

## Revisiting Mansfield Park: The Critical and Literary Legacies of Edward W. Said's Essay "Jane Austen and Empire" in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993)

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*Edward W. Said's seminal essay "Jane Austen and Empire" exhorts critics to attend to novels' "historical valances." Yet advances in British imperial history show that Said underestimated the extent of country houses' Caribbean and East India Company links. Historians of British imperial history have yet to reflect directly on the implications of these discoveries for the critical legacy of Said's essay. Informed by twenty years of critical debate, I explain why research into country houses' colonial connections warrants a definitive modification of Said's view on Austen. Correspondingly, the article considers the literary legacy of Said's essay on Austen in three texts: John Agard's poem "Mansfield Park Revisited" (2006), Jo Baker's novel Longbourn (2013), and Catherine Johnson's novel The Curious Tale of the Lady Caraboo (2015). Agard, Baker, and Johnson are heirs of both Austen and Said, whose writings continue to shape postcolonial renderings of the English countryside.*

**Keywords:** Edward W. Said, Jane Austen, black British history, country houses, postcolonial ruralities

In *Slavery and the British Country House*, Madge Dresser and Andrew Hann observe that country houses are potent "symbol[s] of refinement, connoisseurship and civility ... and iconic signifier[s] of national identity."<sup>1</sup> Yet, as they argue, this high-flown rhetoric is undermined by such houses' colonial connections. In recent years a wealth of Caribbean and East India Company links have been recovered from the historical record.<sup>2</sup> In the light of these discoveries, Edward W. Said's exhortation to attend to novels' "historical valences" remains crucial.<sup>3</sup> The exhortation appears in

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1 Madge Dresser and Andrew Hann, *Slavery and the British Country House* (London: English Heritage, 2013), xiii.

2 See Stephanie Barczewski, *Country Houses and the British Empire, 1700–1930* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 2014); Paula Byrne, *Belle* (London: William Collins, 2014); Catherine Hall, Keith MacClelland, Nick Draper, and Katie Donington, *Legacies of British Slave Ownership* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Margot Finn and Kate Smith, eds., *New Pathways to Public History* (London: Palgrave, 2015); Miranda Kaufmann, "Thoughts on Belle." Blog entry June 26, 2015, www.mirandakaufmann.com/blog/thoughts-on-belle.

3 Edward Said, "Jane Austen and Empire," *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1993), 107.

Said's seminal essay on *Mansfield Park*, "Jane Austen and Empire," first published in *Culture and Imperialism* in 1993. However, advances in the field of British imperial history reveal that "Jane Austen and Empire" has proved an inexact historical guide: Said considerably underestimated country houses' ties to empire. Historians have yet to reflect directly on the implications of their discoveries for Said's reading of *Mansfield Park*. Accordingly, the first half of my article undertakes this task. Informed by some twenty years of critical debate, this essay explains why current research into country houses' colonial connections warrants a definitive modification of his view on Austen. From here, I consider the legacy of "Jane Austen and Empire" to contemporary writers, a task that reaffirms Said's principle of attending closely to "historical valances." This is not merely due to new historical knowledge, but because contemporary British authors are actively rewriting English rurality in the light of such knowledge. Examined in the second part of the essay are three literary works that demonstrate the ongoing relevance of "Jane Austen and Empire" to contemporary British writing about the countryside. They are John Agard's poem "Mansfield Park Revisited" (2006), Jo Baker's novel *Longbourn* (2013), and Catherine Johnson's novel *The Curious Tale of the Lady Caraboo* (2015).<sup>4</sup> In their own ways, Agard, Baker, and Johnson are heirs of both Austen (in modified view) and Said, whose writings continue to shape literary re-conceptions of the English countryside.

Before considering the contemporary literary legacy of "Jane Austen and Empire," this article critically examines the historical foundations of Said's essay. This endeavor inexorably leads to a reading of *Mansfield Park*—and indeed of colonial Britain itself—that is apiece with today's historical thinking on Britain's imperial past. Historians increasingly see colonialism's cultural, economic, and material legacies as more formative of modern Britain than even Said suggested. Contemporary writing increasingly registers this perspective. There is a proliferation of responses to new evidence of rural England's eighteenth- and nineteenth-century black presence. Besides the primary texts examined by this article, many other relevant plays, poems, and films are identified in my conclusion: these collectively represent historically informed new visions of black English rurality. My article confines itself to three distinct iterations of the literary response to Said's thoughts on Austen. Taking a chronological approach to the works by Agard, Baker, and Johnson, I suggest that Said's reading of *Mansfield Park* has yielded to increasingly complex and geographically wide-ranging literary understandings of country houses' material and cultural connection to empire.

In "Jane Austen and Empire," Said argues that novels by Austen and her contemporaries are wilfully silent about colonial cruelty and indifferent to enslaved people's resistance to their oppression. Colonial writers like Kipling and Conrad, he contends, "are prepared for by Austen and Thackeray, Defoe, Scott and Dickens."<sup>5</sup> Among the essay's most widely quoted declarations is that "it is genuinely troubling to see how little Britain's great humanistic ideas ... stand in the way of the accelerating imperial process."<sup>6</sup>

4 John Agard, *We Brits* (Tarsset, England: Bloodaxe, 2006); Jo Baker, *Longbourn* (London: Black Swan, 2013); Catherine Johnson, *The Curious Tale of the Lady Caraboo* (London: Penguin, 2015).

5 Said, "Jane Austen and Empire," 114.

6 *Ibid.*, 97.

Said argues that *Mansfield Park* promotes “a domestic imperialist culture without which Britain’s subsequent acquisition of territory would not have been possible.”<sup>7</sup> He believes that Austen’s novel is agnostic about the extent to which slave-produced wealth funded luxurious lifestyles.<sup>8</sup> His view is that *Mansfield Park* highlights Sir Thomas Bertram’s plantation wealth, which “mak[es] possible his values to which Fanny Price (and Austen herself) finally subscribes.”<sup>9</sup> In the light of new country house research, I ask why, and in what ways, Said’s reading of *Mansfield Park* can be authoritatively challenged from a historical perspective. More than two decades have passed since “Jane Austen and Empire” was published. Said’s pioneering essay has rightly retained its critical currency for contemporary scholars working across multiple fields of enquiry, due to Said’s innovation of contrapuntal reading and, crucially, the principle of linking literary works with cultural imperialism in the first place. My article considers the implications the essay’s *historical* oversights in the light of what we now know.

Country houses have complex, multiple connections to slave-derived wealth.<sup>10</sup> From the 1670s to the early twentieth century, as many as one in six country houses were purchased by merchants whose fortunes depended on colonial trade.<sup>11</sup> After 1700, many newly acquired estates were developed in the countryside surrounding the major slaving ports of Bristol, Liverpool, London, and Glasgow.<sup>12</sup> Country houses were owned by men who insured slave ships or plantations, or who participated in parliamentary debates on issues that affected their own financial interests, such as abolition or East India Company trade.<sup>13</sup> As Margot Finn explains, historians are overturning the conventional academic view that “the British empire made few material demands and had little ... material impact on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British society and culture.”<sup>14</sup> A striking example of this phenomenon is the case of the Hibbert family, which—over three generations—progressed from merchants to planters, eventually financing London docks with sugar money, lobbying Parliament against abolition and establishing themselves in country houses, where the origins of their wealth were gradually forgotten.<sup>15</sup>

British commemorations of slavery tend to focus on abolition,<sup>16</sup> but a range of scholars—including Finn, Catherine Hall, and David Olusoga—are instead emphasising the ways in which slave-related profiteering shaped Britain’s architectural,

7 *Ibid.*, 114.

8 *Ibid.*, 78.

9 *Ibid.*, 73.

10 The “Legacies of British Slave Ownership” project has investigated the importance of compensation to slave owners for lost profits following slavery’s abolition. As Sanchez Manning observes, 3,000 wealthy British families received the modern equivalent of £16.5 billion in compensation from the British government in 1833, representing 40 percent of the Treasury’s annual budget (8).

11 Barczewski, *Country Houses and the British Empire, 1700–1930*, 122.

12 *Ibid.*, 123.

13 Kaufmann blog, 1.

14 Finn and Smith, *New Paths to Public History*, 5.

15 “Transforming Capital: Slavery, Family, Commerce and the Making of the Hibbert Family” in Hall et al., *Legacies of British Slave Ownership*, 203.

16 Janet Todd, *Jane Austen in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 11; Kowaleski-Wallace Elizabeth, *The British Slave Trade and Public Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 111.

cultural, rural, and economic life.<sup>17</sup> Their insights invite some reassessment of Said's major source, *The Country and the City*. Said inherits his tendency to understate country houses' colonial ties from Williams's own incomplete commentary on these links. Some passages in Williams's book recognize colonialism's relationship to country estates, but this relationship is articulated in very general terms. Williams writes: "[i]mportant parts of the country house system, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, were built upon the profits of [imperial] trade."<sup>18</sup> Williams knows that rural society is structured by colonial earnings: "[s]pices, sugar, tea, coffee, tobacco, gold and silver," he writes, "fed as mercantile profits, into an English social order."<sup>19</sup> Many of the countryside's colonial connections, however, remained undiscovered in Williams's day. Although his 1979 documentary<sup>20</sup> rightly suggests that Tatton Hall was "refurbished with colonial wealth," for example, the film's director recalls that insufficient evidence was then available to substantiate the claim.<sup>21</sup> Since the publication of both *The Country and the City* and *Culture and Imperialism*, researchers' focus has extended beyond slavery alone. Research into the East India Company,<sup>22</sup> particularly, has detailed very precisely how colonialism shaped country house architecture, domestic arrangements, and material culture.<sup>23</sup>

In the spirit of attending to texts' "worldliness," Austen scholars have since conducted exhaustive research into the colonial dimensions of *Mansfield Park*.<sup>24</sup> Many critics challenge Said's reading of *Mansfield Park* on the grounds that it underestimates the strength of Austen's pro-abolitionist feeling.<sup>25</sup> In *The Postcolonial Jane Austen*, Moira Ferguson and Elaine Jordon argue that Said overlooks the gender dimensions of abolitionist campaigns,<sup>26</sup> for which support was almost standard among women of Austen's generation.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, Doody and Paula Byrne have each

17 Hall et al., *Legacies of British Slave Ownership*; Finn and Smith, *New Pathways to Public History*; David Olusoga, *Black and British: A Forgotten History* (London: Macmillan, 2016), xxi.

18 Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973), 279–80.

19 Williams, *The Country and the City*, 280.

20 This documentary is not in general circulation. It is directed by Mike Dibb and called *The Country and the City* (after the book). It was first broadcast on BBC1 in 1979. Mike Dibb, "Introduction to Raymond Williams's 1979 film *The Country and the City*," conference paper given at "Re-Imagining Rurality" Conference, University of Westminster (February 27–28, 2015).

21 Corinne Fowler, "The Rural Turn in Contemporary Writing by Black and Asian Britons," *Interventions* 19.3 (2016): 395–415, 1.

22 See also Leverhulme's "East India Company at Home, 1757–1857" project based at UCL in London: <http://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/eicah/>. This project generated a number of detailed case studies of individual houses' relationship to East India Company trade. A large number of voluntary associate researchers joined this co-production project and considerably expanded the historical knowledge-base in a relatively short period of three years.

23 Finn and Smith, *New Paths to Public History*, 5.

24 You-Mee Park and Raja Rajan, *The Postcolonial Austen* (Oxon, England: Routledge, 2000), 3.

25 Park and Rajan, *The Postcolonial Austen*, 8; Marcus Wood, *Slavery, Empathy and Pornography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Margaret Doody, *Jane Austen's Names: Riddles, Persons, Places* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015).

26 Moira Ferguson and Elaine Jordon in *The Postcolonial Austen*, 7. For more information about the pressure that women abolitionist campaigners placed upon William Wilberforce to call for an immediate end to abolition, see the AHRC project, *Women's Writing in the Midlands, 1750–1850*, based at the University of Leicester and led by Dr. Felicity James. See [www2.le.ac.uk/departments/english/research/womens-writing-in-the-midlands-1750-1850](http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/english/research/womens-writing-in-the-midlands-1750-1850).

27 Park and Rajan, *The Postcolonial Austen*, 9.

comprehensively demonstrated that close attention to character and place names rewards the active reader.<sup>28</sup> They both argue that “Mansfield” references Lord Chief Justice Mansfield, who ruled in 1772 that slavery on English soil was unsupported by common law.<sup>29</sup> Byrne also points out that Hawkins (after the slaver John Hawkins) is the maiden name of Mrs. Elton in *Emma*, and her father—the novel hints—was himself a slave trader.<sup>30</sup> Norris (given to the spiteful Mrs. Norris) almost certainly alludes to the brutal slave captain John Norris, who is condemned by an abolitionist historian, Thomas Clarkson, whom Austen admired.<sup>31</sup> Having referenced the names of major players on both sides of the slavery debate, Austen accordingly aligns her characters with mean-spiritedness and ill-feeling. Mrs. Elton—nee Hawkins—is a dislikeable snob. Maria Bertram, who moves into the slave-owning Lascelles’ former residence, is fickle. Mrs. Norris is petty and interfering. This last point undermines Said’s perspective on Sir Thomas’s final judgement about Mrs. Norris, who is happily “dislodged” from his family affairs.<sup>32</sup> If Mrs. Norris was named after a slave-trader, and Mansfield Park was named after a man who prevented slavery on British soil, then Sir Thomas’s reflections acquire a political dimension. Not only is he anxious for his wealth to be disassociated with its point of origin, but his self-seeking relatives begin to look like the morally bankrupt offspring of an economic system that relies on colonial cruelty.

It is necessary to the purpose of assessing Said’s legacy to briefly consider how critics have contested his reading of the “dead silence,” which follows Fanny’s question about slavery to Sir Thomas.<sup>33</sup> Interpretations of this scene are multiple and conflicting. While Said sees this “dead silence” as indicating the novel’s suppression of discussions about slavery and enslaved people’s resistance to slavery,<sup>34</sup> subsequent criticism has variously construed it as hinting at Sir Thomas’s guilty conscience<sup>35</sup> or else his children’s indifference, which the reader is invited to condemn.<sup>36</sup> Marcus Wood compellingly argues that Austen did not detail slaves’ suffering because it was well worn and an emotionally charged topic to which Austen’s readers had, by then, been exposed for some decades.<sup>37</sup> Wood conjectures that the infamous silence is explained by Austen’s consciousness that polemical writing about slavery was by then “passé.”<sup>38</sup> Although Said takes the novel’s lack of detailed reference to Antigua as evidence of British double standards, whereby humanist values are not considered relevant to colonized people,<sup>39</sup> Wood proposes that “Austen is more profoundly, and

28 The phrase “active reader” refers back to John Wiltshire’s observation that Austen invites “an active reading” of her work. See John Wiltshire, “Exploring *Mansfield Park*. In the Footsteps of Fanny Price,” *Persuasions* 28 (2006): 69–99.

29 Byrne, *Belle*, 249; Doody, *Jane Austen’s Names: Riddles, Persons, Places*, 336.

30 Byrne, *Belle*, 245.

31 Byrne, *Belle*, 249.

32 Said, “Jane Austen and Empire,” 110.

33 Park and Rajan, *The Postcolonial Austen*, 9; Todd, *Jane Austen in Context*, 105.

34 Said, “Jane Austen and Empire,” 101.

35 Park and Rajan, *The Postcolonial Austen*, 9.

36 Bartine and McGuire, “Contrapuntal Critical Readings of Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*: Resolving the Paradox,” *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 1.1 (2009): 32–56, esp. 40.

37 Wood, *Slavery, Empathy and Pornography*, 300.

38 *Ibid.*, 300.

39 Said, “Jane Austen and Empire,” 97.

more ingeniously, critical of slavery than has so far been assumed.”<sup>40</sup> Wood finds fault in Said’s repeated declaration that Austen does not question the ethics of sugar wealth.<sup>41</sup> On the contrary, Wood argues, “[f]or those with eyes to see,” *Mansfield Park* “contains a caustic assault on the moral basis of British colonial slavery.”<sup>42</sup> As I argue, work on country houses’ Caribbean and East India connections confirms the insights of Wood in *Slavery, Empathy and Pornography*, and Margaret Doody in *Jane Austen’s Names: Riddles, Persons, Places*. These historical findings suggest far more elaborate, widespread, and complex links between country houses and empire than either Williams or Said were aware. These discoveries merit renewed critical alertness to the historical sensibility of *Mansfield Park* (1814) before turning to the related question of how contemporary writers have responded to this sensibility.

Said’s essay “Jane Austen and Empire” persuasively and influentially extends Williams’s reflections on country houses. Scholars have, however, consistently criticized Said’s treatment of textual evidence from *Mansfield Park*. I want to extend these insights by demonstrating precisely how new historical insights further lend further support to earlier critics’ claims that Said overlooks the nuances of character in Austen’s work. Like any novel, *Mansfield Park* both promotes and discourages sympathy with its various protagonists. Said substantiates his claim that the novel supports, or is indifferent toward, colonial profiteering by alluding to the following request by Lady Bertram: “William must not forget my shawl if he goes to the East Indies.”<sup>43</sup> Yet the novel depicts Lady Bertram as lazy, self-centered, and lacking in moral judgment. She is troubled neither by the source of Sir Thomas’s wealth nor the moral corruption that his involvement with slavery engenders.<sup>44</sup> Nonetheless, Said sees Lady Bertram’s materialistic request for a shawl as evidence of the novel’s tendency to “repress ... a rich and complex history, which has since achieved a status that the Bertrams, the Prices and Austen herself would not, could not, recognise.”<sup>45</sup> Said conflates Austen’s own views with a character whose personality Austen makes ridiculous. He reads Austen in isolation:<sup>46</sup> Lady Bertram’s representation is consistent with novelistic portrayals of the period. As Sara Salih suggests, characters associated with Caribbean plantations are routinely aligned with “indolence ... luxury ... [and] feebleness of constitution.”<sup>47</sup> If anything, Lady Bertram’s shawl episode parodies the tastes of the newly rich, who crave expensive goods from British colonies. It is the laughable Lady Bertram who entertains Williams to bring back “anything else that is worth having.”<sup>48</sup> The *nature* of her request exposes her to further ridicule, since she muddles the East Indies with the West Indies, a muddle which readers are likely to realize<sup>49</sup> and which Said explains away as “a fit of

40 Wood, *Slavery, Empathy and Pornography*, 296.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid., 298.

43 Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (London: Penguin, 2006 [1814]), 296.

44 Wood, *Slavery, Empathy and Pornography*, 311.

45 Said, “Jane Austen and Empire,” 111.

46 Said refers to other canonical works in the essay, including Thackeray and Kipling.

47 Sara Salih, “The Silence of Miss Lambe: *Sanditon* and Contextual Fictions of ‘Race’ in the Abolition Era,” *Eighteenth Century Fiction* 18.3 (2006): 329–53, esp. 335.

48 Austen, *Mansfield Park*, 252.

49 Wood, *Slavery, Empathy and Pornography*, 303.



distracted impatience.”<sup>50</sup> So far, I have summarized critical objections to Said’s reading of *Lady Bertram* by Wood and Salih. Yet there are further indications that Austen’s subtlety may have eluded Said due to a deficit in historical knowledge at the time. Indications of Austen’s distaste for the upper-class consumption of empire is not restricted to *Lady Bertram*’s unsympathetic character alone. It is also suggested by a link that Austen draws between the Bertrams and the real-life Lascelles family. The Lascelles are mentioned when Maria Bertram takes over their family residence in London following her marriage to Mr. Rushworth. This allusion to the Lascelles is telling, although Said does not comment on it. Yet, as Doody argues: “[n]ames of places and persons in Austen’s novels are chosen with ... care”: a name “is never insignificant.”<sup>51</sup> Doody points out that the Lascelles’ fortune came from the notoriously irresponsible Henry Lascelles of Yorkshire, who enriched himself with the Barbados slave trade and who was a central figure in the South Sea bubble disaster.<sup>52</sup> Of dubious origin, this wealth was used to build Harwood House in Yorkshire. The name Lascelles could scarcely be more symbolically freighted, and it is hard to see Austen’s reference to the family as coincidental. John Wiltshire argues that “Austen’s narrative art ... is to keep historical material recessed ... [as] an invitation to active reading.”<sup>53</sup>

Here, I wish to amplify Doody’s reading of the Austen reference to the Lascelles family by attending to recent research into the origins of Harewood House. The Lascelles built Harewood House with Caribbean sugar money, but the real-life household also cherished items that were transported to Britain by the East India Company. The case of *Lady Bertram*’s shawl highlights the relevance of recent work on the East India Company’s impact on upper-class domesticity, historical research that further challenges Said’s understanding of Austen’s perspective on the colonial geographies of country estates. Here again, it is necessary to return to a connection that Austen makes between the real-life Lascelles and the fictional Bertrams. Life imitates art: one of these items is a valuable cashmere shawl from India, belonging to the Countess of Harewood. The shawl can be seen in her portrait,<sup>54</sup> painted four decades after the publication of Austen’s novel. The art historian, Jennifer van Schoor, observes that the Countess’s shawl is critical to her self-fashioning. In keeping with elaborate imperialist codes of the time, the shawl represents an attempt to obscure the unsavory origins of the Lascelles’ wealth by symbolizing pedigree and respectability.<sup>55</sup> This cultural encodement explains its desirability to women like *Lady Bertram*, who are anxious to establish their respectability and to secure their place in the local aristocracy. Like the Lascelles, the Bertrams are newly enriched by slave-produced sugar. The tacit association between the Bertrams and the Lascelles makes it doubtful that Austen wishes to “repress ... a rich and complex history” as Said suggests.<sup>56</sup>

50 Said, “Jane Austen and Empire,” 111.

51 Doody, *Jane Austen’s Names: Riddles, Persons, Places*, 4.

52 *Ibid.*, 126.

53 Wiltshire, “Exploring *Mansfield Park*. In the Footsteps of Fanny Price,” 99–100.

54 The portrait was completed in 1856.

55 Jennifer van Schoor, “The Indian Folds at Harwood House.” Conference paper given at “The East India Company at Home, 1757–1857 at UCL in London, July 11–12, 2014.

56 Said, “Jane Austen and Empire,” 111.

Not only does Lady Bertram's request testify to the demand for luxury colonial items, but it casts this demand in a negative light: the shawl is required to cover up her husband's dubious dealings abroad.

As I have argued, Said does not read *Mansfield Park* in conjunction with Austen's other novels. Her unfinished novel, *Sanditon* (1817), further complicates his position because it contains a mixed-race character, Miss Lambe.<sup>57</sup> As a wealthy heiress brought from the Caribbean to receive an English education, Miss Lambe resembles Dido Belle, the adopted daughter and blood relation of Lord Mansfield, who lived at Kenwood House.<sup>58</sup> Austen knew Dido's cousin and possibly met Dido herself.<sup>59</sup> Like Dido, Miss Lambe is freeborn, with an income of her own. Like Dido, Miss Lambe is "half mulatto."<sup>60</sup> Said is right to encourage close attention to the novel's "historical valences,"<sup>61</sup> but post-millennial discoveries about Dido, and Austen's personal association with her, suggest that Austen and her readers were familiar with an aspect of British history that Said leaves untouched: the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century black presence in British cities and country estates.

The critical work on *Sanditon* demonstrates the value of placing canonical writers' work in the context of middlebrow writing from the period, especially when it comes to assessing Said's reading of Austen. Although Miss Lambe signals a new direction in Austen's fiction, "mulatto" characters appear in earlier novels by Elizabeth Helme, Helena Wells, and Amelia Opie.<sup>62</sup> Elaine Jordon observes that Charlotte Bronte and William Makepeace Thackeray also wrote about "mulatto" schoolgirls and heiresses, suggesting that, though Miss Lambe is a minor character, such figures were far from "minor to Austen's concerns, and to English literature [and] identity."<sup>63</sup> Had *Sanditon* been completed, the figure of Miss Lambe<sup>64</sup> seems unlikely to have surprised its first readers. The issue of *Sanditon* confirms the wisdom of Said's exhortation to explore the "historical valences" of Austen's work,<sup>65</sup> even if new evidence leads us to qualify Said's own conclusions.

How, then, can historically informed rereadings of novels like *Mansfield Park* assist in the task of determining material culture's relationship to empire? Historians have written at length about the popularity of wood that was imported from British

57 Jane Austen, *Lady Susan, The Watsons and Sanditon* (London: Penguin, 2003 [1817]).

58 Byrne, *Belle*, 9; Doody, *Jane Austen's Names: Riddles, Persons, Places*, 336.

59 Byrne, *Belle*, 105; Doody, *Jane Austen's Names: Riddles, Persons, Places*, 337.

60 Austen, *Lady Susan, The Watsons and Sanditon*, 206.

61 Said, "Jane Austen and Empire," 107.

62 Salih, "The Silence of Miss Lambe: *Sanditon* and Contextual Fictions of 'Race' in the Abolition Era," 332–40.

63 Elaine Jordon in Park and Rajan, *The Postcolonial Austen*, 32. Jordon suggests that "Miss Fitzgibbon," in Bronte's unfinished novel *Emma*, appears to be the model for Miss Lambe. She also believes that "Miss Fitzgibbon could have been Jane [Eyre] the suffering schoolgirl and Bertha the tormented creole, in one person." Like Miss Lambe, she is left at a school by a "West Indian" guardian or parent and is the wealthiest pupil. When her fees are unpaid, the schoolmistress's neighbor suggests that she is sold as a slave to pay for her fees. Jordon also notes that Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* has a Miss Swartz (black) who is initially a schoolgirl (Jordon in Park and Rajan, *The Postcolonial Austen*, 31–32).

64 Postcolonial critics argue that Miss Lambe is denied a voice in *Sanditon* (Salih; Jordon in Park and Rajan). Doody believes that this silence has been overplayed, however, because Austen put down her pen just as Miss Lambe arrives in *Sanditon* (211).

65 Said, "Jane Austen and Empire," 107.



colonies, such as mahogany and rosewood. *Mansfield Park's* omniscient narrator observes that a "profusion of mahogany" was installed at Sotherton Court "fifty years back," in about 1757.<sup>66</sup> Literary editors of *Mansfield Park* have suggested that such details are an "historical anachronism."<sup>67</sup> Relying on the *Oxford English Dictionary* as their source, M. P. Chapman and Kathryn Sutherland both conclude that Austen made a mistake. Yet Austen's reference to mahogany is strikingly accurate. The country house historian Barczewski states that "[a]mong the upper classes, mahogany from the West Indies as the most popular; by 1750 nearly £30,000 worth was being imported every year,"<sup>68</sup> the decade in which the mahogany is installed at Sotherton Court. Not only does this detail provide further evidence that Austen provides an oblique commentary on the consumption of colonial goods by wealthy Britons, but it also supports historians' broader observation that these goods were a familiar feature of upper-class domesticity, as illustrated by Lady Bertram's shawl and the mahogany floor at Sotherton.<sup>69</sup>

Other historical work helps to enhance the insights of *The Country and the City*, on which Said so depends. Williams's book recognizes that colonial wealth initiated important shifts in rural social organization.<sup>70</sup> Said's essay likewise addresses the issue of new money, but restricts its observations to the source of Sir Thomas's wealth in Antigua. Historians have since addressed these questions in greater detail. Families that were enriched by colonial profiteering frequently removed themselves from British centers of trade and set up house in the countryside.<sup>71</sup> Dresser observes that, around Bristol alone, the owners of at least forty-two rural properties had West Indian or African business associations.<sup>72</sup> These incoming families habitually procured their entry into rural upper-class society by donating benevolent funds to local colleges, schools, and hospitals. In this way, they became progressively associated with their chosen places of settlement and appearing correspondingly remote from the foreign sources of their wealth.<sup>73</sup> *Mansfield Park* is depicted as a recently built house, suggesting that the Bertrams are relative newcomers. The need to establish local influence further explains the need for symbolic mantles of respectability, such as Lady Bertram's shawl, as well as highlighting Austen's subtle engagement with the desire to obscure the colonial origins of new money.

Year by year, it is becoming increasingly evident how unreliable plantation wealth really was.<sup>74</sup> While Said suggests that Sir Thomas's plantations "guarantee" *Mansfield Park's* stability, historical hindsight makes it likely that Sir Thomas's income will

66 Austen, *Mansfield Park*, 71.

67 Katherine Sutherland, ed., "Introduction to Austen," *Mansfield Park*, xi.

68 Barczewski, *Country Houses and the British Empire, 1700–1930*, 122. David Selwyn notes that Georgian families preferred exotic woods to oak. Austen herself had a mahogany writing desk bought in 1794. See Todd, *Jane Austen in Context*, 221.

69 There is a gendered aspect to the nature of empire's domestic commodification. Kathryn Sutherland observes that Fanny's role is to translate foreign paintings into the domestic realm, "to bring things home, to commodify goodness" (xxv).

70 Williams, *The Country and the City*, 280.

71 Donington, *Legacies of British Slave Ownership*, 214.

72 Dresser and Hann, *Slavery and the British Country House*, Introduction and 14.

73 Donington, *Legacies of British Slave Ownership*, 204.

74 Dresser and Hann, *Slavery and the British Country House*, 5.

remain insecure and potentially ruinous. Whichever the precipitating event that sends Sir Thomas to Antigua,<sup>75</sup> and though he regains control over his plantations, history shows that this control will almost certainly be temporary. Said's own acknowledgment of this forthcoming decline undermines his statement that sugar wealth "guarantee[s]" the estate's stability. Said does not connect this instability with the novel's plot. In the world of *Mansfield Park*, sugar wealth is less sustainable than the honest, frugal income earned by clergymen like Edmund, in parsonages with modest gardens like Thornton Lacey. Fanny's husband earns his money at home, not abroad. The novel's historically charged challenge to the wisdom of relying on colonial profits makes it doubtful that it straightforwardly complies with the practice of "assum[ing] and enjoy[ing] the experience of empire,"<sup>76</sup> as Said asserts.

In "Jane Austen and Empire," Said asks "why [... Austen] gave [... Sir Thomas's plantation wealth] the importance she did, and why indeed she made the choice, for she might have done something different to establish Sir Thomas's wealth."<sup>77</sup> The clear answer to this question is that Austen's novel was published at a time when the slave trade was visibly evident. Liverpool alone was responsible for 84 percent of Britain's transatlantic trade in slaves and nearly 55 percent of trade worldwide.<sup>78</sup> The 1887 letters of historian Gomer Williams record that the city's town hall displayed "busts of blackamoors and elephants, emblematical of the African trade."<sup>79</sup> The Brontë critic Humphrey Gawthrop also records that Austen's favorite historian, "Thomas Clarkson ... saw in the windows of a Liverpool shop leg-shackles, handcuffs, thumb-screws, and mouth-openers for force-feeding used on board the slavers."<sup>80</sup> Given this visibility, it would seem strange for Austen to have made any other "choice." As a writer interested in the impact of newfound wealth on rural life, Austen gave Sir Thomas's sugar wealth "importance" because such wealth was of obvious significance to her generation.<sup>81</sup>

Said departs from *The Country and the City*, which was limited by the approach of Williams's contemporaries to imperial history, which, Margot Finn observes, minimizes the extent to which imperial wealth—as much as agrarian and industrial profits—admitted people (such as the Hibberts) into the landed gentry and aristocracy.<sup>82</sup> Said's essay partially addresses this shortcoming in Williams's work. In "Jane Austen and Empire," he argues that "while he does address the export of England to the colonies, Williams does so ... in a less focused way and less expansively

75 Said suggests that the precipitating event is the 1807 abolition bill, but there is no firm critical agreement about this (111).

76 Said, "Jane Austen and Empire," 96.

77 Ibid., 107.

78 Maria-Lisa Von Sneidern, "Wuthering Heights and the Liverpool Slave Trade," *English Literary History* 62.1 (1995): 171–96, esp. 171.

79 Ibid.

80 Humphrey Gawthrop, "Slavery: Idee Fixe of Emily and Charlotte Brontë," *Brontë Studies* 38.4 (2015): 281–89, esp. 287.

81 See Todd, *Jane Austen in Context*, 332: biographical information supports this: Austen's brother Francis expressed strongly abolitionist views. Francis participated in the battle over Haiti (then St Domingo) in 1806 and was aware of the revolution's impact on European perceptions of slave-produced wealth.

82 Finn and Smith, *New Paths to Public History*, 5.

than the practice actually warrants.”<sup>83</sup> One of Said’s innovations was to turn the literary clock back to the period between 1800 and 1870.<sup>84</sup> His claim that Austen paved the way for more overtly colonial writing by authors like Kipling and Conrad is still frequently cited, sometimes uncritically so. Historians, though, have revealed the extent to which colonial wealth, particularly of returnee nabobs and West Indies planters, was familiar, and often distasteful, to Austen’s generation.<sup>85</sup>

So far, then, I have explored the utility of country house research for revisiting Said’s reading of *Mansfield Park*. I have argued that new historical knowledge largely justifies rereading Austen as having consciously—and often critically—depicted Britain as (to borrow Finn’s words) “an imperial formation.” I move on now to consider how Said—and subsequent modifications of his reading of Austen—have increasingly shaped contemporary British writing. With the exception of Loh’s study, *The Postcolonial Country in Contemporary Literature*,<sup>86</sup> literary criticism has confined its understanding of Said’s legacy to academic writing.<sup>87</sup> Nonetheless, postcolonial rereadings of canonical novels have clearly influenced contemporary British literature, not least because the act of “writing back” to canonical works has been central to the politics of resisting cultural imperialism. What I want to trace, therefore, is the ways in which British writers have acquired, and promoted, increasingly nuanced understandings of country houses’ colonial dimensions and—often by extension—of English rurality itself. The remainder of this article traces a trajectory from Naipaul’s pre-Saidian novel *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987)<sup>88</sup> to Johnson’s *The Curious Tale of the Lady Caraboo* (2015)<sup>89</sup> to suggest that these explorations increasingly reflect, and reflect upon, historical advances, particularly new research into the East India Company’s impact on upper-class domestic interiors.

I allude to Naipaul to illustrate the extent to which Said’s essay has shaped and informed *subsequent* literary depictions of country houses’ link to empire. Published while “Jane Austen and Empire” was in gestation, V. S. Naipaul’s novel *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987) is a key link in the chain: it inaugurated a tradition of rural writing by black and Asian Britons,<sup>90</sup> who often experience the countryside as a fiercely guarded site of national belonging.<sup>91</sup> It is uncertain what Naipaul’s novel might have looked like had the author been privy to Said’s exploration of the literary implications of country houses’ material connection to empire. Nonetheless, it is beneficial to examine a novel that inaugurated a series of literary forays into country house settings.

83 Said, “Jane Austen and Empire,” 98.

84 *Ibid.*, 99.

85 See Helen Clifford and Emile De Bruijin, “Past, Present and Future: The Chinese Wallpaper Project,” paper at “The East India Company at Home Conference,” July 11–12, 2015; Finn and Smith, *New Paths to Public History*; Donington, *Legacies of British Slave Ownership*.

86 Lucienne Loh, *The Postcolonial Country in Contemporary Literature* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

87 Wood, *Slavery, Empathy and Pornography*, 295.

88 V. S. Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival* (London: Picador, 2002 [1987]).

89 Johnson, *The Curious Tale of the Lady Caraboo*.

90 Fowler, “The Rural Turn in Contemporary Writing by Black and Asian Britons,” 33.

91 See Ingrid Pollard, *Postcards Home* (London: Autograph, 2004); Neil Chakraborti and Jon Garland, eds., *Rural Racism* (Cullompton, England: Willan, 2007); Sarah Neal and Julian Agyeman, *The New Countryside? Ethnicity, Nation and Exclusion in Contemporary Rural Britain* (Bristol, England: Policy Press, 2006).

*The Enigma of Arrival* captures the moment before conversations about country houses' colonial dimensions intensified, were disseminated, and began to have precise literary impacts. Based on an eleven-year stay in Wiltshire between 1970 and 1981, the novel is set on the grounds of a country estate in which Naipaul's cottage is situated. Daily rambles allow Naipaul to acquire intimate knowledge of rural Wiltshire, which gives rise to a growing sense of attachment to it:

[The] landscape by which I was surrounded was in fact benign, the first landscape to have that quality for me ... after 20 years in England, I was to learn about the seasons here at last... That in the most unlikely way, at an advanced age in a foreign country, I was to find myself in tune with the landscape in a way I had never been in Trinidad or India.<sup>92</sup>

Naipaul breaks new literary ground by making rurality his central theme. As he later writes: "through a longing for metropolitan material, the writer or narrator misses his big subject."<sup>93</sup> He shifts his literary gaze from the obvious context of urban post-immigration Britain and instead ventures into pastoral territory.

Naipaul's sense of rural England's global connections reflects the historical knowledge of his day. He relies on etymology to substantiate his sense of the countryside's global dimensions, dwelling on the "duplicate name of the hamlet ... Waldenshaw—the same word (for forest or wood) in two tribal languages, both long since absorbed into other languages—the very name spoke of invaders from across the sea and of ancient wars and dispossessions here, along the picturesque river and the wet meadows."<sup>94</sup> This focus on antiquity emphasizes the deep history of Britain's global connections. Yet Naipaul's sense of the countryside's *Caribbean* connections is relatively imprecise. He substantiates them autobiographically. Of his landlord, and owner of the country estate on which he lives, Naipaul writes: "an empire lay between us [even while ...] it linked us."<sup>95</sup> He states that his own "presence there in the valley" is explained by "empire," but concentrates on the generalized fact that he speaks and writes in English despite being born in another continent.<sup>96</sup> The novel does make some direct links between Caribbean and English estates. These links, however, are established in broad historical and personal terms. Naipaul's sense of affinity with the manor is described as "ancestral," "something that came with the history that had made me ... the colonial plantations of estates of Trinidad, to which my impoverished Indian ancestors had been transported in the last century—estates of which this Wiltshire estate, where I now lived, had been the apotheosis."<sup>97</sup> Here Naipaul raises the topic of colonialism and connects it with his own consciousness ("the [colonial] history that made me"), emphasizing probable but unspecified historical encounters between his relatives and those of his Wiltshire landlord. In this respect, Naipaul's commentary resembles that of Williams in *The Country and the City*, which states that, "[i]mportant parts of the country house system, from the sixteenth to the

92 Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival*, 189.

93 *Ibid.*, vi.

94 *Ibid.*, 98.

95 *Ibid.*, 208.

96 *Ibid.*, 208.

97 *Ibid.*, 55.

eighteenth centuries, were built upon the profits of [imperial] trade.”<sup>98</sup> Naipaul explains country estates’ transcontinental connections in terms of Britons’ general accumulation of sugar wealth rather than detailing any direct links between slavery and country houses. As a consequence, his novel gives broad-brush treatment to country houses’ material relationship with empire. Nonetheless—despite Ian Baucom’s assertion that *The Enigma of Arrival* reproduces the imperial nostalgia that country houses traditionally inspire<sup>99</sup>—Rob Nixon rightly observes that Naipaul “invents [a] postcolonial pastoral.”<sup>100</sup> This has been succeeded by a series of literary engagements with black British rurality.<sup>101</sup>

There can be few clearer indications of the synthesis between academic and creative writing than John Agard’s poem “Mansfield Park Revisited,” which appears in his collection<sup>102</sup> *We Brits* (2006). The title references Said’s rereading of Austen’s novel and presents Agard’s poem as a creative accompaniment to “Jane Austen and Empire.” The poem is dedicated to Said, and the “Acknowledgements” section of *We Brits* lists *Culture and Imperialism* alongside several other “eye-opening books.”<sup>103</sup> “Jane Austen and Empire” establishes the discursive parameters of “Mansfield Park Revisited”: Agard’s poem endorses Said’s contention that, although Austen’s novel raises the subject of country houses’ links to colonial capital, it fails to count the human cost. The poem ventriloquizes Said’s view that Austen provides a sanitized sense of country houses’ hidden colonial geographies: “overseas possessions/are best kept overseas.”<sup>104</sup> Agard also inherits Said’s sense that *Mansfield Park* is unconcerned with anti-colonial resistance to enslavement: “no uprising ruffles/the hair under parasols.”<sup>105</sup> Agard’s corresponding assault on cocooned upper-class sensibilities is expressed by the lines: “slave revolts [are] not/right for polite conversation.”<sup>106</sup>

Agard’s poem does not advance new historical knowledge about country houses’ colonial connections. Rather, it promotes Said’s belief in the indifference of Austen (and her readers) to slaves’ plight. Working with the grain of Said’s essay, Agard’s poem seeks to break the notorious silence of *Mansfield Park*, a silence that Said and Agard both interpret as a “humanistic”<sup>107</sup> failure to address the house’s material link to empire. Nonetheless, the poem makes more exact links between country houses and slavery than Naipaul. Because Agard concentrates on *Mansfield Park*, his poem identifies a particular slavery site<sup>108</sup> and corresponding English locale: “Antigua’s

98 Williams, *The Country and the City*, 279–80.

99 Ian Baucom, “Narratives of Postimperial Memory.” *Modern Fiction Studies* 42.2 (1996): 259–83, 283.

100 Rob Nixon, *London Calling* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 276.

101 Fowler, “The Rural Turn in Contemporary Writing by Black and Asian Britons,” 37.

102 *We Brits* explores Britain’s centuries-old black presence. The poems range over iconic rural sites including Mansfield Park and Sunderland Point. The collection also deconstructs country rituals, such as Morris dancing, which Agard accurately attributes to Moors.

103 Agard, *We Brits*, 6.

104 *Ibid.*, “Mansfield Park Revisited,” lines 16–17, 46.

105 *Ibid.*, lines 12–13.

106 *Ibid.*, lines 18–1.

107 Said, “Jane Austen and Empire,” 97.

108 Although *Mansfield Park* provides the setting for Agard’s poem, the accusations of historical amnesia may well be aimed at today’s curators of country houses. There is, however, insufficient textual evidence to substantiate such a reading.

bitter sugar ... melts in Northampton's throat."<sup>109</sup> The "uprising" to which he refers in line 12 is termed "[A]tlantic unrest"<sup>110</sup>—meaning the Haitian Revolution—which so preoccupied Austen's generation.

Subsequent critical modifications of Said's essay partially supplant the vision of Austen's world that "Mansfield Park Revisited" upholds. Nonetheless, Agard's poem signals an important development in *literary* explorations of the topic. Thanks to Said's essay, Agard presents a more lucid and precise exploration of country houses' links to empire than Naipaul. Because Agard references Said's essay, the "bleeding canefields"<sup>111</sup> of which he writes mark out Antiguan plantations specifically. "Mansfield Park Revisited" anticipates future literary explorations of the topic by suggesting that Said's challenge to country houses' iconic heritage status has opened Pandora's box. Like *The Enigma of Arrival*, "Revisiting Mansfield Park" should be read as a form of postcolonial pastoral, and one that is nuanced by Said's seminal intervention into discussions about country houses' colonial histories.<sup>112</sup> Naipaul establishes only temporal and speculative circumstantial links between his landlord and colonial wealth. Agard emphasizes Mansfield Park's direct *material* connection with sugar wealth and country house ownership, also condemning historical amnesia about such riches' unsavory origin. Accordingly, the poem's final lines disrupt country estates' deceptive air of tranquility: "hear dat whip crack —no turning back."<sup>113</sup>

There has indeed been "no turning back." As Agard anticipates, Said's essay on Austen continues to make its presence felt in contemporary writing. Jo Baker's bestselling novel *Longbourn* (2013) is written in the Austen tradition but ranges beyond the territory of *Mansfield Park* and "Mansfield Park Revisited" to expand the horizons of another Austen novel. Baker retells *Pride and Prejudice* from the perspective of servants, one of whom is a black footman, based at Netherfield Hall. The footman, Ptolemy Bingley, is named so as to foreground a slavery connection. Ptolemy confirms this link when he explains plantation-naming practices to a fellow servant: "If you are off his estate, that's your name, that's how it works."<sup>114</sup> Ptolemy's physical blackness visibly attests to the unseen links between slave-produced wealth and the British economy. By bringing the Caribbean to British shores, *Longbourn* answers Said's criticism by resuming Austen's unfinished train of thought in *Sanditon* because Ptolemy's appearance follows and extends Austen's logic in introducing Miss Lambe.

Baker is well versed in Austen criticism, and her invention of Ptolemy reflects particular developments in the field, particularly the recent insight that Austen was alert to the countryside's colonial geographies and interested in the black presence on British soil. In line with Austen scholars' responses to Said, Baker reports that she "just knew that the background would not be as uniformly white as [... represented in Austen film] adaptations, and that Austen and her readers would have known this

109 Agard, *We Brits*, "Mansfield Park Revisited," lines 28–29, 46.

110 *Ibid.*, line 10.

111 *Ibid.*, line 33.

112 Fowler, "The Rural Turn in Contemporary Writing by Black and Asian Britons," 133.

113 Agard, *We Brits*, "Mansfield Park Revisited," lines 30–31, 46.

114 Baker, *Longbourn*, 103.



too—whereas modern readers might need it noticing for them.”<sup>115</sup> Baker’s own meticulous research further justified her creation of Ptolemy; she discovered a reference to a neighbor’s black footman in Austen’s letters. This discovery augments what is already known about Austen’s personal acquaintance with, or at least proximity to, black people such as Dido Belle. Baker was also inspired by Ben Wilson’s popular history book, *Decency and Disorder* (2008),<sup>116</sup> which discusses vernacular culture in Austen’s day and contains several paragraphs about the historical black presence. Baker saw a television documentary about a white Scottish family who traced their ancestry to a black servant in Paisley. This source of inspiration is entirely in keeping with a major driver of recent advances in black British history, namely the surge of popular interest tracing family ancestry.<sup>117</sup> Armed with this information, and following the logic of Austen’s plot, Baker deduced that the Bingley family might easily have made their money from sugar and were correspondingly likely to have had a black servant. Local history also played its part. As part of her undergraduate history degree, Baker learned that Lancaster, where she lives, was once a slave port and sugar depot.

Baker’s bestselling novel represents a literary milestone in high-profile<sup>118</sup> re-conceptualizations of country houses. Ptolemy’s first appearance in *Longbourn* is imbued with a suitable sense of occasion by being announced in an epigraph: “... the entrance of the footman ...”<sup>119</sup> This epigraph is a direct quotation from *Pride and Prejudice* itself. Given the blackness of Baker’s footman, the epigraph draws out a colonial context that Austen leaves implicit. Epigraphs have a particular function in a literary work, summarizing and encapsulating significant concepts. The significance of Ptolemy’s arrival is heightened by the use of ellipses at either end of the phrase, inviting a pause to consider the arrival of black presence in mainstream writing set in Austen’s milieu.

Said’s perspective on country houses’ colonial aspects is further developed in Catherine Johnson’s young adult novel, *The Curious Tale of Lady Caraboo* (2015). Johnson’s novel fosters the idea that British country houses are fertile sites of black history.<sup>120</sup> In a recent paper at the bi-annual conference “What’s Happening in Black British History,” she states that it is her central aim “to remind readers of all backgrounds that ... black British history is everyone’s history.”<sup>121</sup> These words echo those of the social geographer Caroline Bressey, a prominent critic of country houses’ curation practices, who states that black histories should be “embedded components of English history.”<sup>122</sup>

115 Email from Jo Baker, November 18, 2015.

116 Ben Wilson, *Decency and Disorder: The Age of Cant, 1789–1837* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008).

117 During “What’s Happening in Black British History,” it was noted that widespread interest in ancestry has led to important new recoveries of figures from forgotten historical archives (October 11, 2014).

118 *Longbourn* was broadcast on *The Book at Bedtime* on BBC R4 in May 2014 and has been made into a feature film.

119 Baker, *Longbourn*, *Ibid.*, 37.

120 Catherine Johnson, “Engaging Young Readers with Black British History,” unpublished paper given at What’s Happening in Black British History III conference, University of London, 2016.

121 *Ibid.*

122 Caroline Bressey, “Cultural Archaeology and Historical Geographies of the Black Presence in Rural England,” *Rural Studies* 2 (2009): 386–95, p. 393.

Johnson's plot involves the actual case of Mary Willcox, daughter of a Devonshire cobbler, who presented herself as "Princess Caraboo" to Mrs. Worrall of Gloucestershire's Knole Park. The Worralls took Willcox into their home, where a family friend purported to recognize the young woman's invented language as originating from the East Indies. Willcox's deception was discovered in 1817 and was widely reported by the press. Rather than condemning Mary Willcox, however, Johnson's novel depicts her lies as symptomatic of colonial myth-making at the time, not least because "Princess Caraboo" appeals to Mrs. Worrall's obsession with "noble savages." The novel is set just after the 1814 publication of *Mansfield Park*, further indicating the importance of Austen's period for shaping cultural responses to country estates.

Johnson connects country house grandeur to sugar wealth, as Austen, Said, Agard, and Baker have done before her. Like *Longbourn*, in which Netherfield is imagined to have "sugar columns,"<sup>123</sup> Knole Park "glitter[s] like a ... sugar palace."<sup>124</sup> Johnson, however, introduces an East India Company element to her country house setting. This allows her to place rural estates yet more robustly in the context of the further reaches of empire. Extending the more Caribbean-British narrative to incorporate colonial activity in the Asian subcontinent signals Johnson's awareness of new country house research. Her novel maintains a relentless focus on empire's material culture, a hallmark of research by leading historians of British imperial history.<sup>125</sup> The novel contains frequent casual allusions to colonial commodities, emphasizing how thoroughly these defined British life in the early nineteenth century. A naval captain drinks Jamaican rum, which is said to be "straight off the boat."<sup>126</sup> A barman jokes that the captain will "drink the West Indies dry."<sup>127</sup> In keeping with upper-class love of chinoiserie, Mrs. Worrall creates a "dainty Chinese drawing room."<sup>128</sup> Mr. Worrall resents paying "a sultan's ransom" to decorate it,<sup>129</sup> and his wife fetishizes the room, inviting friends to dress in Chinese clothes to celebrate its completion.<sup>130</sup> Such details echo the "domestic turn" in British imperial history<sup>131</sup> and recent historical findings that, at the height of empire, upper-class households enhanced their social status by embracing a cosmopolitan aesthetic.<sup>132</sup> The daughter, Cassandra Worrall, has a "new Indian print" dress and gives "Princess Caraboo" one of her "cast-off Indian muslins."<sup>133</sup> Adding to the house's colonial atmosphere, the Worrall family employs a steward, who they believe speaks Persian, though his roots are actually in Turkey and Alexandria.<sup>134</sup> Such inaccuracies are consistent with

123 Baker, *Longbourn*, 72.

124 Johnson, *The Curious Tale of the Lady Caraboo*, 134.

125 Margot Finn, "Thinkpiece," <http://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/eicah/home/>. 2013, accessed October 1, 2015; Barczewski, *Country Houses and the British Empire, 1700–1930*; Donington, *Legacies of British Slave Ownership*; Finn and Smith, *New Paths to Public History*.

126 Johnson, *The Curious Tale of the Lady Caraboo*, 87.

127 *Ibid.*, 239.

128 *Ibid.*, 11.

129 *Ibid.*, 43.

130 *Ibid.*, 30.

131 Finn and Smith, *New Paths to Public History*, 12.

132 *Ibid.*; Barczewski, *Country Houses and the British Empire, 1700–1930*.

133 Johnson, *The Curious Tale of the Lady Caraboo*, 53.

134 *Ibid.*, 83.

historians' findings that nineteenth-century Britons consumed empire by creating bizarre and eclectic amalgamations of colonial artifacts, fashions, and figures.<sup>135</sup> This trend can be seen in other writing, notably Rita Dove's poetry collection *Sonata Mulattica* (2010), which explores the material cultures of empire in "The Dressing," "The Undressing," "Ode on a Negree Head Clock, With Eight Tunes," and "Staffordshire figurine, 1825."<sup>136</sup>

Johnson's novel sharpens and broadens the postcolonial perspective on country houses, which has been emerging in academic work over the past decades. Perspective an apt word: her characters' major realizations take place on the rooftop of Knole Park House, where "Caraboo" regularly sits. This elevated view provides a clear understanding of country houses' relationship with the outside world. When the Worralls' son, Fred, sits beside "Caraboo," the vantage point allows him to glimpse an alternative global geography: "There was a ... view all the way down to the Bristol Channel, and even the docks—he could just see a small forest of masts, so far away they could have been toothpicks—and the blue of the water stretching away to the west."<sup>137</sup> This expansive vista encompasses Bristol's slave port and its visiting vessels, connecting Knole Park to colonial maritime history and commercial trade.

A second element of Johnson's "manifesto" is to show readers that black people have been in England for centuries.<sup>138</sup> This aspect of the novel touches intimately on questions of English rurality and the politics of rural entitlement. By conveying a substantial nineteenth-century black presence, Johnson is able to challenge the idea that black people have no historical connection to the English countryside. Johnson's early nineteenth-century world is populated with people from elsewhere. "Caraboo" sees "lascars ... Turks [and] Africans"<sup>139</sup> in the docks. There are passing references to Romany camps,<sup>140</sup> "Negro beggars,"<sup>141</sup> "octaroons,"<sup>142</sup> praying "Mussulmen,"<sup>143</sup> maharajah's sons,<sup>144</sup> and "dar[k]-skinned girls two a penny."<sup>145</sup> As the phrase "two a penny" suggests, such presences are presented as commonplace and unsurprising to characters who are depicted as Austen's contemporaries. The novel, however, avoids being naively celebratory. Racism is shown to be rife; Fred Worrall himself comes to regret having made "a misery" of an Indian schoolboy's life because he worships Ganesh.<sup>146</sup> "Caraboo" is subjected to gruelling "cranial exploration[s]" by phrenologists to determine her ethnicity,<sup>147</sup> a reminder of the pseudo-scientific racism that was later to inspire eugenics in the Nazi era. As Robert Young once wrote: "theories of race are also theories of desire."<sup>148</sup>

135 Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto, 1984); Barczewski, *Country Houses and the British Empire, 1700–1930*.

136 Rita Dove, *Sonata Mulattica* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2010), 72, 80, 81, and 187.

137 Johnson, *The Curious Tale of the Lady Caraboo*, 67.

138 *Ibid.*

139 *Ibid.*, 178.

140 *Ibid.*, 47.

141 *Ibid.*, 46.

142 *Ibid.*, 67.

143 *Ibid.*, 70.

144 *Ibid.*, 244.

145 *Ibid.*, 89.

146 *Ibid.*, 244.

147 *Ibid.*, 79.

148 Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995), 9.

Colonial desire<sup>149</sup> looms large in Johnson's novel, which reminds readers that the English country house has been a key site of this desire. Both Baker and Johnson show a concern with communicating the idea of Britain's historical black presence in the countryside. This concern both pre- and post- dates the novels of Baker and Johnson. David Dabydeen's novel *A Harlot's Progress* (1999)<sup>150</sup> depicts a black presence in Lord Montagu's country house, while Tanika Gupta's play *The Empress* (2013)<sup>151</sup> draws on historical research to explore Abdul Karim's presence at Osborne House during the final years of Queen Victoria's reign.

Novelistic explorations of black people's place in rural England have shifted from the etymological and biographical approach of *The Enigma of Arrival* to a progressively more detailed sense of the countryside's connection to empire. Said's essay on Austen has played a crucial role in this process by alerting writers to the countryside's relationship with colonial profiteering. Although Agard's poem represents wholesale acceptance of Said's reading of Austen, *Longbourn* is informed by the counter-assertion that Austen's novels subtly comment both on rurality's colonial dimension and the related presence of black people on British shores.<sup>152</sup> Johnson's novel represents an emerging trend in literary representations of country houses, which shows particular responsiveness to advances in historical understanding of the ways in which empire shaped domestic culture.

Austen's writing has been, and remains, a battlefield for competing visions of British history, literature, and rurality. As Agard prophesied, "them bleeding canefields/refuse to stay remote."<sup>153</sup> Many other writers have since joined the fray, drawing on country houses' black histories to challenge their heritage status. Other notable contributions have come from Seni Seneviratne ("Sitting for the Mistress," 2010)<sup>154</sup> and Tyrone Huggins (*The Honey Man*, 2015),<sup>155</sup> both of whom look to the work of art historians on the black presence in nineteenth-century paintings.<sup>156</sup> Film-makers have also made their mark. A striking intervention is the feature film, *Belle* (2014). The film was inspired by the 1770 painting, which first alerted local historians to the presence of Lord Mansfield's black niece, Dido Belle. The film has a lavish Kenwood House setting and a romanticized version of the protagonist's eventual marriage and financial circumstances. *Belle* thus references yet unsettles conservative heritage dramas<sup>157</sup> by

149 Mrs. Worrall and her associates wish to study "Caraboo" "at close quarters." (Johnson, "Engaging Young Readers with Black British History," 45). This fascination combines with the phrenological incident to suggest, as Young does, that colonial desire is masochistic (Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, 108).

150 David Dabydeen, *A Harlot's Progress* (London: Vintage, 2000). See also David Dabydeen, *The Black Presence in English Literature* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1984).

151 Tanika Gupta, *The Empress* (London: Oberon, 2013).

152 Wood, *Slavery, Empathy and Pornography*; Byrne, *Belle*; Doody, *Jane Austen's Names: Riddles, Persons, Places*.

153 Agard, *We Brits*, "Mansfield Park Revisited," 46.

154 Seni Seneviratne, "Sitting for the Mistress," *Ten New Poets*, eds. Bernardine Evaristo and Daljit Nagra (Tarsset, England: Bloodaxe, 2010).

155 Tyrone Huggins, *The Honey Man*. Unpublished play performed at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre and directed by Emma Bernard with Tyrone Huggins, February 16–21, 2015.

156 See Corinne Fowler, *Green Unpleasant Land: Creative Responses to the Historical Black Presence in Britain's Countryside* (Leeds, England: Peepal Tree Press, forthcoming).

157 Adaptations of Austen are an important explanatory factor in Austen's popularity today. Catherine Johnson even jokes that she wrote *The Curious Tale of the Lady Caraboo* because she "loved Sunday

contesting sanitized representations of country houses in Austen's era.<sup>158</sup> Yet the film's critical reception suggests that there are vast tracts of British consciousness that even Said has yet to penetrate. Reviews of *Belle* construct black people's association with country houses as anomalous. Charlotte O'Sullivan presents Dido as a "one-of-a-kind woman" whose life has been rendered "fit for audiences reared on Jane Austen adaptations."<sup>159</sup> *Variety* magazine suggests that Dido was "an exceedingly rare member of eighteenth-century high society," a one-off,<sup>160</sup> and there is not a single reference to country houses' colonial connections in any review published by *Film Journal International*, the *Daily Mail*, the *London Evening Standard*, *The Guardian*, or *Variety*. One reviewer even writes that black people are "incongruous" with Austen's world.<sup>161</sup>

Bloom was wrong to claim that "increased consciousness of the relation between culture and imperialism is of no use to interpreters of *Mansfield Park*."<sup>162</sup> Said's essay on *Mansfield Park* opened up a rich seam of discussion. His contrapuntal reading has been a cornerstone of postcolonial studies, and scholars from the fields of literary studies, cultural studies, history, film studies, and sociology have all engaged with it. Nonetheless, new research in the field of British imperial history means that critics can gain a great deal from modifying Said's grasp of the novel's "historical valences." Said's reading of *Mansfield Park* underestimates the clamor of public objections to slave-produced wealth (Wood) and overlooks *Mansfield Park*'s suggestive allusions to landscape gardening, new money, and the colonial gaze. Said never comments on the fact that Austen's characters share the names of key figures in the national abolition debate. Biographical work on Austen reveals ever more personal connections to empire, highlighting the influence of pro-abolition figures in Austen's family, while studies of her reading reveal her approval of pro-abolitionist writers like Cowper, Thomas Clarkson, and Helen Maria Williams.<sup>163</sup> Austen had an active interest in the politics of empire and her marginalia suggests that it pleased her to contradict official versions of history.<sup>164</sup> Said asks "why she [Austen] gave it [Sir Thomas's plantation wealth] the importance she did, and why indeed she made the choice" to create an Antiguan connection.<sup>165</sup> Now that historians are beginning to glean the myriad ways in which colonial profiteering shaped imperial Britain's cultural and economic life, it is becoming increasingly apparent that *Mansfield Park* offers a series of oblique commentaries of this wealth. In fact, Austen's depiction of country houses' connections resembles Olusoga's recent

afternoon costume dramas" and has "always wanted to write a novel with empire line frocks" ("What's Happening in Black British History III," University of London 2016.

158 The film takes historical liberties, emphasizing the case of the Zong drownings rather than Mansfield's Somerset ruling. See Kaufmann blog.

159 Charlotte O'Sullivan, "Bonnets, Bosoms and Race Relations," *The London Evening Standard*, June 13, 2014.

160 Justin Chan, "Belle Rings Chimes of Freedom," *Variety*, September 17, 2014, 34.

161 Ibid.

162 Harold Bloom in Todd, *Jane Austen in Context*, 106.

163 Gillian Dow and Kathie Halsey, "Jane Austen's Reading, The Chawton Years," *Persuasions Online* (Jane Austen Society of North America) 30.2 (2010).

164 Katie Halsey, *Jane Austen and Her Readers* (London: Anthem, 2013), 18.

165 Said, "Jane Austen and Empire," 97.

articulation of black British history as “a global history ... [and] a history of more than just the black experience itself.”<sup>166</sup>

The last major interventions into the Austen-Said debate were made by Wood’s *Slavery, Empathy and Pornography* and Doody’s *Jane Austen’s Place Names: Riddles, Persons, Places*. In the field of British imperial history, country houses have once again become a focus for investigating cultural imperialism and its economic base. It is evident that country houses’ architecture and landscapes, as well as British visual culture,<sup>167</sup> are even more closely connected to empire than Williams and Said knew.

Country houses remain symbolic custodians of English culture and heritage despite the insights offered by Williams and Said. Austen, too, is a towering literary figure to whom writers obsessively return. As her image on the banknote reminds us, she is frequently associated with a persistently amnesiac brand of English rurality. Contemporary writers are mounting a challenge to the idea that English country houses are spaces of whiteness. In so doing, many writers depart from “Jane Austen and Empire” in both senses of the word: their work is founded on Said’s spatial re-conception of country houses and yet it increasingly exceeds and even contradicts Said’s conclusions. Agard endorses Said’s thesis. “Mansfield Park Revisited” establishes an important critical foundation for later literary representations of country houses. Baker’s novel reflects Austen scholars’ critical riposte to Said. Her black footman represents a response to the emerging consensus that Austen was interested in Britain’s black presence and was uneasy about Britain as a colonial formation. Johnson expands country houses’ colonial geographies by availing herself of recent advances in black British history and British imperial history. Resourced by the growing number of case studies about the transcontinental histories of England’s great estates, contemporary writers are producing progressively more vivid and variegated pictures of their links with colonialism. They are Austen’s true inheritors.

166 Olusoga, *Black and British: A Forgotten History*, xxi.

167 Barczewski, *Country Houses and the British Empire, 1700–1930*, 166.