

The Austen Concept, or Becoming Jane — Again and Again

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Abstract: Jane Austen has developed an immense cultural efficacy over the past two hundred years. She remains immanently canonical in academic literary studies, and has simultaneously garnered tremendous popular appeal and a wide-ranging applicability in diverse social circles. This distinctive status invites us to theorize the possibility of an Austen concept, drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of the philosophical concept. The Austen concept is rooted in both Austen's cultural power and her status as a writer, allowing her to continually resonate, relate to, and vibrate with other concepts as she continues to create new energy and life.

"That's their Austen. It's not my Austen. But it's also not the point. Whoever we say Austen is, or whatever we suspect she would or wouldn't have liked, we're writing inferior literary and cultural histories if we leave out the incredible range of people, practices, texts, and images that contributed to her complicated and unlikely trek to becoming an icon" (Looser, 11).

"A life contains only virtuals. It is made up of virtualities, events, singularities. What we call virtual is not something that lacks reality but something that is engaged in a process of actualization following the plane that gives it a particular reality" (Deleuze, "Immanence: A Life," 31).

In Gilles Deleuze's posthumously published essay, "Immanence: A Life," he speaks of the great complexity of a life and its implications. He notes how a life "contains only virtuals. It is made up of virtualities, events, singularities." He emphasizes the potentiality and diversity of the human experience and points to "a process of actualization" that offers events, possibilities, and material ramifications that lend "it a particular reality" ("Immanence: A Life," 31). Deleuze's radical theory of human life resists late-capitalist pressures to stabilize and individuate the subject; he insists: "the life of the individual gives way to an impersonal and yet singular life that releases a pure event freed from the accidents of internal and external life, that is, from the subjectivity and objectivity of what happens" ("Immanence: A Life," 28). When we free a life from the "accidents of internal and external life" that compel subjectification and codification, it is exposed to the immanence of creative energies, including the infinite events and potentials of other life. This process is, for Deleuze, undoubtedly complicated, messy, even chaotic. Internal life may appear manageable or organized, and external life allows for larger ideological structures to regulate numerous lives and frame their legacies, but for Deleuze, these are mere accidents and do not capture the haecceity of a life's immanence: i.e., its virtuality. Devoney Looser, in her influential book, *The Making of Jane Austen* (2017) considers this great diversity and range of Austen's life, works, and afterlives. When she muses, "That's their Austen. It's not my Austen. But it's also not the point," she acknowledges the multiplicity of "Austens" that have been created by scholars, students, fans, devotees, and others over the past 200 years. A Looser makes clear throughout her study, the very idea of "Jane Austen" has been fabricated — created — through an ongoing process in which different historical events, cultural markers, and poignant figures have shaped our understanding of the literary icon. Looser offers a fascinating treatment of Austen's reception that helps us to understand the details of this material history — a material history that other scholars have also addressed.^[1] In this introduction, I re-theorize "Austen" as a Deleuzian concept and suggest how her very history and future accentuate the potency of her immanent virtuality and perpetual becoming.

The goal of this special issue of *Rhizomes* is to promote readings of Austen framed by Deleuze and other theorists that might open up new dialogue and possibilities for our academic study of her works and life. As we celebrate the two-hundredth anniversary of Austen's death, we can look back with pride and perhaps some trepidation at the immense amount of scholarly work on Austen and her writings. Austen has enjoyed great critical recognition, and the ongoing popular vogue of her fiction has only increased this attention; we have seen numerous scholarly volumes addressing the filmic adaptations of her novels, her cult status, and the legacy of her appeal.^[2] Feminist and gender critics have made vital contributions to Austen studies since the 1970s, in the past twenty years queer theorists have complicated the sexualities and sexual desires of her characters, readers, and fans, and we have seen brief forays into Postcolonial Studies and Critical Race Theory.^[3] But it is striking to note that Austen experts, for a variety of reasons, have never maintained much of any consistent investment with other domains of Critical Theory, and even the work I acknowledge above has only occasionally been deeply engaged with the potential of theory to ask new and probing questions about Austen's writings. I hope this issue both explores and invites us to continue to address this void in the reception of her corpus. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her memorable essay, "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl," asserts that "Austen criticism is notable most not just for its timidity and banality but for its unrelenting exaction of the spectacle of a Girl Being Taught a Lesson — for the vengefulness it vents on the heroines whom it purports to love, and whom, perhaps it does" (83). Sedgwick's claim points to at least two prominent features of Austen scholarship: (1) its "timidity and banality" and (2) its commitment to disciplining young women. Academic work on Austen has at times been prosaic, often recalling an adoration of the writer and her narratives, and since the mid-twentieth century, it has certainly focused on the heroines and their roles in the larger marriage plots of the novels.

This concentration has invited and in many ways compelled critics to track a rather conventional progression of female characters from young and juvenile women to older and supposedly mature women who ostensibly merit or earn a marriage by the end of the novel. Within this standard reading, heroines must be taught lessons along the way — and, of course, there are women who never learn their lessons well enough. This model of reading Austen has restricted and classified our knowledge of her stories; we have effectively crafted a limited understanding of "Austen," and as Claudia L.

Johnson maintains, academic scholars have been at least in part responsible for this. She explains: “The claim to unbiased enquiry is foundational to our enterprise as teachers and students, but we too have been an interested and decidedly high-handed party contending for access to the real Jane Austen . . . some of our most basic assumptions about how to read her novels were calculated to consolidate authority of a new professorate” (“Austen Cults and Cultures,” 212-13). Academics have often expressed a desire to congeal and contain “Austen” in order to assert dominance over her works. The expansion of Austen and her influence reminds us of the fecund virtuality of her life and afterlife — a fecundity that has often alarmed elite scholars and others wishing to direct her life and legacy. And as Johnson makes clear, this has aroused fear and anxiety in those interested in maintaining control over the novelist and her impact. Johnson points out that “Austen’s appeal has been wide enough to be a worry, for it reaches beyond the authority of those who consider themselves entitled to adjudicate not only who but how it is proper to enjoy ‘great’ literature” (“Austen Cults and Cultures,” 212). Austen’s expansive impact and perpetual vogue have frightened the academic establishment which has sought to employ the canonical writer and her works to educate and advise young women, serve as an example of proper literary writing, and at times even adjudicate morality.^[4] The essays in this special issue deliberately attempt to disrupt such established readings of Austen and recapture the immanence and virtuality of her life and works. As *Rhizomes* has always sought to pursue ambitious and innovative research that seeks to produce new knowledge, was a logical site for this project.

The Deleuzian Concept and the Plane of Immanence

Early in Looser’s cultural history of Austen, she remarks:

It sounds impossible, but Jane Austen has been and remains a figure at the vanguard of reinforcing tradition *and* promoting social change. In early 1900’s London, when elite men were drinking, singing, and calling Austen an apolitical author in their private men’s clubs, suffragists were marching through the streets outside with her name emblazoned on a banner. (3)

Looser points to Austen’s versatility as a literary figure and icon; her life and works have been and continue to be used to advance diverse, even diametrically opposed, political causes. I want to present this feature of Austen’s life and afterlife as a Deleuzian concept. In *What Is Philosophy?*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari theorize the concept in order to contemplate the larger work of philosophy as an intellectual enterprise that perpetually creates new ideas and energy along what they identify as the plane of immanence. They claim that “the concept is defined by *the inseparability of a finite number of heterogeneous components traversed by a point of absolute survey at infinite speed*. Concepts are ‘absolute surfaces or volumes,’ forms whose only object is the inseparability of distinct variations.” In their rather obtuse language, they emphasize both the immediacy and diversity that compose a concept; the concept contains a vast range of “distinct variations,” and because the concept is also an “act of thought,” it necessitates something akin to formation or coherence, even if such coherence is momentary or illusionary. Deleuze and Guattari conclude: “The concept is therefore both absolute and relative: it is relative to its own components, to other concepts, to the plane on which it is defined, and to the problems it is supposed to resolve; but it is absolute through the condensation it carries out, the site it occupies on the plane, and the conditions it assigns to the problem” (*What is Philosophy?* 21). When Deleuze and Guattari introduce the concept, they highlight both its relationality to other concepts, ideas, and experiences, as well as its status as a congealed form, and for Deleuze, we congeal the concept along the plane of immanence through our acts of thought — acts that continually remake the concept. As we have seen throughout her extensive cultural reception, Austen relates — remains relative — to an abundance of other concepts and energies, and yet we still cling to a phenomenon of Jane Austen that we can identify, discuss, and debate.

Austen functions as a Deleuzian concept because of the immense reach and influence of her life and works; she has impacted a range of peoples, groups, and institutions, creating new kinds of relations and possibilities, and yet we maintain the absolute notion of “Jane Austen.” We have clearly seen this immanence with the vast creativity of the 1990’s Austen vogue — a vogue that has seemingly never ended and continued to engender new creative energies. Throughout this proliferation of “all-things-Austen,” we still operate with a material reality of an Austen. Jane Austen lived and existed, even as Jane Austen continues to exist, function, and create events. Nicole M. Wright’s influential 2017 article, “The Alt-Right Jane Austen,” exemplifies how the Austen concept produces perpetually new potential points of connection and meanings — even surprising connections and meanings — as we retain our investment in the supposed historical reality of Austen and her work. Wright explores the importance of Austen to alternative conservative political movements over the past decade and writes: “I found that there are several variations of Alt-Right Jane Austen: 1) symbol of sexual purity; 2) standard-bearer of a vanished white traditional culture; and 3) exception that proves the rule of female inferiority. Some right-wing writers use Austen as shorthand for defiance of the sexual revolution.” Wright makes clear that Austen is used by these Alt-Right movements as an icon — of chastity, whiteness, and exceptionalism. This malleability of Austen exemplifies the Deleuzian concept; she is able to serve simultaneously a diverse array of cultural purposes for the Alt-Right, regardless of any possible contradictions, and still retain a seemingly singular and stable status. Wright theorizes that for these proponents of the Alt-Right ideology, “Austen is not a trailblazer for the female authors who followed in her wake, but rather a rebuke to women who have not reached her level of achievement.” The Alt-Right conceptualizes a supposedly fixed identity for Austen, and then uses her life as a woman writer both to uphold female purity and remind other women of their relative inadequacy; Austen as a figure apparently serves to inspire and chastise even as her writings somehow manage to recreate a white supremacist utopia.

As a Deleuzian concept, Austen can fulfill multiple ends and build numerous points of connection regardless of inconsistency or historical inaccuracy. Her life and fiction maintain an efficacy that we have re-purposed at different historical times and within distinct material contexts to fashion meaning — even meanings and purposes that we deem inappropriate, anachronistic, or even detestable. Wright concludes that, perhaps, the greatest impact of Austen within the Alt-Right community is her ability to help normalize its politics: “by comparing their movement not to the nightmare Germany of Hitler and Goebbels, but instead to the cozy England of Austen — a much-beloved author with a centuries-long fandom and unebbing academic following — the Alt-Right normalizes itself in the eyes of ordinary people.” By merely aligning Austen, including her life, cultural identity, and the public perception of her stories, with the radical thought of the Alt-Right, we establish the illusion of a historical link — a relation that vibrates and momentarily condenses. This function of the Austen concept helps to “nudge readers who happen upon Alt-Right sites to think that perhaps white

supremacists aren't so different from mainstream folks." As a concept, Austen influences contemporary happenings, people, and movements, creates knowledges that alter and can even mask our perception of such events. The Austen concept allows such virtuality, even when it means our adored author and her works serve to normalize repulsive individuals and extremist movements. As participants in acts of thought, we do not get to control the vibrations of a concept, but we can respond to them and incorporate such fluctuations into new ways of thinking.

Deleuze and Guattari's theory of the concept is especially helpful in our attempts to make sense of this ongoing versatility of Austen because it allows us to grasp the perpetuity of her utility, the range of her applicability, and the ruse of her coherence as an intellectual and cultural phenomenon. In other words, the Austen concept invites us to appreciate the multiplicity of Austen and acknowledge the lucidity of diverse Austen events. Deleuze and Guattari maintain that "concepts are centers of vibrations, each in itself and every one in relation to all the others. This is why they all resonate rather than cohere or correspond with each other. There is no reason why concepts should cohere" (*What is Philosophy?* 23). The concept is a site of diverse and interactive vibrations — convergences of thought that "resonate rather than cohere;" these vibrations are productive of ever new energies and possible relations along what Deleuze and Guattari famously identify as the plane of immanence. They note that "the concept is the beginning of philosophy, but the plane is its instituting. The plane is clearly not a program, design, end or means: it is a plane of immanence that constitutes the absolute ground of philosophy . . . the foundation on which it creates its concepts" (*What is Philosophy?* 41). Austen, like all concepts, exists along this plane of immanence, the same plane on which Deleuze theorizes that the complexity of a human life lies; as the concept fluctuates, it comes into contact — into relation — with new concepts. Austen as a concept can certainly resonate with apparently diverse concepts such as the Alt-Right, suffrage movements, and other literatures, but these concepts do not cohere; their energies vibrate and produce meanings. Concepts are, in short, fundamentally generative and procreative; they create events and "every concept is a combination that did not exist before" (*What is Philosophy?* 7). The Austen concept has proven extremely productive over the past 200 years, and we should remain confident that this diverse productivity will persist, for as Deleuze notes, "the event considered as non-actualized (indefinite) is lacking in nothing . . . but it is itself a pure virtuality on the plane of immanence that leads us into a life" ("Immanence: A Life," 31). Austen's sustained popularity and adoration will assuredly generate new energy in life, and her status as a literary artist is vital to this ongoing becoming.

Literature, Life, and Becoming

Austen's distinct status within the history of British Literature undoubtedly impacts the perpetual generativity of her "non-actualized" events and possibilities along the plane of immanence. She clearly has a special place in the history of British literature as a thoroughly canonical figure who is also immanently popular. Her canonicity has never really been in doubt, but F.R. Leavis clarified the issue when he announced Austen as "the inaugurator of the great tradition of the English novel," by which he "mean[s] the tradition to which what is great in English fiction belongs" (16). As the sole female author included by Leavis, she was, and in many ways, remains, exceptional within the history of the novel. And at least since the publication of James Edward Austen-Leigh's *A Memoir of Jane Austen* (1869), Austen has enjoyed tremendous popular appeal. Johnson, Looser, and others have provided thorough and intelligent accounts of the dynamic relationships between these academic and non-academic cultures, and Clar Tuite specifically addresses the efficacy of Austen's ongoing canonical legacy.^[5] Tuite describes Austen's peculiar position as "hypercanonical" because "she is so often quoted and so often invoked purely by and as quotation" (1). This tendency to use and deploy Austen in piecemeal or in fragmentary segments, according to Tuite, "breeds ahistoricity and an inescapable transhistoricity." Tuite continues: "By transhistoricity I mean the way in which canonical Austen has become transportable across and within conventional period designations. The enterprise of literary-critical history on the other hand, is to fix the peculiarities and particularities of those contexts" (2). While canonical Austen persists, so too does her popularity and her appeal to various historical moments, tempting us to create distinct and singular events for her life and afterlife, even as we often lose track of the materiality of these specific historical moments. When we transmit Austen in isolated quotation or small parcels, we lose context, but perhaps we also gain context; we see the effects of this process in the numerous novelties of the 1990's Austen vogue, such as the Jane Austen songbooks and advanced manuals, or even the Alt-Right Jane Austen. Tuite concludes that "Austen's afterlives derive their life and livelihood from the new ways in which they are reread and restaged" (19). Austen's afterlives inevitably create new contexts, new history, and new life; although established literary and cultural scholars may become frustrated by the non-canonical connections or transhistoricity, this is a Deleuzian process that promises perpetual energy. I am interested in theorizing how this distinctive position allows us to better understand the implications of the Austen concept, especially through Austen's role as a writer of literature.

In her now famous 1816 letter to her nephew, Austen jokes about the missing chapters from the drafts of his novels and playfully exonerates herself: "do not think however that any theft of that sort would be really very useful to me. What should I do with your strong, manly, spirited Sketches, full of Variety & Glow?" She identifies her very inability to work with her young relation's impressive work and questions: "How could I possibly join them on to the little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory on which I work with so fine a Brush, as produces little effect after much labour?" (16-17 December, 1816; 323). Austen's self-deprecating comments have been routinely used to explain the supposed narrowness of her life and novelistic world, including her supposed lack of interest in social or political issues. But as we have seen, the life and world of Austen is expansive and diverse, and the productivity of the Austen concept undoubtedly derives from her writing. For Deleuze, "To write is certainly not to impose a form (of expression) on the matter of lived experience. Literature rather moves in the direction of the ill-formed or the incomplete." He insists upon the unfinished quality of literature, but Deleuze, this is not an indicator of inadequacy or inappropriateness. Rather, he explains that "writing is a question of becoming, always incomplete, always in the midst of being formed, and goes beyond the matter of any livable or lived experience." Deleuze theorizes the very experience of writing as a perpetual process of creation and recreation that transcends the mimesis of memories or base lived experience. He disputes the classic Aristotelian claim and argues that literature essentially "transverses both the livable and the lived" and "is inseparable from becoming" ("Literature as Life," 1). Deleuze's theory of writing highlights the ongoing vitality of literature; it continues to engender and become, and as he makes clear, "there is no literature without fabulation." Like the concept, literature is generative, but this "fabulating function" is not about "projecting an ego" for the author or fixing a subject identity.

While many insist upon reading Austen's novels as an experience of the author's opinions or advice, Deleuze instead claims that writing "consists in inventing a people who are missing. It is the task of the fabulating function to invent a people" ("Literature and Life," 3-4). The Austen concept helps us to understand the immanent virtuality and productivity of the writer's life, works, and afterlife, and it is important to remember that this ongoing becoming is fundamentally rooted in her production of literature. Deleuze concludes that "the ultimate aim of literature is to set free, in the delirium, this creation of health or this invention of a people, that is, a possibility of life" ("Literature and Life," 4). Austen's literature has most assuredly create peoples — in her narratives, her adoring fans, and her critics. Especially since the 1990's vogue, we have witnessed a proliferation of Austen artifact such as the seemingly endless fanfiction volumes, fan-edited video collections (fanvids), and online environments that both document and demonstrate this process of immanent (re)creation. These new Austen events recreate the beloved worlds of Austen stories, often with contemporary twists and revisions, reminding us of the numerous vibrations of the Austen concept. Austen's (re)creation has become immanent, and through this process, facilitated the perpetual generation that Deleuze and Guattari identify with the concept. The articles of this special issue, likewise, document and demonstrate the potency of the Austen concept. They show us the ongoing life and energy of Austen's work, and most assuredly take this life a energy to new places with which we may not be fully comfortable. My ultimate hope is that this volume of *Rhizomes* reassures us all that Austen as concept remains in a state of becoming, and that the work of Critical Theory can help invigorate this becoming. Deleuze and Guattari memorably theorize: "There is no subject of becoming except as a deterritorialized variable of the majority; there is no medium of becoming except as a deterritorialized variable of a minority. We can be thrown into a becoming by anything at all, by the most unexpected, most insignificant of things" (*Thousand Plateaus*, 292). The ongoing becoming of Austen requires the destabilization of majoritarian thinking that is secure, canonical, and dominant, and we accomplish this by maintaining contact with the variations and vibrations of minoritarian thinking. We need not look for the exceptional moments to continue the process of Austen's becoming, and we may not always like the results, but the Austen concept will continue to reverberate and resonate in the events of literature and life.

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Notes

1. Looser's work follows in the wake of such valuable contributions as Claudia L. Johnson's *Jane Austen's Cults and Cultures* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012) and, of course, B.C. Southam's *Jane Austen: A Critical Heritage, Vols. I-II* (London: Routledge Kegan & Paul, 1968, 1987).
2. The most prominent of these volumes has been *Jane Austen and Hollywood*, ed. Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield. Second Edition (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2000). Other works, including Sue Parill's *Jane Austen on Film and Television: A Critical Study of the Adaptation* (London: McFarland & Company, 2002) and Gina and Andrew MacDonald's *Jane Austen on Screen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) have also been influential.
3. Looser's anthology, *Jane Austen and the Discourses of Feminism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995) collected many of the most important feminist voices in Austen criticism and served as a touchstone for further inquiry by gender and queer studies scholars. D.A. Miller's *Jane Austen, or the Secret of Style* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) has become the single most influential queer reading of Austen, but we have certainly seen others, many of which have been spurred by the creative adaptations of the past twenty years. And while it has not generated tremendous ongoing dialogue, *The Postcolonial Jane Austen*, ed. You-Me Park and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (London: Routledge, 2004) was an important moment for Austen scholarship.
4. For an example of this deployment of Austen to train young women, see Michael Kramp, "The Purity of Jane, Or Austen's Cultural Importance Nineteenth-Century America," *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal* 22 (200): 31-40.
5. See also, Looser, *The Making of Jane Austen* and Johnson, *Jane Austen Cults and Cultures*.

Cite this Essay

<https://doi.org/10.20415/rhiz/033.i01>

RHIZOMES ISSN 1555-9998 ★ 230 East Hall Bowling Green State University Bowling Green, OH 43403
Editors: Ellen Bery and Carol Siegel. Reviews editor: Craig J. Saper. Technical editor: Helen J Burgess