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“Giving voice to the tireless relish of life”: Listening for the Plantation in Eudora Welty’s *Delta Wedding* and Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*

“LONG BEFORE I WROTE STORIES,” EUDORA WELTY RECALLS IN HER 1984 memoir, *One Writer’s Beginnings*, “I listened for stories.” “Listening for them,” she clarifies, “is something more acute than listening to them. I suppose it’s an early form of participation in what goes on” (854). Reciting one of her earliest memories, the author describes the aural fascination she felt as a child toward Fannie, an African American seamstress who tailored clothes for the Welty family, and who, besides her “speed and dexterity, brought along a great provision of up-to-the-minute news” (853). Relishing the local gossip that her mother admonished Fannie for sharing, Welty admits that, even though the “gist of her tale would be lost on me . . . Fannie didn’t bother about the ear she was telling it to; she just liked telling. She was like an author” (854). Though Welty supplements this childhood recollection by suggesting that she would have to “grow up and learn to listen for the unspoken,” the piqued attunement she demonstrates toward this otherwise marginalized black sewing woman still suggests that the author possessed an acute awareness of subjugated stories from the very start (854).

As Welty describes honing her craft in the first section of *One Writer’s Beginnings*—aptly titled “Listening”—she reveals a great deal about the influence of hearing and sound upon her own writing style. Reminding us of the nimble-natured Fannie, who could “speak in a wonderfully derogatory way with any number of pins stuck in her mouth,” Welty argues that “Movement must be at the very heart of listening,” evincing the interconnected relationship between motion and sound that forms the core of her writing (854, 851). Like Fannie, who spun a yarn both literally and figuratively, Welty associated ceaseless motion and sound with another of her most fondly admired literary mentors, Jane Austen. Often described as the “Jane Austen of the South” (Prenshaw 308), Welty used the theme of movement to counter the

sense that the only things she and the eighteenth-century British author had in common were quiet plots concerning marriage and traditional female values. In her essay “The Radiance of Jane Austen,” Welty comments on how, in Austen’s fiction, “There is always a lot of jumping; that seems to vibrate through time. Motion is constant—indeed, it is necessary for communications in the country” (3). Further associating motion with sound, Welty praises “the noise” that emanates from Austen’s novels, exclaiming, “What a commotion comes out of their pages,” and commending the British writer for how “The sheer velocity of the novels, scene to scene, conversation to conversation, tears to laughter, concert to picnic to dance, is something equivalent to a pulsebeat” (3). “The clamorous griefs and joys” taking place in Austen’s novels, Welty suggests, “are all giving voice to the tireless relish of life,” illustrating the vitalizing power of sound and movement in providing adequate animation to a story (4). Finally, she asserts, “never did it escape Jane Austen that the interesting situations of life can take place, and notably do, at home” (5).

While I do not wish to bolster the myth of gentle “Miss Welty,” the author’s remarks on the domesticity of Austen’s fiction do invite initial comparison with one of her own family romances, the 1946 novel *Delta Wedding*, which describes the loud, bustling preparations of Dabney Fairchild’s marriage to the overseer, Troy Flavin. While such a nuptial affair certainly highlights Welty’s domestic theme, this does not mean that such a topic prevents meaningful social commentary. On the contrary, as Patricia Yaeger states, Welty’s focus on the “quotidian praxis” of southern racism allows her to give a “sense of the ways race functions in the nonepic everyday” (63, xv). Welty’s decision to set *Delta Wedding* in 1923 substantiates this view, as she described her choice in an interview with Charles Bunting: “It couldn’t be a war year. It couldn’t be a year when there was a flood in the Delta. . . . It had to be a year that would leave my characters all free to have a family story” (49-50). Although the “family story” at the heart of the novel is most clearly the marriage between Dabney and Troy, such relative quiet also allows Welty to focus in on the day-to-day workings of the cotton plantation. Enhancing the effect of this setting is the particular month in which the action of *Delta Wedding* occurs, September, the prime time for cotton-picking. Though the Fairchilds seem practically oblivious to the labor of this enterprise, Welty continually strives to make the sounds of the cotton industry heard over the “clamorous griefs and joys” of

the unrelenting wedding preparations. This pattern encourages the perceptive reader to listen out for the laboring personae of the plantation Delta hidden underneath the bellowing family tale.

As Yaeger deftly assesses in her reevaluation of southern women's writing, critics of American fiction have been reading such literature "with its tongue cut out, ignoring the blood at the root; we have been reading this fiction with its volume turned down" (10). My aim in this paper, however, is not to crank the dial up on Welty's novel; *Delta Wedding* is noisy enough. Rather, under the influence of the author's intuitive young self, I seek to listen *for* the stories buried by willfully ignorant ears. While Yaeger's work interrogates the "racial blindness" expressed by images of "fractured or scattered whiteness" in southern women's fiction, I wish to examine how "American ways of racial knowing" are inflected by an absolutely adamant *deafness* to the voices of a plantation economy (xii). Reading Jane Austen's 1814 novel *Mansfield Park* in aural comparison to *Delta Wedding*, I remain acoustically attuned to the marginalized presence of subjugated labor to examine the soundscape of both novels through various sources (conversation, machinery, nature, vibrations). This approach reveals how both authors make subtle observations about race, particularly through the narrative perspective of female children characters. Springboarding off Yaeger's notion that "southern whites may encounter African Americans as landscape, background, atmosphere—as part of the furniture," I argue that alongside these auditory references to subaltern characters, both Welty and Austen employ ubiquitous commodities as a mouthpiece for the voice of plantation labor (22). As a result, these authors contrast the omnipresence of products such as cotton, sugar, and tea with the marginal presence of the labor that produces such luxuries, shattering the echo chamber of self-perpetuating domesticity.

* * * * *

While her 1969 essay makes Welty's overall love of Jane Austen abundantly clear, her affection for *Mansfield Park* is much less obvious. As Welty told Jean Todd Freeman in 1977, she was able to read Austen's oeuvre again and again, "because she only has a short row of books and you can't stop when you start her anywhere. If you ever start her, you read them all" (195). Yet, there are signs that she was not as fond of this particular novel as some of the others. Throughout "The Radiance of Jane Austen," for example, Welty refers to the specific brilliance of almost all

of Austen's major works—except for *Mansfield Park*. In addition to this notable omission, the book is meagerly represented in Welty's personal Austen collection. Curators at the Welty House and Garden describe how the author had an Austen volume in almost every room of her home so that there was always one to hand, a fact corroborated by the list compiled by the Welty House staff, which shows that Welty owned two copies of *Emma*, four copies of *Northanger Abbey*, four copies of *Persuasion*, two copies of *Pride and Prejudice*, one copy of *Sense and Sensibility*, and one copy of *Mansfield Park*.¹ While there is only a single *Sense and Sensibility*, the fact that Welty neglects to mention *Mansfield Park* in her Austen essay and only has one edition of this text is particularly striking, especially on a meta-textual level, when considering the key themes of silence and absence that the novel itself brings up.

Even in previous scholarly works that draw Austenian connections to *Delta Wedding*, *Mansfield Park* has received inadequate attention. Most recently, Carolyn Brown's essay "Such 'Sparkling Vitality'" pairs the two authors by linking *Delta Wedding* to *Pride and Prejudice*, based on the discovery of a 1965 letter from Welty to her niece Mary Alice Welty White, in which the author documents the "likenesses and differences" between *Pride and Prejudice* and her own 1946 novel. Among their similarities, Welty states that both novels are "set in self-contained small worlds" and that they "limit themselves in scope to the domestic scene." She suggests that they are "comic novels," "feminine in style," and, most importantly, expresses her hope that both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Delta Wedding* come across as "observant and written with an eye and ear as sharp as possible" (226). Brown fruitfully demonstrates plot similarities between the two texts to further her argument, noting that both stories lead up to marriages, and equating the "large named estate" of Shellmound and Marmion with the Longbourn, Pemberley, and Netherfield properties of Austen's book (228). While Brown is not wrong about these thematic parallels, by listening a little closer below the surface of *Delta Wedding*'s bridal spectacle, we may notice greater resemblance to *Mansfield Park* than previously realized. Like many of Austen's works, this 1814 novel satisfies the criteria of being

¹A full list of the books in Welty's collection that pertain to Jane Austen can be requested through the Eudora Welty House and Garden, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

"self-contained" and, though far from "limited in scope," also takes "the domestic scene" as its inspiration, along with the generic mainstay of a "large, named estate." Furthermore, both the titular *Mansfield Park* and Welty's *Shellmound* are premises knowingly founded on plantation wealth, yet both residences represent a perpetuation of ignorance toward how such wealth is produced. As with *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park* continues to be "feminine in style" and in narrative voice, using free indirect discourse most prominently to access the thoughts of its protagonist, Fanny Price. Like Laura McRaven of *Delta Wedding*, Fanny Price is, for all intents and purposes, motherless—Mrs. Price all but ignores her throughout the novel. Fanny has a morally questionable father, an ex-marine lieutenant "disabled for active service, but not the less equal to company and good liquor," echoing Laura's distant father in Jackson, of whom the Fairchilds wholeheartedly disapprove (*Mansfield Park* 4). Most importantly, both girls are relative outsiders; their familial visits thus provide the opportunity to probe the peculiarities of plantation culture to which those closer to the heart of the scene have become desensitized.

This perspective is key to both novels, because, as Yaeger states, children are already considered "marginal to mainstream culture" yet remain "caught up in its process of indoctrination," and as such, "the child may question her society's values and provide a narrative space for challenging its beliefs" (136). To emphasize this inquisitive permeability of youth, Welty focuses on the relative naiveté that both she and Laura McRaven appear to share. "When I wrote that novel," she recalled in an interview with John Griffin Jones,

I don't [sic] know much about the Delta, which I probably don't need to tell you. So I made my person a little girl nine years old . . . She knew just about what I knew. In that way I could venture as far as I liked. I could tell my story, but I wasn't telling it as an old hand at the Delta. I didn't know it, except how to get there from here. (330)

Contrasting herself to "an old hand at the Delta," Welty makes clear the importance of the outside perspective she employs in *Delta Wedding*, as Laura is able to approach the region as someone not fully inculcated into the culture, while the enigmatic phrase that Laura "knew just about what I knew" implies both the young girl's and the author's keen insight into issues that other individuals have become willfully ignorant toward. Finally, the topographical motion of getting from there to here bears a

strong connection to what the children in both *Delta Wedding* and *Mansfield Park* understand about the politics of location and its relationship to marginalized voices. As Laura insists in *Delta Wedding*, for instance, “My papa has taken me on trips—I know about geography.” Yet, as Welty points out, “in the great confines of Shellmound, no one listened” (316); the Fairchilds are contented with their own self-contained existence, deaf to any ideas about the outside world that Laura might bring for their enlightenment.

Similarly, in *Mansfield Park*, the Bertram sisters bully their cousin Fanny over her supposed lack of worldly knowledge. Gleefully reporting her foolishness to their mother, the sisters run into the polite drawing room and announce:

“Dear Mamma, only think, my cousin cannot put the map of Europe together—or my cousin cannot tell the principal rivers in Russia—or she never heard of Asia minor—or she does not know the difference between water-colours and crayons! How strange! Did you ever hear anything so stupid?”

“My dear,” their considerate aunt would reply, “it is very bad, but you must not expect everybody to be as forward and quick at learning as yourself.” (16)

While we might read this episode as evidence of Fanny Price’s simplicity, as with Welty’s use of Laura McRaven, this naiveté seems much more demonstrative of Fanny’s ability to more open-mindedly observe the world around her. Read through a postcolonial lens, the Bertram cousins’ insistence on Fanny’s cartographical ignorance bespeaks their imperialist viewpoint of the globe, while the notion that Fanny needs to be able to tell the difference between watercolors and crayons demonstrates that the girls consider classification and the establishment of material difference to be an important part of analyzing the world. Though the Bertram girls are “forward and quick at learning,” this short passage illustrates that what they have gained in their swift education is simply the knowledge that benefits those in power. While they listen to their cousin in order to belittle her, there is little room left in their scholarly vault to register more marginalized voices than this. As Meenakshi Mukherjee observes:

the Bertram girls live in a *sealed and static space*, totally self-obsessed and completely *unheeding* of the world outside, where a war was going on and where slaves worked on plantations to ensure the comfort and elegance of their lives in a country mansion. Jane Austen *quietly* draws a distinction between the limited world that Sir Bertram’s

daughters and sons inhabit and the quality of *Fanny's mind, which can open out* to issues beyond the self. (56; emphasis added)

Here, Mukherjee establishes Austen's manipulation of novelistic sound to emphasize the central difference between Fanny and her cruel cousins. Like the Fairchilds, the Bertram girls inhabit a limited world, hemmed in by their comfortable lives on the country estate. Even if they *can* place Asia Minor on a map, Mukherjee suggests, this education is only part and parcel of appearing genteel; in reality, the Bertram sisters look no further than the ends of their noses, and hear no other voices but those of white hegemony. Furthermore, in describing their self-obsessed viewpoint as "unheeding of the world outside," Mukherjee registers that while the girls have probably heard about global goings-on, such as slavery capitalism and plantation culture, they have quickly disregarded this knowledge to concentrate on the elegance of life in their hermetic home.

Fanny, on the other hand, like Laura McRaven, has a mind that travels beyond her own experience, which can "open out" to consider the perspective of other people in the world. These young girls make effective narrators for both Welty and Austen, then, because they have not yet been fully indoctrinated into the Westernized narrative of empire, and are perhaps almost *pre-colonial* in their view of different countries. Laura and Fanny are not so much *unlearned* as imaginatively boundless, free from colonizing perspectives of geography concerned with mapping and boundaries, subjugation and ownership. Read in this light, the girls appear much more open to questioning the epistemologies of race that their relatives have come to take for granted. Indeed, as Welty suggests, it is this type of willingness, the porous nature of Laura as a constantly learning child, that most sets her apart from her family. At Shellmound, she sits, "with her eyes wide. At any moment she might expose her ignorance—at any moment she might learn everything" (16). While this description focuses on Laura's sight rather than her hearing, it still broadly illustrates her inclination to entertain differing perspectives; what Laura learns at Shellmound depends on what she chooses *not* to ignore.

Not just a geographer with eyes open to colonial reinterpretation, the child is also able to register motion outside the sealed and static space of hegemonic forces. "As the focus of adult rules and regulations," Yaeger notes, "the child is a victim as well as a seismologist who registers the

costs of a classist or a sexist ethic; she becomes a vivid, painful pressure point, a site of strain and unrest within an unjust social system” (136). Fanny and Laura may encounter the distaste of their relatives, then, because they threaten to disrupt the unstable networks of knowledge and power in which their families are heavily invested; listening for the dimmed sound of the plantation amid the noise of white gentility, these children register the deeper racial message that dominant culture tries so hard to hide. Measuring movement in the earth to predict unrest bubbling under the surface, the seismic symbol of the child registers the fact that such subterranean vibrations of subjugated personhood contain *a lot* more power than those who sit atop supposedly steady planes of wealthy comfort would like to believe.

* * * * *

Certainly throughout *Delta Wedding*, the physical presence of the African American domestic staff is often represented as generalized background noise that the Fairchilds have all but learned to ignore. Laura’s atmospheric perception however, allows her to tune in to the wavelength of these otherwise marginalized voices. While playing hide-and-seek with her relatives, Laura uses her keen senses to seek what is hidden for herself: “from where she hid she could see the back of the house, hear the Negroes” (95). Laura hears the African American voice because she is in a closer position to witness it, but also because her ears are open to accepting the sound. Hide-and-seek enables Laura to listen for the “Negro” presence in the Fairchild household because in attempting not to be found, she is so obviously quiet, piqued for listening, and hidden. With its focus on staying silent, alert, and enclosed, this concealment establishes Laura’s sensitivity to black experience on a much deeper level, echoing the constricted spaces of existence that African Americans have been subjected to from slavery onward and emphasizing Laura’s heightened consciousness of racial injustice in this moment. Such empathy becomes even more acute when her intellectually disabled cousin, Maureen, catches Laura hiding in among the woodpile and callously causes a heap of logs to fall on her before running off. “The surprise, the heavy weight, and the uncertainty of getting out kept her so busy that at first she did not miss them coming to look for her,” Welty describes, suggesting that Laura feels so completely trapped by her circumstances that she does not even begin to register that none of her relatives have even bothered to start

searching (96). Even as Laura surveys the damage to her body and spits pieces of bark from her mouth, however, Welty provides the opportunity for her young protagonist to become the "listening" child who knows that "stories are there" by describing the sonic environment that can be heard from this uncomfortable vantage point: "Inside the house the light, tinkling sounds went on; Roxie's high laugh, like a dove cry, rose softly and hung over the yard" (*OWB* 854; *DW* 96). Among the woodpile at the back of the house, Laura's intimacy with the African American presence intensifies, as she hears the incessant tinkle of the domestic bell and becomes enveloped by the veil of Roxie's laugh. As she begins to extricate herself from this situation alone, Laura comes to realize how little the Fairchilds actually pay attention to anything outside of their domestic vacuum, as a "feeling of their unawareness of her came over [her]" (96). That Welty would thus parallel this sense of Fairchild obliviousness in a moment where Laura feels most akin to the African American domestics in the novel suggests that Laura has gained at least *some* idea of what the subjugated staff experience at the hands of this deliberately obtuse family. Even more pertinently, as Laura looks at her scraped knees, Welty describes how she feels "as black and ugly as a little Negro," ostracized and bullied by the Fairchild family, her presence forced into the darkest of corners outside the self-perpetuating "circle" of the house (97, 95).

This sub-level nature of sound appears earlier in the novel too, when Ellen is trying to rock baby Bluet to sleep; the Fairchild house is described as "nearly still" and therefore calm enough that "from below . . . faint noises from the kitchen" can be heard (82). Welty uses this sense of hush to attune the reader to the sound of *Delta Wedding's* African American characters, which comes "from below," and emphasizes how hard one must listen to register it—even with a quiet house, the sounds from the kitchen remain "faint." Furthermore, in locating the black voice here, the novel equates domestic individuals with a place within which they commonly work; from the perspective of the Fairchild family, African Americans are synecdochally, and aurally, related to the kitchen. This symbolic connection continues through the image of the household dinner bell, a sound that is repeated a number of times throughout the novel: the "dinner bell rang"; "I seem to hear the dinner bell," said Aunt Jim Allen" (149, 151). The bell draws attention to the Fairchilds' dependence on their servants as it calls the family to dinner, an audible signal that would not be necessary had they

cooked the meal for themselves. For Aunt Jim Allen, as for others, no thought is given to the hand that rings the bell or the chefs behind the meal that it signifies—the bell is a signal for prepared food, not for the food preparers. Perhaps no better, for Ellen Fairchild the bell even *becomes* the African American, albeit a named one. “Don’t I hear Roxie’s bell?” she asks, preemptively, before “Sure enough, as if in answer, the dinner bell rang” (200). Here the bell becomes undeniably associated with Roxie’s position in the Fairchild household—through its chime the servant answers the mistress, fulfilling the Pavlovian expectation of this domestic ding sounded by the dominant plantation class.

One of the more troubling equations of African American presence via sound is the ever so subtle way in which it is connected with animal noise, a relationship that begins when Laura recalls “the baying of the dogs at night,” near the start of the novel (10). Her cousin Roy’s interpretation of this noise is much more racially coded, as he believes that “when you heard dogs bay, a convict had got out of Parchman and they were after him in the swamp” (10). Parchman Farm, a notoriously grueling prison-cum-plantation historically dedicated to housing black men, has often been identified as a site of contemporary slavery.² That the sound of dogs, which for Laura is rather insignificant baying, becomes racially connected to the escape of an (assumed) African American inmate for Roy, shrewdly suggests that the Fairchilds view the black presence in the Delta as something lesser—criminal and bestial. Brannon Costello also sees this animal connection at work in the novel; he cites the moment when Laura hears “nothing, except the sounds of the Negroes, and the slow ceiling fan turning in the hall, and the submissive panting of the dogs” (69). This train of thought, Costello conjectures, “implies that the noise of African American work is essentially background noise on a level with mechanical contrivances like the fan and submissive creatures like the dogs” (52). Further, as Toni Morrison points out, assigning the black voice bestial characteristics emphasizes its linguistic difference from white people, as “equating speech with grunts or other animal sounds closes off the possibility of communication,” keeping the domestic workforce subjugated and unheard (68). Finally, the external workers, i.e. those who pick in the fields as opposed to assist in the house, are represented as an organic, and yet again faint, sound of the natural environment: “the song of distant

²See Blackmon.

pickers started up like the agitation of birds" (47). The already dimmed resonance of pickers is normalized through the suggestion that their sorrow songs are as commonplace as avian chirps, thus making them easier to ignore; for the planter class, the removed sound of black labor is no more out of the ordinary than the everyday tweeting of birds.

The Fairchild family relies on nature to obscure not only the sound of these pickers, but also the sight of them, as Welty describes "a dense high wall of honeysuckle, which shut out the sight of the cotton wagons streaming by on two sides" (173). Significantly, this traditional southern flower surrounds a Confederate cemetery, invoking a sort of "natural" boundary between the idealized Old South symbolized by the war dead and the laboring bodies of the cotton industry that actually built the livelihood of the planter class, commenting on the typical racial blindness within traditional pastoral images of the South—emphasized by Welty's use of mockingbirds, cedars, and rosebushes inside the graveyard—and confirming Toni Morrison's argument that for white America, it actually "requires hard work *not* to see" the African American (17). Yet this foliage barrier is able to conceal only so much, and though Welty suggests that behind it "nothing else of Fairchilds could be seen," this floral symbol of southern gentility is unable to drown out the sonic presence of plantation labor (173). In fact, Welty goes so far as to say that noise is the single part of the plantation sensorium that remains: "only its sound could be heard—the gin rumbling, the compress sighing, the rickety iron bridge being crossed, and the creak of wagon and harness just on the other side of the leaves" (173). Thus, while the Fairchilds may work hard to cover over the foundations of their leisurely wealth with the white beauty of honeysuckle's charm, Welty demonstrates that the aural elements of the cotton industry do not simply fade away that easily.

For a household where such outside appearance means everything, no area can be overlooked. A case in point is the manicuring of the Fairchild garden: "Little Uncle's little boys were up in the yard, crisscrossing with two lawn mowers cutting the grass for the wedding" (94). The anonymity of Little Uncle's sons represents the lack of identity afforded African Americans in this novel, though it is significant that they are connected to their black domestic father here. This detail illustrates the ancestral thread running through a plantation culture that evolved from slave labor. In an almost perverse kind of primogeniture, Little Uncle's "little boys" have the Fairchild's land passed down to them by their

father—not to own, however, but to toil and mow just as Little Uncle did before them. Enhancing this idea, Welty even supposes that “The sound of the lawn mowers was pleading; they seemed to be saying ‘Please . . . please’” (94). Reading for the African American voice via the machinery it operates, this beseeching sound of the mowers is undoubtedly a mechanical response to the ceaseless work that must be performed for the spectacle of a Fairchild wedding, a chance for the sounds of plantation labor to express the true hardship of the workers beyond the pruned and preened gardens of the white well-to-do. Such machinations of oppression are a central place for hearing the sound of African American experience, as Costello argues in *Plantation Airs*: “Welty critiques this myth of an insular, self-perpetuating aristocracy by highlighting key moments at which the machinery of coercion and exploitation, the true relationship of employer and servant, becomes visible and disrupts the Fairchilds’ carefully maintained façade,” as the author uses the incessant clamor of plantation technology to draw keen attention to the presence of a labor force so dutifully ignored by the Fairchilds’ shroud of white decorum (39).

Nowhere do machinery and genteel facade combine more than in a characteristic living room scene of *Delta Wedding*, where the Fairchilds sit “sighing, eating cake, drinking coffee,” enjoying their leisure time and the commodities made possible by plantation labor (20). Stillness is implied by the fact that “sighing” can be heard, and the mood is so quiet that Laura registers how the “throb of the compress had never stopped. Laura could feel it now in the handle of her cup, the noiseless vibration that trembled in the best china, was within it” (20). For Yaeger, these vibrations—which she describes as “ceaseless”—represent “all the vestiges of labor power that have accumulated in the objects [Laura] holds” (98). Echoing, I would argue, the “tireless relish” of Austenian life, the vibrations throbbing through this delicate object speak the labor force behind the cotton gin, the business that enables the Fairchilds to stop and take in the day, while it runs ceaselessly on. As Yaeger puts it, the sound of the plantation workforce, represented through this continual hum, is “a story *omnipresent but not heard*” (98). By deftly contrasting the stillness of the genteel atmosphere with the motion of the gin microcosmically contained in the cup, Yaeger suggests, Welty indicts the Fairchild family for their ignorance of plantation labor to the extreme; if the true story of cotton production is so omnipresent, vibrating so noticeably in their very best crockery, how can this family

possibly still ignore it? How can they choose so willfully to disregard such motion and sound? Simply put, elaborates Yaeger, "the vibrations in the teacup represent something that registers below the level of white self-consciousness but gets taken for granted," a sublevel sound register, we might say, that only seismically attuned observers such as Laura have not become ignorantly accustomed to (98-99). While Yaeger's reading focuses on the tactile notion of feeling the vibration of the gin in the handle of Laura's cup, my reading suggests the oscillations that Laura senses in the fragile stem are actually created by the sound waves of plantation labor, the motion of cotton ginning making its way into her very hands, and disrupting the pleasant domestic scene. Thus, what I would call the *sensual omnipresence* of cotton brings the African American workforce straight into the plantation household, where their labor is repurposed for the Fairchilds' delicate comfort: "there were easy chairs covered with cotton in a faded peony pattern" (21). Even Laura, in her flashbacks to Shellmound on the train, "remembered well the cotton lint on ceilings and lampshades, fresh every morning like a present from the fairies, that made Vi'let moan" (8). Although the black Vi'let is recalled in connection to cotton here, it is because she is the one tasked to remove this detritus from the awnings on a daily basis, the incessant nature of which makes her "moan." Vi'let's voice is heard, but only by Laura, who, for as much as she devotes remembrance to Vi'let herself, still inextricably ties the visual image of cotton to the longsuffering sound of Vi'let's task.

Similar to Laura and her selective memory, Dabney Fairchild also associates cotton with excessive whiteness in remembering how her grandfather James died dueling with Old Ronald McBane over the material product she bemoans:

To give up your life because you thought that much of your *cotton*—where was love, even in that? *Other* people's cotton . . . all the cotton in the world was not worth one moment of life! . . . What was the reason death could be part of any question about the crops, for instance? (157-58)

This tirade could be a harsh invective on plantation culture, but for the fact that Dabney frames her criticism around white experience. In referring to "other" people's cotton she invokes competition between planters in the same economy as one another, like her grandfather and Old McBane, not to the Othered hands of those who pick the bolls. With her cry that "all the cotton in the world was not worth one moment of

life,” she mourns the late James Fairchild while remaining entirely ignorant of the number of black deaths that have come as a result of “the crops.” As Liza Kramer deftly observes, “Dabney is so fixated on achieving some Platonic ideal of wealth in which there would be no personal cost to whites, that she seems unconscious of the fact that it was primarily African Americans who lost their lives to cotton production under the plantation system” (147). Perhaps the most personal cost to the Fairchild family’s reputation would be admitting this fact, which is why African American lives (and deaths) must be quieted, perpetually kept at conversational bay, even in Dabney’s interior monologue.

Glossing over the inhumanity of such an economy brings us back to the connective thread between *Delta Wedding* and *Mansfield Park*. In one of the most widely discussed passages from Austen’s novel—dubbed “the dead silence”—Fanny Price attempts to speak directly to her uncle about his business in Antigua and its wider ramifications. Recalling the previous evening’s conversation with her cousin Edmund, she enquires:

“Did not you hear me ask him about the slave-trade last night?”

“I did—and was in hopes the question would be followed up by others. It would have pleased your uncle to be inquired of further.”

“And I longed to do it—but there was such a dead silence!” (171)

Critics such as Edward Said have oft read this conversation from a postcolonial standpoint in an attempt to answer Gayatri Spivak’s question “Can the subaltern speak?” For Said especially, the subaltern has no voice in *Mansfield Park*, and the silence that descends upon the Bertram’s living room exists to suggest that “one world could not be connected with the other since there simply is no common language for both” (96). Yet Edmund’s response that it “would have pleased [Sir Bertram] to be inquired of further” does suggest a willingness on the part of the plantation owner to answer extra questions about his Antiguan holdings. Rather, as in the ideal world of the Fairchilds, we might see the slave trade as a topic that could be brought up with Sir Bertram, but that for niceties sake should not be discussed when it conversationally intrudes upon the domestic setting. Yet again, it is Fanny’s spoiled cousins who sit by “without speaking a word, or seeming at all interested in the subject” when she tries to bring it up. Owing to this aloofness, Fanny is afraid that it may “appear as if I wanted to set myself off at their expense, by showing a curiosity and pleasure in information which [Sir Bertram] must wish his own daughters to feel” (171). Like

the Fairchild cousins of *Delta Wedding*, then, the Bertram sisters of *Mansfield Park* have no interest in the logistical basis of their wealth, appearing dulled to any discussion of the slave trade by deploying willful ignorance toward their father's job, preventing the plantation from even having vernacular space in the novel. One slight difference between this invisible voice in the two works does exist by virtue of history and the century of distance between the authors, however. The workforce that enables the comfortable existence of the Bertrams in *Mansfield Park* is arguably much easier to ignore than that of the Fairchilds because it is much further away. Sir Thomas Bertram owns a sugar plantation in Antigua, an area of England's West Indian colonies that will not see slavery abolished until twenty years after the publication of *Mansfield Park*. Suffering from "poor returns," Sir Thomas finds it "expedient to go to Antigua himself, for the better arrangement of his affairs" (27-28), yet his absence from *Mansfield Park* is never contrasted with an actual presence in Antigua—never does the reader visit the plantation, or encounter the voices of its slaves. Nevertheless, Austen manages to make subconscious references to this slavery, for the keen reader to spot, as Moira Ferguson points out. Lord Mansfield, for instance, was a factual figure, a Chief Justice prominent in the abolition of the slave trade who perhaps lends his name to the novel and its setting, while Mrs. Norris (Fanny's other cruel, living aunt) may have been named after Robert Norris, a notorious slave trader of the time. Finally, as Ferguson demonstrates, Fanny's childhood home is inextricably linked to the slave trade, as both Portsmouth and Antigua "witness slave ships arriving and departing; scenes involving the sale of people and naval engagements are in constant view" (134). Like Laura's, then, Fanny's external viewpoint—her naval port background—may predispose her to notice the lack of direct references to slavery on a far greater scale than her inland cousins, while she is at *Mansfield Park*.

Part of the reason for this selective interest has to do with the fact that, like Shellmound in *Delta Wedding*, *Mansfield Park* is, for the white genteel characters, framed around the commodities that the plantation is able to provide, instead of the human workforce this requires. Said cites John Stuart Mill's apt remark in his 1848 treatise *Principles of Political Economy* that the plantation colonies "cannot be regarded as countries with a productive capital of their own, [but are rather] the place where England finds it convenient to carry on the production of sugar, coffee and a few other tropical commodities" (90). Lady Bertram

of Mansfield definitely views such locations in this profitable way, as she requests that Fanny's naval brother William "must not forget my shawl if he goes to the East Indies . . . I wish he may go to the East Indies, that I may have my shawl. I think I will have two shawls" (266). In the commercial culture of the plantation, the East Indies do not represent human labor for Lady Bertram, but rather the fashionable shawls she will be able to procure when William Price visits there. As Said explains, "the empire functions for much of the European nineteenth century as a codified, if only marginally visible, presence in fiction" (63). By switching senses, we can read the codified visibility of these colony products for the presence of slavery otherwise unheard, creating the "common language" that Said sees the two worlds lacking. One such codification of empire occurs in the most traditional pastime of Austen's fiction, the taking of tea and cake, represented in *Mansfield Park* via the "procession, headed by Baddeley [the Bertram's butler], of tea-board, urn, and cake-bearers" (298). This seemingly benign symbol of gentility provides the strongest presence of plantation culture in Austen's novel, for the tea-board and cake are totally incomplete without sugar—the exact commodity that the workers on Sir Bertram's Antiguan plantation supply to white British families.

Interestingly, *Delta Wedding* also pursues this association, as workers at Shellmound become coupled with commodities of white wealth. The symbol of lemonade, for instance, stretches over at least ten pages of the novel, after Vi'let brings a "pitcher" of the beverage to Aunt Tempe, "so strong it would bring tears to the eyes," potentially insinuating the white characters' clouded vision of race (130). Having drunk at least one glass of the juice, Aunt Tempe pours out another, but this time asks "pitifully for a little tiny bit of sugar." The request soon turns into a farcical task of designation, as Ellen shouts, "India—you run out and tell Vi'let to stop whatever she's doing and come sweeten Aunt Tempe's lemonade to suit her" (138). This excessive delegation of responsibility, like the dinner bell, serves to emphasize the Fairchilds' absolute dependence on black domestic labor for the most mundane of jobs that they could easily fulfill (138). So busy must Vi'let be with other household tasks, in fact, that Ellen is forced to repeat "Vi'let, bring the sugar!" just two pages later, undoubtedly shouting across the domestic space and over the continual hum of the cotton gin (140). Drawing attention to the products of plantation labor (albeit not the Fairchilds own monoculture), Vi'let brings the requested sugar in to Aunt Tempe on "an unnecessarily big

silver tray," highlighting the ostentatious displays of wealth that the Fairchild family use to hide the foundational basis for their own gentility. The episode draws attention to the absurdity of trying to hide the presence of laborers such as Vi'let behind these domestic symbols (140). Such commodities appear to be Welty's and Austen's ways of bringing the marginalized presence of the plantation workforce to the forefront. Both authors use a material culture that the planter classes had begun to take for granted as a means of reinserting the truth about this capitalist economy into an atmosphere where the voice of the subaltern is so readily subsumed to become "part of the furniture" itself (Yaeger 22).

In a 1974 interview, Jan Nordby Gretlund questioned Welty about this constantly ignorant Fairchild behavior, emphasizing the family's inability to "treat their black laborers as human beings," and asking if the "Fairchilds of *Delta Wedding* ever realize their shortcomings?" Welty's answer reflects the determined accuracy with which she always aimed to tell a story, as she suggested this kind of racial treatment was "probably exactly what was going on at the time." In fact, she hints at racial obliviousness as she speculates of the Fairchilds—and perhaps the Delta as a whole—that "They didn't even realize what they were doing" (*More Conversations* 254-55). Yet one reviewer, Diana Trilling, felt quite the opposite, believing that both the Fairchilds and their author knew precisely what they were doing within the novel. In her scathing (now notorious) *Nation* review of *Delta Wedding*, Trilling summarizes the surface action of the novel in remarks that sound Austenian at base: "Relatives pay calls and are called upon; meals are eaten; gifts arrive; people dance; servants rally in the established plantation fashion" (103). Harking back to Welty's own illustration of the "sheer velocity" of Austen's work, Trilling describes how the "Domestic bustle and a spattering of family reminiscences are all the narrative structure Miss Welty needs to house her treasures of sensibility." Trilling opines that Welty celebrates white southern aristocracy, a culture that she "describes so fondly," according to the generic expectations of plantation romance (103). "[O]ne suspects," Trilling continues, "that, for all its tenuousness 'Delta Wedding' says precisely what it intends to say," in what she reads as an idealistic presentation of the old white South (104). Having now considered more deeply the sonic environment of the novel, perhaps Trilling is actually guilty of some of the same narrow-mindedness exhibited by the Fairchilds, and what Eudora Welty truly intended to

say can only be heard by listening more closely underneath the superficial artifice that white gentility vainly represents to the rest of the world. Listening *for* the stories that Welty (and Austen) wrote, rather than just *to* them, allows the more perceptive reader to hear the “tireless relish” of the marginalized plantation voice, to register the “unspoken” tales hidden below the tremendous commotion that initially clamors from their novels’ pages.

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