against all non-whites."[30] Challenging some scholars' efforts to dismiss these comments as incidental, Immerwahr rightly maintains that Hume's revision process shows that he "did seriously consider objections to his racist position. His response, however, was to sharpen his attack on blacks further. His racism should thus be read as something he was willing to defend, rather than an offhand remark."[31] And, as Henry Louis Gates Jr. reminds us, this matters a great deal for our understanding of the foundations of the modern world because "Hume's opinion on the subject . . . became prescriptive."[32]

Understood in tandem with his antiblackness, Hume's essay on suicide highlights how liberal modernity constitutes itself through exclusion. More precisely, it demonstrates how black being and social

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standing in the world is positioned as the negative to the liberal subject's positive claims to the same. In this frame, Hume's pronouncement that "no man ever threw away life while it was worth keeping" contains within it an unheard question about whose life is worth keeping, and moreover, what it means to "keep" life in the first place—one's own life or someone else's. Here, the philosophical gambit that the decision to die represents the apotheosis of individual liberty reveals its limits. That logic presumes an autonomous subject whose coherence as such is marked against those classified as nonsubjects. In contradistinction to that subject's presumed entitlement to keep or destroy his life, the nonsubject's political, social, and physical existence is indexed as not her own, a kind of non- or not-quite life—"worth keeping," perhaps, but only as determined by someone else. Thus, Hume's essay implicitly forecloses the very liberation efforts to which its central idea would later be applied.

This proviso, implied in "On Suicide," is more apparent in Hume's footnote, which clearly reveals how liberal modernity fixes the racialization of black people in terms of nonbeing, even in relation to other minoritized groups. As an analytical framework, Afropessimism helps us to understand how "Black death is subtended by the psychic integration of everyone who is not Black."[33] It also exposes what Wilderson calls the ruse of analogy: the fiction that black suffering can be analogized to other structures of violent exclusion and oppression. Thus, as he explains in his foundational work, *Red, White and Black*, the racialization of people of African descent and of indigenous peoples in North America are variously underwritten by literal and metaphysical relations to death. Europeans rendered Africans "black" through ontological negation for the purpose of extrapolating the labor power of their bodies. Indigenous peoples in North America were made "red" through genocides that facilitated Europeans' expropriation of their lands. However, without denying the historical events of genocide and dispossession, Wilderson maintains that as a structuring modality, the "red" position remains "ontologically possible . . . half-alive" through, among other things, the discourse of sovereignty.[34] By contrast, the nonontology of blackness is absolute:

> Chattel slavery did not simply reterritorialize the ontology of the African. It also created the Human out of culturally disparate entities from Europe and the East. . . . The race of Humanism (White, Asian, South Asian, and Arab) could not have produced itself without the simultaneous production of that walking destruction which became

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> known as the Black. Put another way, through chattel slavery the world gave birth and coherence to both its joys of domesticity and to its struggles of political discontent; and with these joys and struggles, the Human was born, but not before it murdered the Black, forging a symbiosis between the political ontology of Humanity and the social death of Blacks.[35]

It is worth pausing here to acknowledge that this framework has serious limits. Iyko Day stresses that Afropessimist accounts put forward by Wilderson and Jared Sexton lean too heavily on notions of indigenous sovereignty that turn on recognition by the liberal state.[36] Along similar lines, Mark Rifkin contends that the two positions belong to fundamentally "disparate political imaginaries and trajectories," not least because the varied, culturally specific models of indigenous sovereignty are often at odds with the emphasis on (social) death and/as political nonbeing in black radical discourses like Afropessimism.[37] Afropessimism's insistence on social death as the condition of possibility for black life has also been notably recalibrated by Fred Moten, whose answer to Afropessimism, black optimism, emphasizes the deathliness of liberal modernity itself. Discussed more fully in this book's third chapter, Moten posits that social death is "the field of the political . . . the fundamentally and essentially antisocial nursery for a necessarily necropolitical imitation of life."[38] In response to Moten, Sexton insists that "nothing in afro-pessimism suggests that there is no black (social) life, only that black life is not social life in the universe formed by the codes of state and civil society, of citizen and subject, of nation and culture, of people and place, of history and heritage . . . Black life is not lived in the world that the world lives in."[39] Likewise, Christina Sharpe, whose *In the Wake* resonates, in certain ways, with both Afropessimism and black optimism, demonstrates how "Black life [is] lived in, as, under, despite Black death" in multivalent ways that are irreducible to Eurocentric frameworks of sociality.[40]

That irreducibility is precisely what makes Afropessimism, black optimism, and related discourses that variously seek to demystify liberal modernity's dependence on black (social) death relevant to this study. If black life turns on what Moten calls "an always already imposed and interdicted 'right to death,'" it does so in ways that are thoroughly at odds with—and thus reveal the limits of—Hume's assertion of that right for "Man" and subsequent liberal revolutionaries' appropriations of that right for those excluded from that category, including enslaved Africans.[41] In this frame, to posit enslaved Africans' suicides as emancipatory

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is oxymoronic. The dead don't get free by dying. Rather, as Saidiya Hartman contends, what may appear to be an act of self-destruction is, in fact, "a radical refusal of the terms of the social order," an embrace of forms of life that can only be lived in spaces of death, inaccessible through (or, indeed, to) the liberal imaginary.[42] As a result, attempts by well-meaning liberals to appropriate Hume's formulation in order to highlight the wrongs of enslaving people of African descent presents a classic case—which is to say, an inevitable failure—of using the master's tools to dismantle his house.[43] The liberal trope of the "suicidal slave" forecloses the possibility of black life within and beyond the bounds of liberalism, rendering the suicidal figure really a murdered one.

And while historical cases of African-identified people choosing death over bondage certainly underline the brutality of enslavement, so too do the actions of those maintaining and profiting from the institution, and these are often obscured in literary efforts to build a case for abolition through the liberal argument for suicide. Sentimental depictions of black people dying by suicide diminish white culpability. In most cases, they write white people out of the picture completely (except, as we'll see, those who can be made into sympathetic avatars for white readers). Such representations feed the delusion that what's at stake is, in Wilderson's terms, conflictual rather than structural—that antiblackness can be overcome by facilitating African-identified people's entry into liberal society. But the point is that antiblackness is not an event that can be overcome. It is a structural foundation of the modern world. Thus, as Wilderson puts it, "The imaginary of the state and civil society is parasitic on the Middle Passage."[44] Extending the scope of the metaphor, Sharpe reminds us that "we are all positioned by the wake [of the slave ship], but positioned differently."[45] What is needed, then, is the wholesale destruction of "Man"—not the self-destruction of individual women or men—to move toward anything that might approximate liberation.

Methods

It is worth pausing here to explain my methodological foundation, with which readers situated in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British literary studies may be unfamiliar. With some recent exceptions, these fields have historically authorized and have been authorized by epistemic and institutional structures grounded in liberal humanism, including the liberal arts and the neoliberal university.[46] These are some of the givens through and toward which Eurocentric humanistic knowledges

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continue to be produced. Discussions of race in these fields, especially in romantic literary studies (where I am primarily situated), have tended to be subordinated to or subsumed by discussions of enslavement or colonialism. As a result, much of the work on romanticism's relationship to the subject—and subjects—of African enslavement reads black histories and black lives through white critical lenses. In Marlon Ross's assessment, this is because to substantively foreground race in historically white fields requires confronting certain discomfiting truths: "No one wants to seem so vulgar as to call romantic writers racists."[47] Ross notes that much of the work on "race" (i.e., enslavement and/or colonialism) in romantic literary studies has avoided implicating romanticism as such, except where canonical writers can be praised for antislavery sentiments or abolitionist efforts. Thus, even as the field's interest in the historical construction of modern racial categories has grown in recent years, in its critical practices, it has largely avoided or actively precluded the necessary methodological transformations that must attend rigorous engagement with antiracist thought and action.

Notably, this is not the case in all areas of literary studies.[48] In romanticism, this discrepancy can be understood, at least in part, as a function of the field's peculiar relationship to western academia relative to other areas of literary and cultural studies. As Manu Samriti Chander has keenly observed, "Romanticism survived the culture wars unscathed."[49] This is not to say, as Chander acknowledges, that the social upheavals at the end of the last century had no effect on the study of romanticism. Without a doubt, one of the most profound and significant interventions in the history of romanticist scholarship was the expansion of the field to include (white) women writers. But attending to gender is not the same as attending to race, not least because evidence of "gender," however one defines or engages that concept, can be recovered in ways that evidence of "race" cannot. And thus Chander, like Ross, registers a largely unexamined privilege that runs through much scholarly work in the field—the luxury not to see race and the choice, conscious or unconscious, not to address it.

Indeed, as Bakary Diaby reminds us, efforts to bring race to the forefront of romantic literary studies have a long—and long-forgotten—history. In 1942, Eva Beatrice Dykes, the first African American woman to complete the requirements for a doctoral degree in the United States, published *The Negro in British Romantic Thought*. Written well before the interventions of feminist, postcolonial, or critical race theory, Dykes's work situates canonical romantic writers' engagements with the topic of African enslavement against texts by lesser-known British writers,

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including many white women whose "recovery" in the field is credited to white feminist scholars working later in the twentieth century. In so doing, Dykes highlights a related problem in historically white fields such as ours: the tendency to assume that "race" signals only nonwhiteness. We don't just encounter "race" because, for example, the subjects of antislavery texts are black; we also encounter "race" when the writers we study are white. In their efforts to represent blackness, white writers tell us a lot about the privileges and blind spots of whiteness—blind spots too often reproduced or insufficiently interrogated in our scholarship. Dykes's work underscores the urgency of recognizing and naming these forms of discursive violence, even as she decries the fact that romanticism's investment in antislavery efforts (which, she emphasizes, cannot be divorced from its antiblackness) is not more widely discussed: "Almost all the well-known writers of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries wrote against slavery; yet they are remembered by the general student of English literature not for their anti-slavery utterances but for their conforming more or less to those principles of writing which make their works take place among the classics of English literature."[50] Ultimately, as Diaby points out, Dykes recenters the canon, "ask[ing] us to believe that Romanticism can revolve around the lowly and the oppressed; that, at its best, Romanticism is a field of study intimately tied to the vulnerable."[51] Even so, in her insistence that "many of these writers were not prompted by any consideration of social equality for the Negro," Dykes challenges us to read against the grain of the self-professed emancipatory aims of many of the era's best-known texts and authors.[52] As this book will highlight, many of these texts exemplify how racism reproduces itself in discourses where we might expect to see it challenged.

Nearly a century since Dykes's groundbreaking work, and more than a generation after critical race, ethnic, and feminist studies were institutionalized in university curricula, it should go without saying that romanticism as a field of knowledge organized within the broader disciplinary construction of English literature is deeply rooted in racism in its most fundamental sense: "When a racial group's collective prejudice is backed by the power of . . . institutional control, it is transformed into racism, a far-reaching system that functions independently of the intentions or self-images of institutional actors."[53] In the imperial mission to "civilize" the world through domination and exploitation, British colonizers and enslavers enabled a knowledge economy that continues to reproduce ideologies of whiteness as the universal ideal and transparent default by way of (among other tools) literary education.

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Gauri Viswanathan has shown that "as early as the 1820s, when the classical curriculum still reigned supreme in England . . . English as the study of culture and not just language had already found a secure place in the British Indian curriculum."[54] Building on this work, Chander has demonstrated how, in negotiating their relationship to colonial curricula, Indian intellectuals effectively consolidated one of the first canons of what we now recognize to be British romanticism.[55] When versions of this canon moved to England later in the nineteenth century, they came first, as Terry Eagleton has shown, to Mechanics' Institutes as a way of "providing a cheapish 'liberal' education for those beyond the charmed circles of public school and Oxbridge."[56] Long before romanticism was emblematic of bourgeois sophistication, it was "literally the poor man's Classics."[57] And while it has evolved, in some ways, beyond these roots in ideological apparatuses used to educate but not to equalize, the study of romanticism remains, as Paul Youngquist puts it, "oblivious to its whiteness."[58]

A word about my usage of the term "romanticism." I engage "romantic" and "romanticism" here in the most conventional sense, referring to the cadre of European poets and artists who turned against empiricism toward the epistemological efficacies of emotion, saw in the volatility of the natural world an answer to what they considered restrictive within their highly ordered societies, and took seriously the possibilities opened by idealism to counteract absolutism. While I can appreciate the intent of recent efforts to claim these characteristics toward more "inclusive" narratives of the historical era against which it developed, I maintain that the term itself is inextricable from the bourgeois white male individualism with which it has been most closely associated.[59] When speaking of the era in and against which romanticism developed, this book aims to highlight the period's cacophony of political, moral, and aesthetic ideologies—conflicts and antagonisms too often flattened by framing the period through romanticism (i.e., "the romantic era") because of that term's loaded relationship to bourgeois white male individualism. Romanticism, then, is treated here not as the defining discourse of an age but as one of many interconnected responses to social transformations that occurred between the rise of the abolition debates in the 1770s and the emancipation of enslaved people of African descent in Britain's colonies in the 1830s.

A word, too, about the term "whiteness," which refers not to ethnic or cultural identity but to the dominant institutions that socialize all of us into habits, attitudes, and value systems that enable the unequal distribution of cultural and financial capital and power. Whiteness, in

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this sense, is not reducible to skin color, even as the privileges associated with being read as white stem from racial hierarchies developed, in no small part, during the era many of us associate with romanticism. Because it is socially constructed, whiteness is fluid (who and what gets considered white changes over time), relational (it cannot exist without those against whom it defines itself), and turns on invisibility (those who benefit most from it usually do not see it).[60] Moreover, whiteness cannot be disarticulated from other instruments of oppression, including patriarchy.[61] In this sense, whiteness is really "white manness," or what Sara Ahmed discusses using the shorthand "white men": "When we talk of white men, we are describing an institution . . . a persistent structure or mechanism of social order governing the behavior of a set of individuals within a given community." This encompasses not only "what has already been instituted or built but the mechanisms that ensure the persistence of that structure."[62] Regardless of who we are or understand ourselves to be as individuals, scholars of romanticism in its current configuration are all white men, which is to say, we work in a field that was not only built around white bodies and sustained through white critical perspectives but that has explicitly and deliberately been used to maintain fictions of whiteness as transparent and thus universal ever since romantic literatures were introduced into school and university curricula. We cannot begin to think seriously about "race" in this field without naming whiteness as part of that discussion. However, it must be said that making whiteness visible as a category of analysis within the larger purview of "race" in romantic studies is only a small step toward unsettling "the production and perpetuation of [romanticism's] blank authority."[63]

That authority, I will argue here, is closely bound up with the myth of romantic suicide. Even as the canon as such was established around them, British romantic writers were intentional about how future generations would receive them. Instrumental to their efforts was the idea of creative genius that so thoroughly underpins the myth of romantic suicide. Andrew Bennett has shown how the romantic authors we inherit as canonical actively constructed their literary reputations in order to make themselves indispensable to their own and future generations. By making the white male "genius" into an aesthetic ideal, they effectively created the criteria through which they would achieve literary immortality. Their attention to posterity, according to Bennett, was intimately tied to "the crucial possibility that the death of the writer will, in itself, produce an effect on the survivors."[64] This was achieved, in part, by seizing on the idea of Chatterton. Through effusive affirmations of Chatterton's poetry, coupled with public

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self-identifications with the poet, many of our most canonical romantic writers elevated a now-familiar set of ideas about the relationship between genius and suicide as part of a strategy to fix their own posthumous fame.[65] In so doing, they also ensured the canon's epistemic homogeneity, creating inherently ethnocentric standards of supposedly universal taste.

Romantic suicide, then, is necessarily implicated in modernity's racial consciousness, even as it presents itself as apolitical and thus unrelated. Romantic suicide purports to turn our gaze to private suffering, but in highlighting the "genius" of representative white men, it reveals itself to be essentially political. In 1830, Victor Hugo celebrated romanticism as "liberalism in literature."[66] To a certain sensibility, liberalism held—and still does hold—the promise that all those whom it acknowledges as worthy can freely pursue individualistic goals. The primary texts and authors discussed in this book sought to call attention to liberalism's racial exclusions in order to reimagine and expand its boundaries. However, despite some recent arguments to the contrary, this book maintains that liberalism cannot be transformed to meaningfully serve the interests of those it holds as its "others."[67] Thus, *Death Rights* is oriented beyond it.

I am guided in this orientation by the work of, among others, Fran Botkin, Bakary Diaby, Jared Hickman, Atesede Makonnen, Patricia A. Matthew, Joel Pace, Marlon Ross, Matt Sandler, Rebecca Schneider, and Paul Youngquist. Each of these thinkers, in their own uniquely different ways, engages with critical modalities developed by scholars in black studies to read romanticism. Black studies and romantic literary studies are relevant to one another insofar as both fields are centrally concerned with many of the same historical events (e.g., the revolutions in America, France, and Haiti) and theorize many of the same issues (e.g., social transformation, freedom, human dignity). Dwight McBride has suggested that conversations between these fields should be undertaken in the interest of foregrounding the relationship between literary romanticism and the development of modern racial politics in the historical backdrop against which it unfolded. McBride asserts that such a practice of reading across academic disciplines and cultures would require scholars of romanticism to substantially expand how we understand the relevance of blackness to our knowledge of the early nineteenth century—that is, to move beyond noting "the appearance of traditional Romantic tropes in Black-authored texts."[68] Nor should such a practice be seen as purely in the service of contextualizing texts written by black authors. Rather, it can enable scholars across subdisciplines of literary and cultural studies to understand romanticism not only as an artistic watershed in European

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cultural history but as a set of discourses that have substantially shaped (and been shaped by) modern racial thinking. Moreover, it can enable romanticists to move beyond historicizing enslavement and colonialism toward rigorous interrogations of romanticism's role in producing—not merely reflecting—the antiblack logics of liberal modernity.

While many of the critical frameworks I engage in this book emerge from the study of enslavement and racialization in the United States, their theoretical elucidations of "blackness" and "the west" as complex transnational phenomena offer indispensable counternarratives to how scholars of, for example, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain have understood modernity's discourses of death, freedom, and the particular relevance of suicide to both. As Moten reminds us, "what is called Western civilization is the object of black studies" just as surely as "blackness . . . is not but nothing other than Western civilization."[69] However, though romanticism and black studies can both be said to originate, in some way, in the eighteenth century, their epistemic orientations are fundamentally different and those differences should not be elided. Black studies, as Alexander Weheliye explains, "works toward the abolition of Man, and advocates the radical reconstruction and decolonization of what it means to be human . . . [thereby pursuing] a politics of global liberation beyond the genocidal shackles of Man."[70] By contrast, "Man" is the condition of possibility for the study of romanticism and, as I will show, romantic ideas continue to circulate in service to its attendant ideologies. In bringing romanticism into conversation with black studies, my goal is not to locate points of commonality but rather to attend rigorously and ethically to their frictions.[71]

Nowhere are these frictions more pronounced than in each field's relationship to liberalism. On one hand, even as individual romantic writers varied in their views on liberal politics and institutions, as a field of study, romanticism's epistemic grounding in liberal principles is often taken for granted as part of its engagement with the era's revolutionary ideologies.[72] Where scholarship on gender, class, disability, enslavement, and empire has brought much-needed nuance to the study of romanticism, as I note above, much less has been made of the role played by race, both within and beyond the black/nonblack binary. Black studies, by contrast, has been at the forefront of ongoing reassessments of liberalism. As Hartman elucidates in *Scenes of Subjection*,

> Liberalism, in general, and rights discourse, in particular, assure entitlements and privileges as they enable and efface elemental forms of domination primarily because of the atomistic portrayal

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> of social relations, the inability to address collective interests and needs, and the sanctioning of subordination and the free reign of prejudice in the construction of the social or the private. Moreover, the universality or unencumbered individuality of liberalism relies on tacit exclusions and norms that preclude substantive equality; all do not equally partake of the resplendent, plenipotent, indivisible, and steely singularity that it proffers. Abstract universality presumes particular forms of embodiment and excludes or marginalizes others. Rather, the excluded, marginalized, and devalued subjects that it engenders, variously contained, trapped, and imprisoned by nature's whimsical appointments, in fact, enable the production of universality, for the denigrated and deprecated, those castigated and saddled by varied corporeal maledictions, are the fleshy substance that enable the universal to achieve its ethereal splendor.[73]

Along similar lines, Charles W. Mills has shown how liberalism turns on a "racial contract" whereby the political ontology of the rights-bearing subject is buttressed by the state-sanctioned exclusion of racialized nonsubjects. While this is theoretically also true of those excluded through social logics other than racialization (e.g., white women), in practice, whiteness offers proximity to hegemonic power structures that remain inaccessible to racialized peoples. As a result, liberalism "has historically been predominantly a racial liberalism, in which conceptions of personhood and resulting schedules of rights, duties, and government responsibilities have all been racialized. And the [social] contract, correspondingly, has really been a racial one, an agreement among white contractors to subordinate and exploit nonwhite noncontractors for white benefit."[74] Thus, if literary romanticism developed at least partly as a set of engagements with liberal discourses of universal rights and freedoms, then taking seriously liberalism's foundational exclusions should fundamentally alter our understanding of and approaches to those engagements. By overlooking or minimizing the relevance of these exclusions, the study of romanticism effectively reproduces them.

Death Rights reads romanticism as part and parcel of the legal and philosophical discourses that underwrite liberal modernity's antiblack foundations. In this frame, I argue that the trope of romantic suicide (re)inscribes the rights, entitlements, and freedoms promised by liberalism as the exclusive province of white men. In romantic suicide, the choice to die represents neither a critique of an unlivable society nor even a sign of mental illness but instead suggests that a particular sort

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of "genius" transcends the material conditions and political ontologies that variously delimit everyone else's lived realities. Romantic suicide obscures structural inequities that can render some realities unlivable. Moreover, it stymies our capacity to recognize forms of social life that exist outside of hegemonic conceptions of "human being." Addressing this requires an epistemic reorientation, accessed here through careful engagements with critical modalities developed in black studies including, but not limited to, Afropessimism and black optimism. Ultimately, this book endeavors to ask what the study of romanticism stands to gain from embracing intellectual traditions that challenge epistemologies rooted in liberalism—and whether it offers them anything in return. But let me be clear: this is not about "solidarity" nor about opening the field to be more "inclusive." Opening historically Eurocentric fields to perspectives they have implicitly or explicitly marginalized does not address the underlying assumptions driving those fields' disciplinary formations. Consequently, this book is about complicity. It is about what, if anything, remains ethically possible.

Death Rights joins a growing movement to reorient romanticism's conventional self-definitions and confront structural racism in British literature and literary studies more broadly.[75] Making every effort not to elide foundational differences, I have tried to make connections while attending carefully to my positionality and speaking *with* and *to*—not *as* or *for*—positionalities that are not my own. The questions I raise in these pages are, I believe, the questions that will define the next generation of romanticist scholarship: On what foundations has our field been built? Toward what ends does it currently exist? How can we read these literatures ethically, attending honestly and rigorously to their internal contradictions rather than relegating those contradictions to the margins or worse, never becoming aware of them at all? If these questions unsettle some readers, that is testament to how urgently they need to be asked.

Chapters

The chapters that follow underline the absurdity of using the self-destruction of black bodies to advocate for the liberation of black people. This is not to minimize the important social transformations achieved by abolitionist and women's rights campaigns at the turn of the nineteenth century but to highlight the limitations of revising, rather than eradicating, the antiblack logics embedded in the structures

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those movements ostensibly sought to dismantle. The first three chapters examine how white abolitionists, early liberal feminists, and Afrodiasporic writers engaged the trope of suicide in different ways to negotiate liberal discourses of rights and freedoms. Chapters 4 and 5 are more speculative explorations of these ideas in practice, both historically and in the present day.

"Liberty and Death" traces how the idea of suicide enters liberal political discourses in England within broader discussions of the relationship between property, legal personhood, and individual freedom. This chapter reads Thomas Day and John Bicknell's 1773 abolitionist poem, *The Dying Negro*, as a reimagining of the 1772 ruling in *Somerset v. Stewart*, a decision that freed one man but did not extend to all enslaved people. Day and Bicknell replace the promise that some saw in that legal victory with an act of suicide, thus highlighting a fundamental aporia in the logic of classical liberalism found explicitly in John Locke's inability to reconcile enslavement with suicide in his *Second Treatise of Government*. Reading Locke alongside and against the legal principle on which Somerset was actually freed, the writ of habeas corpus, the chapter shows that *The Dying Negro* is not finally committed to the freedom or personhood of enslaved Africans at all. Rather, the poem capitalizes on its readers' interests in more general questions about the nature of Britons' freedoms, brought forward in public responses to the Somerset trial.

"Chained to Life and Misery" extends the scope of the inquiry to white women's negotiations of liberalism's racial logics for their own emancipatory ends. This chapter considers white women's racialized representations of suicide in early calls for (white) women's rights. In contradistinction to abolitionist representations of black, typically male figures choosing death to "prove" African-identified people's capacity to reason, in the hands of white women writers, nonwhite women's self-annihilation is tied to excessive emotionality and the inability to reason. Foregrounding the racism characteristic of the era's gendered discourses of feeling, this chapter observes how suicide operates to sublimate white supremacist logics in works by Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Robinson, Claire de Duras, and Felicia Hemans. The chapter concludes with a reading of *The Story of Mattie J. Jackson*, an autobiography by a formerly enslaved woman that registers and challenges, at the level of form, the long reach of these discursive patterns of liberal feminist antiblackness.

"Writ in Water" extends the discussion of black life writing by considering how *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* likewise challenges European tropes associated with enslaved Africans'

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suicides. Calling into question the era's social and scientific theories of race as they undergirded liberal definitions of personhood and, more broadly, the human, Equiano uses suicide to develop an alternative imaginative space for black social existence. His radical (re)vision of black life is precisely not beholden to the bounds of liberalism, relying on a relational rather than an individualistic frame. This chapter concludes by reading the trope of tragic romantic genius, as developed in the poetry of John Keats, through the understanding of suicide put forth by Equiano.

"In Sympathy" considers how the treatments of suicide discussed in the first three chapters are synthesized and mobilized in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Incorporating philosophical essays on sympathy by Percy Shelley, Wollstonecraft's framing of suicide as a form of feminist protest, and Mary Shelley's personal experiences with suicide, this chapter argues that *Frankenstein* works to grapple with how liberalism frames suicide in two competing ways: on the one hand, Shelley treats suicide as the apotheosis of liberal subjecthood and on the other, marks self-destruction as the logical end to which nonsubjects like the creature are driven. The chapter concludes by reading Victor LaValle's *Destroyer*, a modern-day sequel of sorts to *Frankenstein*, as reflective of the limitations of engaging liberalism to imagine black freedom.

Finally, "Marvelous Boys" returns to where this book began: the popular and critical commonplace of romantic suicide. Theorizing its mythic structure and ideological function, this chapter demonstrates how romantic suicide reproduces fantasies of the posterity and invulnerability, even in death, of bourgeois white masculinity. Moreover, it argues that the deification of white male solipsism has served to reproduce an isolationist and exclusionary status quo. Through broad readings ranging from the Victorian afterlife of Thomas Chatterton to Kurt Cobain's resurgence in hip-hop, this chapter argues that the singular genius implied in the myth of romantic suicide has really been a representative man—an ideological symbol through which liberalism's social, epistemic, and ontological frameworks are reaffirmed, and threats to their cohesion are evacuated.

Though *Death Rights* happens to be the first book-length study of suicide during the period traditionally associated with British romanticism, this is not a comprehensive study of romantic representations of self-destruction. It is, rather, a work of cultural criticism that traces how ideas about suicide were mobilized to challenge liberal modernity's organizing structures of antiblackness even as they reinscribed them. While the authors discussed in these pages devote a great deal of narrative energy to death, most express a desire to change

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the world, not to leave it. There is no transcendental embrace of the sublime melancholy of oblivion and no fetishistic attraction to suicide as a means of securing literary immortality. These authors look outward and confront a broken world. And while I argue that suicide was always an ironic, failed cipher of liberalism's (im)possibilities of inclusion, I insist that there is value in understanding the nature of these failures. That they have been overwritten in our collective memory by a reverential ideal of bourgeois masculinity exemplifies how white supremacist logics reproduce themselves by seizing on the very discourses meant to challenge them.

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