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Teaching Mary Wollstonecraft's Travelogue of Historical Trauma

Abstract

Abstract: I teach Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796) in an undergraduate English literature course on "Survival Narratives of the Eighteenth Century" at the University of California, Davis. The aim of this course is to show how significant perilous voyages were to the ways in which writers in eighteenth-century Britain imagined and interpreted their world. The course draws from the burst of new scholarship on rethinking the traditional "rise of the novel" narrative in imperial, oceanic, and global contexts and develops interpretive frameworks for the eighteenth century's changing relationship to commerce and exploration. Wollstonecraft's travelogue is the final text in a syllabus that begins with Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and continues with Phillis Wheatley's poetry about ocean voyages and Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789). Wollstonecraft's account of traveling in Scandinavia, written in the aftermath of the French Revolution, is more concerned with the survival of the human species than the survival of the individual. But reading Wollstonecraft's travelogue in a course on survival narratives primes students to understand how the material conditions of reading and writing—often taking place under extreme circumstances—shaped the literature being produced in the eighteenth century. In this essay, I describe a metacognitive exercise in which students reflected on Wollstonecraft's meditation on survival in an era of environmental catastrophe with their own "travelogues" written from where they logged into the Zoom classroom. With classes online at the time due to COVID-19, many of my students drew on this lesson to discuss how a moment of crisis shaped their skills and experiences as writers.

Keywords

Travelogue, trauma, transatlantic slave trade, survival

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When I first taught Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796) in the fall of 2020, the idea of embarking on a journey to remote Scandinavian territory was far from my mind. Tuning in on Zoom several times a week, students jokingly compared their daily dorm room scenery to the rocky coast of Norway that inspired Wollstonecraft's sublime reflections. Students were quick to realize, however, that *Letters* is as much an exploration of the survival of personal and political catastrophe as it is a travel narrative. Traveling as an agent of her estranged lover Gilbert Imlay to track down a missing silver shipment soon after a suicide attempt and reeling from the horrors of the French Revolution, Wollstonecraft grapples with her own mortality even as she muses on the fate of the human species in the distant future. Accompanied only by her baby daughter and a nursemaid, Wollstonecraft documents the natural scenery and the people she encounters over the course of twenty-five letters. The letters I selected to focus on provide an overview of the role of historical trauma in the travelogue. I assigned the Advertisement (Wollstonecraft's brief statement of intention in presenting her letters for publication), Letter 1, Letter 4, Letter 18, and Letter 19, sections of the text that provide opportunities to discuss the conventions of travel writing, the deliberate connections Wollstonecraft forges between the sublime and the psychology of the individual, and the role of sympathy in the text. Although I have also taught the full text in an upper-division class on Romanticism, focusing on several letters provided more than enough material for two classes in an introductory-level seminar.¹

I most commonly teach Wollstonecraft's *Letters* in an undergraduate English literature course on "Survival Narratives of the Eighteenth Century." This course aims to show how significant perilous voyages were to the ways in which writers in eighteenth-century Britain imagined and interpreted their world. Wollstonecraft's travelogue is the final text in a syllabus that begins with Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and continues with Phillis Wheatley Peters's poetry about ocean voyages and Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789). In teaching Wollstonecraft's text in this course, my goals are:

- 1) to situate Wollstonecraft's discussion of survival alongside the discussions of life-and-death survival that precedes it in the syllabus, in particular, contrasting Wollstonecraft's privilege in taking a journey to Scandinavia at a historical moment when the slave trade was not yet abolished in Britain.

2) to examine the *Letters* as an explicit engagement with survival that primes students to understand how the material conditions of reading and writing shaped the literature being produced in the eighteenth century.

After seven weeks of reading survival narratives, however, students were eager to consider the questions Wollstonecraft raises about the minute particulars of survival on an individual level—the personal catastrophes in Wollstonecraft’s life—and survival on a larger scale—writing in the tumultuous aftermath of the French Revolution and considering the fate of the human species. In many respects, a selection from Wollstonecraft’s *Letters* allows the class to pull together threads running through this course beyond this contrast of scale, including the tensions of connection and distance, isolation, and community, and imagining survival now and in the future.

I intentionally teach Wollstonecraft’s travelogue at the end of the term to first set up a framework for discussing the true stories of life-and-death survival that haunt the eighteenth century. “Survival Stories of the Long Eighteenth Century” draws from the burst of new scholarship on rethinking the traditional “rise of the novel” narrative in imperial, oceanic, and global contexts and develops interpretive frameworks for the eighteenth century’s changing relationship to commerce and exploration.ⁱⁱ A central theme of this class is that Britain initiates involvement in the transatlantic slave trade at the beginning of the century and abolitionist efforts are well underway by the end of the century. At the same time, we examine how race and environmental history are inextricably intertwined in stories of survival that emerge over this historical period. Of the thirty students enrolled in the course in Fall 2020, twenty-one were English majors or planning to declare as English majors, while the remainder were filling a general education requirement. The course is designated to fulfill a “Writing Experience requirement designed to ensure that students become proficient writers across a range of academic and real-world contexts.” Its introductory nature means that I make sure to draw out thematic connections between the texts themselves as well as encourage students to think through their twenty-first-century experiences.

Before we arrive at Wollstonecraft’s story, the class considers travel based on the devaluation of life—both human life and nature—and the labor of enslaved people. In order to scaffold earlier readings and lay the groundwork for the discussion of Wollstonecraft, I incorporate secondary source readings from Laura Doyle’s *Freedom’s Empire: Race and the Rise of the Novel in Atlantic Modernity, 1640-1940* and Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Doyle, for instance, has written at length about the similarities between Equiano’s *Narrative* and Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, pointing out that whereas Crusoe encounters more

than his fair share of shipwrecks, Equiano faces the dangers of slavery and sea on an ongoing basis (Doyle 193). Doyle suggests that Equiano places himself in the same tradition as Defoe's *Crusoe* to forge a new "Anglo-Atlantic narrative of captivity and liberty," an argument that helps students connect fictional and all-too-real survival accounts. Sharpe provides us with language for discussing the devaluation of Black life:

Living as I have argued we do in the wake of slavery, in spaces where we were never meant to survive, or have been punished for surviving and for daring to claim or make spaces of something like freedom, we yet reimagine and transform spaces for and practices of an ethics of care (as in repair, maintenance, attention), an ethics of seeing, and of being in the wake as consciousness; as a way of remembering and observance that started with the door of no return, continued in the hold of the ship and on the shore. (130-131)

Read alongside Equiano's autobiography and Wheatley Peters's poetry, these secondary sources guide students in reading accounts of historical trauma and particularly the ways in which the act of writing can be construed as an act of survival.

When we arrive at Wollstonecraft's *Letters* at the end of the term, students are already well-versed on how crisis shapes the writer. Equiano movingly writes about being separated from his sister after the two are kidnapped together. The brother and sister reunite briefly and then are torn from each other permanently over the course of a day. After reading accounts of Equiano's trauma, students recognized the marked difference between the texts, especially the privilege afforded to Wollstonecraft to travel to Scandinavia with her infant daughter and her daughter's nurse and her ability to craft a travelogue out of her adventures.

Materiality, epistolarity, sentimentality

I found students to be particularly curious about Wollstonecraft's aims in writing a travelogue after reading the Advertisement, in which she confides that "In writing these desultory letters, I found I could not avoid being continually the first person—the little hero of each tale." They had prepared for discussion of the Advertisement and the first two letters by completing a low-stakes discussion post statement that asked "What choices does Wollstonecraft make in crafting her travelogue? This prompt asks students to consider the space Wollstonecraft develops within her written work and make connections to more current versions of the travelogue. For instance, one student pondered what Wollstonecraft would have

thought of “vlogging,” a form of travel blogging in video form that frequently appears on YouTube, and considered how a moment in which Wollstonecraft describes a moonlit sky might have translated to the video format. I took this student’s comment as an opportunity to outline key features of the travelogue in the eighteenth century, particularly emphasizing the emotional response to the scenery as a key to the development of the traveler attuned to the world around them. Another student wrote that Wollstonecraft “does this weird thing where she invites the reader to put her book down if they don’t like it,” observing that the personal language of the Advertisement sets the stage for a travelogue that sometimes seems more like a diary than a formal description of the scenery.

Since one of my main learning outcomes for this class was considering the material conditions of reading and writing in the eighteenth century—while at the same time identifying overlaps and differences between Wollstonecraft’s text and the previous texts we read in the class—I began by considering how *Letters* does and does not fit into the genre of the travelogue. The question of how to define a travelogue had already come up in class in relation to Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative*, a text that draws on the conventions of the adventure travelogue to describe the enforced transportation of an enslaved person. While in an upper-division class we might move immediately to discussing the epistolary format of the *Letters*, I intentionally framed this question similarly to the pre-class discussion prompt to inspire confident responses. One student mentioned an observation from that post:

Something that I have noticed [that] seems to be a constant in travel literature in general is the tendency of the author to make clear the similarities and differences between the place they are from as opposed to the place they are currently in.

We discussed this student’s observation in relation to one of Wollstonecraft’s first observations in Letter I: “How different is it on the English coast, where, in the most stormy weather, boats immediately hail you, brought out by the expectation of extraordinary profit” (5). Another student who had read excerpts of Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in a previous class observed that “Wollstonecraft tends to point out the relative justness or unjustness of the systems she’s viewing, which in *Letters* can be something as simple as the service she’s receiving.” This observation was particularly helpful in terms of situating Wollstonecraft as an activist who campaigned for women’s education before penning *Letters*.

Students were interested in what they identified as “meta literature” moments in the text, or as one student put it, “how Wollstonecraft was acting as her own critic within her writing, attempting to keep herself in line with her ideals.” We discussed this specifically in relation to a moment in which Wollstonecraft describes how she was entering a town and a custom-house officer asks her to “descend, I might have said step, from our car” (13). The inclusion of the word “descend” and the edited language reminded students that Wollstonecraft maintains tight control over her narrative while also intentionally showcasing her writing process. As one student put it, “It is cool to see Wollstonecraft pull back the curtain a bit and expose some of her thought processes when it comes to her writing.” As students prepared their final papers for this class, taking note of Wollstonecraft’s edits was helpful in modeling how drafts are constructed bit by bit.

Students were quick to pick up on the emotional tone of the *Letters*, an editorial choice we discussed in relation to the travelogue’s epistolary format.ⁱⁱⁱ In the second class on the *Letters*, we talked about how the letters use emotional response to move through broader themes connected to the literary imagination and working through trauma. When asked what they noticed about reading a travelogue in the form of letters, one student admitted they found Wollstonecraft’s use of “you” and address to an absent third party to be jarring. We discussed the possibility that the absent addressee was Imlay, which led to a productive conversation about one of the forms of trauma within the text that many students said they connected to on a personal level: the breakup of a romantic relationship. A student called the publishing of *Letters* a “Taylor Swift moment,” connecting the pop singer well-known for singing about her past relationships to the fact that Wollstonecraft published the travelogue after her relationship with Imlay dissolved. Although many students assumed the recipient of the letters was Imlay, they were surprised to learn that Wollstonecraft had rewritten the letters and crafted them into the narrative that was eventually published after returning home. A discussion about the extent to which Wollstonecraft’s original letters differed from the published narrative led students to consider how Wollstonecraft effectively joined the conventions of the travelogue to her personal life. The conversation once again returned to Taylor Swift and other female pop singers who are met with both ire and admiration when they draw on their personal life in their music, a topic that allowed me to draw in William Godwin’s publishing of Wollstonecraft’s memoirs after her death and the mixed reception of that text.^{iv}

Trauma-informed pedagogy

Our discussion of how Wollstonecraft rewrote the letters for publication helped students consider both creative license and the impact of trauma on autobiographical texts. In order to set up a trauma-informed approach to these texts from the beginning of the term, I draw on Kate Parker, Bryan M. Kopp, and Lindsay Steiner's excellent framework for trauma-informed pedagogy. Parker et. al. seek to "foster a classroom atmosphere that raises the awareness of the presence of trauma, that promotes help-seeking and self-care behaviors, and that holds space for difficult conversations and unexpected resonances." Practically speaking, I acknowledge both on the syllabus and verbally at the start of class that the material we will be discussing may bring up traumatic experiences for students and note that marginalized students are more likely to be impacted by trauma. Since much of the material in the class connects to stories of Black survival, I frame our discussions of trauma by bringing in excerpts of Kerry Sinanan's "BLM 2020: Breathing, Resistance, and the War Against Enslavement" on class slides. Sinanan writes that "Black life itself is a rebellion, a constant pressure today, and stretching back to the slave ship," an idea that invites students to meditate on the connections between past and present trauma. Building on Sinanan's work, our class discussion connected back to one of the most productive conversations of the quarter on Olaudah Equiano's autobiography. Students had previously read a selection from Brycchan Carey's impressive open-source collection of materials on Equiano, including an article on Vincent Caretta's claim that Equiano was not born in Africa as he claimed, but born and enslaved in South Carolina. My class found particularly persuasive Carey's suggestion that "as a terrified and traumatised child, the young Equiano may have been too afraid to tell the truth when asked for his place of birth." We discussed how other eighteenth-century writers frequently incorporated accounts from other people when writing firsthand reports of traumatic events. Daniel Defoe, for instance, blended eyewitness accounts of the Great Storm of 1703 while writing *The Storm* (Davis 157). Carey has also argued that Ignatius Sancho's firsthand account of witnessing the Gordon Riots in 1780 is a literary construct. Students were especially eager to discuss the role of writing in processing traumatic events and ultimately conceded that the impact of Equiano's text on the reading public far outweighed any potential liberties he took with the text. In the context of Wollstonecraft's *Letters*, then, students were eager to discuss Wollstonecraft's potential motivations in framing the text for publication: what did she rewrite from her original accounts and why? We were careful as a class to disentangle the different layers of response to trauma in the strikingly different texts.

Processing disaster

As a way to situate Wollstonecraft's work in the broader themes of the class, we spent much of the second class discussing Wollstonecraft's meditations on the fate of the human species. The benefit of reading *Letters* at the end of a class on eighteenth-century narratives is that Wollstonecraft often makes explicit observations that feel eerily prescient for an era in which environmental catastrophes occur frequently. Wollstonecraft writes of imagining the world a million or two million years in the future "when the earth would perhaps be so perfectly cultivated, and so completely peopled, as to render it necessary to inhabit every spot" (102). Building on these ideas, the Wollstonecraft unit explores how the humanities can offer insights into asymmetrical vulnerability in our own culture.

While we had established in the previous class that Wollstonecraft was still processing her experiences of witnessing the violence of the French Revolution, we dedicated the second class to thinking about how witnessing the arbitrary violence of war fundamentally shaped Wollstonecraft's views about survival and sympathy. Scott Juengel, for instance, considers how Wollstonecraft "struggles to reconcile the time of revolutionary politics with what we might call 'species time,' resulting in forms of untimeliness that figure as disaster without end" (5). When asked to consider where we see Wollstonecraft grappling with personal and collective trauma, multiple students referred to a passage in which Wollstonecraft considers the role of sympathy in restoring her sense of community:

What are these imperious sympathies? How frequently has melancholy and even misanthropy taken possession of me, when the world has disgusted me, and friends have proven unkind. I have then considered myself as a particle broken off from the grand mass of mankind; —I was alone, till some involuntary sympathetic emotion, like the attraction of adhesion, made me feel that I was still part of a mighty whole, from which I could not sever myself—not, perhaps, for the reflection has been carried very far, by snapping the thread of an existence which loses its charms in proportion as the cruel experience of life stops or poisons the current of the heart. Futurity, what hast thou not to give to those who know that there is such a thing as happiness!

As we read this passage (highlighted on a PowerPoint slide), we discussed parallels to how students were currently processing the collective trauma of the pandemic. Turning on their camera briefly to speak, one student mentioned that papers were already being published on the impact of the pandemic. Another student

used the chat function to type that they found Wollstonecraft's line about considering herself "as a particle broken off from the grand mass of mankind" to be particularly "moving" to read while experiencing the alienation of signing on to a Zoom classroom: "I really feel what she's feeling," the student added. Students struggled with the final line and were initially reluctant to offer interpretations, but soon noticed that "Futurity" was being treated as a "personified" figure. We debated whether or not Wollstonecraft "appealed" to the future or addressed the future from a despondent perspective ("what hast thou not to give"), with students split on how Wollstonecraft comes to terms with her hopelessness about potential future disaster. Since the learning outcomes for this class included evaluating the different registers in Wollstonecraft's writing and tracing how the style, form, and content were typical of the period, the discussion of personification allowed us to home in on which types of literary devices are deployed in survival texts.

Jacques Khalip and Frances Collings pose a series of questions in their Introduction to *Romanticism and Disaster* about how to grapple with disaster in Romantic texts: "What are the social, historical, and political conditions or possibilities of living amidst devastation? How does one recognize such devastation in the first place, and what are the criteria through which it is posited?" One moment we discussed to understand how Wollstonecraft recognizes devastation is in Letter 19, as Wollstonecraft notices the encampments of families driven out of their homes by the Copenhagen Fire of 1795. We looked at painted images of the fire and considered how writers depict traumatic events that happen to people other than themselves. In contrast to Wollstonecraft's letter, which discussed the writer "avert[ing] [her] eyes" from the suffering of survivors, the pictures clearly show the forms of people attempting to escape to safety (100). To bring this question back to the class and survival, we asked "How can we practice an "ethics of care" as observers of disaster?"

To conclude our unit on Wollstonecraft and consider what we had learned about the genre of travelogue, I asked students to complete a brief exercise on Google Docs in which they completed a short travelogue of their own, from either their immediate location or a location within one minute's walk. Many students opted to take their laptops outside for this exercise, which provided a change-up of scenery (those who found themselves temporarily without WiFi connections wrote on a Word document and then copy-pasted their reflections into Docs upon return). I suggested that students draw on their pre-class reflections about Wollstonecraft's choices in crafting a travelogue and consider how their own material conditions inform what they produced. I asked students to consider: How would you go about writing a travelogue? Would you put yourself in it (including autobiographical details) or take yourself out (merely describing the scenery)? Students could

alternatively opt to take a picture of their surroundings and describe it briefly. Whichever option they chose, I asked students to consider the territory around them through unfamiliar eyes, as if they were encountering it for the first time as a traveler.

Since returning to in-person teaching, I have already attempted versions of this assignment for several other courses: in a course on the American Gothic novel, I asked students to take a picture or describe an image on campus in a way that developed the Gothic nature of the image. In a class on British laboring-class poets, I asked students to do the same for an image that described their relationship to work at that moment. I found that this particular exercise translates well to a non-digital context, especially if the instructor takes the time to scroll through the Google Doc and allow students to see the work their peers have produced. Similarly, I have discovered through teaching Wollstonecraft that students' shared experience of disaster—from the pandemic to the recent California fires—leads to productive conversations about the role trauma plays in eighteenth-century texts. Whereas I might have shied away from explicitly referencing these shared moments in the past, worried about bringing up painful emotions or directing my students too far from the text, analyzing the way that Wollstonecraft brings these moments to bear on her narrative has modeled a way of teaching that considers such moments to be crucial to understanding our historical surroundings.

ⁱ While this essay is focused on teaching Wollstonecraft's *Letters* in the context of an introductory class on eighteenth-century survival, I have also found it productive to teach this class alongside Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) in a course on Romanticism. Students in the Romanticism course gained a sense of Wollstonecraft's range as a writer.

ⁱⁱ See, for instance, Laura Doyle's *Freedom's Empire: Race and the Rise of the Novel in Atlantic Modernity, 1640–1940* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993), and Kathleen Wilson's *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 2003).

ⁱⁱⁱ In order to frame the epistolary form as an important development in travel writing, I ask students to consider whether they have ever sent a postcard during a vacation and if so, what information they chose to include. I point students to Elizabeth Bohls and Ian Duncan's *Women Travel Writers and the Language of Aesthetics*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005) and Clare Brant's *Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture* (New York: Palgrave, 2006) in order to show the range of work linking the epistolary form to travel writing.

^{iv} Godwin's *Memoirs of the Author of "The Rights of Woman"* (1798) contained an

appendix with Wollstonecraft's personal letters to Imlay.

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