Check for updates



arresting narrative. This greediness for just a little bit more, however, was partially quenched by the appendix, which includes (among other key sources) Cuéllar's letter (in translation) for the interested reader's perusal.

Cuéllar ultimately finished his career with a whimper. The last information known of him is that he sought and was granted permission for travel to New Spain, a virtual handout for a man who had served the Spanish monarchy for so long. It may be that he finished his life there contentedly, but, when he last appears in the historical record, Kelly tells the reader, he was destitute, having "virtually nothing to show for his efforts" (223). Perhaps Kelly's most admirable trait as a writer is that he reminds us of the extraordinary lives lived by men of war, so many now forgotten. As Kelly shows, occasionally they can be revived through the patient excavation of sources and the application of a lively historical imagination.

*Freddy C. Domínguez*
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville
fcdoming@uark.edu

Deanna P. Koretsky. *Death Rights: Romantic Suicide, Race, and the Boundaries of Liberalism*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2021. Pp. 214. $95.00 (cloth).
doi: 10.1017/jbr.2023.165

Scholarship in the social, cultural, and literary history of suicide in the long eighteenth century is certainly on the rise. In recent years, scholars have made significant contributions to understanding of suicide in this period via various conceptual frameworks, including class, nationalism, gender, emotions, and race. Deanna P. Koretsky—a founding member of the Bigger 6 Collective, a group established to challenge the structural racism in the academic study of Romanticism—is the latest to add to this fertile field with *Death Rights: Romantic Suicide, Race, and the Boundaries of Liberalism*. The ambition of the Bigger 6 Collective is writ large in this monograph. The publication presents an important racial critique of the Romantic myth of the tragic suicidal genius, and trenchantly exposes the extent to which Enlightenment and Romantic ideals of liberalism were promulgated via suicide narratives at the expense or exclusion of Black lives, and especially enslaved Africans.

Koretsky's argument is forcefully and provocatively articulated in her introduction, which in many ways places Romanticism squarely on trial: she highlights the Romantic privileging of white male individualism and strips Romanticism of its status as "the defining discourse of the age" (14). In the first chapter Koretsky presents an interpretation of Thomas Day and John Bicknell's abolitionist poem *The Dying Negro* (1773) as a cogent example of how the social death of slaves as a precondition to self-destruction is frequently obscured by liberal notions of self-determination and the emancipatory ideals of sentimentalism. The poem is contextualized in relation to *Somerset v. Stewart* (1772), a landmark trial in the history of abolitionism, theorized using John Locke's principles of property and self-ownership and read through literary form as a suicide note. It is a persuasive reading, one that reifies the structural associations of *white* with *life*, and *Black* with *death*, despite the poem's seemingly best intentions.

Drawing upon the well-documented association between the rights of women—as enslaved subjects of patriarchal rule—and the rights of slaves, in chapter 2 Koretsky turns to question the ethics of the white appropriation of enslavement and dispossession as protofeminist discourse. This time under the guise of female solidarity, Black suicide is once again obfuscated for white political ends. The works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Robinson, Claire de Duras, and Felicia Hemans are analyzed for the varied ways in which suicide is racialized as a nonwhite experience and female emancipation is depicted at the expense of nonwhite women.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2023.165 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In chapter 3, Koretsky focuses on the more widely known *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789), which, as she argues, consciously resists European stereotypes of slave suicide and seemingly absurd liberal constructions of suicide as a path to Black freedom. Instead, Equiano's ideation and rejection of suicide, via what Koretsky suggests is a deeply spiritual encounter with African folklore as he stares into the depths of the Atlantic, leads to a powerful assertion of imagination, and of Black life, on their own free terms. Koretsky concludes the chapter with a brief comparative demonstration of how an artist like John Keats, obsessed with his own mortality and imagined posthumous life, can afford the luxury of suicidal dreams when his humanity is already assured—unlike the less-than-human, non-white Equiano.

Koretsky next examines Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) for what she admits is a rather more speculative consideration of the racialization of suicide in liberal discourse. Koretsky reads the novel as "an integrationist fantasy" (98) that aspires to humanize monsters via sympathy, but one that ultimately turns the tables on bourgeois individualism itself to reveal how the intertwined self-destruction of creature and creator in the novel function as an analogy for the apotheosis and end of liberalism.

The final chapter is, admittedly, a little unusual. Labeled "Chapter 5," and titled "Marvelous Boys," it is considerably shorter than the previous chapters. The chapter functions as an epilogue of sorts—arguably, two epilogues back-to-back. One returns to the death of Thomas Chatterton as the dubious origin of the myth of Romantic suicide—dubious, Koretsky argues, as the myth obfuscates the double unlikelihood that Chatterton's poetry warranted his Romantic apotheosis as genius or that his death was actually a suicide. The other turns to contemporary culture, recalling the death of Kurt Cobain as evidence of the persistence of the Romantic suicide as a myth. More significantly, Cobain's death is aligned with the Black cultural memory of slavery and the recurrent mortal violence to which contemporary African Americans are subjected via a deft reading of the music video for hip-hop artist Denzel Curry's "Clout Cobain" (2018). Both sections have their merits, but perhaps only one was necessary as a concluding gesture. That they are both included, though, seems to accentuate a broader structural issue: from the digression on Keats concluding chapter 3, Koretsky's focus appears to shift to give greater prominence to white artists. In the final third of the monograph, consideration of Keats, Mary Shelley, Chatterton, and Cobain significantly outweighs brief discussion of contemporary African American artists Victor LaValle and Curry. Some, then, might see the last two chapters—as insightful as they may be—as supplementary to the project's core, preferring to see this book republished as a short monograph of three tightly-interwoven chapters. Others might raise more pointed objections to the relative disappearance of Black authors, narratives, and subjects in the final third as a structural misjudgment that undermines the study's critical and political objectives.

Regardless of these finer potential issues, Koretsky's objection to the racially exclusionary myth of Romantic suicide is novel and compelling, an argument to be necessarily reckoned with by current and future scholars working on the literary and cultural history of suicide in the long eighteenth century. When framed in this way, it promises to be an indispensable contribution to the field. Moreover, the book is another important reminder of the racially coded myths scholars inherit and still employ in the broader fields of Romanticism and British literary history.

*Eric Parisot*
Flinders University
eric.parisot@flinders.edu.au


https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2023.165 Published online by Cambridge University Press