University of Southampton

Faculty of Arts and Humanities

Department of English

Barbarians at the kissing gate:

contemporary authors crash the Austen canon

A novel (*The Dead Authors Guild*) and critical commentary

by

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Abstract

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This thesis comprises a novel and critical commentary that explore the marginalization of female writers in late eighteenth-century literary criticism and biography, the erasure and/or spectral presence of queer writers and writers of colour during the same time period, and addresses efforts towards broadening the British literature canon through contemporary Austen adaptions that centre those formerly absent or marginalized voices from the original novels.

The novel *The Dead Authors Guild* is a speculative Austen adaption grounded in biography and feminist literary critical scholarship that animates the archival silences. Set in 2016, the young, queer American scholar protagonist flees Berkeley for an English village to research a centuries old literary mystery involving an obscure British Jamaican female writer that might save the scholar's career but only if entanglements with an arrogant British professor and Jane Austen's ghost, who desperately needs her help, don't get in the way. The narrative alternates between the scholar's point of view and that of Austen's ghost.

In the critical commentary, the notions of biography and marginality will be explored further. Austen's position in her reader's minds and that of many literary critics is 'semi-divine'. The section on the origins of the project discusses how this notion sparked the idea for the novel. How does being classed as 'semi-divine' impact biographies of Austen? Or inspire modern day reader pilgrims to swarm the physical spaces she inhabited, even 250 years after her birth? This prompts a discussion of her ghostly role in the novel and connects it to the erasure and/or spectral presence of queer writers and writers of colour in the British Literature canon. The decades-old movement to de-colonize the canon is put into a wider perspective that lays the foundation for the case studies section that examines contemporary Austen novel adaptions by queer writers and writers of colour.

List of Contents

List of Illustrations

Research Thesis: Declaration of Authorship

Print name: **Amy Franklin-Willis**

Title of thesis: **Barbarians at the Kissing Gate: Contemporary Writers Crash the Austen Canon**

I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. None of this work has been published before submission.

Signature: Date: 28/03/2026

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisors Rebecca Smith and Dr. Gillian Dow for their guidance and enthusiasm for my project. It has been a privilege to work with them and to benefit from their substantial knowledge of Jane Austen's work and life. On a personal note, it would not have been possible to complete this thesis without the support of my wife Wendy Franklin-Willis. As the daughter of two first-generation university graduates, this thesis is dedicated to my parents. My late father Dr. Jerry Willis always encouraged my writing and suggested, almost twenty years ago, that I pursue a doctoral degree. My mother Joan Shoults obtained bachelor and master's degrees, as well as completing all of her doctoral coursework prior to my birth. A former librarian, she instilled a deep love of reading and books in me and in her grandchildren.

The Dead Authors Guild

by

Amy Franklin-Willis

The text of the novel had been redacted in preparation for commercial publication.

Critical Commentary

The best use of literature bends not toward the narrow and the absolute but to the extravagant and the possible.

Mary Oliver [2]

Nowadays I feel that if I didn't write novels, I would have to pretend to do so in order to justify the odd, haphazard exploration of the world that I call 'research'.

Margot Livesey [3]

1.0 Introduction

My novel *The Dead Authors Guild* (*DAG*) began as a short story written between two soaring California redwood trees during a hostile takeover of my children's tree fort. The story would become my MA dissertation's creative component. It was the spring of 2020 in the middle of the global COVID-19 pandemic. De-camping to the back garden had been a necessity with my distance-learning family of three children and one teacher spouse parked in front of computers screens throughout our small house. Every day I climbed the ladder into the trees with a laptop and snacks in tow. The tree fort offered a portal to a much needed make-believe world. The small space provided views of the rugged San Leandro Hills, shaggy bits of copper redwood duff on the floor, and a constant breeze ruffling the spider webs in its corners. The pandemic had ranked well-below my number one worry at the time as one of my children had become ill earlier that year. Progression on my MA course had been delayed by two special consideration requests. By late summer, I had determined several things: I could not magically make my child well or protect a loved from getting COVID-19, but I could exert some control over submitting my thesis on-time.

I burrowed into the story world where order could be restored. A young American scholar spends Christmas in a haunted Elizabethan manor house in a snowy, sleepy English village and befriends Jane Austen's ghost. The setting was intentional. In addition to the pandemic, that summer California suffered its worst fire season in modern history and on September 9, 2020 smoke from multiple fires threw the San Francisco Bay Area into an apocalyptic orange-coloured day of darkness. On the same day, a murder of crows took up residence in our eucalyptus tree. Neighbours took this as further proof that the end was nigh.[4] I needed the creative world to reflect the opposite of my lived experience, hence snow, Christmas, Chawton—the English village where Austen had lived. Novelist Alice McDermott describes fiction writing as the 'addictive delight of literary creation' and that delight was particularly welcome during the extraordinarily difficult times of the COVID-19 global pandemic lockdown.[5]

Ultimately, my MA dissertation was submitted on-time and by the fall of 2021, the global lockdown was over, a COVID-19 vaccine was widely available in the U.S, and my child was no longer seriously ill. And I knew *Once Upon a Jane*, the short story, could be a novel. My MA critical commentary argued that a generally accepted aspect of Austen's biography about a proposal from Harris Bigg-Wither was likely based on nothing more than generations-removed family gossip with no verifiable first or second-hand accounts. In *DAG* I explored this point further by creating an alternate version of the story.

The circumstances surrounding the short story phase nudged *DAG* towards its finished form of a comic novel written in the Austen satiric mode. The opportunity to 'escape' through creating the story had been remarkably life-affirming. Joy and hope could be located within the fictional world when the contradictory emotion of despair dominated home and global fronts. When the work began to transform the compact story into a complex, multi-strand narrative, I chose to veer far from the elegaic tone of my first published novel. [6] It explored how loss, grief

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[2] Oliver, Mary, Upstream (Penguin Books, 2016), p. 68.
[3] Livesey, Margot, The Hidden Machinery: Essays on Writing (Tin House Books, 2017), p. 295.
[4] If I wrote a non-dystopian novel scene where these two events occurred, readers would likely feel it was too dramatic and not believable. Which it was.
[5] Alice McDermott, What About the Baby? Some Thoughts on the Art of Fiction (New York: Picador, 2021), p. 215.
[6] Amy Franklin-Willis, *The Lost Saints of Tennessee* (Atlantic Monthly Press: 2012).

and regret functioned within multiple generations of a family. Grief and loss are significant themes in *DAG* but they are the harmony rather than the melody as in *Lost Saints*.

DAG explores literary creation and canon expression as well as grief, loss, love and overlooked/hidden histories through the lens of a young queer literature scholar and Austen's ghost. The story centres around American scholar Dr. Georgianna Carson who flees Berkeley for an English village to research a two-hundred-year-old literary mystery involving an obscure British Jamaican female novelist that might save Georgianna's academic career but only if entanglements with arrogant British professor Quinn Marlowe and Jane Austen's ghost, who desperately needs her help, don't get in the way. *DAG* protagonist Dr. Georgianna Carson is a melding of two Austen characters: the young vulnerable Georgiana Darcy, sister to *Pride and Prejudice's* Mr. Darcy,[7] and Catherine Morland, the naïve heroine of *Northanger Abbey* whose perceptions are muddled by reading too many Gothic novels.[8] *DAG's* primary setting, Chawton House, is a 'real' one with its own complicated story. An Elizabethan manor house located in Hampshire, it has been owned by the Knight family for generations dating back to the sixteenth century. Jane Austen's brother Edward was adopted by distant relative Thomas Knight and his wife Catherine and became the sole heir to his adoptive parents fortune.[9] In 1809 Jane Austen along with her mother and sister moved into Chawton Cottage, the former bailiff's house on the Chawton House estate. In the early 1990s, Chawton House was in disrepair and on the verge of development as a golf course when American entrepreneur Sandy Lerner stepped in to buy a 125-year lease on the estate. She invested an estimated $20 million in restoring the house and established the Chawton House library for early women writers with a core collection of her own books. From 2007-2017 the library sponsored visiting fellowships for international scholars. This is the program that brings *DAG* protagonist Dr. Georgianna Carson to Chawton.[10] Georgianna needs to make a significant discovery before the end of her month-long fellowship and reckon with her misinterpretation of the motives of those around her, both literary and real. Jane faces the looming deadline of the 200th anniversary of her death, which marks the end of her ghost after-life and the chance to correct the historical record about her life, transmitted primarily by others due to a lack of primary documents.

The examination of grief is an ongoing theme in my writing—how does grief shape and re-form a person? A family? How does the absence of something or someone continue to resonate in and fill the present? In *The Dead Authors Guild* the connective tissue between primary protagonist Georgianna and Jane Austen is grief over their experiences of multiple losses and a crisis of time to complete their separate quests. Just as the story begins, Georgianna has lost her father unexpectedly, the second tragedy for her family who lost her brother when he was a teenager. Jane has been grieving the loss of her loved ones for two centuries, especially the loss of a child that she gave up as a young woman.

DAG is a biomythography of Austen wrapped in a queer Austen adaption that throws light on marginalized writers and people from the long eighteenth-century. I wrote the novel I have always wanted to read. Black queer poet Audre Lorde is credited with inventing the biomythography form in 1982 with the publication of her autobiography *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, however Roland Barthes also refers to the concept of 'bio-mythology' as a 'system of meaning' around historical figures that functions as an explanation of their character, life and work.[11] This definition is the one I use when referring to *DAG* as an Austen biomythography. I have been frustrated by recent novels featuring Austen and/or her immediate family members. Gill Hornby's *Miss Austen* focuses on Austen's sister Cassandra at an advanced age descending on a family friend's home to procure any potentially controversial correspondence sent by Austen.[12] The novel's dual timeline structure gives Hornby the opportunity to portray Austen in her late twenties and dramatizes the Harris Bigg-Wither proposal scene, which follows the prevalent biographer party line on the issue precisely. Austen's voice is also transmitted through letters. But neither mode reveals a new imaginative take on Austen. Hornby offers a sketch of Austen that is nearly as frustrating as the half-finished one by Cassandra Austen that hangs in the National Portrait Gallery. Disinclined to rock the boat of Austen scholars or Austen fans, Hornby creates a static, not fully realized character and the novel is less interesting because of this.

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[7] Jane Austen, Jane, *Pride and Prejudice* (Penguin Classics, 2008).

[8] Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (Penguin, 2003).

[9] Deirdre Le Faye, *Jane Austen: A Family Record* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 43-44.

[10] See 'The Future of Chawton House Library' in *The Female Spectator,* 4.2 (2016), p. 1, <https://chawtonhouse.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/TFS-2.4.pdf>. See also Chawton House website: <https://chawtonhouse.org/the-library/visiting-fellowships/>.

[11] Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Penguin Random House, 1982). See also Roland Barthes, 'Musica Practica' in *Image-Music-Text,* trans. by Stephen Heath (Fontana Press, 1977), pp. 149-54.

[12] Gill Hornby, *Miss Austen* (Century-Penguin Random House UK, 2020)

In Stephanie Barron's fifteen book *Jane Austen Mystery* series Austen is a Regency-era, middle-aged Miss Marple solving murder cases.[13] Barron's Austen is lively, quick-witted, smart, and action-oriented while the novel world is firmly rooted in history. The plotting is compelling and satisfying and the series engages Austen's novels with skill but the interior emotional life of Austen is not on offer. Hornby's and Barron's work demonstrates a hesitancy that prevents them from fully inhabiting Austen's character or veering away from biographical breadcrumbs. This may be from concern about reader response or, in Barron's case, conventions of the cozy, mystery sub-genre of crime writing that dictates plot over character.

But it is the novelist's job to present the exterior *and* interior life of her characters. The intimacy of the novel form permits this. From my perspective, interior character development is one of the great privileges of the work. Screenplays or teleplays don't allow it other than through spoken dialogue or the occasional narrative voice-over. Novel readers gain extended access to another person's thoughts, feelings, and actions through the characters. When done well as novelist Maggie O'Farrell did in *Hamnet*, it is a completely—to use a current catchphrase—*immersive experience.*[14] This is the ambition I had for Austen's character in *DAG*: to inhabit her world with curiosity and empathy and to write her as fully human as possible.

Part of how *DAG* makes sense of the world, both the contemporary one as well as the literary and historical world of Austen's England, is through its engagement with queerness. *DAG* is a queer Austen adaption that places queer characters in the main action of the story. For decades I have read and studied texts, historical and contemporary, in which queer characters are absent or minimized. In early 2020 I attended a lecture given by Jill Liddington, an accomplished Anne Lister scholar.[15] Liddington described Lister's 'marriage' to fellow Yorkshire resident Ann Walker as one that included a ring exchange and attending church together. I was dumbfounded. The notion that there was a definitive *record* of a woman marrying a woman (spiritually, romantically, financially though not legally) in 1834 closed the canyon between Sappho and Gertrude Stein that had existed in my limited knowledge of documented lesbian relationships throughout history. The validation of a common experience displaced my personal experience of feeling like my wife and I were pioneers lacking predecessors. The two-hour lecture and Liddington's book opened access to a more inclusive history of people who loved like me.

Before writing *Pride and Prejudice* novel adaption *Come As You Are,* Camille Kellogg questioned 'why am I spending so much time consuming media that I can't see myself in?'[16] *DAG* is my first novel with a lead queer character.[17] As *DAG* developed, I knew that queering up Austen with a lesbian *Pride and Prejudice*-inspired Elizabeth Bennett/Fitzwilliam Darcy dynamic would be delightful to write and mirror my own experience.[18] The mirrors and windows approach is foundational to decolonising and 'queering' literature.[19] Developed by Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop, the approach argues that the role of literature is to transform the human experience into story and when a story allows readers to see their own lives reflected and affirmed, they can see them as part of the larger human experience. When people from groups historically marginalized experience this, it is powerfully validating: I exist, my family exists, my religion exists, my country exists, and so forth. In the novel's beginning, Georgianna's character navigates her sexuality in Berkeley by becoming spontaneously engaged to an old boyfriend the day after her father's funeral while also dating a brilliant woman scientist. In the UK, she meets the charismatic and difficult York lecturer Dr. Quinn Marlowe who is also a visiting fellow in residence at Chawton House. Their relationship arc is a classic enemies-to-lovers by way of the Elizabeth/Mr. Darcy trope: Quinn is rude and obnoxious initially but when Austen's ghost enlists her and Georgianna as her apprentices, they begin to understand one another and grow close through the shared mission of helping Austen.

Another crucial aspect of my biomythography novel wrapped in a queer Austen adaption is the ways in which the novel throws light on marginalized writers and people from the long eighteenth-century. As a queer, white woman born in the American South and the daughter of first-generation university graduates, I am interested in feminist, postcolonial critical approaches that challenge my own biases and

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[13]For an example, see Stephanie Barron, Jane *and the Twelve Days of Christmas* (Soho Press, 2014).

[14] Maggie O'Farrell, *Hamnet,* (New York: Knopf, 2020).

[15] Anne Lister was an eighteenth-century Yorkshire landowner whose coded diaries revealed her romantic and sexual relationships with women. See Jill Liddington, *Nature's Domain: Anne Lister and the Landscape of Desire* (Pennine Press, 2019).

[16] Camille Kellog, *Come As You Are* (Dial Press, 2023), p. 294.

[17] I have completed five novel manuscripts.

[18] Minus the friendship with Austen's ghost part. Regrettably.

[19] Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop is considered the 'mother' of children's multicultural literature due to her scholarship and writing on the subject, including her iconic 1990 essay 'Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors' originally published in *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom,* Vol. 6, No. 3, Summer 1990 edition. See the full essay at the Scenic Regional Library website: <https://scenicregional.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Mirrors-Windows-and-Sliding-Glass-Doors.pdf>

assumptions and will discuss this in detail in **Section 2.3.** A disconnect has existed between the availability of history and writing about and/or authored by marginalized people in eighteenth-century England and the teaching of the British literature canon. I cannot recall a single literature module over four years of undergraduate education in 1990s California and one year of postgraduate study in the UK six years ago that included work by Black writers or mentioned Black British history, [20] other than in relation to slavery and Austen's *Mansfield Park*.[21] Gretchen Gerzina refers to this as 'British historical amnesia'.[22] Those university modules also lacked any mention of queer writers or queer history despite textual evidence like Anne Lister's diaries, which have been publicly available since 1988.[23] In Chapter One of my novel, Georgianna expresses that she believes Austen's popularity overshadows that of more 'interesting' and 'ground-breaking' women writers of the period. Her character allows me to discuss 'real' texts like *A Woman of Colour a Tale*—possibly authored by a woman of colour writing about colonialism and slavery, and to create Eliza Chesterfield, the focus of Georgianna's research for her Chawton House Library fellowship.[24] Chesterfield is a fictional British Jamaican female novelist who, in the context of the novel, is the first *known* woman of colour of Caribbean descent to have a novel published. My novel explores intersectionality between contemporary Austen canon-expansion and decolonization of the canon—including groups marginalized by gender, race, and/or sexuality. *DAG* includes substantive, nuanced characters from these groups and works to offer an accurate, contextual backdrop for the history it describes.

In my confirmation review, one of the assessors asked an intriguing question: Does Jane Austen and her work's presence—some might say omnipresence— in global culture elicit a specific kind of hybrid response? The assessor went on to describe the creative component of this thesis in a hybrid way that I had not yet grasped at the time, but ultimately feel is accurate: *The Dead Author's Guild* is contemporary romance meets Austen fan fiction meets historical novel. The more literary way of saying this is: it's a speculative Austen adaption grounded in biography and feminist literary scholarship that animates archival silences. My approach to researching and writing this novel was to be inclusive of these multiple genres. Sections **2.1 and 2.2** include the biographical and historical elements as well as the speculative nature of choosing Jane Austen's ghost as a secondary protagonist. This choice appears not to have been replicated in published novels other than the 2019 self-published *Jane Austen's Ghost.* I find this surprising given the obvious natural segue to a spectral point of view when almost all of Austen's fame and appreciation followed her death.

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[20] No mention, for instance, of the 14,000 black men in America who fought for the British army during the Revolutionary War and immigrated to Halifax, Jamaica, St. Lucia, Nassau and England after its conclusion. See Gretchen Gerzina, *Black England: A Forgotten Georgian History,* 2nd ed. (John Murray-Hachette, 2022), p. 156.

[21] Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park,* ed. by Kathryn Sutherland, (Penguin Classics-Penguin Books, 1996).

[22] Gretchen Gerzina, *Black England: A Forgotten Georgian History* (John Murray, 2022), p. xxi.

[23] The first edition of *The Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister* was published in 1988. The second edition was published in 2010 with the following endorsement from novelist Emma Donoghue: 'The Lister diaries are the Dead Sea Scrolls of lesbian history: they changed everything'. See *The Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister*, ed. by Helena Whitbread (Virago Press-Little, Brown Book Group, 2010).

[24] Anonymous, *The Woman of Colour a Tale,* ed. by Lyndon J. Dominique (Broadview Editions, 2008).

1.1 Overview

This thesis explores how efforts to decolonize the British literature canon and, to a lesser degree, the broader English language canon in partnership with intersectional research on queer theory and decolonization created a (relatively) hospitable environment for writers of colour and queer writers to find publishers and audiences for Austen novel adaptions that create new galaxies of possibility. In **SECTION 2.3 and 2.4** the decades-old movement to de-colonize the canon is put into a wider perspective and explores connections between *A Woman of Colour* and *Mansfield Park* while also turning to intersections between queer theory and decolonization. **SECTION 2.5** examines contemporary Austen novel adaptions that include a transgender Elizabeth Bennet, a gay, male American Emma(ett), a 'downstairs' version of *Pride and Prejudice*, a 'remixed' *Pride and Prejudice* that places it in modern day Brooklyn and features Zuri Benitez, a Haitian Dominican American Elizabeth; and a *Mansfield Park* adaption *This Motherless Land* that moves between Lagos and Somerset at the end of the twentieth century. Only two of these works are set in the long eighteenth-century. This leads to Chapter Three of the thesis-Story Development. **SECTIONS 3.1 AND 3.3** discuss the biomythography and historical elements of the novel, including key texts that shaped my approach. **SECTIONS 3.2 and 3.4** focus on narrative choices like why the Jane Austen character is a ghost and the fantastical elements of the Dead Authors Guild, which functions as a kind of literary Marvel Avengers. **SECTION 3.5** looks at the novel's use of intertextuality in its inclusion of personal correspondence—letters, diaries, and a book-within-a-book—*The Dead Authors Guild's Book of Member Modus Operandi and Minutiae.*

One might, then, answer the question of whether Austen's presence in global culture lends itself to a hybrid response with an emphatic affirmative. In Section 2.5, I set out some critical parameters to explore Austen's omnipresence. My novel *The Dead Authors Guild* is my attempt to fictionalize, and thus embody, this hybridity.

2.0 Novel Foundations

2.1 Origins

The ignition point for *The Dead Authors Guild* may have come from a visit to Winchester Cathedral on the 11th of March 2020, just days before the COVID-19 pandemic shut down the world. As part of a module on 'Jane Austen and the Heritage Industry', students had the opportunity to talk with The Reverend Canon Dr. Roland Riem, Vice-Dean and Canon Chancellor of Winchester Cathedral-Austen's burial place and long a pilgrimage site for her readers and scholars. When the subject of the recent controversial and, at the time, failed attempt to erect a statue of Austen on the cathedral grounds arose, The Rev. Canon Dr. Riem noted that the public's perception of Austen as semi-divine made any physical representation impossible.[25] The concept of Austen as semi-divine launched a 'galaxy of emotions'.[26] If one considers Austen a literary 'saint' and regards her work with reverence, does that denote semi-divine status? In 1861 an anonymous essayist complained in the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* that 'we can think of her [Austen] as nothing less than an angel writing novels with a quill plucked from one of her own wings'.[27] In Deidre Lynch's essay commemorating the 200th anniversary of Austen's death, the long nineteenth-century is designated as the moment when the pro-Austen-the-saint crowd caught the public's attention: in 1901 American novelist W. D. Howells referred to Austen as a 'passion and a creed, if not quite a religion' and the following year, the second Earl of Iddlesleigh penned an article entitled 'The Legend of St. Jane' declaring Austen as the 'most fascinating of saints' and including a list of must-see Austen sites 'where our divinity visited earth'. [28]

How does one read the work of a 'semi-divine' female writer? How does one write her life? These tensions launched *The Dead Authors Guild*.

[25]Alison Flood, 'Winchester Cathedral scraps Jane Austen statue plan after protests', The Guardian, 21 Feb 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/feb/21/winchester-cathedral-scraps-jane-austen-statue-plan-after-protests> [accessed 28 March 2025].

[26]Author Toni Morrison describes the feeling of 'finding' a new character's voice as launching a 'galaxy of emotions.' See Toni Morrison, 'Memory, Creation, and Fiction' in *The Source of Self-Regard* (New York: Vintage, 2020), pp. 326-333 (p. 327).

[27]Sutherland, Kathryn, *Jane Austen's Textual Lives: From Aeschylus to Bollywood*, (Oxford University Press: 2005), p. 72.

[28] Deidre Lynch, 'Jane Austen at 200', in *Jane Austen: Writer in the World*, ed. by Kathryn Sutherland, (Bodleian Library, 2017), pp.186-204 (p. 196).

2.2 Research Questions and Methods

Biography. History. Myth. Wish fulfilment.

These are the four quadrants this thesis attempts to tackle. From a novel-writing standpoint, it is a much larger reach than I have attempted before in my work. In my novel *The Lost Saints of Tennessee* I aimed to write a love letter to a town that grew some of my favourite people-my grandmother, my aunt, my father-and to explore how grief could displace notions of family and home across multiple generations over four decades.[29] In some ways, *DAG* is a similar exploration of the village of Chawton and its impact on shaping my favourite writer Jane Austen and her work. *DAG*'s contemporary time span is compressed: four weeks from mid-December 2016 to mid-January 2017. The historical time period stretches from late 1795, when Austen's romance with Tom Lefroy began, to the novel's present day when Austen needs help tracing the path of her child's life. One of *DAG'*s narrators is the ghostly form of Austen. The actual Dead Authors Guild (the group not the novel itself) is a magical literary Marvel Avengers that led this lifelong English major into the heart of a classical versus quantum physics debate.

The selection of a historical figure, never mind one of the world's *most* known ones, as a primary character presented the challenge of deciding:

How much biographical and historical accuracy did I want to employ?

With Austen, the historical textual evidence is limited-the 160 curated letters, surviving manuscripts (of which there are few), and six published novels, birth/death records, financial transactions, her will. Biographers lean heavily on family accounts for everything else and these accounts come from collateral descendants, many of whom were children when she died. When there are significant gaps in the historical record, the likelihood of the biographer filling them increases, blurring the lines between verifiable history and speculation/gossip.[30] Biography is made with facts; fiction is created 'without any restrictions save those that the artist…chooses to obey'.[31] Those 'gaps' frustrate biographers but for a novelist or filmmaker? Tantalizing, blue-sky opportunities. Authors like Hornby and Barron imagine plots for Austen's life within the historical record boundaries. Screenwriter Gwyneth Hughes took the Bigg-Wither marriage proposal fact/fable and made an entire film about it called *Miss Austen Regrets* that imagines the potential romances Austen might have had.[32] On *DAG'*s literary plot front, I created a fictional woman novelist of colour as Georgianna Carson's research focus at Chawton House, a 'real' centre for early women's writing in Hampshire. I leaned into the novelist's prerogative of wish fulfilment and possibility—a woman of colour *may* have published a novel in the period; she may not have been publicly identified as a person of colour.[33] This could have been the case with the anonymously authored novel *A Woman of Colour.*[34] Neither of the period's actual *published* works by Caribbean women of colour were novels.[35] This will be addressed further in **SECTION 2.3**.

The use of a literary mystery subplot is a gateway to exploring how and why women writers have historically been belittled, marginalized, silenced, and ignored.[36] This is particularly true for women writers of colour and queer women writers. Austen expressed frustration and anger with the treatment of novelists, primarily women—overwhelmingly if not exclusively white—during her lifetime, through the narrator's voice in *Northanger Abbey:*

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[29] Amy Franklin-Willis, *The Lost Saints of Tennessee* (Atlantic Monthly Press: 2012).

[30] Kathryn Sutherland, *Jane Austen's Textual Lives from Aeschylus to Bollywood.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 57.

[31] Virginia Woolf, 'The Art of Biography' in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1942), pp. 187-197 (p.188).

[32]See *Miss Austen Regrets*, dir. by Jeremy Lovering (BBC Films, 2008).

[33] Between 1773 and the mid-1850s, the percentage of white men's wills proven in Jamaica that acknowledged 'mixed-race' children ranged from a low of 15.5 percent to a high of 22 percent; those children received bequests and were either already living in Britain or were soon sent there, per their fathers' wills. See Daniel Livesay, *Children of Uncertain Fortune: Mixed-Race Jamaicans in Britain and The Atlantic Family, 1733-1833* (Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture; University of North Carolina Press, 2018), p. 403.

[34] Anonymous, *The Woman of Colour a Tale,* ed. by Lyndon J. Dominique (Broadview Editions, 2008).

[35]There were two long-form works of the eighteenth-century written by Caribbean women of colour. See Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince A West Indian Slave,* ed. by Thomas Pringle (F. Westley and A. H. Davis, 1831; facsimile repr. Warbler Press, 2023) and Mary Seacole, *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*, ed. by Ziggi Alexander (Falling Wall Press, 1984).

[36] The protagonist Georgianna takes a fellowship at the Chawton House Library to get access to newly acquired personal correspondence that could help her solve what she believes may be a centuries old murder mystery involving a little known British Jamaican novelist and her husband, whose novels have always held a place in the British literature canon.

> …while the abilities of the nine-hundreth abridger of the History of England, or of the man who collects and publishes in a volume some dozen lines of Milton, Pope, and Prior…are eulogized by a thousand pens, there seems almost a general wish of decrying the capacity and undervaluing the labour of the novelist…[37]

If a woman writer manages to be published, her books may not be reviewed, her work may not be preserved nor studied by scholars or students, like 98% of current GCSE English students in the UK.[38] There will likely be no comprehensive biography. Instead, only the breadcrumbs she scattered-a diary, a letter, a poem, and in rare cases, published novels-can be followed to prove that she existed. That she made art.[39] This is what Clifford Siskin calls the 'great forgetting' that went on to become 'The Great Tradition' in British Literature when the designation of texts as 'literature' narrowed in the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries just as the new academic discipline established itself in 'an extraordinary act—in scope and in speed—of gendered exclusion and forgetting.'[40] This hearkens back to *DAG'*s first chapter where protagonist Georgianna declares that she favours other non-Austen women writers of the period whose work has been overshadowed by her. Women novelists abounded in the period but Austen 'for some reason, was not forgotten when all the others who wrote were'.[41]

My second primary question was to investigate:

> **Was a ghost story an appropriate genre for telling this story?**

Other options were considered like the historical novelist's go-to framing device: the dual timeline story, which *DAG* ultimately utilizes in moderation. But Austen's position as 'semi-divine' coupled with literary pilgrims visiting the physical spaces she inhabited since the Hill sisters first memorialized Chawton Cottage in 1901 appears to lend itself to a spectral presence.[42] I am not an avid reader of ghost stories. As a child of the suburbs, I jump at creaky old house noises. Choosing to *write* a ghost story came as something of a surprise. But my ghost story is squarely within the non-horror *Northanger Abbey* Gothic romance realm with its rational revelations for mysterious sounds/objects. Also, Jane is a, mostly, friendly ghost. This narrative choice and other motivating factors behind it—like the spectral presence of queer people/writers and people/writers of colour in the wider British Literature canon—are the focus of **SECTION 2.2.**

Research Methods

In **Section 2.5** of this thesis, contemporary Austen adaptions featuring characters seldom or *never* seen in the original texts will be presented and examined for their connections and similarities to the source material while also using a lens of decoloniality to view their treatment of race, gender and sexuality. These contemporary novels are authored by queer writers and writers of colour. As a white, queer, American-born woman descended from Scottish and Swiss immigrants writing an Austen adaption with a queer protagonist researching a (fictional) British Jamaican eighteenth-century writer, it was critical to do my own research on these varied topics. Firstly, I did an extensive literature review of the historiography of Black and queer people in Britain and the literature written about them and by them during the period. Highlights include Daniel Livesay's detailed exploration of Jamaican legal documents tracing the migration of 'elite' children of Caribbean women of colour and white planters to England.[43] This informed the backstory of *DAG* character Eliza Chesterfield—my fictional British Jamaican writer. Eliza is inspired, in part, by Anna Petronella Woodart, a free, British Jamaican woman who inherited her father's Jamaican estate at 15 and was educated in Britain, eventually marrying a Londoner, just as Eliza does.[44] The 2008 Broadview edition of *The Woman of Colour A Tale* with an introduction by the editor Lyndon J. Dominique is a comprehensive seminar on black heroines in eighteenth-century British literature.[45] A dive

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[37]Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey,* (Penguin, 1995), p. 36.

[38] Rachel Hall, 'Books by female authors studied by just 2% of GCSE pupils', 1 March 2023 < https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/mar/02/books-by-female-authors-studied-by-just-2-of-gcse-pupils-finds-study> [accessed 16 June 2024].

[39] See *Secret Voices: A Year of Women's Diaries,* ed. by Sarah Gristwood (B. T. Batsford Ltd, 2024). It is a fascinating compendium of women's lives and features diary entries from the likes of Sylvia Plath, Eleanor Coppola, Audre Lorde and Alice Walker.

[40] Clifford Siskin, *The Work of Writing: Literature and Social Change in Britain, 1700-1830* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), pp. 195, 265. See also Joanna Russ's *How to Suppress Women's Writing* (University of Texas Press, 1983).

[41] Siskin, p. 196.

[42] The book *Jane Austen: Her Homes & Her Friends* written by Constance Hill and illustrated by her sister Ellen is regarded as one of the first Austen literary tourism guidebooks. See Constance Hill, *Jane Austen, Her Homes and Her Friends*, (John Lane, The Bodley Head Limited, 1923); facsimile repres. (Dover, 2018).

[43] Daniel Livesay, *Children of Uncertain Fortune: Mixed-Race Jamaicans in Britain and The Atlantic Family, 1733-1833* (Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture; University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

[44] Livesay, p. 68, 76.

[45] Anonymous, *The Woman of Colour a Tale,* ed. by Lyndon J. Dominique (Broadview Editions, 2008).

into the Chawton House Library archives provided the opportunity to read Charlotte Charke's 1755 memoir concerning, as the title proclaims, the 'mad pranks of her youth' which included dressing in men's clothes from a young age and, in later years, 'marrying' a woman named Mrs. Brown with whom she ran a Welsh pastry shop.[46]

Mary Gordon's hybrid novel *Chase of the Wild Goose* about the Ladies of Llangollen is described as 'part biography, part novel, part spiritual memoir' and influenced my biomythographical approach.[47] The Ladies of Llangollen were two Irish women who 'eloped' to Wales together in 1780 and lived together for fifty years.[48] Just as author Mary Gordon returned to the Welsh home of Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby, I spent several weeks in the village of Chawton doing research in the summer of 2023. Gordon describes an extended encounter with the ghost of 'The Ladies' on her visit. I did not have a similar encounter in Chawton, though I did hear an Austen ghost story while volunteering at Chawton Cottage, now knowns as Jane Austen's House. I worked as a house steward guiding visitors from all over the world through the house and answering questions. It felt like inhabiting a sacred (an extension of the semi-divine concept) space and was the first time my accumulation of random Austen facts could be shared with an audience truly keen to hear them. Amongst the volunteers, I met Jeremy Knight, Austen's third great-nephew who lived for four decades at Chawton House, and two local people whose families worked in service for generations there. This deepened my understanding of the still strong connections between Austen's time in Chawton and present day. It reinforced my decision to place a contemporary scholar protagonist in Chawton alongside Austen's nearly two-hundred-year-old ghost since that is, in many ways, the reality of modern Chawton life. By staying in rented accommodations directly across from Austen's home, I immersed myself in the physicality of my novel's setting. I observed small details like the allegro beat of a dog's tag tugging its owner up Winchester Road, the cadences of German, Spanish and French from Austen pilgrims waiting outside her house, and the metal clip-clop against cobblestone sound as a girl rode a large black horse past my window. The Chawton Cottage ghost story was about the head gardener weeding a flower border several years prior when she simultaneously heard fabric rustling, like the swish of a skirt, and felt a displacement of air as if someone had just walked past, though no one could be seen. Perhaps Jane and Cassandra keeping an eye on the garden? There was general agreement amongst the staff I spoke with that a benevolent ghost 'energy' was present in the cottage and on the grounds.

I also spent time in the Chawton House Library's reading room consulting texts from their collection of early women's writing. My examination of personal correspondence was particularly helpful for the next phase of my novel's development which included fictional letters that Georgianna researches in the library and inspired me to view cell phone text messages as a contemporary variation on the epistolary form to be incorporated into *DAG*. Austen's novels always include letters, often to move plots forward such as Mr. Darcy's letter to Elizabeth Bennet after her refusal of his first proposal in *Pride and Prejudice* and Captain Wentworth's letter to Anne Elliot declaring himself still in love with her at the end of *Persuasion.*[49] At Chawton House Library, I read the letters of novelist Frances Burney and poet Anna Seward's letters to the Ladies of Llangollen, whom she had visited. The Ladies story is incorporated into *DAG* via Georgianna's antagonist/(female)Mr. Darcy Dr. Quinn Marlowe. Also a Chawton House fellow, Quinn's doctoral thesis research on the Ladies of Llangollen became a best-selling book that was made into a popular and award-winning television series a la *Gentleman Jack*.[50] Novel writing is, at times, pure unadulterated wish fulfilment.

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[46] Charlotte Charke, A Narrative of the Life Of Mrs. Charlotte Charke Containing, I. An Account of her Birth, Education, and Mad Pranks Committed in her Youth, 2nd edition (Printed for W. Reeve, in Fleet-Street; A. Dodd, in the Strand; and E. Cook, at the Royal-Exchange,1755).

[47] Sarah Waters on *Chase of the Wild Goose,* Lurid Editions website, <https://www.lurideditions.com/chase-of-the-wild-goose> [accessed 24 May 2024].

[48] Mary Gordon, *Chase of the Wild Goose* (Hogarth Press,1937).

[49] See Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (Penguin Classic, 2008), p. 191-197. See also Jane Austen, *Persuasion* (Bantam Classics, 2008), p. 254.

[50] *Gentleman Jack* was a television series produced by BBC One and HBO and inspired by the diaries of eighteenth-century lesbian landowner, industrialist, and intellectual Anne Lister. See 'Gentleman Jack has genuinely saved lives', *The Guardian,* 15 July 2022 <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2022/jul/15/gentleman-jack-has-genuinely-saved-lives-readers-respond-to-the-shows-cancellation> [accessed 02 September 2025].

2.3 Decolonizing Eighteenth-Century British Literature

Researching the historiography of Black and queer people and the literature written about them and by them during the long eighteenth-century feels like Ptolemy charting his thousand stars and mapping constellations. One star leads to another star and then to another until we can connect the spaces between them. *The Woman of Colour's* unknown light flashes over the Caribbean, sparks Austen's unfinished *Sanditon* manuscript with its own mixed-race heiress, the luminous galaxy of Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby burns brightly for fifty years in the West, and Anne Lister streaks across the north like Halley's.

Finding a framework/s for this research provided the structure I sought to formally approach it. In their introduction to *Decolonizing the English Literary Curriculum,* Ankhi Mukherjee and Ato Quason argue:

> the anticolonial university, instead of seeing education as redemptive of the very colonial histories that has shaped it, seeks instead to interrogate and eventually abolish the coercive knowledge systems that have continued to haunt it.[51]

Stated another way, if universities are tasked with cultivating knowledge creation and transferring history to its students they cannot simply take 'new' information regarding a former colony and its citizens and align it, as one hangs a painting, with the 'old' knowledge to make a coherent nationalistic narrative. The story/myth a nation tells itself is shaped by the citizens who possess the power to write it or to influence those who write it and teach it. Myth peers into the 'heart of a great silence'.[52] Gauri Viswanathan states that 'we can no longer afford to regard the uses to which literary works were put in the service of British imperialism as extraneous to the way these texts are to be read'.[53] Viswanathan successfully argues that English literature, as an academic subject, was created by British colonial administrators in nineteenth-century India to quell potential rebellion:

> [it] represented an embattled response to historical and political pressures: to tensions between the East India Company and the English Parliament, between Parliament and missionaries, between the East India Company and the Indian elite classes.[54]

Colonial administrators implemented English literature in India as a means of social political control.[55]

While the West can use the humanities and the arts as vehicles to explore the human condition, Viet Thanh Nguyen asserts that they can also function as a kind of creative fog machine obscuring 'the viciousness of the conquests and exploitation that have made the West the West and the other the other'.[56] In *DAG* and the critical commentary, I am listening for those voices that the canon has not heard or has feigned not to hear. I have tried to populate the novel world with characters of colour who authentically reflect the settings through the contemporary characters of Asha, Winston, Rishika and the eighteenth-century Eliza Chesterfield. Each comes from a very different background than protagonist Georgianna who has lived with the dual privileges of being of white, European descent in an upper-middle class family in the Berkeley, California area while experiencing some marginalization as a neurodivergent, queer person. Asha is a significant character in the novel as she is one of Georgianna's love interests. A tenured professor and award-winning scientist at the University of California, Dr. Asha De Silva was born in Sri Lanka and immigrated to Australia as a child when her parents left during the civil war. She came to California for postgraduate training. In the village of Chawton, Georgianna meets Winston and Rishika through the Chawton House visiting fellowship programme. They are the only people of colour she encounters there due to Hampshire county's overwhelmingly white majority.[57] The character of Rishika is a minor one in the story. A senior lecturer at the University of Mumbai, she comes to Chawton House to further her research into the influence of Austen's work in contemporary South Asian fiction and its ongoing appeal with South Asian readers.

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[51] Ankhi Mukherjee and Ato Quayson, Introduction, in: *Decolonizing the English Literature Curriculum*, ed. by Ankhi Mukherjee and Ato Quayson (Cambridge University Press: 2024), pp. 1-20 (p. 7). <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009299985>.
*****Cambridge University Press offers this text as open access online in addition to a pricey hardcover version, a strategy that aligns with decolonizing access to knowledge.
[52] Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth* (Canongate Books, 2018), p. 4.
[53] Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*, Twenty-fifth anniversary edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), p. 170. https://doi.org/10.7312/visw17169.
[54] Viswanathan, p. 11.
[55] Viswanathan, p. 167.
[56] Viet Thanh Nguyen, *To Save and To Destroy: Writing as an Other* (Belnap Press of Harvard University, 2025), p. 12.
[57] According to the 2021 Census, the Hampshire County population is 90% white British, 5% Asian, 2.2% mixed race, and 1.6% black. See 'Hampshire County Cenus 2021', Plumplot, n.d. <https://www.plumplot.co.uk/Hampshire-census-2021.html> [accessed 27 September 2025].

The character of Chawton House Librarian and Head of Collections Dr. Winston Williams is second-generation British with Jamaican grandparents who immigrated to England as part of the post-World War II Windrush generation. Winston and his extended family have lived in Southampton for over four decades. The city of Southampton is considerably more diverse ethnically than Hampshire County as a whole and Winston's backstory reflects this.[58] Winston changed careers in his mid-thirties from accountancy to earning a PhD in Library Science with a specialty in archives and record management. The position at Chawton House is his first head librarian role. He takes a particular interest in Georgianna's research as he rarely gets to support scholars focusing on non-white writers in the collection; Eliza Chesterfield was also one of his favourite novelists during his undergraduate years. Winston and Georgianna develop a warm professional and personal (non-romantic) relationship as he plays a significant role in the development of both the Chesterfield and Austen literary plots.

Interrogating the English language literature canon has been in process for decades but reached a new level of urgency following the killing of American George Floyd by Minneapolis police in 2020. His death sparked the global Black Lives Matter movement which placed increased pressure, and continues to do so, on universities to decolonize their curriculums.[59] The Oxford community felt this keenly—for a moment-- in June of 2020 when Associate Professor of African Politics Simukai Chigudu spoke to thousands gathered for an antiracism protest on Oxford's High Street directly in front of Oriel College, where the statue of Cecil Rhodes hovered above them. Imperialist, white supremacist Rhodes left much of his gold and diamond mine fortune to Oxford and to Oriel College. Dr. Chigudu called for the statue's removal—a request initially made five years earlier by the student movement Rhodes Must Fall that resulted only in a broken pledge by Oriel to commence a 'listening exercise' on the subject.[60] By 17 June 2020, Oriel again agreed to make changes—this time removing the Rhodes statue and its neighbouring plaque. Less than a year later, the college reversed the decision. Currently Rhodes continues to gaze down on Oxford High Street from his Oriel perch. Dark academia novels like R. F. Kuang's *Babel* explore issues of institutional colonial legacy, empire and knowledge production, and racism through its fantastical Victorian setting at Oxford's fictional Royal Institute of Translation aka Babel.[61]

Let us leap from statues to literature syllabi. We begin to view the intentional creation and curation of the British Literature canon in the nineteenth century as an act of anointing-selecting works deemed inclusive of promotable values. Across the subsequent centuries, the canon persists through anthologies that re-produce and re-cycle these works through secondary schools and universities and into the hands of a new generation of readers, scholars, teachers and lecturers. [62] As stated in **Section 2.2,** only two percent of GCSE students in English will read a text by a female writer. A 2021 report published as a response, in part, to the global Black Lives Matter movement reveals that fewer than 1% of candidates for GCSE English Literature answered a question on a novel by an author of colour. Is there any stronger evidence that the traditional canon retains the sheen of holy oil?

An excellent example of this in action is the novel *The Woman of Colour, A Tale.* I stumbled upon it during my doctoral research and it launched my interest in learning more about the lives of black women and writers in England and in the Caribbean during the long eighteenth-century. I have included reference to it in *DAG* as the subject of Georgianna's doctoral thesis in the hopes that a reader might be intrigued to seek it out. Published in 1808, the year after the passage of the British Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, the author is not named specifically but advertised as having written several Gothic romances attributed to a writer known as 'EMF' or Mrs. E.M. Foster though this continues to be disputed and 'anonymous' remains.[63] The publisher was Black, Parry, and Kingsbury--listed on the title page as 'booksellers to the honourable East India Company',[64] the company lasted only a few years and their publications show an interest in British colonialism.[65] The title page also includes the epigraph 'he finds his brother guilty of a skin not colour'd like his own' taken from Book II of William Cowper's prose poem *The Task*. This quote sets up the novel's primary theme of exploring the treatment of black people in England and enslaved people both abroad and

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[58] According to the 2021 Census, residents of the city of Southampton were 68% white British; 13% white 'other' including Irish and Roma; 11% Asian or British Asian; 3% black, Black British, Caribbean or African; and 3% mixed/multiple ethnic groups. See 'Ethnicity, Language and Identity', Southampton Data Observatory, n.d. <https://data.southampton.gov.uk/media/01vhixeh/ethnic-group-2021-census-soton-and-ons-comparators.png > [accessed 27 September].

[59] Mukherjee and Quayson, Introduction, in: *Decolonizing the English Literature Curriculum*, p. 10.

[60] Simukai Chigudu, 'Colonialism had never really ended: my life in the shadow of Cecil Rhodes', *Guardian,* 14 January 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2021/jan/14/rhodes-must-fall-oxford-colonialism-zimbabwe-simukai-chigudu. [accessed 04/04/2025].

[61] R. F. Kuang, *Babel: An Arcane History* (Harper Voyager, 2022).

[62] Victoria Elliott and others, 'Lit in Colour: Diversity in Literature in English School', Penguin Random House UK and The Runnymede Trust, June 2021 <https://litincolour.penguin.co.uk/> [accessed 05/04/2025].

[63] Corrinee Harol, Brynn Lewis, Subhash Lele, 'Who Wrote It? *The Woman of Colour* and Adventures in Stylometry', *Eighteen-Century Fiction,* 32.2 (2019-2020). pp. 341-353 (p. 343), doi: 10.3138/ecf.32.2.341.

[64] Anonymous, *The Woman of Colour a Tale,* ed. by Lyndon J. Dominique (Broadview Editions, 2008).

[65] Harol, Lewis, Lele, p. 343.

'at home'.[66] *A Woman of Colour* is an epistolary novel told in a series of letters from *Woman of Colour* protagonist Olivia Fairchild to her former governess Mrs. Milbanke in Jamaica. Olivia is the orphaned daughter of a white British plantation owner in Jamaica and an enslaved woman of colour; she will receive a significant portion of her father's wealth upon his death but only if she leaves Jamaica and marries an English paternal cousin. Failing this, she will become the dependent of an unsavoury paternal uncle.

The *Woman of Colour* was reviewed in three well-regarded periodicals and praised for the virtue and perseverance of Oliva Fairchild. [67] The *British Critic* offered 'this Woman of Colour is by no means illiterate or without ingenuity of contrivance…the poor heroine does not get a husband, for she is made very much to deserve one'.[68] Two months later in May of 1810, *The Critical Review* printed a much longer review; the reviewer is frustrated by the numerous roadblocks that foil Olivia Fairchild's happiness:

> We do not see what good is to accrue from reading a story [where] an amiable female is despoiled of her name and station in society, through the machinations of a rejected and jealous woman, and three worthy characters made wretched for no one reason in the world.[69]

The reviewer concedes that the author created a heroine possessed of 'a wonderful quantity of magnanimity, fortitude, and religion' but feels they err in a 'too liberal' use of biblical quotations.[70] The character preferred by this reviewer is Olivia's enslaved maid Dido who is 'the most natural of any'.[71] This could be interpreted as a preference for a black character who speaks in Jamaican creole—'Oh, Missee, we be going down—we be going sink in the very, very deep sea!'[72]—thus confirming the expectation that a person of colour could not speak 'standard' English. This contrasts with Olivia's language: 'my dear madam, I know not what to do; the reserve of Augustus increases rather than diminishes, I think, as time moves on';[73] this is viewed as 'proper' English in the eyes of the white people she encounters.

This is three more reviews than Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814) received.[74] Following this initial favourable critical reception for *Woman of Colour*, it fell silent and out of print, a fate experienced by many women writers of the period. Its author (presumed to be female) and subject faced the dual canonical discriminations of gender and race while also challenging nationalistic ideas of a benevolent colonial nation, white supremacy, and the necessity of the marriage contract as a familial wealth transfer vehicle. Dominique describes Olivia Fairchild's happy ending as a 'fascinating alternative for all women to consider' as the result is not marriage but freedom from it with the added bonus of her father's inheritance.[75] This will enable her to return to her Jamaican homeland and participate in proactive advocacy for the rights of people of colour— the free and those who are not, a rather progressive political stance for a 'rich black lady' in British literature.[76] When viewed through this prism, it is not surprising that *The Woman of Colour* failed to find a Victorian audience which made it easier for it to be lost amongst a modern one. It will be one hundred and fifty years later, well into the postmodern period, before it is rediscovered. In 1967 it earns a brief mention in E.M. McClelland's *Comparative Studies in Society and History,* then dips back into obscurity for twenty-five years before Evelyn O'Callaghan mentions it in a footnote in *Woman-Version* (1993) and then resurfaces in the first chapter of Jennifer DeVere Brody's *Impossible Purities* (1998).[77]

The novel remained out of print for two centuries until 2008 when Broadview Editions-a series whose stated goal is to represent the 'ever-changing canon of literature in English'-published a new edition of *The Woman of Colour*, edited by Lyndon J. Dominque whose diligent

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[66] Cowper's work was admired by many writers of the period, including Jane Austen who references his work in her letters and uses quotations from his poems in her own novels—*Sense and Sensibility, Emma,* and *Mansfield Park.* After her death, Austen's brother Henry declared Cowper to be her 'favourite moral' poet. See Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (Penguin: 2003), p. 7.

[67] The three journals were: The British Critic, The Monthly Review, and The Critical Review. See Nicole N. Aljoe, Kerry Sinanan, Mariam Wassif, 'Eighteenth-Century Fiction', 35.1 (2023), p. 2.

[68] Anonymous, *The Woman of Colour,* p. 257.

[69] Anonymous, p. 257.

[70] Anonymous, pp. 257-258.

[71] Anonymous, p. 258.

[72] Anonymous, p. 61.

[73] Anonymous, p. 91.

[74] Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park,* ed. by Kathryn Sutherland (London: Penguin Classics-Penguin Books, 1996).

[75] Lyndon Dominque, 'They Came Before and After Olivia: Cats, Black Ladies and Political Blackness in Eighteenth-Century British Literature and Austen' in *The Routledge Companion to Jane Austen,* ed. by Cheryl A. Wilson and Maria H. Frawley (Routledge: 2021), pp. 259-273 (p. 259).

[76] Dominique, 'They Came Before', p. 259.

[77] Nicole N. Aljoe, Kerry Sinanan, Mariam Wassif, Introduction, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 35.1 (2023), pp. 1-26 (p. 2). <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/880290> [accessed 24 May 2024].

and insightful scholarship works to prevent another 'disappearance' anytime soon. The novel is now sometimes included on eighteenth-century literature undergraduate modules and is the subject of at least three theses, two books, and numerous articles, including an entire issue of the journal *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* in 2023. In their introduction, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* editors Nicole Aljoe, Kerry Sinanan, and Mariam Wassif argue that due to 'persistent devaluing of the representations of Black lives' Black and postcolonial feminist re-readings of the period's literatures is a 'necessary corrective' that provides more historical accuracy and nuance than typically found in 'usually white-washed assumptions and constrained thinking' in pre-twentieth-century literary approaches.'[78] And while the 'recovery' of this text is progress towards canon expansion, there remains a significant gap in canonical literary market value. A first edition of Volume 1 of *The Woman of Colour* went up for auction at Bonhams in 2024. The only other known copy of a first edition is in the British Library. Given this, it is reasonable to expect a significant sale price despite its missing the second volume. In the end, it sold for £1,008.[79] Shall we compare it to a recent Austen first edition sale? In 2022, a complete, first edition presentation copy of *Emma* sold for £375,000, a record high price for an Austen work.[80] The economic impact of canon inclusion/exclusion renders *The Woman of Colour's* literary value as less than 1% of an Austen first edition, .27 percent or about **one quarter** of *one percent* to be precise. Austen's place as one of the world's most known authors with a finite published output obviously makes her collectable value above that of most writers. My point is that the exclusion of *The Woman of Colour* from the canon, until very recently, has had a long-lasting effect on its perceived literary value and in studies of eighteenth-century British literature.

While it has yet to be determined if Austen read *The Woman of Colour,* significant connections exist between Olivia Fairchild's triumphant character arc, and Fanny Price's successful efforts to assert a positive moral influence on the Bertram family in *Mansfield Park*.[81] When newly married Olivia Fairchild writes to her former governess about settling into her home on Devonshire's 'bold and noble shore'[82] she prefaces a discussion of the neighbourhood's inhabitants by saying she is making an effort not to caricature them but by seeing through a 'magnifying glass to discover defects?—Heaven preserve me from such an unchristian-like vision!'.[83] Olivia is invested in being a 'good Christian' and sometimes struggles to live up to those ideals. Likewise, Fanny Price. She is also in a constant state of moral self-interrogation—'if her uncle were to be a great while considering…and those grave looks directed to her, and at last decide against her, she might not be able to appear properly submissive and indifferent'.[84]

A Woman of Colour's epistolary construction may feel outdated and clunky in 2025, veer towards melodrama, and lack Austen's sheen of free and indirect speech-driven narrative. However, the characters it gives voice to are undeniably compelling and *significant* given the lack of substantive black women characters in the canon during this period. I advocate for a literary landscape where the story of Olivia Fairchild is regarded as just as valuable as Fanny Price's to discussions of the marriage novel and the portrayal of people of colour in long eighteenth-century British literature. I would argue further that Olivia Fairchild's story is even more valuable from both a feminist and postcolonial standpoint given her 'happy ending' of returning to Jamaica as a wealthy single woman intent on improving the lives of the enslaved black population. [85]

As the familial outsider-taken in by her maternal aunt Lady Bertram when she was a child, Fanny is marginalized due to her position as their 'ward' and is always conscious of how her actions may be perceived by those around her at Mansfield Park, a countryside estate vastly different from her family's small Portsmouth home teeming with children. Olivia transcends her concern with un-Christian-like behaviour and freely gives her opinion on neighbour Lady Ingot as 'the general terror of the females in the vicinity, as she usually engrosses a great portion of

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[78] Nicole N. Aljoe, Kerry Sinanan, Mariam Wassif, 'Eighteenth-Century Fiction', 35.1 (2023), p. 5.

[79] Bonhams, Books and Manuscripts, Slavery/Abolition, Lot 213 <https://www.bonhams.com/auction/29868/lot/213/slavery-abolition-the-woman-of-colour-vol-1-of-2-first-edition-black-parry-and-kingsbury-1808/>[accessed 9 March 2025].

[80] 'Highest price copy of Jane Austen's work comes to Chawton House", Chawton House, 6 October 2022 <https://chawtonhouse.org/2022/10/highest-priced-coy-of-jane-austens-work-comes-to-chawton-house/> [accessed 9 April 2025].

[81] A review of the library catalogue on the Reading with Jane website-a digital version of the Godmersham Park library-does not provide a match with the publication year, publisher or title. It's possible she read the periodical *Critical Review,* which reviewed *A Woman of Colour* in May 1810; the publication favorably reviewed Sense *and Sensibility* in February 1812. However, we can't know with any degree of certainty whether or not she read *A Woman of Colour.* See https://www.readingwithausten.com/catalogue.html. See also Anonymous, p. 257. See also British Fiction 1800-1829 website <http://www.british-fiction.cf.ac.uk/reviews/sens11-16.html> [accessed 29 September 2025].

[82] Anonymous, p. 105.

[83] Anonymous, p. 108.

[84] Austen, *Mansfield Park,* p. 202.

[85]Anonymous, p. 189.

the conversation, and will make herself *heard,* if not *understood'.*[86] Echoes of this delightfully biting characterization can be seen in *Mansfield Park* after Fanny receives a rare invitation to dine out:

> She had neither sympathy nor assistance from those who ought to have entered into her feelings…for Lady Bertram never thought of being useful to any body, and Mrs. Norris…was in a very ill humour, and seemed intent only on lessening her niece's pleasure, both present and future, as much as possible.[87]

The narrator's harsh judgement of Fanny's aunts mirrors Olivia's declaring Lady Ingot a terror whose worst sin may be that she does not listen, only speaks. Throughout *The Woman of Colour* Olivia challenges existing notions of black people by white English people and Dido gives voice to the experience of an enslaved woman in English society. In one of its most infamous scenes Olivia's sister-in-law Mrs. Merton orders a highly unusual, within English society, breakfast dish the first time she hosts Olivia. When a servant appears with a plate of boiled rice that Mrs. Merton indicates should be placed in front of Olivia, those gathered around the table are puzzled. Mr. Merton asks, 'What is this?' allowing Mrs. Merton to show herself as a considerate hostess by supplying what she assumes is Olivia's preferred food: that she ordered it because 'people of your—I thought that you almost *lived* upon rice'.[88] The em dash is used here to indicate Mrs. Merton's implied use of a word denoting Olivia's race. Olivia recognizes how Mrs. Merton is trying to embarrass her and thus be anything but a *considerate* hostess by insinuating that Olivia must be used to the food most often provided to enslaved people in Jamaica. In her letter to Mrs. Milbanke relaying these events, Olivia shares her riposte:

> "I eat just as you do…and though, in Jamaica, our poor slaves (*my brothers and sisters*, smiling) are kept upon rice as their chief food, yet they would be glad to exchange it for a little of your nice wheaten bread here"; taking a piece of baked bread in my hand.[89]

Olivia makes herself seen and heard in multiple ways in this scene. She is unafraid of telling the hostess she is wrong about her assumed food preferences. She seizes the moment to advocate for better treatment of enslaved people, whom she calls her *brothers and sisters*. The use of italics here shows Olivia verbally emphasizing that she sees herself as part of the larger family of people of colour, which as the daughter of an enslaved mother, she very much is despite her father's wealth. The scene's final flourish is Olivia taking a piece of the bread in her hand—touching it and, one imagines, holding it aloft for all to see with a pleased smile on her face. Dominique argues that Olivia's speech also implicitly criticizes her father's treatment of the enslaved people on his plantation and 'acts decisively to connect her own appetite for equitable treatment as a victimized woman in England with that of Negro slaves in the colonies'.[90]

Olivia learns that she and her new husband will be leaving the city to establish their home in the countryside and writes to Mrs. Milbanke that Dido is thrilled because the English countryside will be as if 'we were at the dear Fairfield plantation' in Jamaica.[91] Olivia goes on to share Dido's words about how the move will elevate her place in society when they are no longer guests in the villainous Mrs. Merton's household :

> "Besides, Dido be *greater* there [the countryside]," said she [Dido], drawing up her head, with that air of pride…"housekeeper to her dear dearest lady…although here she be 'black,' and 'wowsky,' and 'squabby,' and all because she has a skin *quite* so white [as Olivia's]...But Mrs. Merton's maid treats me, as if me was her slave; and Dido was never slave but to her dear own Missee, and she was *proud* of that![92]

Dido's character reveals much about how women of colour are perceived in England: because she is not of mixed-race like Olivia, her presumably darker skin elicits a different kind of response than Olivia's complexion, which is described as olive-skinned. The chance to claim the title of housekeeper of an English country estate causes Dido to tilt her head up with pride. By including Dido's unhappiness with Mrs. Merton's maid treating her like a slave, the novel's author is allowing Olivia's character insight into racial and class dynamics in eighteen-

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[86] Anonymous, p. 108.
[87] Austen, Jane, *Mansfield Park,* ed. by Kathryn Sutherland (Penguin Books, 2014), p. 202.
[88] Anonymous, p. 77.
[89] Anonymous, pp. 77-78.
[90] Dominique, Lyndon, *Introduction* in *The Woman of Colour a Tale* by Anonymous*,* ed. by Lyndon J. Dominique (Broadview Editions, 2008), pp. 11-42 (p. 29).
[91] Anonymous, p. 99.
[92] Anonymous, p. 100.

century England between servants who were paid—if only a pittance—for their work and enslaved people who received no wages. This presents Oliva and the reader the opportunity to view discrimination faced by Oliva as a lesser but intertwined consequence of slavery and colonization. In her essay 'Reading Slantwise: Dido in *The Woman of Colour',* Sofia Prado Huggins applies Saidiya Hartman's critical fabulation method, which aims to imagine the full stories of enslaved people whose lives have often been reduced to passing mentions in historical accounts of brutality and death. Hartman introduces the method in her essay 'Venus in Two Acts':

> I have endeavoured to represent the lives of the nameless and the forgotten, to reckon with loss, and to respect the limits of what cannot be known…narrating counter-histories of slavery has always been inseparable from writing a history of present, by which I mean the incomplete project of freedom, and the precarious life of the ex-slave, a condition defined by the vulnerability to premature death and to gratuitous acts of violence.[93]

By reading *The Woman of Colour* 'slantwise', Huggins attends to subtle shifts in the narrative and re-frames 'moments of instability' that may allow for 'unrealized possibilities, unanswered questions, and open endings'.[94] She convincingly argues that by focusing on what Dido says as much as what she doesn't say reveals:

> a woman who moves through a variety of spaces-a Jamaican plantation, a ship, a London household, an English country estate-with remarkable social awareness and adaptability, thriving even in circumstances that would have been dangerous for a Black woman in her position.[95]

Let us circle back to Fanny Price, consistently named Austen's most disliked protagonist, though I feel quite the opposite about her.[96] In Volume II, Chapter iii, Fanny tells her cousin and future husband Edmund that she broached the subject of the slave trade with his father Sir Thomas, who has recently returned from Antigua where the family owns a plantation. Austen had multiple family connections with Antigua plantations. The closest were through her father George Austen.[97] Like Olivia Fairchild, Fanny reminds the Bertram family of the human cost of their wealth through enslaved labour. Edmund expresses disappointment that no other family members continued the conversation. Fanny replies, 'I longed to do it—but there was such a dead silence! And while my cousins were sitting by without speaking a word or seeming at all interested in the subject' she kept quiet. She feared that her enthusiastic interest in the subject might cause injury to Sir Thomas who must wish his own daughters felt similarly, another example of Fanny's hyperconsciousness of causing offense to her wealthy benefactors.[98] This is the moment heard round the postcolonial critical word when Edward Said's ground-breaking 'Jane Austen and Empire' essay questioned what Austen's 'dead silence' meant regarding the novelist's ability, at the time of its publication, to explicitly address the fact of enslaved labour in the Caribbean providing the undergirding to wealth for many of Britain's richest families.[99] He cannot resolve the paradox between how Austen, who was vocal about her Christian faith and misgivings on aspects of the Church of England, would have likely felt about enslaved labour on British Caribbean plantations and the role England played in the transatlantic slave trade without explicitly referencing the Bertram's family wealth being built on the backs of those enslaved people in Antigua. Said argues that while many want to 'jettison' her novels for their lack of explicitly addressing the horrors of a nation building its wealth through enslaved labour, there is a more effective approach:

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[93] Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', *Small Axe,* 12.2 (2008), pp. 1-14 (p. 4).

[94] Sofia Prado Huggins, 'Reading Slantwise: Dido in *The Woman of Colour (1808)', Eighteenth-Century Fiction,* 35.1 (January 2023), pp. 27-42 (p. 29).

[95] Huggins,'Reading Slantwise', pp. 30-31.

[96] Tara Isabella Burton, 'In Defense of Fanny Price', *The Paris Review* (14 July 2014), <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2014/07/10/in-defense-of-fanny-price/>[accessed 12 April 2025].

[97] In 1760, Reverend George Austen was designated trustee for a former student's sugar plantation in Antigua, though he was never called on to serve as trustee. See 'Room 8: *Mansfield Park*: The Global Contexts', Jane Austen's House website, n.d. <https://janeaustens.house/online-exhibition/mansfield-park-courting-controversy/room-8/> [accessed 29 September 2025]. For further reading about Austen family connections to slavery, see Devoney Looser, 'Breaking the Silence: Exploring the Austen Family's Complex Entanglements with Slavery' in *Times Literary Supplement* (21/05/21). <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/jane-austen-family-slavery-essay-devoney-looser/> [accessed 19/11/21].

[98] Austen, *Mansfield Park,* p. 184.

[99] Said, Edward, 'Jane Austen and Empire' in Culture and Imperialism (Chatto and Windus, 1993), pp. 115.

> …if we take seriously our intellectual and interpretative vocation to make connections, to deal with as much of the evidence as possible, fully and actually, to read what is there or not there, above all, to see complementarity and interdependence instead of isolated, venerated, or formalized experience that excludes and forbids the hybridizing intrusions of human history.[100]

Again, the 'hybrid' word. Said's methodology requires that scholars regard all of the evidence/context/history available and read 'what is there or not there', a challenging proposition.

The literary mystery subplot in *The Dead Authors Guild* positions Georgianna as a researcher interested in bringing the work of women from marginalized communities to light. Her doctoral research project was *The Woman of Colour*. Her current research project is trying to discover what happened to (fictional) British Jamaican writer Eliza Chesterfield, author of a bestselling novel in 1813, who died at the age of twenty-seven from unknown causes. There are no biographies of Eliza and her novel fell into obscurity. Georgianna's Gothic leanings make her initially suspicious that Eliza's husband John Chesterfield may have been responsible for his wife's death. His writing career skyrocketed after Eliza's untimely death and his work remains in the British Literature canon.

The incorrect murder theory demonstrates Georgianna's naïve, overdramatic Gothic leanings just as *Northanger Abbey's* Catherline Morland worried General Tilney murdered his wife. But Georgianna's research will lead her to uncover a different truth about the Chesterfields. John Chesterfield, literary lion, stole his dead wife's work and passed it off as his own just as history has revealed other 'famous' male writers/poets have done. A few known instances are Wallace Stegner using entire sections of Mary Foote's diaries (without her permission) in his Pulitzer-prize winning novel *Angle of Repose*, F. Scott Fitzgerald using his wife Zelda Fitzgerald's diary entries (without her permission) in *The Beautiful and the Damned*, William Wordsworth being inspired by/borrowing from his sister Dorothy Wordsworth's journals, and Henry 'Willy' Gauthier-Villers publishing the *Claudine* series written by his then-wife Colette under his name.[101] It can also be glimpsed in the Austen scholarship world. The man credited as bringing Austen 'back' into the canon is R. W. Chapman with his 1923 edited editions of her work. However, the woman who *first* did this was Katherine Metcalfe in 1912 with the Oxford University Press edition of *Pride and Prejudice.* Metcalfe married R. W. Chapman in 1913 and 'let' him take over the editing project despite describing herself as 'really the originator in the editing of Jane Austen'.[102]

Before closing this section, let me address the bonnet-clad white lady in the room. If I am such a proponent of decolonizing the canon, why have I spent years studying one of the traditional canon's most revered authors? I could argue it was years of colonial literature indoctrination married to lush period costume dramas featuring women in low-cut gowns and panoramic shots of idyllic emerald fields dotted with sheep, both of which were entirely foreign for a girl growing up in southwest Oklahoma. But in truth, I fell in love with Austen's work first. Then, as often happens with Austen, I grew curious about the woman who created it. One of the great joys of the doctoral work has been reading and studying contemporary adaptions that take their inspiration from Austen and wed them to contemporary settings and issues like gentrification in New York's outer boroughs, women's roles in modern day Pakistan, and a gay American teen's coming of age story.

To clarify my position, I am not advocating for the *elimination* of the existing canon in favour of 'rediscovered' texts but for an approach that views the 'canon' as a porous entity that changes over time expanding its breadth and requires that those texts are read through different lenses—textual, historical, cultural, economic, decolonial. The palimpsest approach envisioned by Brinda Bose aligns with this-an inquisitive

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[100] Said, p. 115.

[101] See Wordsworth Grasmere <https://wordsworth.org.uk/wordsworth/the-people/>; Sands Hall's 'The Ways of Fiction Are Devious Indeed', *Alta,* 4 April 2022, <https://www.altaonline.com/books/fiction/a39179237/wallace-stegner-mary-hallock-foote-plagarism/>; Heather Laine Talley's 'Zelda Wasn't Crazy', *HuffPost,* 20 May 2013. <https://www.huffpost.com/entry/zelda-wasnt-crazy_b_3268211>; Aida Edemariam's 'Wild, controversial and free: Colette, a life too big for film', *The Guardian,* 7 January 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jan/07/colette-french-novelist-movie-keira-knightley>.

[102]Barchas, Janine, 'Why K. M. Metcalfe (Mrs. Chapman) is "really the originator in the editing of Jane Austen"', *The Review of English Studies*, 68.285 (2017), pp. 583–611. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44505606> [accessed 29 September 2025].

cycle that layers innocence with experience, where the most recent layer is lost when covered again and where all layers can be exposed.[103] Bose further describes the palimpsest approach as:

> decolonization invites a sense of breaking open boundaries imposed by the (once) institutionalized and therefore more powerful critical praxis to let in multifarious, conflicted ideas that kaleidoscopically create new and recalibrated patterns of reading and writing.[104]

This mirrors my experience of re-visiting the Austen canon and its contemporary adaptions along with the Austen biomyth for novelistic purposes-picking up the stones of characters, plots, and Austen family gossip to peer beneath them for new fictional pathways that may offer a different historical, political, and emotional context. **SECTION 2.5** will discuss adaptions that break open boundaries imposed by the canon.

[103]Brinda Bose, 'Genders, Sexualities, and Decolonial Methodologies', in: Decolonizing the English Literature Curriculum, ed. by Ankhi Mukherjee and Ato Quayson (Cambridge University Press: 2024), pp. 110-126 (p.110). <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009299985>.
[104] Bose, p. 111.

2.4 Intersection of Queer Theory and Decolonizing Literature

The queer theory of 2025 aims to be an intersectional, nuanced approach. Queer studies emerged as a humanities discipline in the 1990s and much of the initial research focused on a white, male, Western, gender binary perspective that challenged notions of heteronormativity and heterosexual privilege, and rigid gender roles but lacked an intersectional approach that included de-stabilized concepts of gender, imperialism, colonization and racialized oppression. In a process of 'decolonizing queerness', the field is working towards an approach that will be intersectional and include 'the lived realities of many LGBT individuals and communities of colour' both within Western nations and the nations of Africa, Asia, and the Americas that was often missing from earlier approaches.[105] Robert Chevrette asserts that contemporary queer postcolonial methods must employ 'the work of transnational feminisms, women of colour, and Indigenous theoretical critiques' that highlight intersections with ethnocentric, Western, capitalist, patriarchal, White supremacist, and heterosexist structures.'[106]

A queer critical reading of *A Woman of Colour* provides an example of an intersectional approach that addresses gender, imperialism, colonization, racial oppression and notions of compulsory heterosexuality. Halina Adams convincingly argues that the novel presents the 'inherent rot at the heart of an empire fuelled by forced labour and sexual exploitation.'[107] When protagonist Olivia returns to Jamaica as an unwed woman in possession of her father's fortune, it may be viewed as an 'entanglement' of heterosexual desire, racism, and place.[108] Olivia looks forward to working with other women in Jamaica to improve the lives of enslaved people. The text implies that 'true liberation can only be found in communities that embrace queerness.'[109] It offers a different version of colonization, one where the colonized country-Jamaica-can be a 'true space for freedom, broadly conceived [where] colonized space can and should reject the sexual and imperial dictates of the unnatural, rapacious metropole.'[110] Adams also points out that Jamaica becomes a place of possibility for queer women of colour in the Romantic period.[111] This is a conclusion that I have not seen or imagined before and it is why decolonising queer theory can generate terrific new insights both from within and outside the canon.

The British literature canon's colonial ideals promoted writers who were, with a handful of notable exceptions, straight, white, cis-gendered men.[112] The inclusion and re-discovery of queer historiography and writing by queer people remains challenging despite textual evidence like Charlotte Charke's memoir and Anne Lister's diaries, and epitomizes what Terry Castle calls the 'the apparitional lesbian' whose shadowy presence haunts texts and history.[113] The scholar and reader must first *look* at what is present and then look past for what may be just outside the frame or absent altogether. When I turn to a 'queer' way of 'doing' literature, I seek out Bose for an articulation of a method that propels 'conversations forward' through destabilizing traditional methodologies 'by accepting the path of "complex returns" to intellectual, social, and political inheritances' that leaves space for interaction with them.[114] Chris Roulston characterizes the concept of queer history as one of 'negation' that the process of bringing a queer subject of history into being is 'itself a kind of phantasmagorical project' that occupies 'the spectral, the hidden, the unaccountable, and the unintelligible.'[115] This description conveys a queer decoloniality that can also aptly apply to the presence of people of colour within the canon. By 'seeing' who isn't valued or represented in a text, we may see 'more effectively how Black people and women were far from 'silent ghosts' in eighteenth-century Britain's 'cultural imaginary and social reality.'[116]

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[105] Roberta Chevrette, 'Queering Colonialisms and Empire', *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Communication.* (28 January 2022), p. 8. doi: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.1234.

[106] Chevrette, p. 9.

[107] Halina Adams, 'Queering Liberation in *The Woman of Colour', Wordsworth Circle,* 54.3, pp. 292-310 (p. 293).

[108] Adams, p. 294.

[109] Adams, p. 294.

[110] Adams, p. 294.

[111] Adams, p. 294.

[112] The British canonical novelists currently recognized as being outside of these parameters are Lord Byron, Oscar Wilde, E. M. Forster, Viriginia Woolf, A. E. Housman, W. H. Auden. All are white; all are queer. From the American canon, we can add Emily Dickinson, Willa Cather, Walt Whitman, James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston. Of this second group, it is evenly split between white and black writers; all are recognized as being on the queer spectrum. See Annabel Paulsen, 'Building a Queer Canon: Reading lists and resources for teaching LGBTQ+ texts in the classroom', *Teachers and Writers Magazine,* 28 May 2021 <https://teachersandwritersmagazine.org/building-a-queer-canon/> [accessed 29 September 2025].

[113] See Terry Castle's *The Apparitional Lesbian* (Columbia University Press, 1993).

[114] Bose, Brinda, 'Genders, Sexualities, and Decolonial Methodologies', in: *Decolonizing the English Literature Curriculum,* ed. by Ankhi Mukherjee and Ato Quayson (Cambridge University Press: 2024), p. 121, doi:10.1017/9781009299985.

[115] Roulston, Chris, 'New Approaches to the Queer 18th Century', *Literature Compass* 10/10 (2013), p. 761.

[116] Nicole N. Aljoe, and others, 'Eighteenth-Century Fiction', 35.1 (2023), p. 5. See also Jenny Sharpe's *Ghosts of Slavery: A Literary Archaeology of Black Women's Lives* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

2.5 Contemporary Austen Novel Adaptations

In the first half-century following Jane Austen's 1817 death, a total of six essays were published about her work.[117] This thesis is being completed in the 250th anniversary year of her birth and *obscure* author no longer applies. In May of 2025 she was anointed as the third member of a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) holy trinity that includes Mozart and Shakespeare when the *Rise of a Genius* docuseries portrayed her life.[118] An artistic rendering of her portrait adorns the ten-pound Banknote. A subject search of her name reveals 3,900 articles and 789 books in the University of Southampton's library database. To date, thirty-two film and television adaptions have been produced[119] with new productions slated like a Netflix *Pride and Prejudice* series with Oscar and BAFTA-award winning actress Olivia Colman as Mrs. Bennet and Golden-Globe award winner, queer actor Emma Corrin as Elizabeth Bennet and a new Focus Features *Sense and Sensibility* film adaption.[120] The Austen-inspired/adjacent novel market is also thriving. Amazon offers no fewer than one thousand novels tagged as Jane Austen 'variations.' There is literally a novel for everyone. They range from the traditional historical like Hornby's *Miss Austen* and *Godmersham Park* or the fantastical in *Longbourn: Dragon Entail: A Regency Era Gaslamp Dragon Adventure* by Maria Grace.[121] For *50 Shades of Grey* fans there is the spicy *Pride, Prejudice & Wicked Pleasure* by Em Brown.[122] No bonnet-clad zombie is left behind thanks to Gothic horror global bestseller Seth Grahame-Smith's *Pride, Prejudice and Zombies*.[123] Young adult readers can also find contemporary adaptions that speak to their communities like Ibi Zoboi's *Pride* and L. C. Rosen's award-winning *Emmett*.[124] The land of Austen extends to the digital world now as well. Spiral Atlas's *Northanger Abbey* is a romance video game where the protagonist can be male, female, or non-binary. Storytellers Roleplaying's *Good Society* is a tabletop role-playing game inspired by Austen's novels.[125]

Austen IS everywhere. So while it is never a *bad* time to be writing a novel featuring Jane Austen while also researching her place in the literary canon and her biography, I argue it is a particularly *good* time to be engaged in these activities as a queer novelist and scholar. And the Regency period is also having a moment in popular culture and popular fiction due in equal parts to the ongoing-Austenaissance—begun in 1995 with the BBC's *Pride and Prejudice* series and its infamous wet shirt scene—and the impact of Netflix's global hit series *Bridgerton*, with its colour-blind casting and inspired by Julia Quinn's Regency-romance series; a fourth season is scheduled for 2026.[126] The Regencyland of Austen film/television adaptions and inspired-by novels now includes characters formerly unseen or, at best, present but silent. When we consider the six published novels as Austen mythology, the present moment sees those mythic worlds expanding to include characters of colour and those with a rainbow spectrum of faiths, gender identities, socioeconomic classes, and sexualities, though substantive characters with disabilities remains a universe yet to be explored despite Austen having had an older brother with a disability.[127] The 2024 *Pride & Prejudice* novel adaption *Most Ardently* by Gabe Cole Novoa hit the number nine spot on the *New York Times* bestseller list with its young adult story featuring Oliver Bennet, a transgender Elizabeth Bennet.[128] It's possible that the novel helped create an environment where non-binary, real life actor Emma Corrin could be cast as Elizabeth in 2025 in Netflix's upcoming *P&P* series.[129]

While novel adaptations have broadened the Austen canon, it is worth mentioning that there has been only one large-scale screen adaptation to transgress the heterosexual marriage plot. It further highlights how revolutionary the plot of *A Woman of Colour* was to have

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[117] Claire Harman, *Jane's Fame: How Jane Austen Conquered the World* (New York: Picador, 2009), p.95.

[118] Carol Midgley, 'Jane Austen: Rise of a Genius Review', *The Times,* 26 May 2025 <https://www.thetimes.com/culture/tv-radio/article/jane-austen-rise-of-a-genius-review-fans-will-lap-up-the-quality-insights-l0nhn7lrh> [accessed 10 August 2025]. See also a fascinating article by the 'Rise of a Genius' director: Ali Naushahi, 'As a Muslim girl in Bradford, I saw my story in Jane Austen's novels. Now I've directed a TV series about her', *The Guardian,* 30 May 2025 <https://www.economist.com/1843/2017/10/09/austenistan> [accessed 30 July 2025].

[119] 'Austen on Screen', Jane Austen Society of North America, n.d. <https://jasna.org/austen/screen/> [accessed 31 August 2025].

[120] Samantha Bergeson, 'Everyone Wants Their Own Jane Austen Adaption, and They're Getting Them', *IndieWire,* 25 June 2025 <https://www.indiewire.com/features/general/jane-austen-adaptations-in-the-works-1235135141/> [accessed 30 September 2025].

[121] Gill Hornby, *Miss Austen* (Century-Penguin Random House UK, 2020). Gill Hornby, *Godmersham Park* (Penguin, 2023). Maria Grace, *Longbourn: Dragon Entail* (White Soup Press, 2017).

[122] Em Brown, *Pride, Prejudice and Wicked Pleasure* (Wind Color Press, 2023).

[123] Seth Grahame-Smith, *Pride, Prejudice and Zombies* (Quirk Books, 2009).

[124] Ibi Zoboi, *Pride* (Balzer+Bray, 2018). L. C. Rosen, *Emmett (*Little, Brown and Company, 2023).

[125] Em Friedman, ' Indie game designers were refashioning the Regency long before Bridgerton,' Polygon, 14 October 2022, https://www.polygon.com/23401231/jane-austen-video-game-diversity-bridgerton/ [accessed 01 September 2025].

[126] Harman, p. 206.

[127] Claire Tomalin, *Jane Austen: A Life* (Vintage, 1999), p. 193.

[128] Gabriel Cole Novoa, *Most Ardently* (Macmillan, 2024).

[129] Brooke McIlvanie, 'Final Cast Announced for Dolly Alerton's *Pride and Prejudice'*, Tudum by Netflix, 29 July 2025 <https://www.netflix.com/tudum/articles/pride-and-prejudice-cast-photos-release-date-news> [accessed 20 August 2025].

imagined a world where a British Jamaican woman turned down marriage to a wealthy white man to return to her homeland. In Andrew Ahn's 2022 *Fire Island* film, he takes *Pride and Prejudice's* Bennet daughters looking for potential husbands at countryside balls and transforms them into a modern day group of five gay friends who make their annual trip to New York's Fire Island to find sex and love, or at least one of them.[130] The production features a racially diverse cast and explores issues of racism within queer communities and rigid ideal body types. There is only one female character with limited dialogue—the Mrs. Bennet role played by comedian Margaret Cho, and this is my primary criticism of *Fire Island,* despite its ground-breaking status. How can an Austen adaption completely sideline women? *Guardian* columnist Emma Brockes, in self-professed 'scowling lesbian at the feast' mode, makes a compelling case that the latest crop of Austen adaptions pushing straight marriage endings, even if they have a queer actor or two playing 'straight', are the 'last thing we need' and that many of Austen's female characters are 'cranky enough to have made excellent lesbians'.[131] I could not agree more. And in *DAG,* the character of Quinn Marlowe carries this banner as does Austen who, after two hundred years of after-life living, is often rather out of patience.

I want to spend a moment on the broader field of English language literature 'classic' adaptions before delving into Austen adaptions. We are in the midst of a decades-long publishing marketplace and literary award landscape filled with re-imaginings, the majority of which are authored by women writers and/or writers of colour. One of the first postcolonial re-imaginings is Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea.* Originally published in 1966, it is a prequel to *Jane Eyre* and set in Jamaica.[132] A handful of contemporary examples are works like *Circe* by Madeline Miller (*The Odyssey), So Many Beginnings* by Bethany C. Morrow (*Little Women), The Chosen and the Beautiful* by Nghi Vo (*The Great Gatsby), On Beauty* by Zadie Smith (*Howard's End)*, *Shylock is My Name* by Howard Jacobson (*The Merchant of Venice),* and *The Mere Wife* by Maria Headley (*Beowulf)*.[133] American literature classic *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was adapted by Percival Everett, whose great-grandmother gained her freedom from slavery in 1864,[134] and published as *James* in 2024.[135] It won the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. Everett does not view *James* as a 'corrective' but instead sees himself 'in conversation with Twain' writing the book Twain did not and *could* not have written.[136] What is gained from adaption is the possibility of seeing a work from a different perspective that can often inspire the reader to return to the original and view it with this new layer of awareness. When historically marginalised groups are given a voice through the point of view character/s, they gain a reading experience where characters who look, talk, worship, love, or move through the world like them are the heroes of their own lives. To return to the mirrors and windows approach of multicultural literature and using *James* as an example, African American readers can now read the story of an enslaved character from an American 'classic' who is the main character and possesses his own voice and the ability to write his story. Ultimately, *all* readers benefit from texts that include non-majority characters.[137]

The publication of Jo Baker's 2013 novel *Longbourn* heralded a shift in Austen adaptions. It took the story of *Pride and Prejudice* and told it from the perspective of those not heard from in the original-primarily, the servant staff who provided the Bennet family's genteel domesticity.[138] The primary protagonist Sarah, a housemaid at Longbourn, rushes to answer the doorbell and reflects:

> the instant the door was opened, she ceased to exit. One moment she was there, creaking the door back…and the next she was gone; the two grand gentlemen…stepped through it, and moved past her, and did not so much as glance her way.[139]

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[130] *Fire Island,* dir.by Andrew Ahn (Hulu, 2022).

[131] Emma Brockes, 'I hate to be the scowling lesbian at the feat—but here's what worries me about the new Austen adaptions', *The Guardian,* 17 July 2025 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jul/17/jane-austen-adaptations-woman-man-marriage> [accessed 1 September 2025].

[132] Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (W.W. Norton and Company, 1998).

[133] Madeline Miller, *Circe* (Little, Brown and Company, 2018). Bethany Morrow, *So Many Beginnings* (Square Fish, 2022). Nghi Vo, *The Chosen and the Beautiful* (Tor Books, 2022). Zadie Smith, *On Beauty* (Penguin Books, 2006). Howard Jacobson, *Shylock is My Name* (Hogarth, 2016). Maria Headley, *The Mere Wife* (Scribe UK, 2019).

[134] Carlos Fresneda, 'Percival Everett: Denial of slavery is spreading throughout the United States', *El Mundo America,* 20 November 2024, <https://www.mundoamerica.com/news/2024/11/20/673dc98621efa0d2308b4589.html> [accessed 05 September 2025].

[135] Percival Everett, *James* (Doubleday, 2024).

[136] 'Percival Everett Interview', The Booker Prizes, 15 August 2024, <https://thebookerprizes.com/the-booker-library/features/percival-everett-interview-james> [accessed 05 September 2025].

[137] See Megan Schmidt, 'How Reading Fiction Increases Empathy and Encourages Understanding', *Discover,* 28 August 2020 <https://www.discovermagazine.com/how-reading-fiction-increases-empathy-and-encourages-understanding-41799> [accessed 29 September 2025].

[138] This was primly declared by Mrs. Bennet in Austen's text when Mr. Collins dines at Longbourn and makes the mistake of asking his hostess which of his 'fair cousins' cooked dinner 'Mrs. Bennet…assured him [Mr. Collins] with some asperity that they were very well able to keep a good cook, and that her daughters had nothing to do in the kitchen' in Volume I, Chapter XIII. See Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (Oxford World's Classics, 2019), p. 50.

[139] Baker, Jo, *Longbourn* (Knopf, 2013), p. 195.

The role of the servant is to be invisibly productive, ghost-like to continue one of the themes of *DAG* and intersectional queer theory. *Longbourn* has influenced *DAG* through its broadening of the Austen landscape beyond socioeconomic class by including a Longbourn servant Mr. Hill, married to housekeeper Mrs. Hill, who is secretly gay and Ptolemy 'Tol' Bingley, a mixed-raced servant to the Bingley family who is the illegitimate son of Mr. Bingley's father. Baker infers that Tol's family is enslaved on one of the Bingley's sugar plantations but does not expand on the specifics of Tol's birth. The narrative also mentions via newspaper stories instances of women dressing as men to serve as soldiers, including Mother Ross—also known as Irishwoman Christian Davies, a now well-known historical figure.

I first read *Longbourn* not long after its initial publication and found it dazzling on two fronts. The first was that no writer *before* Baker had tackled *Pride and Prejudice* from the perspective of the Bennet family's servants. Or, at the least, no writer had completed a manuscript on the subject that was considered publishable. This resonated when I began researching *DAG* and discovered that no traditionally published novel existed that had imagined Jane Austen as a ghost character. The second was Baker's fully rendered setting and atmosphere, which deepened the world Austen had originally presented. Austen was not prone to extended exposition about settings. In *Longbourn's* opening, Baker describes a September morning in Hertfordshire where 'sheep huddled in drifts on the hillside; birds in the hedgerows were fluffed like thisledown…fallen leaves rustled with the passage of a hedgehog.'[140] Baker is writing squarely within the literary historical fiction mode with its attention to language and historical detail. *DAG* is quite different with its comedic, satiric approach and primary contemporary setting. However, I strove for Baker's level of detail in the Austen diary section of *DAG*, which is the novel's longest passage set in the late eighteenth century. This felt critical to supporting the reader's suspension of disbelief. I scoured Austen's letters and the numerous Austen biographies for specific place names, menus, and dates of events when she was twenty years old. *DAG's* Chapter 30 contains Austen's first diary entry: (fictional) Austen writes that 'such was his effect upon me, that I felt as if I'd been racing Henry beneath the tall elms of our beloved wood walk.' The wood walk is a place near Austen's childhood home in Steventon and is referenced with fondness in her letters.[141]

Longbourn was a bestseller and named a Best Book of the Year by the *New York Times 100 Notable, The Guardian,* and the *Daily Mail.* This success opened publishing doors for adaptions that worked to decolonize the Austen canon. 2018 brought *Pride* by Ibi Zoboi, a '*Pride and Prejudice Remix*' (according to its cover copy) for young adult readers set in Bushwick, a gentrifying Brooklyn neighbourhood, with Haitian Dominican American Zuri Benitez as its protagonist. I found *Pride* effective in its exploration of Austen's themes of the threat of physical dislocation (in the event of Mr. Bennet's death) and complex sibling relationships. *DAG* deals with Georgianna's dislocation-leaving the United States for the first time on the heels of her father's death, and the ongoing grief of losing her brother at an early age. Zoboi's opening paragraph, like Austen's original, quickly establishes the primary theme:

> It's a truth universally acknowledged that when rich people move into the hood, where it's a little bit broken and a little bit forgotten, the first thing they want to do is clean it up. But it's not just the junky stuff they'll get rid of. People can be thrown away too…What those rich people don't always know is that broken and forgotten neighbourhoods were first built out of love.[142]

Where the Bennet women live in fear of losing their home to a male cousin when Mr. Bennet dies, Zuri Benitez fears that the neighbourhood of her childhood is losing itself to 'bougie' gentrification. Zuri has four sisters and is the second oldest, just as Elizabeth Bennet is amongst the Bennet sisters. Like Mr. Bennet, Zuri's father is a reader: 'Papi reads as if the world is running out of books' though he reads books by Howard Zinn, an American historian and civil rights activist.[143] Austen does not share Mr. Bennet's favourite titles though we may guess he retreats to his library as much for peace and abdication of paternal duty as he does enlightening reading. Zoboi takes the Elizabeth/Wickham/Darcy love triangle and transforms it into a Zuri/Warren/Darius Darcy one where Zuri 's 'prejudice' against the new Darcy family across the street with their Manhattan money and newly remodelled 'mini-mansion' leads her to prefer, at least initially, the boy who 'feels like home...a boy from my hood. Bushwick Warren.'[144] In a cross-cultural twist, Darius Darcy's mother is from London, Croydon specifically and Zuri describes her accent as strange and 'not quite white people British'.[145] By the novel's end, the Benitez family is forced to move out of the neighbourhood,

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[140] Baker, p. 3.
[141] Jane Austen, letter to Cassandra Austen, 25-27 October 1800, in *Jane Austen's Letters,* ed. by Deirdre Le Faye, 4th edn (Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 51-53.
[142] Zoboi, Ibi, *Pride* (Balzer+Bray, 2018), p. 1.
[143] Zoboi, p. 7.
[144] Zoboi, p. 79.
[145] Ibi Zoboi, p.108.

Warren has been exposed as a predatory rake, Zuri's older sister is reunited with the eldest Darcy son Ainsley, and Zuri finds her voice through her poetry and last but not least, dates Darius after their animosity turns to attraction. Breaking news on the novel's after-life came in 2024 when Netflix announced that a film adaption was in the works and being co-produced by Higher Ground, President Barack Obama and his wife Michelle Obama's company.[146]

*Pride'*s critical reception was overwhelmingly positive in outlets ranging from *Publisher's Weekly, Chicago Tribune,* and the *School Library Journal.* However, a reviewer in the *Wall Street Journal* took issue with the language of *Pride,* claiming Zoboi did not write with 'literary formality or what has been called classical narrative tact' citing instances where Zoboi's characters used African American Vernacular English (AAVE), a recognized American dialect; the review ended with 'her heavy use of slang will undoubtedly amuse and validate those readers…who use it themselves, but it may otherwise limit the book's appeal'.[147] This reviewer equates the language of Austen-affluent, white, colonial English-as superior to that of a young Haitian Dominican American character in Bushwick whose voice carries a different racial, cultural, ethnic, class imprint. The reviewer goes so far as to imply that readers who speak like this (readers of colour) will be the only ones who find the book appealing. The review underlines the pernicious segregation of literature into categories of 'worthy' and 'don't waste your time' by language and voice while exemplifying racially-based gatekeeping activities that different Austen audiences and spaces can demonstrate.[148] In *DAG* I worked to create a fictional world where the land of Austen, both literally and figuratively, is populated by a diverse group of characters ranging from the middle-aged South Asian Austen researcher Rishika to the eccentric/batty older white folks holding a séance in Chawton Cottage's garden the night of Austen's birthday, to Winston Williams partnering with Georgianna to recover a place in the canon for his fellow British Jamaican Eliza Chesterfield.

Austenistan is a 2018 short story collection edited by Laaleen Sukhera inspired by Austen's novels and set in contemporary Pakistan. Austen's novels have an enduring popularity in South Asian communities where their focus on parental marriage expectations, strict gender roles, and courtship rituals limited to public events 'translates seamlessly into South Asian storytelling traditions, in Bollywood films such as *Bride and Prejudice* and *Aisha*, or in novelistic retellings such as Soniah Kamal's *Unmarriageable*.'[149] Pakistan's method of implementing *sharia* inheritance law has seen an estimated 86% of Pakistani women being denied their appropriate inheritance share.[150] Echoes of this can be seen in coverture in English common law, a practice during Austen's lifetime that rendered a married woman as having no legal standing separate from her husband, and estate entail as demonstrated in *Sense and Sensibility* when the Elinor and Marianne Dashwood must leave their home following the death of their father as the estate passes to their half-brother and his family.

Collection editor Sukhera founded the Jane Austen Society of Pakistan in 2015 with chapters in three cities. Since then, it has evolved into the Jane Austen Society of The Middle East, North Africa, and Pakistan with over 5,200 followers between its social media accounts. Austen's novels are 'consoling' to Sukhera and she appreciates that Austen often gives her female characters second chances: 'Silly Lydia shames her family by eloping with Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice* but she doesn't pay by being killed for honour.'[151] The lead story in the collection 'The Fabulous Banker Boys' by Mahlia S. Lone takes the plotline of *Pride and Prejudice's* maternal character Mrs. Bennet and re-imagines her in Jameela Baig, a tired, middle-aged mother with 'droopy' eyes because 'she couldn't afford the anti-ageing treatments her friends indulged in…ground down by worrying about money and the fate of her children.'[152] Jameela's husband Javed's government career has stalled and upon his retirement, they are displaced from their government provided bungalow in Lahore to a neighbourhood with shoddy electricity and streets pocked with potholes. The family budget is limited and the one non-negotiable luxury item is private school education for their daughters so

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[146] Andreeva, Nellie,'Pride' Movie, Modern Take On Jane Austen, In Works At Netflix', *Deadline,* 15 October 2024, https://deadline.com/2024/10/pride-movie-jane-austen-netflix-higher-ground-obamas-alloy-1236112691/ [accessed 04 September 2025].

[147] Meghan Cox Gurdon, 'Children's Books: Pachyderm Parties and a Hue That'll Make You Cry', *The Wall Street Journal,* 20 September 2018.

[148] See Amanda-Rae Prescott's "Race and Racism in Austen Spaces: Notes On A Scandal: Sanditon Fandom's Ongoing Racism And The Danger Of Ignoring Austen Discourse On Social Media," ABO: Interactive Journal for Women in the Arts, 1640-1830: Vol.11: Iss.2, Article 10 (2021), doi:10.5038/2157-7129.11.2.1290

[149] Aditi Upmanyu, 'From Delhi to Dorset: Reading Jane Austen across continents', *The Indian Express,* 1 September 2025, <https://indianexpress.com/article/books-and-literature/why-jane-austen-speaks-to-delhi-as-much-as-to-dorset-10212673/> [accessed 5 September 2025].

[150] Munazza Hameed, 'The Women Inheritance Paradox in Pakistan: Faith vs Family', *Modern Diplomacy,* 20 September 2024, < https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2024/09/20/the-women-inheritance-paradox-in-pakistan-faith-vs-family/> [accessed 05 September 2025].

[151] Moni Mohsin, 'Austenistan', *The Economist,* 9 October 2017, <https://www.economist.com/1843/2017/10/09/austenistan> [accessed 5 September 2025].

[152] Mahlia S. Lone, 'The Fabulous Banker Boys', in *Austenistan,* ed. by Laaleen Sukhera, (Bloomsbury, 2018), p. 1.

that, for their father, they won't be 'stupid' and for their mother Jameela its primary benefit is allowing them to make connections with affluent families and thus, increase their pool of wealthy husband candidates.

When Jameela learns that two eligible out-of-town young men in banking are going to be attending an upcoming society wedding, she interrupts Javed furtively watching on-line pornography and asks him to secure an invitation for their family to attend. Where Mr. Bennet visited Netherfield Park to meet Mr. Bingley and trigger a return visit to Longbourn by him, Javed meets the young men of interest when he intentionally attends a mosque for Friday prayers in the father of the bride's neighbourhood. The wished for invitation arrives and the family heads to the elaborate wedding, much in the same way the Bennet family attends the Netherfield Ball. At the wedding, the second oldest daughter Elisha is forced to babysit her sixteen-year-old sister Leena when neither of her parents notice her slip away from the reception into the large house for questionable activities. Leena, like Lydia Bennet, does not yet understand her lower societal status requires strict adherence to societal expectations. Old Lahore families or children of the very rich who are 'spotted drinking and dancing, pressed up against some other rich kid—people only criticise who they dare'.[153]

Nikki May's 2024 contemporary *Mansfield Park* adaption *This Motherless Land* sweeps from Lagos, Nigeria in the 1970s to Somerset, England in the 1990s. Like *Pride,* I found the author's re-imagining of Fanny Price and company uniquely ambitious and instructive. In *DAG* the story follows a young woman facing the loss of a beloved parent and the potential loss of her home. Georgianna is not an orphan, as neither Fanny Price is, but her immediate family has dwindled to two--her and her mother. *This Motherless Land*'s protagonist Funke Oyenuga's happy Nigerian childhood is ended at ten years old when her white, English mother and younger brother die in a car accident. This leaves her black Nigerian father incapable of caring for her and he ships her off to his in-laws in Somerset, who had disowned his wife after she married him.

Funke is thrust into the bosom of an overtly racist family in a foreign country while grieving. They refuse to call her Funke and instead use her middle name Kate, to make things 'easier' for her and give her the attic room, the same room location at Mansfield Park for Fanny, in their family estate The Ring. Though her new cousin Liv proves to be a much-needed ally. She comes to Funke's room first thing in the morning and tucks her in at night, 'in between, they were joined by an invisible thread'.[154] Liv is delighted to have a playmate other than her odious brother Dominic. Funke's aunt Margot, her mother's sister, makes *Mansfield Park's* Mrs. Norris look like a saint. Margot blames her sister's marriage for her own failed marriage and dependent financial state—she lives at The Ring, the family's crumbling estate, with her two children—and only cares about inheriting it as soon as possible, even if it means committing fraud. After an accident in her late teens, Funke is forced back to Nigeria by Margot and lives with her father and his new family before beginning medical school training. When an employee at her parents club recognizes her and remembers her mother kindly, Funke realizes that her life in England where 'she'd search that motherless land in vain, looked for Mum all over The Ring, tried to find her by the lightning tree, sought her out at the folly. But she'd been in Lagos all along.'[155] *DAG's* protagonist Georgianna also experiences a re-orienting of her maternal relationship, one that has been strained since her brother's death and her assumption that he was the favourite child. Her mother Anna Carson travels to Chawton uninvited to 'check' on her. Like Funke's journey between two worlds to 'find' her mother, Georgianna's experience of leaving home emboldens her to share her long-held belief that her mother hadn't 'wanted' her after her parents divorced. In response, Anna shares the real reason: that Georgianna's father was not coping well and needed the day-to-day routine of caring for Georgianna to survive the aftermath of losing their son Matthew.

Transgressive Austen adaptions with swapped gender roles and/or queer authors featuring queer characters are not a recent phenomenon.[156] In 1932 Eleanor Holmes Hinkley's biomythography play *Dear Jane* was produced at New York's Civic Repertory Theatre featuring founder/director/actor Eva Le Gallienne in the role of Cassandra Austen and Gallienne's then-girlfriend Josephine Hutchinson as Jane.[157] The situation feels rather unique, though given the gaps in queer history one never knows, and transgressive—two women in a romantic relationship offstage playing sisters onstage. Fast forward to a 2024 *Book Riot* article on queering Jane Austen that features twelve

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[153] Mahlia S. Lone, 'The Fabulous Banker Boys', in *Austenistan,* ed. by Laaleen Sukhera, (Bloomsbury, 2018), p. 22.

[154] Nikki May, *This Motherless Land,* (Mariner Books, 2024), p. 49.

[155] May, p. 171

[156] At Wellesley College in 1899 a dramatic adaption of *Pride and Prejudice* featured the first known Mr. Darcy on stage played by a woman; indeed, all of the male roles were played by female students given that the college was a single-sex institution. See Devoney Looser, 'Queering the Work of Jane Austen is Nothing New', *The Atlantic,* 17 May 2021, p. 5, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/07/queering-the-work-of-jane-austen-is-nothing-new/533418/> [accessed 07 September 2025].

[157] Devoney Looser, *The Making of Jane Austen* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), pp. 114-115.

LGBTQ Austen novel adaptions.[158] They range from Eden Appiah-Kubi's *Pride and Prejudice*-inspired *The Bennet Women* about three friends—a black woman, a trans woman, and a Filipina woman at Longbourn University in contemporary Washington, DC, to Tirzah Price's *Manslaughter Park,* a queer retelling of *Mansfield Park* and the third in her Jane Austen Murder Mystery series. Queer writers often feel an added responsibility when 'queering' Austen. Given the low to no visibility of queer people in the canon, *Most Ardently* author Gabe Cole Novoa felt it was an honour to 'rewrite a well-loved classic as a queer love story and shine a light on the reality that queer people have, historically, always been here.'[159] Novoa identifies as a Latinx transmasculine American. Queer novelist L. C. Rosen writes about queer history through his adult mystery Evander Mills series—set in 1950s San Francisco and featuring Mills who was outed and fired from the police department and now investigates cases related to the queer community, and Rosen's young adult Tennessee Russo series about a teenage 'Indiana Jones'-inspired character who, along with his archaeologist father, digs up queer history. Rosen finds the idea that queer authors can now tell historical stories that 'maybe we missed because we weren't allowed to tell stories like that at the time' empowering.[160]

Rosen's 2023 *Emma* adaption *Emmett* struck a succesful comedic and satiric tone with its gender/country/sexuality-swap while also honoring key themes and scenes from *Emma.* From the opening paragraph, Rosen establishes that contemporary gay American teen Emmett could be a distant cousin to Emma Woodhouse when he proclaims: 'I know I'm blessed. I'm not religious at all, but that's the best word for it. I'm good-looking by conventional standards, smart, and my dad has a lot of money'.[161] Austen's opening paragraph reads 'Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence'[162] Austen's opening is rife with satire through its third person narrator. Rosen uses a comedic first person voice to show that his protoganist is blissfully free of self-awareness and in full possession of vanity. Rosen's approach inspired me to write *DAG* with a similar balance of joy, playfulness, and authentic Austen. In its opening, I tried to find a tone similar to Rosen's. In the first line 'Georgianna Carson knew better than many twenty-seven-year-olds that people did, actually, die', the insertion of 'actually' is intended to signal that comedy/satire may be afoot. *DAG's* first paragraph's closing sentence ends with a touch of broadly pessimistic sarcasm: '…she boarded her very first international flight unconvinced that hurtling over the Atlantic in a metal tube might prove less dramatic than the previous month'. My intention in *DAG* was to work within the modes of comedy, satire, and romance while utilizing them to explore grief and loss in the spirit of Dolly Parton's famous line from the 1989 film *Steel Magnolias:* 'Laughter through tears is my favorite emotion'.[163]

Set in California, *Emmett* focuses on his unsolicited and disastrous matchmaking efforts and Emmett's cluelessness that his close friend Miles is in love with him. Rosen mirrors aspects of the original: Emmett's mom has died, he is opposed to serious relationships just as Emma believes that she has 'none of the usual inducements to marry…Fortune I do not want; employment I do not want…I believe few married women are half as much mistress of their husband's house, as I am of Hartfield'[164] and his dad, like Mr. Woodhouse, is a hypochondriac. Emmett's dad became obsessed with his son's health in the wake of his wife's death to the point that he draws blood from Emmett for testing whenever his son has a cold. The intersectionality of decolonization and queer theory methodologies are present in an 'immersive' art exhibition scene. The work on display is by eighteenth-century painter William Hodges, most known for his landscapes documenting Captain Cook's second South Pacific expedition. As Emmett and his friends explore the exhibit, the character named West discusses Hodges role as an artistic colonizer:

> it's also really interesting to see the way British eyes first saw Easter Island, New Zealand, Tahiti, and…made them more British in art. That's the colonization…he made canoes look like gondolas…We think of colonization as being about taking over space, forcing people into our culture, but it's also about the ways we perceive other cultures and then express our view of them.[165]

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[158] Rachel Brittain, 'Queering Jane Austen: 12 LGBTQ Jane Austen Retellings', *Book Riot,* 26 September 2024, <https://bookriot.com/lgbtq-jane-austen-retellings/> [accessed 07 September 2025].

[159] Yu-Hung Tien and Mariam Wassif, 'Interview with Gabe Cole Novoa, Author of *Most Ardently: A Pride and Prejudice Remix'*, Keats- Shelley Association of America, n.d., <https://www.k-saa.org/blog/interview-with-gabe-cole-novoa#:~:text=Queer%20people%20have%20for%20so,been%20here%20was%20an%20honor.> [accessed 07 September 2025].

[160] L. C. Rosen, interview with the author, 11 September 2024.

[161] L. C. Rosen, *Emmett (*Little, Brown and Company, 2023), p.1.

[162] Jane Austen, *Emma* (Norton Critical Edition-W.W. Norton, 2012), p. 5.

[163] *Steel Magnolias,* dir. by Herbert Ross (USA, 1989).

[164] Austen, *Emma*, p. 62.

[165] Rosen, *Emmett (*Little, Brown and Company, 2023), p. 72.

A member of the group comments that the paintings are still beautiful, which Emmett silently agrees with, and West responds that the notion of beautiful is subjective and 'shouldn't be judged'.[166] As they move into the immersive parts of the exhibit with aromatherapy and cascading tropical flower petals, West talks more about Hodges's use of composing the painting in the English landscape style and how this serves as a kind of propaganda to make these vastly different lands look somehow British.[167]

Most Ardently and *Longbourn* are the only two historical novels of the six adaptions I address in this section. Novoa wrote *Most Ardently* for a very different audience than Baker's adult, literary fiction-leaning one. This audience is a young adult reader eager for an escapist, queer *Pride and Prejudice* adaption. The text takes Regency society expectations like young ladies must be proficient sewers and 'queers' them: Jane Bennet helps create her transgender sibling's binding cloth. When Mr. Bennet discovers his daughter dressed as a boy, Oliver (Elizabeth's chosen name) comes out to him. His father embraces him, calls Oliver 'my son' and says, 'I'm so proud of you.'[168] There is no hesitation, no questioning. It reads like a 2025 parental guide on what to say when a child comes out as transgender. This is where *Most Ardently* veers solidly into fantasy and wish fulfilment. The scene does not feel historically or even emotionally authentic, but I acknowledge that this is not the novelist's primary goal. Novoa offers transgender readers, in particular, the chance to see a transgender character being affirmed and accepted by their parents, something only half of LGBT children may experience.[169] I come to the novel as a cis-gender scholar with a transgender child. My primary criticism is the text's lack of grounding in the *real* history of the period—plenty of evidence of LGBT lives exists as I've noted throughout this thesis. Novoa includes a brief historical note but it is more summary than specific—no mention of Charlotte Charke or Anne Lister. This is a missed opportunity to affirm the existence of LGBT people throughout history. The risk of a lack of historical detail in a queer adaption is readers leaving the story thinking ALL of it was made-up and that LGBT people didn't actually *exist* in the period. Rosen insists that an author must make clear that 'this [historical novel] isn't some crazy fantasy because if you let people think that…it reinforces this idea that we don't actually belong in that history.'[170]

Camille Kellogg's *Just As You Are* is another *P&P* adaption. It is a queer romance novel with heavy rom-com elements set in contemporary New York at a queer magazine called *Nether Fields*.[171] Like Zoboi's *Pride,* it has a killer opening paragraph that telegraphs who the story will be about and sets the comedic tone:

> Everyone knows that when you throw a dinner party for a bunch of lesbians, at least half of them will be vegan. Which, unfortunately, was why Liz was going to be brutally murdered by her roommate.[172]

To see Austen's iconic *Pride and Prejudice* opening 'it is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife'[173] radically transformed into a commentary on a modern lesbian dinner party is comedic genius. Comedy relies heavily on the surprise factor and Kellogg more than accomplishes that here. But she is also working in ways that Audrey Bilger argues Austen and her fellow eighteenth century novelists Frances Burney and Maria Edgeworth did through writing comic novels: entering society's debate about women's appropriate role in society through 'criticizing, among other things, eighteenth-century gender politics'.[174] In Kellog's case, she's entering into lesbian society expectations—one must be inclusive and ensure all guests have food appropriate to their needs—and satirizing the truth that it *is* very likely that a lesbian dinner party in a major American metropolitan area would include, at the least, a handful of vegan guests.

Kellogg's second paragraph paints an urban village scene, as opposed to rural Longbourn in Austen's original, where protagonist Liz makes her way through the Crown Heights neighbourhood in Brooklyn (where *Pride* is also set): '…a crowd of parents waiting outside the karate

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[166] Rosen, *Emmett,* p. 73.
[167] Rosen, *Emmett,* p. 81, 82.
[168] Novoa, p.75.
[169] See The Human Rights Campaign and University of Connecticut's '2023 Report on Youth' that surveyed 13,000 LGBT-identifying young people: <https://www.hrc.org/press-releases/new-hrc-data-finds-many-lgbtq-youth-still-lack-critical-support-and-acceptance> [accessed 1 October 2025].
[170] L. C. Rosen, interview with the author, 11 September 2024. Rosen and I also discussed *Bridgerton* with its lead characters of colour and the role of historical accuracy. The same risks apply when 'anyone watching it understands it's not historically accurate [i.e. instrumental of Billie Eilish's 'Bad Guy' playing during ball scene] but does that mean a viewer gets to decide what *they* think is accurate based on their already formed beliefs? How do we make sure people come away knowing history they didn't know before isn't just more fantasy?'.
[171] Camille Kellogg, *Just As You Are* (Dial Press, 2023).
[172] Kellogg, p. 3.
[173] Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (Penguin Classics, 2008), p. 6.
[174] Audrey Bilger, *Laughing Feminism: Subversive Comedy in Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth, and Jane Austen* (Wayne State University Press, 1998), p. 9.

studio, a line of couples outside a trendy pop-up…dozens of people walking tiny, slow-moving dogs.'[175] It nails the Brooklyn panoramic establishing shot where much of the story will take place.

Just As You Are influenced *DAG* with its lesbian-specific, contemporary twenty-something satiric comedy, particularly in scenes where Georgianna interacts with love-interests Quinn and Asha. But comedy can also be 'an excellent vehicle for making radical ideas palatable to an audience that might otherwise be offended by them'.[176] Kellog doesn't appear to be operating with this in mind as she's clearly stated that she wrote it for herself and queer readers. It has made me re-consider the background to choosing a comic queer romance mode melded with Austen historical fiction. The reading audience I envisioned was also myself—it was the book I wanted to read, then queer readers who could experience a queer Elizabeth/Mr. Darcy trope, then an Austen audience eager for imaginings about what Austen's life might have been like. Segments of this last audience certainly could find parts of *DAG* 'offensive', particularly the sex scenes and Georgianna's rejection of Henry's proposal. It is something I was aware of while writing and, perhaps subconsciously, may have contributed to choosing a comic mode in addition to the other reasons consciously chosen as discussed in Section 1.0. If I speak at another Jane Austen Society of North America annual conference, it is not out of the realm of possibility that I might be booed out of the room for writing a scene where Austen has sex with Tom Lefroy as almost happened to Dr. Robert Morrison at the 2022 conference when he presented the possibility that Marianne Dashwood's illness in *Sense & Sensibility* was actually a miscarriage.[177]

[175] Kellog, p. 3.

[176] Bilger, p. 9.

[177] This information was relayed to me by a 2023 JASNA conference attendee after I presented my MA research challenging the validity of the Harris Bigg-Wither proposal.

3.0 Story Development

3.1 Biomythography Versus Biography

One of my central intentions with *The Dead Authors Guild* is to craft a biomythography novel of Austen. The form empowers me to tell the 'truth' but tell it 'slant'—to borrow from Emily Dickinson—and intentionally blur the lines between history, biography, and the shroud of myth now firmly attached to Austen**.** My novel investigates the broader themes of her life-her writing practice and publication experience, the obligations and benefits of being an unmarried woman in the large Austen clan, and the potential consequences of romantic entanglements. Austen's published letters provide a glimpse of the facets of her personality, though notably only the ones her sister Cassandra deemed appropriate for public consumption. The letters contain endearing descriptions of family and friends but also show her in less flattering ways such as when she equates her brother James's purchase of a new horse with his wife's hiring of a new maid as 'two great new acquisitions'[178] and one of her most famous biting quips when she ironically writes that the reason a neighbour woman delivered a premature, stillborn child is 'I suppose she happened unawares to look at her husband'.[179] Austen the correspondent is spectacularly funny, mean, sarcastic, anxious, flirtatious, jealous, and frustrated. These examples of character trait opposites-devoted daughter/sister/aunt versus bitchy social commentator-are golden grist for the fiction writer. Complicated, interesting, infuriating characters make compelling fiction. I use some lines from the letters to ground the story in personal history. My Austen character is tethered to the accepted 'truths' of her biography but I aspire to push past these, into the imagined space of the multitudes she contained.

George Gissing proclaimed that 'the only good biographies are to be found in novels'.[180] I don't completely agree with this and read some fine examples of the form for research purposes: Lear's *Beatrix Potter: A Life in Nature,* Wright's *Oscar's Books,* and Liddington's *Nature's Domain: Anne Lister and the Landscape of Desire.* Of these three titles, only Lear's is structured as a traditional, chronological biography that dwells too much for my liking in Potter's childhood but redeems itself in the lushly descriptive narrative and scope of research. [181] *Oscar's Books* takes a completely different tack and traces Wilde's biography as a *reader*, including the list of books Wilde requested while serving a prison sentence.[182] Jill Liddington's *Nature's Domain* narrows the scope to one year (1832) in Anne Lister's life and moves between excerpts from her voluminous diary and narrative passages on almost every page.[183] I use an even tighter timeframe of four weeks that creates a plot under time pressure while also accelerating character emotions. My fictional four weeks take place over the Christmas holidays which adds plentiful opportunities for shenanigans by misbehaving family members and romantic partners.[184]

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[178]Jane Austen, letter to Cassandra Austen, 25 October 1800, in *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. by Deirdre Le Faye, Fourth Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 52.

[179] Jane Austen, letter to Cassandra Austen, 27 September 1798, *Jane Austen's Letters*, p. 17.

[180] George Gissing quoted in Shields, Carol, *Jane Austen A Life.* (New York: Penguin Group, 2001), p. 10.

[181] One hundred and three pages to be exact. See Linda Lear, *Beatrix Potter A Life in Nature* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007).

[182] Thomas Wright, *Oscar's Books: A Journey around the Library of Oscar Wilde* (Vintage, 2009), pp. 319-322.

[183] See Liddington, Jill, *Nature's Domain: Anne Lister and the Landscape of Desire,* 2nd ed. (Pennine Press, 2019)

[184] Chaos ensues when Georgianna's mother, fiancée, and girlfriend travel to England separately, unbeknownst to each other to surprise Georgianna. This scene is inspired by Austen's effective use of set pieces, like the Box Hill picnic in *Emma,* private theatrical in *Mansfield Park,* and the White Hart scene in *Persuasion.*

3.2 Historical

One of the first historical novels I read while reseaching *DAG* was Maggie O'Farrell's *Hamnet*. O'Farrell effectively captures the impact of losing a beloved family member: 'How were they to know that Hamnet was the pin holding them together? That without him, they would all shatter and fall apart, like a cup shattered on the floor'.[185] *Hamnet* imagines how the death of a beloved son impacts William Shakespeare and his wife Agnes (the name O'Farrell uses for the character) individually and as a couple. Told primarily from Agnes's point of view, it is brutal and beautiful in its examination of Agnes's life both before and after the tragedy. The novel opens with a brief historical note from O'Farrell about the couple living in Stratford and having three children-Susanna and twins Hamnet (the name could be used interchangeably with Hamlet at the time) and Judith; Hamnet died at age eleven in 1596; about four years later his father wrote *Hamlet.* I was drawn to O'Farrell's exploration of how grief caused Shakespeare to retreat from his wife and into his work. In the novel's final scene, Agnes searches out her husband in London and finds herself at the Globe Theatre where *Hamlet* the play is being performed:

> Hamlet, here, on this stage, is two people, the young man, alive, and the father, dead…Her husband has brought him back to life, in the only way he can…He has, Agnes sees, done what any father would wish to do, to exchange his child's suffering for his own, to take his place, to offer himself up in his child's stead so that the boy might live.[186]

O'Farrell uses the story to demonstrate how artists are compelled to make sense of the world through their work and the lasting impact this can have on both artist and audience.

While the beauty of *Hamnet* and its instructive theme of a family persevering through grief entranced me, it did not convince me to shape *DAG* in a similar literary historical mode. Perhaps first because my writing capabilities lag well behind Ms. O'Farrell's but also because, to quote Austen in *Mansfield Park's* final chapter:

> Let other pens dwell in guilt and misery. I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can, impatient to restore every body, not greatly in fault themselves, to tolerable comfort, and to have done with all the rest.[187]

Choosing to write *DAG* in a comedy and satire mode encouraged a complex story invovling multiple plot-lines: Georgianna escaping the death of her father, her need to make a significant literary find, her growing attraction to Quinn Marlowe, her developing friendship with Jane Austen's ghost as well as the world of Jane and the Dead Authors Guild. This results in width of story while sacrificing some depth in character development. It is a trade-off I was willing to make with this novel. I *wanted* to see how much I could do with plot development and multiple storylines, inspired by Austen's consummate skills in this area. Additionally, I was dealing with uncertainty and grief on a personal level and felt compelled to write a story that was not rooted in sadness and wistful introspection but instead leaned towards adventure, resolution and new beginnings.

Other examples of historical novels that inspired and guided my creative work were Janice Hadlow's novel *The Other Bennet Sister* which takes up the story of the much-maligned Mary Bennet-one of Austen's least popular *Pride and Prejudice* characters-after all of her sisters have married, allowing Hadlow to explore through Mary's point of view on how different types of marriages work.[188] Like Hadlow, Lauren Groff's *Matrix* utilizes the historical novelist's tool of choosing a historical figure-or obscure fictional character figure in Hadlow's case-with few biographical details.[189] Groff chooses Marie de France, a little-known illegitimate relative of Eleanor of Aquitaine. This grants wide authorial freedom to create a fictional world unbeholden to 'facts'. The novel's language is simple and evocative with a rhythm similar to the nuns' daily prayers and worship:

> And at the heart of the gathering at the head of the table, the great love of Marie's life sits shining so bright Marie cannot see the human form in all the brightness, she can only see the radiance.[190]

It is a style of writing that I admire. *Matrix* deepened my understanding of how effective it can be and provided a revision focus for *DAG* drafts .

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[185] Maggie O'Farrell, *Hamnet,* (New York: Knopf, 2020), p. 233.
[186] O'Farrell, p. 304.
[187] Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park,* ed. by Kathryn Sutherland (Penguin Classics, 2014), p. 428.
[188] Hadlow, Janice. *The Other Bennet Sister* (New York: Picador—Henry Holt and Company, 2020)

[189]Groff, Lauren. *Matrix* (New York: Riverhead Books—Penguin Random House, 2021)
[190] Groff, p. 25.

Alexandra LaPierre's novel *Belle Green* fills the gaps in the previously little-known story of Greene who directed J.P. Morgan's private library while passing as a white woman hiding the secret of her Black father Richard Greener, a prominent civil rights activist. In one of the most dramatic moments in the novel, Belle and her mother receive a letter from Greener years after ceasing contact with him:

> What Belle and Genevieve had never stopped dreading, since the moment they had stepped over the color barrier, had happened. Their Black father, their Black husband, had found them.[191]

I admire the intimate voice here, t is what I am aiming for in *DAG,* that leads the reader to almost gasp at the long-anticipated reveal of the family's dangerous secret.

A re-reading of A.S. Byatt's novel *Possession* proved instructive in clarifying what I wanted for my novel.[192] Byatt's Booker Prize-winning novel is written as a dual timeline historical novel in literary fiction mode. *DAG* shares some similar plot elements to *Possession*: an American literary scholar goes to England and makes an important discovery about a writer's life. In Byatt's work, the scholar discovers romantic correspondence between a famous Victorian male poet and a woman poet, who is in a relationship with another woman. In my work, the scholar uncovers the truth about the work of a little-known eighteenth-century British Jamaican woman writer through previously undiscovered letters between the writer and her cousin. The *DAG* plot takes a serious left turn from *Possession'*s when 1). no queer characters commit suicide and 2). no queer female character leaves her female lover for a man. Published in 1990, *Possession* falls squarely in the still currently active 'bury-your-gays' trope.[193] In *DAG,* the protagonist Georgianna dumps her male fiancée and gets a traditional romance happy ending through its enemy-to-lovers trope that takes inspiration from the Elizabeth Bennet/Fitzwilliam Darcy dynamic granting Georgianna and Quinn a beginning together, if not a wedding.

Byatt's novel is an intellectual one that explores aspects of love, writing, and academe written in a restrained, serious tone that features page-long paragraphs of exposition. The benefits of this approach allow the writer to explore multiple topics at length, hence the 'intellectual' label:

> Her idea of these primeval creatures [trees] included her generation's sense of their imminent withering and dying, under the drip of acid rain, or in the invisbile polluted gusts of the wind.[194]

But it sacrifices story movement and emotion. In writing *DAG,* I knew I valued those two elements and placed them at the heart of the story.

I was struck by Byatt's effective use of free indirect speech, one of the hallmarks of Austen's work, to further character development. Byatt is also wrestling with the function and impact of biography. Through the character of Mortimer Cropper (the American rival of British scholar James Blackadder), sections of his 'Art of a Biographer' lecture are included. Cropper makes a persuasive case that:

> biography was just as much a spiritual hunger of modern man as sex or political activity…people need to know how other people lived, it helps them to live, it's human…a form of ancestor worship…what are the Gospels but a series of varying attempts at the art of biography?[195]

On the following page, Byatt reminds us that one must always be aware of the biographer within the biography, just as 'the historian is an indissoluble part of his history, as the poet is of his poem, as the shadowy biographer is of his subject's life'.[196] This sentiment echoes my own interest in exploring the complex functions of biography. And while personal correspondence may prove to be one of the most instructive tools for the biographer, the inclusion of too much of that correspondence within the novel world is problematic. Byatt includes pages and pages of poems 'written' between her two Victorian poets. This expanse of personal poetry offers no storytelling function and instead impedes the narrative's forward motion. Conversely, the inclusion of a judicious number of letters between the poets provides an interesting and compelling plot and character development tool. I strived to use personal correspondence in *DAG* only when it served the story.

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[191] Alexandra Lapierre, *Belle Greene,* trans. by Tina Kover (New York: Europa Editions, 2022), p. 378.

[192] A. S. Byatt, *Possession* (Vintage Books-Random House, 1991).

[193] See Chris Arnone, 'The History of the Bury Your Gays Trope', *The Guardian,* 16 March 2023, <https://bookriot.com/bury-your-gays-trope/> [accessed 03 September 2025].

[194] A. S. Byatt, *Possession* (Vintage Books, 1991), p. 150.

[195] Ibid., p. 415.

[196] Ibid., p. 415.

For historical fiction writers, figures like Austen provide the outline of a life-the beginning, the end, some middle bits. It is the space between the gaps where story begins. The prospect of writing into the delicious gaps in Austen's biography was exciting. But her character proved difficult to access at first. Writing it felt *transgressive*. Who am I to occupy her voice and speak for her? How does one write in a way that feels authentic and compelling while conscious of the powerful way her novels connect with readers? It took multiple drafts and encouragement from my supervisors to reach a point where writing Austen's ghost not only felt comfortable but also, to return to McDermott's expression, addictively delightful.[197]

[197] McDermott, *What About the Baby*, p. 215.

3.3 Why Jane is a Ghost and Other Narrative Choices

As I began work on *The Dead Authors Guild*, selecting the point of view character was the first major narrative decision I faced. Who should be telling the story? Should it be limited to the 27-year-old protagonist Georgianna Carson, as it had been in the original short story? Was this the best option for a speculative Austen-inspired novel-length work grounded in literary and biographical criticism? Many historical and Austen-adaption novels featured single perspectives-*Hamnet, The Secret Diaries of Charles Ignatius Sancho, The Other Bennet Sister*. However, several used multiple points of view compellingly—*Possession, White Teeth, Incense and Sensibility, Chase of the Wild Goose.* The risks of multiple point of views include spreading the story too thinly across perspectives, which can inhibit the reader's access to understanding a character deeply, and/or cause disruption in the reading process when a chapter shifts point of view. Ultimately, the opportunity to write from the perspective of a nearly two hundred-years-dead Jane Austen won out. Most chapters are from Georgianna's perspective with Austen's point of view chapters sprinkled throughout the narrative at a pacing of every third or fourth chapter. Georgianna and Austen's ghost sometimes appear together in chapters but always from a singular point of view.

As stated in the Introduction, *DAG* protagonist Dr. Georgianna Carson is a blended version of two Austen characters: the young Georgiana Darcy from *Pride and Prejudice's* and Catherine Morland, the naïve heroine of *Northanger Abbey*. The former's youth is transformed into Georgianna's intellectual power-she graduated from UC Berkeley at the age of 19-and is in the postdoctoral stage of academic life by twenty-seven. Catherine Morland's naivete is mirrored in Georgianna who, after suffering the loss of an older brother when she was 12, has mostly experienced the world through reading, resulting in a dangerous lack of practical life experience. This combined with her youth makes her vulnerable to impulsive decisions with the potential for far-reaching consequences.

The Dead Authors Guild is, in some ways, a literal *and* figurative attempt to follow Stephen Greenblatt's advice that the scholar's role is to 'speak to the dead and to make the dead speak.'[198] The creative choice to make Austen a ghost distinguishes it from pure Austen adaptions and Austen-adjacent novels. As mentioned in the introduction, this represents a unique take on Austen in the literary marketplace-no other novels with ghost Jane appear to have been published traditionally (i.e. not self-published). The choice grants me the authorial freedom to speculate how Austen might view the actual 'after-life' of her work, versions of her biography and her experience as a member of the (fictional) Dead Authors Guild. Austen's existence as a ghost echoes her lived experience as a (semi) anonymous author and her posthumous life as one of the world's most popular writers with one of the leanest biographies.

I am far from the first to be fascinated with Austen's potential spectral presence. In the early 1900s, Charles Darwin's son Francis enjoyed a game that involved soliciting the questions children and adults would ask Austen's ghost.[199] In the first travel guide to Austen sites, Hill invites her readers to 'put back the finger of Time for more than a hundred years…step with us into Miss Austen's presence.'[200] Kipling's 1926 poem 'Jane's Marriage' describes Austen's ascension into heaven with Shakespeare standing at the top.[201] Claudia Johnson begins her 2012 introduction '*Jane Austen's Afterlives'* with a story about hearing Austen take a breath while she was preparing a Norton Critical edition of *Mansfield Park*.[202] Fast forward to 2024 when the social media platform X (formerly known as Twitter) hosts three 'Austen ghost' accounts with usernames like @JaneAustenboo with bios that proclaim 'just your garden-variety reanimated 18th-century novelist' and 'time will explain. Official & verifiable spectre.'[203] A writer interested in the life of mediums and in ghosts, historical novelist Hilary Mantel asks in her autobiography 'what's to be done with the lost, the dead, but write them into being?'[204]

My decision to use Austen's ghost is deliberate. A Jane Austen character who has existed for nearly 200 years past her initial forty-one-year lifespan provides the opportunity to reflect and comment upon her own life and her work's after-life. Claudia Johnson cautions that historical and biographical Austen scholarship is sometimes 'methodologically naïve and sometimes irrecoverably entrenched in logical fallacies' and is *always* prefaced by 'very definite ideas' about what would be discovered there. [205] One of my primary arguments about biography is that the 'facts' of a person's life can be subject to interpretation. Another reason for telling a ghost story is to draw on Austen's use

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[198] Stephen Greenblatt, 'What is the History of Literature?', *Critical Inquiry,* 23 (1997), p. 479.
[199] Claudia Johnson, *Jane Austen's Cults and Cultures* (University of Chicago Press, 2012), p. 5.
[200] Constance Hill, *Jane Austen Here Homes and Her Friends,* (Dover, 2018), p. xii.
[201] Clarie Harman, *Jane's Fame: How Jane Austen Conquered the World* (New York: Picador, 2009), p. 163.
[202] Claudia Johnson, *Jane Austen's Cults and Cultures* (University of Chicago Press, 2012), p.
[203]X, < https://twitter.com/search?q=jane%20austen%20ghost&src=typed_query&f=user> [accessed 14/04/2024].
[204] Hilary Mantel, *Giving Up the Ghost* (Picador, 2003), p. 351.
[205] Claudia Johnson, *Women, Politics, and the Novel* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. xix.

and subversion of the Gothic in *Northanger Abbey, Sense and Sensibility,* and *Persuasion.* By choosing a setting and time of year that lend themselves to Gothic themes-the old Stables of Chawton House during a 'dark and stormy' winter-I am playing with the Gothic in a contemporary context.

Mary Gordon's hybrid novel *Chase of the Wild Goose*, originally published in 1936, provides an instructive novel of literal ghostly hybridity and is described as 'part biography, part novel, part spiritual memoir'.[206] It tells the story of the eighteenth-century's 'first lesbian power couple'.[207] Lady Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby transformed a small cottage and its grounds into a Gothic fantasy estate where they lived together for fifty years. Over a century before Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas hosted Hemingway and Picasso in their Parisian salon, the Ladies of Llangollen welcomed luminaries like Wordsworth, the Duke of Wellington, poet Anna Seward, Anne Lister, and Sir Walter Scott. Virginia and Leonard Woolf's publishing press Hogarth published over a thousand copies of *Chase of the Wild Goose* in 1936 and a second edition followed in 1937, an indication of the public's interest in the book.[208] The penultimate chapter of Gordon's novel details etiquette if one should encounter a ghost.[209]

> These people do not come to us for nothing, and if we ignore them may never come again…When we have the good fortune to meet these people we should be perfectly simple over it, take them as real, approach them on what they indicate is their own ground, and try to meet their desires.[210]

The above provides the framework for my protagonist Georgianna's response to befriending the ghost of Jane Austen. With ghost stories, writers generally have two options: scary ghost or friendly ghost. For mine, Austen's ghost is not scary, though she is intimidating, rather demanding, and easily annoyed. Georgianna is not 'perfectly simple' when Austen reveals herself as a ghost. But she eventually allows herself the suspension of disbelief required to regard their ensuing friendship as good fortune and helps Austen find proof of the daughter she gave up at twenty. I should also mention the work of Sarah Waters whose historical novels like *Affinity* and *Fingersmith* explore lesbian, Gothic, Victorian themes with the *possibility* of ghosts while her 2009 *The Little Stranger* is an outright Gothic ghost story set in post-World War II England.[211] Gothic elements in *DAG* include a large tapestry of King Arthur and his knights in the Stables' main entrance hall, frequent 'dark and stormy' nights, and a locked cabinet in Georgianna's room contains, nods to the frequent appearances of these items in Gothic fiction. Scholar Georgianna prefers reading to almost any other activity and is limited in worldly experience due to spending her life in one area-Berkeley, California. These are traits she shares with *Northanger's* Catherine Morland. Over the course of *Northanger*, Catherine travels from her rural village to the popular and crowded city of Bath where she meets a broader swathe of people. Catherine moves from an exclusively Gothic romantic perspective to an 'educated' one more firmly grounded in the actual (versus the romantic fictional) world and learns to trust her own judgement. Geographically speaking, Georgianna's character does the reverse: she travels from a large, metropolitan area where two painful deaths in her family have taken place to a small village in England, her first experience abroad. Her character arc reflects parts of Catherine's: Georgianna's reading and research become entangled with her social and romantic life, and she gains confidence in trusting her judgement and resilience. But where Catherine grows out of a reliance on Gothic romance, Georgianna must retain some of it to continue her friendship with Austen's ghost.

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[206]Sarah Waters, *Chase of the Wild Goose,* Lurid Editions website, < https://www.luridEditions.com/chase-of-the-wild-goose> [accessed 24 May 2024].

[207] 'Ladies of Llangollen', Cadw, https://cadw.gov.wales/ladies-llangollen [accessed 17 June 2024].

[208] Virginia Woolf initially rejected Gordon's manuscript submission. After revising it, Gordon met success on the second try. See also Fiona Brideoake, *The Ladies of Llangollen: Desire, Indeterminacy, and the Legacies of Criticism* (Bucknell University Press, 2017), p. 250.

[209] In the book, Gordon inserts herself as a character in the final chapters and describes the experience of meeting the ghosts of the Ladies of Llangollen.

[210] Mary Gordon, *Chase of the Wild Goose,* Second Edition (London: Hogarth Press, 1937), p. 239.

[211] See Sarah Waters, *Affinity* (Riverhead, 2000). See also Sarah Waters, *Fingersmith* (Riverhead, 2002). See also Sarah Waters, *The Little Stranger* (Riverhead, 2009).

3.4 Literary Avengers Assemble

Austen is not the only ghost in my story. The Dead Authors Guild group is a literary version of the Marvel Avengers. It functions much like the guilds of the Middle Ages by defending the interests of a trade, in this case writing, and regulating the quality of workmanship.[212] The group consists of accomplished dead writers who have been appointed members and they meet monthly in London at the Authors' Club. These members exist in the after-life world of the guild for two hundred years. Their role is to guide talented apprentice writers, who are very much alive. The setting for the guild meetings is the 'real' Authors' Club which was founded in 1891 and continues to operate in the National Liberal Club at Whitehall Place. [213] Guild members receive assignment to an apprentice when a writer faces a potentially career-ending crisis. This is the premise that throws my protagonist in the pathway of Austen's ghost in 2016 Chawton-Georgianna is struggling in the last year of her postdoctoral fellowship and desperate to prove her literary murder mystery theory in the hopes that it will garner her a book contract that helps to secure a permanent faculty position at the University of California-Berkeley. The Dead Authors Guild member's job is to get the apprentice back on track and prevent them from quitting. Again, I am indulging in a bit of wish fulfilment. What writer has not wished for an experienced mentor who makes house calls? Over the decades, the 'real' Authors Club hosted literary figures ranging from Mark Twain, Frances Hodgson Burnett, Thomas Hardy, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and J. M. Barrie and this inspired the idea of putting Austen in my fictional Authors Club room with writers like Mary Seacole, Beatrix Potter, Charlotte Bronte and Oscar Wilde.

[212] Guilds, *London Lives,* n.d. <https://www.londonlives.org/static/Guilds.jsp> [accessed 2 October 2025].

[213] C. J. Schuler, *Writers, Lovers, Soldiers, Spies: A History of the Authors' Club of London, 1891-2016* (The Authors Club, 2016).

3.5 Putting the Text Back in Intertextuality: Diaries, an Austen Font, and a Secret Book

Paterson Joseph's 2023 historical novel *The Secret Diaries of Charles Ignatius Sancho* inspired me to include diary entries in *DAG*.[214] Joseph's book tells the story of Charles Ignatius Sancho who was the first African prose writer published in England and arguably one of the country's most well-connected and well-known Black men in eighteenth-century England.[215] As the title suggests, the novel is told from the perspective of Sancho conveying his life story through letters to his son. This gives the narrative an immediate sense of intimacy. The use of the diary format is, perhaps, one of the writer's best tools for centring the voice of a character and letting them speak for themselves, as it were. This seems particularly helpful when writing characters who have been marginalized by society. A historical example can be seen in the impact of Anne Lister's diaries with their explicit descriptions of sexual relationships with women in upsetting notions of women's romantic 'friendships' being strictly platonic during the long eighteenth-century period.[216]

In *DAG* I wanted to explore Austen's documented experience of romantic and, potentially, sexual attraction to young Irishman Tom Lefroy during the winter of 1795.[217] It forms Austen's central motivation as she nears the end of her after-life period and requires help finding the lost (fictional) diary chronicling a youthful romance that had included plans to marry and a sexual encounter that resulted in a pregnancy. Lefroy reneged on his marriage plans and she was forced to abandon the baby to the Foundling Hospital in London. Founded by philanthropist Thomas Coram to care for vulnerable babies, the Foundling Hospital cared for 25,000 children from 1741 to 1954 before evolving into its current iterations of children's charity Coram and the Foundling Museum.[218] Austen desperately wants to find out what happened to her daughter and needs Georgianna and Quinn's assistance in tracing her. If writing Jane's ghost character had been difficult at first, writing her (imagined) diary felt wildly intrusive and inappropriate. I am aware of how bizarre that sounds, but it is how I felt as a writer who is both an Austen scholar and Austen superfan. But from a narrative standpoint, it was the most efficient way to cover the Lefroy romance and its consequences. Equally important, this intimate part of Austen's (mostly fictionalized) story needed to be conveyed directly by her twenty-year-old self.

A tool that helped me write the diary despite my reservations was the Jane Austen font created by designer Pia Frauss.[219] Available at no cost for non-profit use, the font is made up of characters hand-written by Austen in publicly accessible documents. It is startlingly similar to her handwriting and was easily downloadable to my Microsoft Word fonts table. Here is an example of the font using the diary's first entry:

23December 1775 , Steventon
Everything is changed. I am changed.

It was an extraordinary experience to draft the diary typing on a normal computer keyboard and see the words appear in Austen's script on the screen. Somehow, this deepened my ability to empathize with her character .

In the midst of a *DAG* re-write, I was editing Austen's first chapter (Chapter Three) when I reached the section describing the rules of the ghost world that cited the Dead Authors Guild's *Book of Member Modus Operandi and Minutiae.* I had thought of the idea initially as a way to show that the guild's senior writers had rules that governed their after-lives. But when I considered the idea further, framing the beginning of each of Austen's chapters with an excerpt from the book that previewed the theme of that chapter could enrich the sense of the supernatural world. As a reader, I love a book-within-a-book and the interpolated tale was a key feature of eighteenth-century fiction. Here is the excerpt at the beginning of Chapter Three:

The Dead Authors Guild
Book of Member Modus Operandi and Minutiae
Chapter One / Section 2
The Material World and Tangible Force

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[214] Joseph, Paterson, *The Secret Diaries of Charles Ignatius Sancho* (New York: Henry Holt, 2023).
[215] Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (Pluto Press, 2018), pp. 95-100.
[216] See Anne Lister, *The Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister*, ed. by Helena Whitbread (Virago Press, 2010).
[217] See letters #1 and #2 in *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. by Deirdre Le Faye, Fourth Edition (Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 1-4.

[218] Ruth McClure, *Coram's Children: The London Foundling Hospital in the Eighteenth Century* (Yale University Press, 1981). See also 'History', Foundling Museum <https://foundlingmuseum.org.uk/our-story/history/>[accessed 10 October 2025].
[219] See Pia Frauss Fonts website <http://www.pia-frauss.de/fonts/ja.htm> [accessed 2 February 2025]. An article on the Jane Austen Summer Program website alerted me to the font's existence. See also Zeina Makky, 'Write Like Jane', Jane Austen Summer Program, 2 October 2019 <https://www.janeaustensummer.org/post/write-like-jane#:~:text=The%20Jane%20Austen%20typeface%2C%20designed,font%20or%20on%20Frauss'%20website.> [accessed 2 February 2025].

Members do not have the capacity to exert lasting tangible force on the material world at any time or in any location. Attempts to circumnavigate this operational rule will be met with the most severe of consequences.

3.6 Creative Practice

The Dead Authors Guild is the fifth novel I have completed. It is the first one written under the framework of a postgraduate degree. There were several motivating factors behind pursuing a doctoral degree, not the least of which was an interest in learning more about marginalized groups in the long eighteenth-century in England. But the biggest one was establishing clear, socially acceptable boundaries around my writing and academic work.[220] Like most writers, my writing life has often been given short shrift due to other necessary responsibilities like family and (non-writing) career. Fitzgerald describes this as 'the struggle between an overwhelming urge to write and a combination of circumstances bent on keeping me from it'.[221] Over two decades of novel writing, I use weekly word count goals for first draft completion. One of the advantages of being a writer is that unlike the artist whose medium is sculpture or dance or music, writing can be accomplished almost anywhere-coffee shops, public libraries, or even tree forts. With *DAG,* Austen's satirical document *Plan of a Novel* inspired me to try one additional writing tool: a non-satirical novel planning document that included premise, plotting, characters, timeline, themes, and rules of the ghost world.[222] It now stretches to fifteen pages and ended up being enormously useful in plotting, something of an Achilles heel for me. The planning document gave me the space to work out major character stories and plotlines *prior* to thrashing them out in a draft. Austen's plotting skill is one of the reasons I keep peeking under the hood of her work, trying to understand how seemingly unrelated subplots all tie into the primary theme by a novel's end.

The novel is the marathon form of the writing world. It demands time, attention, and perseverance. And a lot of words. 85,000 in the case of *DAG.* In my forties, I ran three half-marathons and found the training required a similar kind of discipline. The process of slogging through weeks of seven, ten, and twelve mile runs provided focus, joy, difficulty, and stamina. I believe this is why I keep writing novels. They all start the same way. An idea, usually a character, a situation, a setting that lands within my mind and settles. Over time, the story spreads out, taking up more space until it tugs insistently, perversely to escape its limited interior life. And I will spend a year, or two, or a decade in the case of *The Lost Saints of Tennessee*, putting words on a page until the landscape of the novel becomes as familiar to me as the hallways of my home. The challenge of transforming an internal story world into an external one filled with characters that have never existed before can be endlessly frustrating and, often, devoid of hope that the story can be realized. But it can also be magical. Heady. Enormously satisfying after a good day's work. In a letter to poet Louse Colet, novelist Gustave Flaubert describes the writing process:

> […] for better or worse, it is a delicious thing to write, to be no longer yourself but to move in an entire universe of your own creating. Today, for instance, as man and woman, both lover and mistress, I rode in a forest on an autumn afternoon under the yellow leaves, and I was also the horses, the leaves, the wind, the words my people uttered, even the red sun that made them almost close their love-drowned eyes.[223]

The passage is extraordinary in its articulation of the transcendent experience writing can offer a writer. By creating an entire universe, you are 'no longer yourself'. And for the reader? She is also no longer herself after reading a transformative novel that both reflects elements of her own life experience while also framing a view into lives that are quite different. Novel writing and novel reading is a form of meditation that can collapse 'barriers of space and time and extend our sympathies…And like mythology, an important novel is transformative. If we allow it to do so, it can change us forever.'[224]

It is worth briefly noting here that when I first began writing the short story that became *DAG,* Donald Trump was serving his first term as president of my country. And now as I submit my thesis, he is serving a second presidential term. Political chaos abounds including federal troops in American cities, reversal of a decades long right to abortion for American women, and—relevant to this thesis—a near-tripling of book bans in public schools and an assault on American universities to revoke any diversity, equity and inclusion policies or risk federal funding. The majority of books 'challenged' as inappropriate for school-age children feature characters of colour and/or LGBT characters and/or

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[220] If a writer does not have a publishing contract for a book, the world quickly loses it patience with 'writing work' as a reason not to take on extra responsibility at a 'real' job, escort children to the dentist, or organize a family reunion. However, the world—for better or worse—does recognize what a university degree is and generally accepts the idea that declining something because of a coursework deadline is a worthy endeavour.

[221] F. Scott Fitzgerald quoted in McDermott, p. 197.

[222] Her *Plan of a Novel* lists various unsolicited story suggestions she received as well as cliched plots popular in sentimental-didactic novels. See Thomas Keymer, 'Teenage Writings: Amusement, Effusion, Nonsense' in *Jane Austen Writer in the World,* ed. by Kathryn Sutherland (Bodleian Library, 2017), pp. 16-35 (p. 27).

[223] Gustave Flaubert, *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert*, ed. and trans. by Francis Steegmuller (New York Review of Books, 2023), p. 277.

[224] Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth* (Canongate Books, 2018), pp. 154-55.

promote 'un-American ideals'.[225] In a 2008 speech Toni Morrison spoke about two common responses to perceived chaos: naming and violence.[226] She suggested a third response: stillness. This stillness could manifest as passivity or dumbfoundedness or paralytic fear but, it can also be art.'[227] Authoritarian regimes and dictators work to control artists and sanitize/erase art for nationalistic (or personal) ideals. But the role of the writer is to write back against this. To write the story about the trauma that is 'so deep, so cruel, that…only writers can translate such trauma and turn sorrow into meaning, sharpening the moral imagination''.[228] We need storytelling, myth-making, world-building that opens the world and 'bends not toward the narrow and the absolute but to the extravagant and the possible.'[229] While writing *DAG* has functioned as a form of escape, it has also been an essential exercise in writing myself into existence.

[225] 'The Normalization of Book Banning: Banned in the USA', PEN America, 1 October 2025 <https://pen.org/report/the-normalization-of-book-banning/#heading-6> [accessed 3 October 2025].

[226] Toni Morrison, 'Peril' in *The Source of Self-Regard* (New York: Vintage, 2020), pp. vii-ix.

[227] Morrison, p. viii.

[228] Morrison, p. ix.

[229] Mary Oliver, *Upstream* (Penguin Books, 2016), p. 68.

3.7 Conclusion

Figure 2. Martin Jennings. *Jane Austen.* 2025. Bronze. Winchester Cathedral. Used with permission of the artist. Image by Martin Jennings, used with permission of the artist.

Over the course of the past four years, I have explored Austen's work as the undergirding to contemporary stories about young women (and two young men) finding their way in diverse settings ranging from Pakistan to California. The malleability of her work to inform stories about characters of colour and queer characters only underlines the universality of her themes: young people finding their way amongst complex family and societal expectations. I immersed myself in Austen's biography and the myth/s surrounding her in order to write a novel that explores a contemporary young woman's experience of grief and belonging alongside what Austen herself might have thought of her work's after-life and what her own experiences as a young woman might have been. Austen's work and her life appears to be a mystery never to be solved. But it seems unlikely that anyone, including myself, will tire of trying.

In my examination of decolonizing the canon, I reiterated that I am arguing for an approach that regards the 'canon' as a porous entity that changes over time and is read through different lenses—textual, historical, cultural, economic, gender, sexuality, decoloniality. It is the palimpsest approach envisioned by Bose-an inquisitive cycle that layers innocence with experience, where the most recent layer is lost when covered again and where all layers can be exposed.[230] In this thesis, I have re-visited the Austen canon and its contemporary adaptions along with the Austen biomyth for novelistic purposes to imagine new fictional pathways.

In a stroke of circularity typically reserved for fiction, Winchester Cathedral unveiled a new Jane Austen statue in October of 2025, the month prior to the submission of this thesis, in honour of the 250th anniversary of her birth. The project still raised community concerns and bickering about the appropriateness of the location but not enough to scuttle it as in 2019.[231] She is now fully embodied in an artistic representation that shows her as a tall woman with excellent posture and an open, almost friendly expression. Perhaps a sign that Austen's legacy as a 'saint' may be evolving. Most of all, the statue reveals a human woman-no signs of a demigod or an angel-touching a writing table where an open book and ink pot rest, as if anchoring her to her writing practice and, ultimately, to us.

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[230]Bose, p.110.

[231]Charlotte Andrews, 'Jane Austen anniversary sculpture given go-ahead', *BBC News*, 9 August 2024 <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cvg3d0vwm2xo> [accessed 28 March 2025]

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