

Dr. Lydia Craig

Loyola University Chicago

#VirtualJaneCon

1 May 2021

**Wealthy Black Britons in High Society: Comparing Jane Austen's
Sanditon (1817) and Alicia Le Fanu's *Fashionable Connexions* (1823)**

Thank you for joining my #VirtualJaneCon session today, and a big thank you to our indefatigable organizer, Bianca Hernandez-Knight for setting up this incredible weekend of Jane Austen celebration and interrogation. My name is Lydia Craig, and I recently received my PhD in Nineteenth-Century Studies at Loyola University Chicago. Today I'd like to share an exciting project that has personally answered many of my own questions about what Jane Austen might have intended for the character of Miss Lambe, an interracial West Indian heiress who appears in her unfinished 1817 novel *Sanditon*. For those of you who watched Andrew Davies' adaptation last year, you'll remember that this character, played by Crystal Clarke, was named "Georgiana" and given an extended story arc in which she refuses to allow herself and her fortune to be exploited by greedy and racist British aristocrats despite societal pressure. Secretly, she loves a man of African ancestry like herself, the dashing Otis Molyneux, who is played by Jyuddah James. None of this appears in Austen's novel, where Miss Lambe is merely presented as extremely wealthy, living under close supervision, and being, unsurprisingly, in delicate health. Of course, Austen died before she could complete the manuscript draft, so we don't know whether Miss Lambe would have become a central character, as may have been intended. However, a novel I have recently discovered sheds light on how Austen could have interpreted and portrayed Miss Lambe as a wealthy black woman attempting to navigate late Regency society. *Fashionable Connexions* is a novel, written and published in 1823 by Irish immigrant

Alicia Le Fanu, a generation-older cousin of the famous Victorian writer of the macabre, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu. Unlike Austen, Le Fanu managed to construct an entire story arc in high society for her wealthy West Indian family of three siblings descended from an African mother. Their last name is “Tornado,” an allusion to the “tumult” their presence and identity causes in British society, not only in the northern countryside, but also among London’s elite. By comparing the details Austen does provide about Miss Lambe in *Sanditon* to the experiences of Mr. Tornado and his two sisters as they experience racism in *Fashionable Connexions*, I hope to not only establish that there *were* wealthy Black Britons, contrary to what some critics and even fans of the recent Netflix series *Bridgerton* (2020) might believe, but also suggest that if Austen had lived, she may have depicted similar events in her novel.

[SLIDE] When *Bridgerton*, a series based on the books by Julia Quinn, hit Netflix on Christmas 2020, it became an instant success and was heavily interrogated for its decision to feature Black characters rather than the usual all-white period drama cast. Resulting media coverage itself warrants its own presentation; but suffice it to say that a debate spilled over online to Facebook and Twitter, with members from various Jane Austen groups criticizing Shonda Rhimes’ decision to depict rich black individuals among the “beau monde” as “historically inaccurate.” [SLIDE] This reflects a widespread belief, bolstered by period dramas over the last century, that Regency society was all-white, except, perhaps for visiting dignitaries for other countries who visited and left. Some journalists and historians responded, by emphasizing the long history of “Black Britain,” that is, the presence in England of those with African heritage reaching back to at least the Early Modern period.

[SLIDE] An important scholar in this field is Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina, who has published several books and collections on the subject like *Britain’s Black Past* (2020) which

contain groundbreaking research on prominent Black Britons such as Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa), Dido Elizabeth Belle (pictured), Ignatius Sancho, Mary Prince, Nathaniel Wells, and Ira Aldridge, to name a few. These studies, and those contained within multiple other collections, some of which are included in my further resources handout, establish that there was a sizeable population of tens of thousands of Black Britons in Jane Austen's Regency England. Many were freed slaves, British soldiers, and Loyalists escaping the new United States of America, others were merchants, writers, and a few, arriving from the West Indies, were even wealthy. My research has suggested so far that there has been something of a historical coverup regarding that last population of Black Britons, and the Victorians started it as racism against rebellious colonies like India and Jamaica intensified in the 1840s and 1850s. A 1906 newspaper article called "History Repeats Itself" was published in the *Weekly Irish Times* by Lady Helen Forbes. Discussing the phenomenon of American heiresses marrying into the cash-strapped British elite, gaining titles for money, Forbes claims this has happened before: "The forerunner of the American was the West Indian heiress [...] But she often laboured under a great disadvantage, from which the American wives of English husbands are almost certain to be free. There were not many West Indian girls who had no undisguisedly black ancestress lurking in the background" (22). She claims "there is not a noble pedigree in the land that does not bear traces" of this historical phenomenon of the West Indian heiress. Based on records beginning to be revealed, it seems that Black Britain in the Regency was not only more extensive than we know, but also far more visible than history has remembered.

[SLIDE] Before turning to Miss Lambe, I would like to direct your attention to this list of late eighteenth century and early nineteenth-century novels featuring Black characters, usually West Indian heirs and heiresses. The abolition of slavery, as many of you will know, took place

over decades in a succession of Parliamentary Acts. For the purposes of the following literary discussions, I'd like you to remember two, the *Slave Trade Act* (1807) which abolished the slave trade in Britain and its territories and the *Slavery Abolition Act* (1833), which nearly abolished slavery in Great Britain's territories. Africans in Britain were legally free following Lord Mansfield's 1772 decree that slavery was not permitted in England, the land of liberty. However, even after the slave trade was supposedly abolished, whites in the West Indies could still oppress the African people they forcibly enslaved – until emancipation in 1833 – and afterwards could compel them to work as “apprentices” until the late 1830s. Most of these novels fall within this period, when Britain continued to permit slavery in the West Indies.

[SLIDE] Miss Lambe arrives in the new seaside resort town of Sanditon in Chapter 11, but her arrival has been anticipated eagerly since Chapter 5. Miss Diana Parker, an energetic old maid, hopes that the “rich West Indian” will feature in the upcoming “season” at Sanditon. However, Diana recommends this person sight unseen, comically unaware if they are a man or woman, and is even ignorant of their name until Chapter 10. [SLIDE] Like Lady Denham, Diana seems to be primarily impressed by the wealth of this person and to be better acquainted with someone who will, by association, make everyone at Sanditon appear more desirable and well-connected. [SLIDE] Instead of being multiple “West Indians” or “Mrs. Griffiths,” the schoolmistress, as Diana first thinks, Miss Lambe is a “young West Indian of large fortune in delicate health” (Ch. 10). This seventeen-year-old is also interracial, seemingly having both African and European ancestry, and is described as “chilly and tender,” meaning she is prone to catching cold and is in delicate health. Mrs. Griffiths doats on her since she is the highest paying pupil – this fee is what makes Miss Lambe so “important and precious” to the hovering

schoolmistress. Miss Lambe has her own maid, a sign of gentility and the best room, which should make her a person of social consequence, a lady.

[SLIDE] Interestingly, Mrs. Griffiths and Lady Denham both try to use Miss Lambe's ill health to control and direct her fortune, showing that this Black woman has very little real power while she remains a schoolgirl and has not yet "come out" as a prospect for marriage. Hoping that her nephew Sir Edward can become acquainted with and marry Miss Lambe, Lady Denham tries to ingratiate herself by offering a delicacy – asses' milk for the invalid – but is rebuffed by Mrs. Griffiths. Curiously, the schoolmistress claims that Miss Lamb is "under the constant care of an experienced physician" and his medicines are the only ones she takes; however, it is implied that Mrs. Griffiths actually gives Miss Lamb "tonic pills" from a business owned by her cousin. Sadly, we can't know how this headmistress would have been developed as a character, but she, like Lady Denham, appears to be primarily ruled by greed and a desire for wealth. Miss Lambe does not appear to be in safe hands in Sanditon as clearly multiple characters were intended to develop designs on her fortune, such as the nefarious Sir Edward Denham.

[SLIDE] The last we hear of Miss Lambe in Chapter 12, Diana Parker is going to accompany her to the bathing machines by the coast for her "first dip." Miss Lambe is "so frightened" of the experience that Diana intends to offer encouragement and even go in with her if necessary (Chapter 12). Perhaps Diana would have been a firm friend to the West Indian heiress and Miss Lambe would have managed to recover her health and gain confidence. But Austen herself cannot give us those interesting answers, unless she had an outline stowed away somewhere that awaits discovery in a musty archive.

[SLIDE] I'd like to think that Alicia Le Fanu can, at least in a historical sense, help us finish this story, not specifically of Miss Lambe in Sanditon, but of the West Indian heiress or

heir in elite English society. I stumbled across this novel by mistake while researching early nineteenth-century cultural hatred of upstarts for my dissertation. It's quite literally buried in Le Fanu's four-volume series which is weirdly called by a different name, *Tales of a Tourist*. It is the second of two novels in the series, the first being *The Outlaw* and set in Ireland a decade or so after the United Irish Uprising of 1800. In *Fashionable Connexions*, we see the same upwardly striving society Austen pictures, especially in *Emma* (1815), where everyone is a social climber. After a family tragedy, Julia Somerville, the novel's heroine, turns against her former enjoyment of wealth and social status. She only wants to live quietly in the northern English countryside, take care of the poor, and get on with the local clergyman Adolphus Lascelles – a weird Christian Byronic “hot daddy” combination who is inconveniently married to an estranged and adulterous lady. It's a wild, improbable, and even rebellious main plot that wonderfully succeeds Austen's themes and helps me, at least, understand female discontent and longing for more in life prior to the Victorian era – and yes, I am working on a scholarly edition. But the most fascinating subplot, to me, in the novel, is that of the West Indian Tornado family.

[SLIDE] In Rothbury, Northumberland, a bored rural town filled with grasping individuals, Julia discovers a dangerous secret: Isabel, the daughter of local Squire Birkit, has renamed herself “Belinda,” a mysterious act of identity reinvention that is an allusion to Maria Edgeworth's novel of that name. Thus, this privileged daughter of the gentry identifies with a novel which originally featured an interracial courtship of the heroine Belinda by Mr. Vincent, a West Indian of African descent. Edgeworth was forced by her father to change this in a later edition, along with an interracial marriage between a black enslaved man, Juba, and a white female servant, Lucy. This is because “Belinda” has fallen in what appears to be mutual love with Mr. Tornado, a Creole, or interracial West Indian, whose father sent him to live and be

educated under the watchful eye of Squire Birkit. Mr. Tornado is fabulously wealthy, so one might think the course of true love would run smooth.

[SLIDE] Anticipating the reform of marriage law and women's property rights, a campaign ultimately championed by her cousin Caroline Norton, Le Fanu shows women to be tyrannized over by cruel and authoritative men in power who simultaneously seek to control and exclude Black men like Mr. Tornado. Squire Birkit is horrified, sternly banishes Mr. Tornado, and swears, "that not a drop of black blood should intermingle with his family" (Vol.1, 175). The lovers correspond through "Belinda's" friend Jane Sanderson and even meet in secret when the squire is absent from his residence, only to be caught. Lying low in the area and hoping that "Belinda" will run away with him, Mr. Tornado realizes, in the matter of Heathcliff from Emily Brontë's 1847 novel *Wuthering Heights*, that his true love will not risk everything to be with him. So, he elopes with Jane Sanderson instead and the wealthy couple soon arrive in London. Though Jane is cut off by her horrified family, she is received in elite society because of Mr. Tornado's wealth. The groom himself receives the congratulations of his father, who, it is revealed, is a white plantation owner. A clear picture is being drawn here by Le Fanu that is firmly grounded in socioeconomic reality, a portrait that I believe may have been an allusion to the West Indian heir Nathaniel Wells, a wealthy gentleman and Britain's first Black sheriff. Black Britons are not only lower and middle-class; they are also upper class, despite the clearly expressed racial prejudices of some members of the white gentry, or even aristocracy.

Setting up a magnificent establishment with her new husband and enjoying the best of London's luxuries and delights, the new Mrs. Tornado discovers that her husband has two half-sisters, Theodora and Mariamne, children of his African mother. [SLIDE] Unlike Mr. Tornado (and even Austen's Miss Lambe), the two young women have no European ancestry. They are

black, a skin tone they confidently emphasize by wearing white clothes, hats, and flashy turbans. Are they the daughters of two enslaved Africans? Why have they been permitted an elite education in music, needlework, art, and literature, as becomes apparent? Who is paying for it, their brother or their brother's white father? Even their "Christian" names are fascinating – Miss Lambe was not yet given a first name in *Sanditon*– Mariamne might be an allusion to King Herod's unwilling wife of that name, murdered by the tyrant for resisting him. "Theodora" could suggest the Roman Empress, wife of Justinian I, who was known for rescuing enslaved prostitutes. Both can be read as the sort of classical names forced upon the enslaved, but also as "reclaimed" nods to powerful and rebellious women. The presence of the Miss Tornados raises endless questions, but it does clarify Mr. Tornado's strange haste to marry – he requires a female chaperone for his sisters as they come out in society, a white woman who can gain them entrance into society, aided by his money, and who will have their best interests at heart because they are connected as family. And to do Jane justice, she seems to enjoy their company, admire their accomplishments, and try to find them good marriages – all without a hint of racial prejudice.

[SLIDE] However, on one occasion Jane asks an earl's daughter, Amelia De Ross Somerville, to chaperone her sisters-in-law to the opera to watch a play based on a novel by Sir Walter Scott which they are dying to see. Initially delighted, Amelia is horrified to discover that the highly educated, fashionable, and beautiful Theodora and Mariamne are not Creole like Mr. Tornado, as she supposed, but ethnically African. Behaving coldly in their presence despite Julia's desperate attempts to moderate her offensive behavior to the elegant women, Amelia shudders afterwards, "If you knew, my dear Miss Somerville, my antipathy – my horror of blacks –" (106). She has spent years believing that her cousin Captain De Ross, the love of her life, was devoured by cannibals on an African expedition. Though he has just returned very

much alive, the revelation of the false rumor does not make this selfish anti-heroine any less racist. [SLIDE] The very confidence of these women and their obvious belief in their own beauty is a shock to her, suggesting the fragility of white identity.

Ultimately, Amelia sickens and dies, a punishment for her bad behavior throughout the novel, but Theodora and Mariamne end up married, to a Jewish banker and an English peer, respectively. By uniting herself to a Jew, Theodora joins another wealthy “other” from a people group discriminated against in nineteenth-century England. Mariamne, however, has married a man who is either a Duke, Marquis, Earl, Viscount, or Baron – regardless of the precise title, Mariamne Tornado, daughter of an enslaved African woman, is now a Black British aristocrat. We do not know if this marriage is happy, or if she is going to have her part of her brother’s fortune squandered and be treated badly by a racist set of in-laws. *Owen Castle* (1816), another novel from the list shown previously, contains a first-person account of the Black heroine Olivia Fairfield’s experiences as a new bride, and they are not all pleasant. At the same time, I think it’s vital to realize that a novel from the late Georgian era, right after the Regency and Austen’s inclusion of Miss Lambe, contains wealthy Black Britons in high society, agreeing with what Lady Helen Forbes recalled about West Indian heiresses marrying into the aristocracy nearly a century later. With digitization, more and more historical and literary evidence of this historical reality is going to appear, research performed among genealogical charts, immigration records, newspapers, diaries, correspondence, literature, and even DNA results.

[SLIDE] But back to the matter at hand: as Le Fanu sympathetically shows, Black Britons did not have their path smoothed for them and they most certainly encountered racial prejudice from white elites, yet they persevered, and they managed to remain in England. Seen in this light, the Tornadoes end up triumphing, as Miss Lambe might have done in Sanditon had her

character arc been completed. I am still thinking about more the complicated issues with how Miss Lambe and the Tornadoes manage to rise to the pinnacle of good society in Great Britain, aided by immense fortunes derived from the profits of African enslavement, the misery and compulsion of their own parents by their European ancestors. In the late 1830s, following West Indian emancipation, Great Britain will compensate both Miss Lambe and Mr. Tornado for the loss of forced African labor on their plantations, but not the newly freed for their years of suffering – where will their loyalties lie?

[SLIDE] There are also other complications, surrounding the texts themselves, which are written by white women. One article I have included on the handout, by Sara Salih, engages with “The Silence of Miss Lambe” in *Sanditon*, noting that, like the “colonized other” in imperial literature, she is a character who never speaks. Of course, the story wasn’t far along yet, but Miss Lambe already is interacting with Diana Parker, who can’t ever stop talking. Diana states that *she* promised to attend Miss Lambe while bathing, not that Miss Lambe *asked* her. Black characters are not given a voice in these two novels, though *Belinda*, *The Woman of Colour*, and *Owen Castle* are exceptions to this rule. Though far more positive about Blackness, perhaps due to Irish solidarity with a far more colonized and exploited “other,” Le Fanu manages to describe the Tornado family’s adventures without allowing them to utter a single word. We must guess at their thoughts and motivations, extrapolate from summaries of conversations. For instance, what does it mean that after his sisters are married, Mr. Tornado allows Jane to fritter away his father’s fortune at the gaming tables among the beau monde? Does this signal his ownership of Jane, his white wife, or his disregard of his father’s fortune derived from West Indian atrocities? Can he rest now, having saved his two sisters from the fear of re-enslavement back home?

[SLIDE] At the moment, I do more reading than writing for my project on *Fashionable Connexions*, because I feel that it is important to discover and hear those voices through reading the scholarship and histories that have been published on the subject of Black experiences in nineteenth-century Britain and the Caribbean and to read what they themselves wrote on various subjects. When I was an undergraduate, I was told by many teachers that these materials didn't exist, but the internet and the efforts of hundreds of scholars have proved that these resources absolutely do. On my website I've uploaded a brief document that contains what I have felt to be helpful avenues to start or continue exploring the topic of Black Britons – a sampling of films, YouTube videos, 19th century works by British Africans, literary mentions, and scholarly books, collections, databases, and articles.

If you have any suggestions to offer me in return, I would be very happy to receive them – my email is on the handout. In the meantime, I would like to thank you all for listening to this first ever talk about *Fashionable Connexions*, besides my dissertation committee and defense audience, and how it can explain more about the experience of Black Britons in high society, a real-life story Jane Austen was on the verge of exploring.