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Online Engagement in the Public Humanities with Jane Austen & Co.

Jane Austen & Co. (<https://www.janeaustenandco.org>) is a free online lecture and discussion series hosted by the Jane Austen Summer Program. Jane Austen & Co. uses the enduring popularity of Jane Austen as a springboard to explore historical concepts and texts that broaden attendees' perspectives of the Regency period by exploring topics such as gender, race, empire, and global trade. As such, we do not focus solely on the life and writings of Jane Austen but on the overarching contexts about the world she lived in, as well as diverse representations of Austen's works in modern adaptations. We also occasionally feature authors of Austen adaptations for readings and Q&As.

I founded Jane Austen & Co. in 2019 as a reading group at a local public library, but with the pandemic, I transitioned it into an online lecture series with my co-director Dr. Inger Brodey (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill). We have had three digital series thus far; I have included a full list of our talks and series at the end of this paper. Each event includes a 40-minute talk followed by a vibrant Q&A that typically lasts for another 30-40 minutes. After the talk, we follow up by sending attendees a bibliography of readings, with as many open-access sources as possible (you can see an example [here](#)).

Jane Austen & Co. has seen high audience engagement during the past year. Our best attended lecture, Devoney Looser's "Slavery, Anti-Slavery, and the Austen Family" received 390 simultaneous audience members. Other high performing events have included "Global Fashion in the Age of Jane Austen" (330 audience members), "Lord Mansfield and the Slave Ship Zong" (305 attendees), and "Wedgwood, Abolition, and the Female Consumer" (299 attendees). This success has taught us some valuable lessons about public interest in the humanities, but each lesson brings new challenges. These lessons can be succinctly summarized as:

1. Material culture and social history tend to be more popular over literary history and theory. It is sometimes a struggle to convince audiences to read even short page-long readings before a talk, despite the demand for bibliographies following the talks. It is difficult to market and engage viewers on talks about media or authors that the audience is unfamiliar with—even if the goal is to introduce them to a new author.
2. It is vital to include opportunities for audience engagement and participation. On Zoom, we make ample use of both the Q&A and chat function. We typically enjoy a robust chat during events. Participants will often share experiences, discuss questions, and suggest further readings of their own. The chat function allows the lectures to feel as though they are not a passive experience for attendees. It unfortunately cannot be easily muted for those who are uninterested. Furthermore, the ephemeral nature of the chat means that it is unavailable to audience members after the event, and it signals the need for increased online engagement after the talk.

As a literary scholar, one of my goals is to encourage further people to read texts, especially ones that defy conventional perspectives of history. Since, as stated, literary events tend to be less popular among attendees, I would love to discuss strategies to increase engagement about literary or media studies topics. I am also very interested in forms of public humanities discourse that push beyond the traditional lecture and essay formats, and I am eager to learn about projects that encourage various forms of community feedback and discourse. Community creation within our program is a top priority for me; I am eager to learn ways to encourage and facilitate conversations that last beyond our events.

Series and Title List

All recorded talks available at <http://www.janeaustenandco.org/recorded-events>

Asia and the Regency series:

- Ogawa Kimiyo “Jane Austen’s Influence on Japanese Realist Novels” (Nov. 19, 2021)
- Hilary Davidson “Global Fashion in the Age of Jane Austen” (Dec. 2 2021)
- Peter Sabor “From Xo Ho to Mi Li: Horace Walpole and China” (Dec.16 2021)
- Harada Noriyuki “Translation and Transformation of *Pride and Prejudice* in Japan” (Jan. 13 2022)
- Tristanne Connolly “*Emma* in Bollywood: the Small World of *Aisha*” (Jan. 27 2022)
- Barnita Bagchi “Jane Austen and India, Jane Austen in India” (Feb. 11 2022)
- Takakuwa Haruko “*Pride and Prejudice* as *Angels’ Ladder*: Jane Austen in Takarazuka Musical Theatre” (Feb. 17 2022)
- Markman Ellis “Jane Austen and the British Way of Tea” (Mar. 24 2022)
- Karen Yamashita “*Sansei and Sensibility*” (Apr. 22 2022)

Race and the Regency series:

- Devoney Looser “Slavery, Anti-Slavery, and the Austen Family” (May 18, 2021)
- Juliette Wells “Teaching Jane Austen and Diversity” (May 4, 2021)
- Gretchen Gerzina “The Black Woman in Nineteenth Century Studies” (Apr. 27, 2021)
- Damianne Scott “*Bridgerton*’s Queen Charlotte is Playing to the Masses and It’s About Time” (Apr. 13, 2021)
- Lyndon Dominique “Political Blackness in *The Woman of Colour*” (Apr. 6, 2021)
- Robert Morrison “Making No Difference in Colour or Character: Depictions of Race in *Bridgerton* and the Regency” (Mar. 25, 2021)
- Patricia Matthew “I Hope White Hands: Wedgwood, Abolition, and the Female Consumer” (Mar. 16, 2021)
- Ibi Zoboi, “Remixing *Pride and Prejudice*: A Conversation with Ibi Zoboi” (Feb 15, 2021)
- Danielle Christmas, “Lord Mansfield and the Slave Ship Zong” (Feb. 4, 2021)

Staying Home with Jane Austen series:

- Lauren Gunderson and Margot Melcon, “Christmas at Pemberley: A Conversation with Margot Melcon and Lauren Gunderson” (Dec. 13, 2020)
- Jo Baker, “Upstairs, Downstairs with Jane Austen: A Conversation with Jo Baker” (Nov. 18, 2020)
- Kim Wilson, “Gardening with Jane Austen,” (Nov. 5, 2020)
- Susan Allen Ford, “Reading with Jane Austen,” (Oct. 20, 2020)
- Jo Ann Staples, “Playing Games with Jane Austen” (Sept. 3, 2020)
- Suzannah Fullerton, “Dancing with Jane Austen,” (Aug. 25, 2020)
- Jeanice Brooks, “Making Music with Jane Austen,” (Aug. 11, 2020)
- Jenny Batchelor, “Crafting with Jane Austen,” (Jul. 23, 2020)
- Hilary Davidson, “Dressing with Jane Austen,” (Jul. 9, 2020)
- KC Hysmith, “Eating with Jane Austen,” (Jun. 30, 2020)
- Sonia Kamal and Sonali Dev, “Food, Family, and Identity with Sonia Kamal and Sonali Dev,” (Jun. 4, 2020)