

INTERVIEW

By Natália Corrêa Porto Barcellos

Featuring professor Michael Kramp

Michael Kramp is Professor of English at Lehigh University- USA. He is a scholar of nineteenth-century British Literature, Critical Theory, and Masculinity Studies. He is currently engaged in a multiyear project, **Jane Austen and the Future of the Humanities**, designed to leverage Austen's work to showcase the importance of the humanities to diverse public audiences; this project involves a podcast, a documentary film, and a public-facing monograph. He is the author of *Patriarchy's Creative Resilience* (Routledge, 2024) and *Disciplining Love: Austen and the Modern Man* (The Ohio State University Press, 2007) and editor of *Jane Austen and Masculinity* (Bucknell University Press, 2017) and *Jane Austen and Critical Theory* (Routledge, 2021).

Being worldwide celebrated 250 years later, why do you think Jane Austen's work is still so relevant?

It is, of course, impossible to explain the enduring, comprehensive, and global popularity of Austen in one pithy statement, but here goes . . .

Austen is one of a select group of literary figures who is at once deeply canonical (i.e. respected and consistently studied at colleges and universities) and truly popular as both a writer and a persona. I know it is tempting to think about Austen's stories as "timeless" or somehow universal, but I do not believe such explanations accurately capture the cultural work of Austen and her narratives. I like to think about "Austen" as a distinct cultural figure who is at once versatile, accessible, and safe—or at least unthreatening. We adapt, modify, and update Austen's stories, employing various genres and mechanisms, from film to television to cookbooks to clothes to fan fiction; in such adaptations or modifications, we at once recognize Austen and her work, and appreciate the variations of such versatile stories. These variations or makeovers of Austen enhance the diverse reach of her ideas and writings and inevitably inspire additional adaptations. In addition, Austen is quite accessible. You don't need a graduate degree to read and appreciate Austen. Many (most?) read Austen without critical introductions or extensive footnotes; we don't need a professor to guide us through the works of Jane Austen. This accessibility,

moreover, helps us to understand why Austen has become popular on a global scale, especially when we consider the massive number of translations of her works. And finally, Austen is deemed safe—or, at least, unthreatening. In our world of political extremism in which people rarely associate with others who think differently from them, Austen remains a nexus—a possibility of connection. School boards do not receive complaints about the teaching of Austen or the inclusion of Austen in curricular plans. People from various locations on the political spectrum read and appreciate Austen, and these same people are not threatened or angered by Austen's stories; people with divergent political viewpoints adopt and adapt Austen for their purposes. As I suggested at the beginning, I think it's impossible to explain fully all the reasons for Austen's enduring global popularity, but I think her versatility, accessibility, and ostensible safety help us to begin this conversation.

From a postcolonial perspective regarding literary studies, do you think it is necessary to justify Austen's work? Could you please comment on this topic?

As a rule, I think it's a bad critical practice or method to attempt to justify any literary figure. As a scholar, I do not want to put myself in this defensive position of justifying or rationalizing the work of a writer. My goal as a scholar is always to try to understand the cultural work of a literary text/literary figure; if I were to try to justify anyone or anything, I fear it could blind me to various cultural functions, including functions that we may find damaging or dangerous. To this end, I think it's vital to consider the role of Austen/Austen's work in historical and ongoing imperial projects. While many imagine Austen as an isolated figure in the English countryside, I think scholars now agree that she was keenly aware of national and international affairs, and we know that she interacted with her brothers and extended family who traveled extensively. She was aware of the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, and conflicts across the Empire. But the biographical details of Austen's life are not as informative to me as the ongoing legacy of Austen's work, which has been used and embraced in various colonial settings, including India, Australia, New Zealand, and various locations in Africa. The Malawian poet, Felix Mnthali, memorably attributes an "elegance of deceit" to Austen; he claims that her works "lulled the sons and daughters / of the disposed / into a calf-love / with irony and satire / around imaginary people." This may be a harsh treatment of Jane Austen as a person, but it helps us to appreciate the cultural functions of Austen's works in some spaces. Recent writers such as Soniah Kamal and Nura Maznavi have re-imagined Austen within imperial contexts, demonstrating both the malleability of her writings and ideas, and the enduring impact of Austen for post-colonial thinkers. Austen has been used to advance imperial projects and critique or even circumvent imperial projects, and I would suggest that such dynamism within post-colonial spaces and discourses reflects her versatility, accessibility, and

presumed safety of her work. Ultimately, Austen is a potent cultural resource, and because of her influence, I don't think anyone should be surprised that her writings and ideas have been (and continue to be) used within colonial and post-colonial discourses.

What role does the popularity of adaptations play in (mis)understanding Austen's literary work?

The ongoing adaptations, updates, and makeovers of Austen and her writings/ideas have been massively impactful for the global impact of "Austen." Austen is a more impactful and more versatile cultural figure because of the many adaptations, and I prefer to think about these adaptations as an ongoing creative process. In addition, it's important to remember that we have been adapting "Austen" and her works for quite some time now, and every adaptation adjusts the story, the context, or the characters. These makeovers help to expand the audience or reach of "Austen," inviting people from all over the globe to engage with her narratives; these new treatments also augment, complicate, or modify how we "know" Austen. As a scholar, I am not terribly concerned about restricting our approaches to Austen or determining the "correct" way to read or think about Austen. As I mentioned above, I think of my job as an attempt to understand the larger cultural work of a literary text/literary figure, and to that extent, the adaptations only enhance such functions.

