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# Race and Racism in Austen Spaces: Eroticizing Men of Empire in Austen

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**The contributors are grateful to *ABO* and the journal's editors for this conversational space to address vital issues about racism in Austen spaces. These pieces comprise voices outside and inside of academia, voices of those who work in different Austen spaces, including social media, television, heritage, and publishing. We are aware that publishing this work crosses many boundaries and brings worlds together that are not usually put in conversation together: we believe they need to be. We are grateful for the specialized work that the editors have done to bring this cluster forward: we also believe that more anti-racist strategies are needed in publishing to support the work of Black, Latina/x and people of colour. We are not aware of another volume on Austen, published in the US, that is authored entirely by writers of the global majority and are pleased to be part of this effort.**

In a recent essay for a co-edited volume, *Austen After 200: New Reading Spaces*, (forthcoming from Palgrave Macmillan), I discuss the reform of Mr. Darcy as described by Marilyn Butler in *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (1975) as part of a broader move within the British novel to solidify Protestant imperial expansion. In this cultural context, Darcy's improvement means he becomes more socially flexible, while also acting as a locus of "good British values." Through Darcy, Austen seeks to rescue the corrupt upper classes and make them fit for imperial purpose. The romance plot, however, functions to eroticize Darcy's social duty and, by helping Lydia and Wickham, he becomes the perfect hero who, rather than reveling in flowery sentiment, acts benignly for the common good. In this Introduction to the cluster focusing on *Race, Racism and Austen Spaces*, I consider, below, the cultural contexts for the eroticization of the imperial male in Austen spaces. This eroticization masks their function as lynchpins of colonial and imperial power. Austen adaptations make the imperial erotic as the power of acquisition, domination, and extraction is wrapped up in the ideal Regency hero for today whose romantic currency makes them irresistible.

The need to continue to be attentive and trenchant about the colonial and imperial contexts of Austen studies and spaces, past and present, has arguably never been more urgent. Since 2020, support has fallen dramatically for Black Lives Matter (BLM) and this itself testifies to an overall withdrawal of support from white people for Black and racialized "others" (Cornish). It is not possible to divorce this social moment from Austen studies however much readers and viewers may wish the texts and content to offer an escape from real-world issues. The essays in this cluster make new and urgent arguments about how we need to continue to read race and racism in Austen, Austen adaptations, Austen social media, and

academic spaces as ongoing transatlantic debates continue about the role of empire and slavery in the Regency world. The essays in this cluster map the contours of this engagement and trace the urgency of this work. Tré Ventour-Griffiths explores the relationship between Austen adaptations and a contemporary culture that is divided about acknowledging Regency Britain's racist histories. Amanda- Rae Prescott details how racism functions in social media spaces that remain unregulated and often disregarded by Austen scholars and commentators. And Bianca Hernandez-Knight reads the pleasures of whiteness in the consumption of Regency romance and Georgette Heyer's novels that continue to repackage period heroes while also perpetuating a racism that commentators refuse to acknowledge.

These essays tap into a clear "culture war" around men of empire, notably the slave masters of the eighteenth century, that has increased in visibility and urgency in response to BLM 2020. The debates about Edward Colston and Henry Dundas, for example, are repeatedly reduced to them being "men of their time" who did "good" despite the fact that their power and wealth came directly from enslaving others. Assertions that Colston and Dundas were paternalists who were not out of step with eighteenth-century slave-trading cultures ignores the resistances and refusals of the enslaved themselves who never thought that their bondage was "acceptable." And, as the Countering Colston group argues, "Presenting Colston as a philanthropist is deeply disrespectful to the tens of thousands of people whose enslavement he helped to fund and organize" ("Countering Colston"). In these debates about men of empire, we can see the clear racialized divisions that seek to exclude Black and anti-racist voices and perspectives.

Colston's statue in Bristol was toppled from its plinth and thrown into the harbor by BLM protestors in the summer of 2020, finally bringing to a close decades of conversations between Bristol's Black community and the council that were leading to no action (Farrer). Edinburgh council wanted to balance its many commemorations of Dundas with a plaque noting his role in delaying abolition. But Dundas's descendant, Bobby Melville, insists that he was a "politician of vision and integrity" even though it was Dundas's clause for gradual abolition that led to its continuation. As Stephen Mullen asserts, "There is no historiographical controversy about Henry Dundas' culpability in delaying abolition," but his legacy is nevertheless currently being recast as a form of abolition by his descendants. In addition, eighteenth-century queer studies frequently discuss the slave owners William Beckford and Matthew Lewis without reference to the fact that they were enslavers, as if their material wealth and literary productions have nothing to do at all with slavery. The National Museum of Wales has just decided

to remove the portrait of Sir Thomas Picton, Governor of Trinidad and "hero" of the Battle of Waterloo, who authorized a type of torture and abuse against a thirteen-year old girl, Louisa Calderón, so extreme that he was convicted at the time of torture. As Nathan Dorn writes,

> "Picton-ing" is a form of torture in which the victim has one arm tied by a restraint that runs through a pulley connected to the ceiling, while the other arm is tied tightly to one of the feet so that the leg is forcibly bent upward at the knee. The remaining foot is then positioned so that a toe rests on a spiked piece of wood as the weight of the whole body is lowered onto it.

Despite all that we knew then and now of their actual pursuits, racist beliefs, and actions, men of empire still hold allure and power via their descendants and in academic and corporate structures, due to the very wealth they accumulated in their pasts. Picton had previously been included in the Heroes of Wales exhibition. Yet these contexts remain denied by Austen adaptations that reproduce decontextualized men of empire like Colonel Brandon, Captain Wentworth, and William Price, as well as the landed gentry of empire, such as Darcy, as romantic heroes. Crucially, they are removed from the actions of empire, but not from its output—the wealth of the Regency British white patriarchal elite which is re-consumed in Austen spaces today.

The celebration of Georgian and Regency culture—by the U.S. and U.K. in particular—repackages it as a repository for imperial nostalgia. Its material luxury, its balls, its politeness, its sparkle are continually remade in glossy adaptations such as *Sanditon* (2019), *Bridgerton* (2020), and Autumn de Wilde's *Emma* (2020), that continue to present the material as central to what the period has to offer, today. As Christopher Maxwell notes, the polite eighteenth-century society was definitively a material one: "glazed porcelain, polished mahogany, glossy velvet, gilded wood, lustrous silks, and large glazed windows" all contributed to the making of a culture that harnessed what it extracted and accumulated within global imperial markets to make a British identity (39). And the material *made* the very politeness that is celebrated in ongoing adaptations: "Politeness was, by definition, an artificial, performative state, as the existence of manuals dedicated to its attainment attest . . . politeness was an exclusive trait" (Maxwell 39). The set of de Wilde's *Emma* filmed at Firle Place clearly combines period politeness with the material. It emphasized a "Jane Austen–Candy Land aesthetic" that production designer, Kave Quinn, and set decorator, Stella Fox, felt was the aspect of Georgian décor and material culture that had been missed in other adaptations ("The gorgeous sets"). That this material luxury had been

gathered via the very kinds of torture and abuse enacted by men like Picton is illegible and far removed from the adaptations which nevertheless revel in aesthetics. But this is the haul of patriarchy, and Austen's romance plots repeatedly ask us to elide material desire within romantic desire, thus evaporating the power structures involved in pleasure. The shiny, lavish sets of today's Regency romances go further to make the material extractions of the eighteenth century something to be enjoyed on their own aesthetic terms, perfect backdrops to perfect romance. The gloss of this society has become synonymous with quintessential Englishness in heritage culture, a relationship that the recent National Trust report works hard to unsettle. In September 2020, the National Trust issued its "Interim Report on the Connections between Colonialism and Properties now in the Care of the National Trust, Including Links with Historic Slavery," which Ventour-Griffiths explores in his essay. As well as noting all known examples of legal and other links between its properties and slavery, the Report details the wider contexts of investment in wealth generated by British colonies that allowed money to flow back to the center. In a comprehensive review of how the wealth, garnered through slavery and empire, was invested into banking, merchant houses, and directly to landed estates, the report exposes the global nature of what Austen cultures often read as quiet provincial English life:

> Although the idea of the global country house – as both a site of cultural influence and political power – may initially appear at odds with the more traditional notion of the stately home as the epitome of Britishness, research led by historians and heritage organisations is increasingly uncovering the part these houses and estates played globally. (Huxtable et al, 7)

Notably, the Bath Assembly rooms were "funded by a tontine subscription" (Huxtable et al, 97) established by James Leigh-Perrot who married Jane Leigh-Perrot—the sister-in-law of William Spry, Governor of Barbados—and who had inherited her father's plantations and the enslaved people attached to them. Other people connected to the Leigh-Perrots and the Assembly Rooms had various investments in slavery and in colonial ventures that were consolidated and transferred through marriage. Austen's romance plots take our attention away from the racial capitalist function of patriarchal marriage in Britain at the time focusing, instead, on the putative fulfilment of love and happiness and the joining of "good men" to deserving heroines. Far from being profiteers of empire, either directly or indirectly, Austen's heroes are "gentleman-like," handsome and, in the end, morally sound. Throughout her novels the term "gentleman-like," signifies a happy congruence of manners and status and, of course, a hero to be fallen in love with. Mr. Knightley and Henry Tilney are introduced with this word. In *Sense and*

*Sensibility* Colonel Brandon is "silent" but "particularly gentlemanlike" (36), and Mr. Bingley is first introduced to us as "good looking and gentlemanlike; he had a pleasant countenance, and easy, unaffected manners" (12). The word is withheld from Darcy and his first proposal is astoundingly rude, but Mrs. Gardiner later does use the word to describe Darcy when he converses with them at Pemberley: crucially as he shows them his estate. Darcy's reform and his role and responsibility as a landowner are all made to shimmer under the gloss of romance economies. As so many have noted, it is when Elizabeth playfully, but not untruthfully, sees Pemberley that she first regrets rejecting Darcy's proposal: "of this place" she "might have been mistress" (202). That love-plot and landholding are intertwined to blur the boundaries of material and romantic desire is ironically noted by Austen herself. And in the other novels, the white women wooed by Austen's heroes are complicit with imperial power, as Erin Goss has powerfully argued regarding *Persuasion*:

> Anne Elliot, introduced as the embodiment of "honesty against importance" and "indifference for everything but justice and equity," nevertheless depends in her characterization on the availability of West Indian profit and the successful pursuit of its retrieval.

Austen's romance plots collude to make property and wealth consolidation a morally acceptable site of desire and the actual colonial economies of accumulation are obscured.

While certainly not all of her heroes are independent estate landowners, what remains invisible in Austen's plots is that the polish of manners, combined with affirmed morality in the hero figure, is the purview of *white*, male imperial Britons. Indeed, there are no Black men in Austen's novels who could offer any contrast: this is not their world, but the world made from their blood and labor. Austen did see Black people in Bath though: The National Trust Report notes that Austen, on a visit to Bath in 1801, wrote to Cassandra and mentioned a Black servant in her aunt's home: "Frank, whose black head was in waiting in the Hall window, received us very kindly; and his Master & Mistress did not shew less cordiality . . ." (97). While this note may in itself appear "cordial," it is inherently racist, noting Frank's blackness and erasing his unfree status in Austen's family: extracting the labor of Black people was not something that happened only in the distant colonies, however politely done. Moreover, Austen swiftly ornamentalizes Frank here, who becomes a "black head," a piece of statuary like the many statues of Black boys that decorate the National Trust properties themselves. The infamous stand of a Black boy, holding a scallop shell on his head at Dyrham

Park became a particular site for the debate in 2020 about how to acknowledge estates' connections to slavery. As the National Trust notes: "the stands evoke contemporary aristocratic culture that sought young black male household attendants" (de la Rosa). Like these, and many similar objects, Frank, too, becomes an acquisition, owned by white men, and Austen's move here implicitly registers Frank's chattel status which separates him from white servants of the time: he is not free to leave, is unwaged, and a marker of wealth in Bath. This trope of the Black man/slave as statue goes back at least to Aphra Behn's *Oronooko* (1688) in which her female gaze transforms the "Royal Slave" into "perfect ebony": "He was pretty tall, but of a shape the most exact that can be fancied; the most famous statuary could not form the figure of a man more admirable turned from head to foot" (23). Romantic and imperial desire elide under the colonial acquisitive gaze. Frank, too, is admired by Austen and this admiration forges his manifest objectification, in extreme and marked opposition to the white male heroes of her plots.

In a recent piece for the *Times Literary Supplement*, Devoney Looser offered new details showing that, while Austen's family was long-known to have profited directly from slavery, the family moved "from known complicity in colonial slavery to previously unnoticed anti-slavery activism." Like many in her contemporary society in the later eighteenth century, Austen, we can surmise, also was not in favor of the mass capturing and transportation of millions of Africans across the Middle Passage to labor as chattel on colonial plantations. But anti-slavery is not anti-racism. Patricia A. Matthew argues that in order to read accurately the historical context around Austen's novels—in particular around *Mansfield Park* in which the wealth of the Bertram's estate comes directly from their slave plantations in Antigua—a perspective is needed that is both broad and flexible. Reading Austen within the context of Britain's broader "abolitionist turn . . . requires us to be transatlantic, an analytical move that helps students understand the continuities of abolitionist discourse" (353). If Austen and her family moved with their times to become abolitionists, they also moved with their times to become Britons whose support for imperial expansion was as natural as breathing the air that was too "pure" for slavery (Thomas).

A recent volume dedicated to diversity by *Persuasions* begins with a question about Austen's personal attitude towards non-white people. "Was," Danielle Christmas and Susan Allen Ford write, "Jane Austen racist?" The question is not only whether Austen herself was "racist," but whether her works were and continue to be part of systems of racialized supremacy that persist in fandoms and in academic circles today. As the essays in this cluster show, racism and antiblackness are *pervasive* in Austen worlds and it is the very invisible whiteness

of Austen's novels—their characters, plots, values—that continues to gather cultural value to her, making her the global figure she now is. White supremacy in Austen spaces is not only legible in the Alt-right communities named by Nicole M. Wright in her article "Alt-Right Jane Austen": all of us here contributing have directly and frequently experienced racism and exclusion in the various Austen spaces that we are part of that include academia, classrooms, conferences, social media, large Austen organizations, journalism and costuming. Austen's worlds continue to be overwhelmingly white without this fact being nameable.

As Marcos Gonsalez writes in his analysis of Austen and whiteness in the postgraduate classroom:

> Once a week I enter this room, and feel that whiteness, as professor and students run around the fact that Austen and her protagonists are women. As they rally around this shared understanding, I sit and ask myself: Does anyone else in this room know Jane Austen is . . . white? Do they even know they are all white?

Most worryingly, Gonsalez received a lower grade than usual for his paper on empire and Austen. He notes that the rebukes he felt for his attempts to discuss Austen, empire and race were also gendered: "My other classmates, all white, mainly women, say nothing to add onto the reading I am trying to bring into the classroom" and his white woman professor dismissed his argument. If the novels and Regency revivalism today celebrate British men of empire, then colonized men are a direct threat to the gendered dynamics harnessed for the romance plot. As Gonsalez writes: "I must read them from this body. This body built of colonization. This body built from the pillaging and massacring and dispossessing of the indigenous peoples of the Americas." The bodies that built the wealth of Austen's world, of the National Trust estates, must be kept segregated, like Frank, from the bodies that own that wealth and from the bodies who seek to possess Austen's cultural capital today.

Even in July 2020 when support for BLM was high, Austen spaces were already censoring naming race and whiteness. As Katherine Grant details, an article on race in the Regency period by @bellabreenbooks [Bella Breen] was taken down from the group *Austen Authors* (Jeffers and Lathan). She writes, "Turns out, the Austen Authors admins had removed Bella's post because it was a 'controversial' 'hot button' topic" (Grant). Breen's original post contained historical information about race in Regency England: not everyone was white. Not only this, but Breen had dared to name the fact that Austen's men of empire were fathering children in the colonies "Ten per cent of English men stationed in Jamaica fathered children

with Jamaican women . . . Stories abound of biracial children raised in the gentry and rising to prominence through the military and other areas of British society" (Breen). This account of men of empire was censored by *Austen Authors*: it does not fit the illusion of contemporary Regency romance. Such censorship amounts to a segregationist move to keep non-white perspectives and histories outside of Austen spaces, which is the focus of Hernandez-Knight's essay.

Austen adaptations continue to co-opt consumers into the erasure of the imperial function of Austen's plots and heroes by eroticizing the male heroes. We are all merrily seduced by wet shirts and bathing torsos, (Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*, 1995), flexing hands and terse speech (Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*, 2005), naked white bottoms in splendid rooms (Knightley in *Emma*, 2020), discussions of muslin, (Tilney in *Northanger Abbey*, 2007), reminiscences of India's spices (Brandon in *Sense and Sensibility*, 1995) and repressed naval austerity (Wentworth in *Persuasion*, 1995). We might even consider the rehabilitation of Wickham in *Death Comes to Pemberley* (2013) about which P.D. James said explicitly that she wanted us to see his "heroic side" in another context, and so she makes him a hero who protects Britain from French invasion. In this latter case, imperial valor makes up for avarice and sexual predation. In the more recent *Sanditon* adaptation for PBS (2019), Sidney rescues himself from our judgment by refuting all monies from the slave trade although the same is not the case for his brother, who continues to fund his sea-side pleasure resort with colonial monies. We might contrast the moral improvement of Sidney with how the series treats Otis Molyneux, the only Black male character in Austen adaptation who is swiftly transformed from loving romantic hero to dissolute gambler. This is despite the fact that he is an abolitionist activist campaigning with the well-known Sons of Africa among whom Olaudah Equiano and Ottabah Cugoano were the most famous. The dismissal of Otis is also in the series a dismissal of the Black man as a site of moral agency, and Prescott's essay explores more of the racial context of *Sanditon*. In all of these instances, the eroticization of Austen's white heroes on-screen deploys well-worn romance plot techniques from eighteenth-century fiction to mask the imperial power of these men of feeling, continuing Austen's power to co-opt us into whiteness through pleasure.

To take one example, Colin Firth's Darcy (*Pride and Prejudice*, 1995) famously cools down after his unexpected return to Pemberley by diving in a pond, emerging with a dripping white shirt in front of a startled Elizabeth. The audience cannot help but share this moment of Darcy's eroticization which is crucially accomplished by emphasizing his natural spontaneity, in line with Romanticism's ideals. The Davies adaptation thus joins Darcy, visually, to Joseph Wright of Derby's portrait of Brook Boothby, a famous "man of feeling" depicted in the

Romantic landscape of his real Derbyshire estate, which is close to Darcy's fictional one. Davies' scene serves many functions in his adaptation: if we are thinking of Darcy as a wealthy landowner, we are also thinking of him as a moral man of his age *and* as an ideal romantic partner for Elizabeth whose true nature will soon be revealed along with his torso. His power is eroticized to produce uncritical desire for this wealthy Briton. While Austen is clear that Darcy's wealth comes from his own land, the National Trust report also makes it clear that Regency British wealth was being bolstered and sustained by colonial gains: Darcy is the old money, reformed to be a moral center for global expansion that begins with his own expansion of his connections. We cannot ignore the thriving Gardiners, merchants, whom Darcy decides to admit to his circle because of his love for Elizabeth, thus providing established British solidity to expanding economic ventures and those raised in their fortunes. Other characters, such as Mrs. Elton in *Emma*, are more clearly linked to Bristol trade boosted by slavery and, as Goss discusses, Mrs. Smith's property in the West Indies is in fact regained for her by Wentworth. As Austen tells us, Wentworth's hero credentials are materially boosted by having gained his wealth in imperial action "Captain Wentworth, with five-and-twenty thousand pounds, and as high in his profession as merit and activity could place him, was no longer nobody" (234). Wentworth shares this affirmation with William Price in *Mansfield Park* whose achievements at sea prompt the dissolute but wealthy Henry Crawford to jealousy of Fanny's regard. He is disposed of by the plot as unreformable while the active and rising William is presented as the imperial Briton whose actions we should all admire, much as Austen admired her brothers' Naval achievements.

Real-life Derbyshire estate owners of the eighteenth century did have clear connections to money from slavery. The Fitzherberts of Tissington Hall ran their substantial Jamaica plantations, four in all, from Derbyshire and the baronetcy inherited by the present-day Sir Richard Fitzherbert, who still resides at Tissington, was conferred by George III in 1794. (Historic England). No mention is made of slavery, Jamaica, and wealth extracted by colonial violence on the official Tissington Hall website. While it seems certain that Jane Austen did not in fact travel as far north as Derbyshire, many present-day tourist websites stress the Peak District as an inspiration for *Pride and Prejudice*. And the *British Heritage* website reminds us that Austen adaptations have used Derbyshire and its estates as sets for their romantic offerings: "Perhaps you remember Colin Firth emerging from a lake in the 1995 version of Pride and Prejudice, or Keira Knightly pondering life from a windswept crag in the 2006 [2005] version. If so, you have seen the lake at Lyme Park and Stanage Edge, one of the Peak District's best climbing spots" (Hopley). Romance, Romantic landscape, and landed estates are here subtly intertwined to disguise the economies of the past and present. Austen

is marketed as part of the English heritage sector that was both supported by slavery, and that continues to capitalize on that historic wealth.

The essays here unsettle these easy elisions between the material culture of British heritage, Regency romance and histories of race in Austen adaptations and spaces, making it clear that Austen cultures and racism are not only inextricable, but ongoingly self-reinforcing. These essays push the boundaries of what is acknowledged in Austen spaces and, just as importantly, of who can acknowledge it: the writers come from social media, journalism and educational consultancy backgrounds. They are writers in multiple media and genres and, while they frequently interact with academics and academia, are not always welcomed in these spaces. In this way, racism and gatekeeping combine to silence the important conversations needed on Austen cultures. In his essay, Tré Ventour-Griffiths, a writer-poet and educator of race and Black history, discusses the National Trust report and the facts of wealth from enslavement that it unearths. He situates a discussion of PBS's *Sanditon* (2019) series and its racial politics within the context of both acknowledgement of British slaving past and the backlash against this acknowledgement. As he argues, "In the twenty-first century, the UK continues to celebrate this racist past" and he links this directly to both the popularity and problems of Austen adaptation culture. Amanda-Rae Prescott, a freelance journalist and advocate for increased racial representation in Austen and period drama spaces, discloses the details of racism on social media surrounding *Sanditon*. She pays particular attention to the racist implications of white fans' deploying of a pineapple emoji on Twitter and Facebook in 2020 that denoted supposed community identity but that also functioned to exclude and harm non-white Austen fans thus replicating some of the very dynamics that the character Georgiana faces in series one of *Sanditon*. In her essay, Bianca Hernandez-Knight, a social media consultant, writer and Austen space-maker, highlights the erasure of anti-Semitism and white supremacy in Austen cultures that also continue to read Georgette Heyer. She frames this within a wider discussion of the dismissal of romance genres that draw on Austen today and that also excise history from period in complex ways. In all of these essays a commitment to opening up Austen spaces, and allowing diverse readers to appreciate her works from anti-racist perspectives is clear. Each writer here cares too much about Austen's texts to allow them to be co-opted by such "dull elves" (Austen, *Letters*, 210).

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