

# Editing Otherwise

*Mathelinda Nabugodi*

## ABSTRACT

*In her important book, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), Christina Sharpe encourages Black scholars to “imagine otherwise” in order to do justice to the painful legacies contained in the archive. In this provocation, I consider the ramifications that Sharpe’s argument might have for editorial scholarship and finish with an invitation to re-examine the boundary between editing and adaptation.*

---

THE PARAGON EDITOR PRESENTS AUTHORITATIVE TEXTS. WHATEVER scholarly paradigm they subscribe to, they are likely to use their judgment and expertise to establish a text that is based on editorial principle not personal caprice. Their ethos is neutrality (in service to the text), restraint (no creative interpolations here), and mastery (over the text’s history and a potential panoply of revisions, variants, and corruptions). This representation of a paragon editor is rooted in an ideal of scholarship that is coming under increasing pressure from various directions: Black, Feminist, Queer, Decolonial, and related modes of critique that interrogate the concepts of objectivity and rigor that structure how knowledge is produced and validated within the academy and wider world. Such critiques are not primarily about the ethnicity and/or gender identity of any individual scholar; rather, they challenge the underlying epistemological premises that define scholarly authority. Many of our ideas about authoritativeness can be traced back to the foundations of the modern university and its disciplines in the late eighteenth century. At the time, the typical editor, scholar, researcher was a white man of means, bristling with condescension towards cultures not his own; these could serve as objects of research or curiosity but never as equal agents of knowledge production (and “culture” broadly encompasses not only racialized non-European cultures, but also those oppressed closer to home, say, women’s or working class culture). The emergence of disciplines and the professionalization of knowledge not only codified the archetypal scholar’s social and intellectual habits, they were also tools of exclusion — instruments designed to dismiss other ways of knowing.

In the field of editorial scholarship, this legacy is reflected not only in a lack of diversity among scholarly editors but also in the complexion of those authors whose works receive the honor of being edited. Complete, critical, annotated editions notoriously require the painstaking labor of several editors spread out over several years if not an entire career. Minoritized authors are seldom deemed worthy of this effort. I have myself contributed to editing the work of Percy Bysshe Shelley for the prestigious Longman Annotated English Poets series; at the time of writing, the series does not include a single poet who is not a white man — in stark contrast to the diversity of Anglophone poetic production. This is problematic, not only from the point of view of social, racial, epistemic and (dare I say) *editorial* justice but also for the discipline itself. One important reason why students from minoritized groups achieve lower grades at university has to do with the fact that they do not see themselves, their history and their experience represented in the curriculum. Why would they — or indeed anyone — care for scholarly editions if such editions are systematically privileging the works of dead white men?

The simple response would be to say that we — editors as well as the funding bodies that support editions — should make sure to edit a more diverse set of authors and texts to cater to a more diverse set of readers. And if conventional scholarly editions have tended to be expensive print productions geared at university libraries rather than individual buyers, today digital technology can make them available free of charge to anyone with an internet connection. Except that digital editions are often more expensive to make and maintain — requiring an ongoing commitment to keeping the digital infrastructure compatible with evolving software. This means that any ambitious digital edition requires external funding, and here editions of racialized writers encounter the same structural problems that impede research and teaching beyond the canon. Nonetheless, digital technology enables multi-modal editions that incorporate audio-visual materials alongside interactive functionalities that stimulate reader engagement (see Portela, Tiktópoulou and Petridou, and Van Mierlo's contributions to this special issue for some examples of how digital editions can be tailored to invite imaginative responses). Such tools can make the edition appeal to a wider and more diverse audience than has previously been the case. But while increased diversity and lowered access costs are undoubtedly ways of expanding the appeal of scholarly editions, they still beg the epistemic question. At the end of the day, if scholarly editions have been oriented towards a certain kind of reader, this is not only due to the high price and restrictive canon, but also a reflection of the exclusionary

nature of discipline formation, that Enlightenment conception of scholarly authority that underpins an authoritative edition. This is where creative-critical editing could be a means of challenging the implicit hierarchies that structure the discipline and foster new, ethically attuned ways of working with the archival remains of literary history.

To put it bluntly: if conventional editorial scholarship — due to its disciplinary origins — has a residual whiff of eighteenth-century white supremacist thought about it, what would it mean to edit otherwise? Can we imagine Decolonial, Queer, Black, and/or Feminist editing practices? I can anticipate a resounding “NO!” Editing is not identity politics. Then again, one need only think of D. F. McKenzie’s *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (1986; 1999) or Jerome McGann’s *The Textual Condition* (1991) to acknowledge the importance of thinking about the social contexts in which texts are produced and circulated. Equally importantly, we must consider the social contexts in which we practice and theorize editing. Therefore, this provocation is grounded in my being a scholarly editor of British Romantic poetry, an editor who has predominately edited from manuscript to establish clean reading texts, an editor who is also a Black woman living through a time when the murder of George Floyd and the global Black Lives Matter protests that followed in its wake have prompted academic institutions to examine their own implication in present-day systemic racism and how they have benefitted from historic injustice and exploitation. Thinking from this position, I take British and American colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade as the key historical context for Anglophone eighteenth- and nineteenth-century poetry to consider what it would mean to edit this writing otherwise.

My formulation “editing otherwise” echoes a passage from Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016) that I repeatedly return to. Addressing Black scholars working on the history of Black slavery in America, Sharpe writes:

That is, our knowledge, of slavery and Black being in slavery, is gained from our studies, yes, but also in excess of those studies; it is gained through the kinds of knowledge from and of the everyday, from what Dionne Brand calls “sitting in the room with history.” We are expected to discard, discount, disregard, jettison, abandon, and measure those ways of knowing and to enact epistemic violence that we know to be violence against others and ourselves. In other words, for Black academics to produce legible work in the academy often means adhering to research methods that are “drafted into the service of a larger destructive force”

(SAUNDERS 2008a, 67) thereby doing violence to our own capacities to read, think, and imagine otherwise. Despite knowing otherwise, we are often disciplined into thinking through and along lines that reinscribe our own annihilation, reinforcing and reproducing what Sylvia Wynter (1994, 70) has called our “narratively condemned status.” We must become undisciplined.

(2016, 12–13)

“Sitting in the room with history” is also what the editor does, as they sit with a full set of textual witnesses in front of them, texts that may include holograph drafts as well as a range of editions published in the author’s lifetime or posthumously. If dealing with writing produced in Britain and its colonies between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries, the editor sits with materials that were written and printed by authors and publishers whose contemporaries were busy kidnapping, killing, raping, enslaving, and subjugating peoples across the globe. This is very easy to forget when faced with a literary manuscript, head filled with questions such as “Is this mark a comma or a random stroke?”, “Is this hastily written word *There* or *Their*?”, “Is this an authorial variant or an editorial corruption?” Sharpe highlights the knowledge abandoned in my quest for textual accuracy, my myopic methodological precision. My engagement with textual minutiae is a way of bracketing out, of discarding, discounting, disregarding, and jettisoning all I know about how the Romantic poetry that I edit was intertwined with the enslavement of Africans in the British empire. To borrow Sharpe’s phrasing, this knowledge is “in excess” of the research methods of editorial scholarship, and yet with what scholarly accuracy do I produce an edition that does not make any mention of these highly significant facts?

Sitting in the room with history is painful. How much more comforting to scrutinize punctuation than to contemplate historical injustice. Yet the main point of this provocation is to suggest that *all* British and American archives, including the literary archive, are archives of suffering insofar as they preserve materials produced during a time of imperial expansion and enslavement, and that they necessarily reflect this political context in direct or oblique ways. “There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism”, as Walter Benjamin has it in his seventh thesis “On the Concept of History” (2003, 4: 392). And the critical editor who draws their material from such archives must deal with this legacy as a component of the sociology of the text. To take an example from my own experience: the proximity between a Romantic poet’s notebook and a plantation ledger

was forcefully brought home to me during the archival visit when I first came face to face with a Romantic-era letter from a plantation manager in the Caribbean to the plantation owner in Britain. The letter factually reported on repairs, harvests, cattle, and humans bought and sold. But my sense of shock was not occasioned by the contents, dehumanizing as they were, as much as by the fine-grade paper and neat handwriting: visually, the letter was indistinguishable from the letters of the great poets that we frequently see displayed in museums and library exhibitions.

If reproducing a poet's manuscripts is a scholarly good in and of itself (think of *The Cornell Wordsworth* [21 vols.; 1975–2007] or *The Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts* [23 vols.; 1986–2002] to name but two monumental editions that foreground manuscript evidence in re-editing Romantic poetry), it is by no means clear that the same is true of plantation ledgers and slave ship manifestos. These materials are documents of European and American culture, for sure, but they are also a key component of the administrative technology that transformed humans into chattel as individual persons became items in another person's inventory. Editing them risks reproducing that dehumanizing erasure of Black life on which the transatlantic slave trade, and the global economy that arose in its wake, depended (see JOHNSON 2018). But even beyond that historic violence, there is also the lived pain in the present. M. NourbeSe Philip has recorded her reaction on first seeing a sales book kept by a Jamaican slave trader in the 1780s. It lists the names of European and American traders and planters active in Jamaica, whereas Africans are only described as "negroe man" or "negroe woman". Only one term is used to describe individual personal characteristics: "meagre". "There are many 'meagre' girls, no 'meagre' boys", Philip writes. "This description leaves me shaken — I want to weep. I leave the photocopied sheet of the ledger sitting on my old typewriter for days. I cannot approach the work for several days" (PHILIP 2008, 194). Her reaction shows how painful the archive can be. The pain of sitting in the room with history.

Yet, what ultimately emerged from Philip's encounter with the archive is a book-length elegy, *Zong!*, which recomposes the words of a court report on the Zong case. The Zong was a slave ship whose captain, Luke Collingwood, mismanaged the navigation across the Atlantic. When his human "cargo" began to die from thirst and disease, he decided to throw 150 living Africans overboard in order to claim insurance for lost cargo. The case was brought because the insurers refused to pay up and solely hinged on the wilful destruction of property (certainly not on the mass murder at sea).

*i*                      *ola b*    *e holds*  
*t*    *be has*                      *p o*    *f bis ca*  
*pe*    *b*    *is g*    *old o*  
*rb*    *h*    *er in m*  
    *y lap sk*    *im the s*  
    *kin of the se*    *a la*    *mer ma mer*  
    *el mar ma*    *mère mare*    *for e*  
    *yes l*    *egs ea*    *rs h*  
    *ands hea*    *ds & f*    *eet f*  
*or bo*    *die s l*    *im*  
    *bs for ri*    *bs spin*    *e s to*  
    *es shi*    *n s & lip*    *s for pel*  
*vis*    *& fe*    *mur*  
    *for*    *mo*    *lars f*  
    *or bo*    *la &*  
    *hey ave &*  
    *sa*    *l*    *ve for i*  
*c*    *a*    *n*    *i can for i*  
    *am je*    *suis & yo*    *so*  
    *y*  
    *for sum*    *e*    *go & eu*  
    *sou scan*    *the se*    *a the w*

Figure 1. PHILIP 2008, 136 (detail).

Every single word in *Zong!* originates in that document, which is to say that Philip’s composition of the poem is a work of editing. This is what we may, once more evoking Sharpe, call editing “in the wake”. Philip unmoors the words of the court report, loosens them from the grotesquely impersonal meaning they first conveyed in that court room, and lets them spill over the page as fragments of sentences, further fragmenting into pure sound before, finally, they sink into the page — the last section is printed in fading grey ink (see Figs. 1 and 2).

If *Zong!* offers one way of conceptualizing editing otherwise, Sharpe herself offers another. In discussing the case of Mikia Hutchings, who was arrested for scribbling “Hi” on a school wall, Sharpe proposes to “annotate and redact” a paragraph of a *New York Times* article on the case (see Fig. 3). In this redaction — an act of editing that is explicitly marked as Black — Sharpe brackets the oppressive state system that surrounds the young girl in order to foreground her own voice. “Through redaction we might

ifa  
clarion ear i shavè me  
me rave i revnow for je do you  
A clear the basis it hear a detail  
no mist in the valport andian pass  
the dray cart reves in the the life was peas  
ofmiail rolidcloptuligaplop  
& den youldndtr and i Ruth will slap  
the sail thesobs Sam deer slave stag/s sobs oh boar/s &  
only mate the the river doves carpuish & mud huasfirst  
we will rush the huts there the river doves when  
will be dogs sobs & fish aghas let we rush de &ap/n  
to seal grouse omi se thisowls &e crast  
hold him negroes tit/spea then/s too uskirthud over pigs and o'over  
negroes je lead breed of &sheagain of sin this greed  
a deal reveipain has my  
elation alig with mes new rarit seeds the  
erase this riot that hat my the seal  
ave on erase me sea/s deasinfun man deal feeds the  
ave well lust done for  
ave i see you tin thkate sin for gold  
slave comes in in fur restush the captain  
ring save the ave/resthowmy the poemany  
negro how do carasave the salve/s my she  
the vale/s too vou ask me I beg dem fo Avo

Figure 2. PHILIP 2008, 181 (detail).

“Hi”  
“I only  
wrote one word, and I had to do all that,”  
“It isn’t fair.”

Figure 3. SHARPE 2016, 124 (detail).

hear what she has to say in her own defence in the midst of the ways she is made to appear only to be made to disappear. Put another way, with our own Black annotations and Black redactions, we might locate a counter to the force of the state [. . .] that has landed her on the front page of the *New York Times*” (SHARPE 2016, 122–23). The fragility of this redaction is, however, that even as it blacks out the (white) framing narrative, the act is only made possible by Mikia Hutchings’s case having been taken up by an internationally significant newspaper such as *The New York Times*. It thus still depends on the institutional structures that Sharpe seeks to counter.

I would like to propose yet another mode of editing otherwise, a practice that is exemplified in Mojisola Adebayo’s one-woman-play *Moj of the Antarctic: An African Odyssey* (2006) and Tiana Clark’s *The Rime of Nina Simone* (2018), both of which incorporate fragments from Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere* (1798). Coleridge prefaces his poem with an “Argument”:

How a Ship having passed the Line was driven by Storms to the cold  
Country towards the South Pole; and how from thence she made her  
course to the tropical Latitude of the Great Pacific Ocean; and of the  
strange things that befell; and in what manner the Ancyent Marinere  
came back to his own Country.

(1798, 3)

This could well serve as a plot summary for *Moj of the Antarctic* that traces Moj’s journey from being an “African-American house-slave” on a “rich Southern plantation” (ADEBAYO 2006, 10) to becoming a cross-dressing sailor on a whaling exhibition that takes her to Antarctica.

MOJ: And then, at last, the mainland, the black Antarctic mountain.

*Visuals section including of the black mountain, and various other  
gorgeous visuals of Antarctic landscape – connected with the text below.*

The sailors below at their  
Christmas eve hoosh,  
I steal away  
To survey  
The rump of the black Antarctic mountain (*Image of this.*)  
On a never ending Sabbath day  
Where the sun merely skims the horizon then rises again...



To gaze  
 At the African giantess  
 Rising out of the ice  
 She might be my mother lost  
 (2006, 42)

The contrasts between black skin and white ice (or snow) through which Adebayo’s “African giantess” emerges also shape Clark’s representation of Nina Simone (“her bolted / black back clutching every battle-born / ballad: a lone column of glissandos / and thunder snow, booming and bright” [2018, 51]), who takes the Marinere’s place in a “Rime” that likewise opens with an “Argument”:

*How a Slave Ship was driven by capitalism and racism inside the triangle of the transatlantic slave trade; and of the strange things that befell; and in what manner Nina Simone came back from the dead to her own Country to stop a graduate student on the way to workshop.*

(2018, 51)

The graduate student is the poet herself, stepping into the role of the wedding-guest whom the Marinere intercepts in Coleridge’s treatment. “I didn’t recognize her at first,” the student confides, “but felt urgency inside her glittering / eyes — grotesque and morganite, / melting blooms” (CLARK 2018, 51). Nina Simone’s glittering eye is the glittering eye of the Marinere. “By thy long grey beard and thy glittering eye / ‘Now wherefore stoppest me?’” the wedding-guest demands (COLERIDGE 1798, 5). “Sorry, I can’t — I’m late. I’m —” the graduate student objects (CLARK 2018, 51). “There was a Ship, quoth he —” (COLERIDGE 1798, 5). “I need to tell you something about yourself” (CLARK 2018, 51). Can we imagine this as the ethos for an editor of Coleridge’s poem? To tell the reader something about themselves? Arguably, this is a central theme of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. J. R. Ebbatson has read it as an allegory of “European racial guilt” that taints not only those directly involved in colonial expansion and the slave trade, but also those who stay at home and enjoy the fruits of exploitation. “The Mariner in regaling strangers with his ghastly tale, and leaving them sadder and wiser, is acquainting them with crimes committed in their name”, Ebbatson concludes (1972, 198). By hearing the Marinere’s story, Coleridge’s wedding-guest becomes implicated in the crimes of the slave trade — just as Nina Simone implicates the graduate student into its

afterlife as the legacy of the slave trade is being played out on the body of a Black woman: in both cases the auditor is told a story about themselves. Is made to sit in the room with history.

Of course, there is already a literary-critical term for this kind of reworking: adaptation. These are not editions of Coleridge, but adaptations. I am also very aware that calling Adebayo's play or Clark's poem an edition of a canonical poem may seem a way of belittling them, of downplaying their originality, setting them into a derivative relation vis-à-vis Coleridge. And yet, for the purposes of this provocation, I would like to suggest that Adebayo's and Clark's reworkings of Coleridge's text can stand as a model, an inspiration, for the critical editor. They point towards a mode of close textual engagement whose focus is not on the author's intention but on an ethical approach towards the historical context in which they wrote. This is not simply a presentist projection of the editor's concerns on the source materials — as Ebbatson's reading lays out, the concern with slavery and abolition is there already in Coleridge's poem — but an attempt to activate texts from the past for our present. To approach them not as frail monuments to be fixed in an authoritative edition, but, on the contrary, as pieces of clay that are plastic and ever-changing. Adaptable. Capable of being transformed while retaining their inner substance. Along these lines we can envisage, for instance, an edition of *The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere* that is manufactured solely from reworkings of Coleridge's text by Black women of the twenty-first century. This edition would still be critical in its accurate handling of the source texts. It would be creative in composing the works of multiple authors into one. But it would also challenge our conception of what an edition is and the relation between critical editor and creative writer. In this sense, it would be a model of editing otherwise.

University of Cambridge

## Works Cited

- ADEBAYO, Mojisola. 2019. *Moj of the Antarctic: An African Odyssey*. In *Plays One*. London: Oberon Books.
- BENJAMIN, Walter. 2006. "On the Concept of History". In *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol. 4: 1938–1940, edited by Howard EILAND and Michael W. JENNINGS, translated by Harry ZOHAN, 389–400. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- CLARK, Tiana. 2018. "The Rime of Nina Simone". In *I Can't Talk About the Trees Without the Blood*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

- COLERIDGE, Samuel Taylor. 2006. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner and other poems*. Grasmere: The Wordsworth Trust.
- EBBATSON, J. R. 1972. "Coleridge's Mariner and the Rights of Man". *Studies in Romanticism*, 11.3: 171–206.
- JOHNSON, Jessica Marie. 2018. "Markup Bodies: Black [Life] Studies and Slavery [Death] Studies at the Digital Crossroads". *Social Text*, 36.4: 57–79.
- PHILIP, NourbeSe M. 2008. *Zong!* Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.
- SHARPE, Christina. 2016. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham: Duke University Press.