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Koretsky, Deanna P. *Death Rights: Romantic Suicide, Race, and the Bounds of Liberalism.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 2021. 203 pp.

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<1>Deanna Koretsky opens *Death Rights: Romantic Suicide, Race, and the Bounds of Liberalism* by acknowledging the fact that "[s]uicide 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" (2). However, as she goes on to write, "cultural narratives about suicide are ours to read and weigh; they show us what it is to live in this world" (2). In the following captivating pages, she investigates how suicide was mythologized, gendered, and racialized in the cultural narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. She "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" (4). Focusing on the Romantic period and its obsession with suicide, she pulls apart familiar narratives about abolitionist poetry, slave narratives, and Enlightenment definitions of personhood to compellingly argue that the right to death was (and is) as an exclusive one that highlights the limitations of liberalism, and that representations of suicide send powerful (often mixed) messages about race.

<2>In the first chapter, "Liberty and Death," Koretsky reads Thomas Day and John Bicknell's poem *The Dying Negro*against legal and philosophical understandings of property and personhood, including the ramifications of Somerset v. Stewart and John Locke's convoluted thinking about slavery, freedom, and death. She argues that "[t]hough Day and Bicknell claim an antislavery ethos, *The Dying Negro* cannot get past paradoxes laden within the liberal principles it engages to bolster its cause. The trope of the "suicidal slave" raises far more questions than the poem can reasonably answer about the foundations of modern political and legal institutions" (38). Not only paying attention to the poem's contexts and contents, she also unpacks the implications of the poem as a fictional suicide note, writing that "[b]y engaging a literary form that presupposes the speaker's death, Day and Bicknell circumvent the

black subject ostensibly at the center of their interrogation" (38). Ultimately, "the ennobled figure of the "suicidal slave" utterly fails at creating for African-identified people a framework in which to actually live as free subjects" (45).

<3>In "Chained to Life and Misery," she turns to representations of female suicide crafted by proto-feminists and "considers how liberal calls for gender parity were also, in many cases, arguments *against* racial parity" (49). She explores how writers like Mary Robinson and Claire de Duras used the sentimentalized suicides of non-white women to claim the right to reason and personhood for white women. She highlights how texts like "The Negro Girl," *Ourika*, and "Indian Woman's Death Song" rely on "the willingness of women broadly marked as nonwhite to embrace literal death, leaving only white womanhood alive" (67). The end of the chapter is strongly punctuated by Koretsky's insightful engagement with the autobiography *The Story of Mattie J. Jackson*. Like Robinson and de Duras, Jackson (a formerly enslaved black woman) offers a sentimental poem about a black woman driven to suicide by unmanageable feelings; however, this poem is immediately succeeded by a rehearsal of the facts of the case. Koretsky argues that "when she repeats this woman's story in decidedly unsentimental prose, Jackson rescues her from the fates of real and fictional black women whose lives were—and in many ways, still are—reduced to sentimental tropes and sacrificed on the altar of white women's rights" (71). In this chapter, Koretsky not only scrutinizes the trope of non-white, irrational female suicide but also highlights contemporary resistance to its forms and power.

<4>"Writ in Water" looks at how un-ventriloquized black voices imagine death, community, and the ocean. Reading *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, Koretsky suggests that "Equiano's engagements with suicide lead to a powerful affirmation of black life on its own terms. Within the waters of the Atlantic Ocean, Equiano finds new frames for understanding what it means for him to choose, again and again, to stay alive" (75). His narrative resists tropes found in texts like *The Dying Negro* and instead "demands that Anglo-European readers confront what it means that someone they have deprived of social life would keep choosing to live" (82). She argues that Equiano's relationship with the ocean and the themes of the diasporic folktale of Mami Wata complicate associations of water with the finality of death and instead offer new ways of thinking about life, ecology, and relationality. The penultimate chapter, "In Sympathy," offers a compelling reading of the suicidal impulses driving *Frankenstein* by first drawing attention to the ways suicide haunted Mary Shelley's life and to Percy Shelley's musings on sympathy. She then traces how in the novel, "liberalism seems to lead to suicide one way or another" (97). Koretsky argues that while Shelleycritiques exclusionary liberal

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social logics that resist integration of or true sympathy with the creature, through his "turn to suicide, she also forecloses the possibility of life outside these logics," possibilities that others, including Victor LaValle in his *Frankenstein*-inspired comic *Destroyer*, might be capable of imagining (116).

<5>The last chapter, "Marvelous Boys," takes up the mythologized figure of Thomas Chatterton, whose death was made iconic through the deliberate efforts of romantic poets like William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Percy Shelley. Koretsky argues that the narrative built around Chatterton's suicide celebrated (and continues to celebrate) both the romantic white male suicide and liberalism itself, in ways that overshadow the lives (and deaths) of others. As she puts it, "romantic suicide epitomizes a defensive ideology wherein the deification of white male solipsism reproduces an isolationist and exclusionary status quo. And while it emerged from the nineteenth century, the myth of romantic suicide continues to circulate to strikingly similar ends today" (123). In many ways, this chapter typifies one of the most exciting aspects of *Death Rights*: Koretsky's deliberate engagement with not only canonical romantic texts but also those that have resisted (or been resisted by) canonization. She gives weight to both Wollstonecraft and Mattie Jackson, reads *Frankenstein* against *Destroyer*, places Chatterton next to Cobain next to "Clout Cobain." In doing so, she shows the way that these texts have been misread, under-read, or read along deliberate and occlusive lines, and, through her own analysis, demonstrates ways of reading that are rich, resistant, and offer new considerations of romantic constructions and their legacies. *Death Rights* is an engaging and essential contribution to not only nineteenth-century studies as a whole, but also studies of whiteness, slavery and abolition, and suicide.

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