

SCOTT, WHITNEY N., M.A. Grave Space: Mr. Shimerda's Suicide and the Prairie in *My Ántonia*. (2013)
Directed by Dr. María Sánchez. 76 pp.

Willa Cather's much beloved American classic, *My Ántonia*, is often celebrated for the triumphant story it tells about human resilience in the face of hardship. For every celebrated character, however, there are multiple others who succumb to the onerous environments in which the more central characters thrive. A closer examination of characters who meet violent or tragic ends, such as Mr. Shimerda, suggests that these minor characters, while serving as integral parts of other characters' triumphs, are more than foils used in establishing other characters' success. Instead, Mr. Shimerda and his grave come to illustrate the violent means through which dominant subjectivities are constructed. This essay begins with an analysis of how various subjects in *My Ántonia* are constituted in relation to other subjects as well as their geographical environments then continues on to examine how dominant subjectivities require violent events—like Mr. Shimerda's suicide—to come into being. The latter portion of this essay draws closely from Foucault's concept of heterotopia to offer a close reading of Mr. Shimerda's grave that demonstrates its situation within a complex set of relations and recommends an alternative reading of his suicide as potential critique rather than pathology.

SCOTT, WHITNEY N., M.A. Is This Still Shellmound?: The Plantation's Troubled Boundaries in *Delta Wedding*. (2013)
Directed by Dr. Scott Romine. 76 pp.

Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding* presents the image of a plantation in flux. Character movement within and between established plantation spaces draws attention to destabilized boundaries in the plantation's material presence; this destabilization also exists in the plantation's social and familial registers. When plantation spaces are altered to compensate for the changed needs of the Fairchild family, boundaries must also change. These trends, while deviating from the plantation's ideal configuration, compel the Fairchilds to cling to that ideal as a means of coping with change. Ultimately, the Fairchild family must navigate a complex relationship between their idealized perception of the plantation and the plantation's spatial function that deviates from their ideal. This essay will examine the tensions present in Shellmound's spatial function as the Fairchild ideal is troubled by the problems of scarcity and abundance as they relate to the reproduction of bodies, material spaces, and familial identity as they comprise plantation at large.

GRAVE SPACE: MR. SHIMERDA'S SUICIDE AND THE PRAIRIE IN *MY ÁNTONIA*

AND

IS THIS STILL SHELLMOUND?: THE PLANTATION'S TROUBLED
BOUNDARIES IN *DELTA WEDDING*

by

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GRAVE SPACE: MR. SHIMERDA'S SUICIDE AND THE PRAIRIE IN *MY ÁNTONIA*

Willa Cather's much beloved American classic, *My Ántonia*, is often celebrated for the triumphant story it tells about human resilience in the face of hardship. For every celebrated character, however, there are multiple others who succumb to the onerous environments in which the more central characters thrive. Jim Burden, the novel's narrator, remembers Ántonia's father, Mr. Shimerda, as an example of someone who could not acclimate to the physical and social demands of prairie life, and his suicide plays an important role in Jim's perception of the prairie and himself. Mr. Shimerda, known for committing suicide during Jim's first winter in Nebraska, is imprinted on Jim's earliest memories of the plains; after the suicide, Mr. Shimerda's grave—the "little island" of "tall red grass"—becomes a reminder of the prairie as it was before the wildness of the plains gave way to cultivated fields, and Jim uses it as a basis by which to measure change (Cather 57). Jim's perception of Mr. Shimerda, his suicide, and his grave also unveils networks of biopolitical relations that complicate a reading of the text as triumphant. A closer look at the social context surrounding Mr. Shimerda's suicide and the spatial rendering of his grave, instead, illustrate the relationships that exist between individual characters, the land, and the society that mediate what sorts of relations are possible and for whom. This network of relationships consists of a complex system of action and inaction that facilitates an alternative reading of Mr. Shimerda's suicide to make a statement about landscape and human identity as they impact and are

impacted by the cultural changes that violently transform the prairie from “the material out of which countries are made” (7) to a major participant in the United States economy.

Though Mr. Shimerda symbolizes a major crossroads in the novel, both literally and figuratively, scholarly interpretation of his suicide tends to focus solely on its role in *Ántonia*’s identity construction. Shelley Saposnik-Noire, for instance, argues that “Mr. Shimerda sacrifices his life to nature, taking with him a part of *Ántonia* but freeing her to undergo her own rebirth in nature, in the spring of the Nebraskan prairie” (174).

Ántonia’s “rebirth in nature,” as a result of her father’s death, also enables her to revise her gender identity because her physical toil in the fields masculinizes her, as Jan Goggans argues (163). Though other scholars note that Cather uses violent events, like suicide, for more than dramatic effect, they also tend to highlight how these events shape the autonomy of those left behind once violent events have taken place rather than examine the significance of the events themselves or those who do not pull through as valiantly. In *Violence, the Arts, and Willa Cather*, Joseph Urgo and Merrill Maguire Skaggs view violent or terror-laden events as facilitators of personal growth for Cather’s leading characters. In their words: “there are the few who succumb [to terror], but there are many who construct lives without succumbing to existential terror—exemplary characters who live in cognizance of the closeness of death, who force life from terror” (19). While there is no doubt that violent and terror-filled events are vital to the development of Cather’s central characters, “the few who succumb”—like Mr. Shimerda—are more than foils through which the reader is made aware of *Ántonia*’s triumph or Jim’s success. Later in their analysis, Urgo and Merril cite Cather’s short

story “Consequences” which says: “every suicide is logical and reasonable, if one knew all the facts” (qtd 21). Following this logic, considering characters who commit suicide to be tragic or romantic is a politically charged move, one that reduces any potential for critique or self-determination on the part of the victim. The first portion of this essay examines the factors that contribute to Mr. Shimerda’s suicide including constructions of his subjectivity as mediated by relations between his former self, the community around him, and the land. Elucidating this network of relations also allows for Mr. Shimerda’s suicide to distinguish itself from a highly romanticized account and become available for more nuanced interpretation. To conclude, I will adopt portions of Foucault’s heterotopia in an examination of Mr. Shimerda’s grave to provide one such alternative reading that suggests Mr. Shimerda’s suicide and his grave function within a network of relations that maintain social differentiations in the service dominant group while also subverting these relations through making them known.

Any discussion of forces that precede suicide is, at its root, a conversation about power. Although many interpretations of power and its various modalities and manifestations exist, the primary theoretical function of this essay inaugurates a language of relation as it pertains to the (re)formation of human identity and geographical locality. John Allen’s understanding of power as “a relational effect of social interaction” influenced by geography, for instance, closely resembles the theoretical intent of this essay (2).¹ Of course, any discussion of power would be incomplete without a nod, at

¹ Even though Allen’s commentary refers to the cosmological trend of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, similar phenomena exist a century earlier as immigration adds an international component to the formation of the industrialized Midwest United States.

least, toward the copious writings of Michel Foucault. His lectures from the *Power/Knowledge* collection inform discussion of how economic considerations and systems of knowledge can foster perpetual relations of force (89).² In these lectures, Foucault states that analyzing the formation of subjects is a necessary component of understanding power's immediate relationships with its object and field of application (97). Understanding how Mr. Shimerda's subjectivity is formed and challenged, then, provides keen insight to larger systems of power and social relations that also influence the greater social and ecological environments.

Comparing the Shimerdas' experience in immigrating to Black Hawk with Jim's experience is a useful way to examine how the relations available to individuals as they start afresh in a new locale are contingent upon classifiers like race, class, and national identity; this determination of social relations mean that Mr. Shimerda's subjectivity becomes a point of conflict between his identity as it existed in the old world and the new one required of him in Black Hawk. As a member of a privileged class, Jim's process of acclimating to the prairie serves as a useful contrast in understanding the mechanisms of migrating to Black Hawk, especially as the process becomes even more belabored for the Shimerdas. In her study of space and identity in Cather's works, Danielle Russell suggests that even the most privileged travelers experience cognitive dissonance when immersed in unfamiliar environments (53). The foreignness of the prairie landscape is forefront in Jim's consciousness as he immerses himself in his new home, and his earliest

² In these lectures, Foucault makes several suggestions regarding future studies of power, many of which emphasize power's relational components. For instance, Foucault asserts that power "exists in mutual relations and multiple forms of subjection in social organisms" (96).

descriptions of the landscape illustrate the drastic changes he must undergo to adapt to his new environment. “There seemed to be nothing to see,” Jim remembers of his first view of the prairie, “no creeks or trees, no hills or fields” (Cather 7). As a migrant from the Blue Ridge Mountains, young Jim looks for familiarity in a new place. The stark contrast between the prairie landscape and what Jim knows dislocates Jim’s subjectivity. His self is a territory stripped of those aspects that give it identity – its relationships with adjacent and overlapping territories, both human and geographical. To reestablish an identity, Jim must first go through a process of deterritorialization. Jim refers to the effects of this process when he describes being unable to orient himself in the absence of known landmarks; his whole self is “erased, blotted out” (7). Most of his knowledge of the world and his self must stay behind in Appalachia where his parents’ spirits will look for him “at the sheep-fold down by the creek, or along the white road that led to the mountain pastures” (7). Those people and landscapes that define Jim’s subjectivity prior to the prairie are distant, and the identity Jim knows is likewise detached from his experience as immersed in the plains.

Though Jim’s identity upon arrival is at odds with the prairie, he rapidly establishes new relations with his surroundings by leaving behind thoughts of the mountains to merge with the prairie and his grandparents’ home. He describes the process of reterritorialization in which he establishes new relationships with the land, allowing himself to be “something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins,” thereby becoming “part of something entire” – the vast network of relationships between himself and surrounding territories (12). By associating his own body with the yield of

prairie soil and his mind with the larger, more ephemeral world around him, Jim begins to leave behind the parts of himself that require prior contexts in order to exist. He then begins attaching his subjectivity to his current environment, and the process is relatively smooth for him. Jim, as a narrator looking back after the opening chapter, goes no further than the prairie to identify himself, suggesting the extent to which he has taken the landscape as part of himself. Even though Jim undoubtedly endures hardship in his transition from Virginia to Nebraska as an orphan, his relationship with the land and other people is eased by his status as a young white male attached to a family already settled in the land and in the community.

Without the added toil of finding a means of providing for himself or a group with which to identify, Jim is able to acclimate quickly. Allen interprets resources as a front for relations of power; therefore, the spatial configuration of the Burden property and the structures already established on their land represent far more than fiscal wealth. As Jim recalls: “I had been told that ours was the only wooden house west of Black Hawk ... Our neighbors lived in sod houses and dugouts” (10). The wooden house is situated on a homestead that features multiple constructs. Jim describes the layout of the immediate area surrounding the house in this way: “Our white frame house, with a story and a half-story, stood at the east end of what I might call the farmyard, with the windmill close by the kitchen door. From the windmill the ground sloped westward, down to the barns and granaries and pig-yards” (10). Since (re)forming identity, according to Russell, is associated with the presence of structures on a landscape (54), the developed homestead Jim takes as his new home facilitates his transition from orphan Virginian to a prairie

grandson. He belongs to a house with a living room, basement, dining room, and kitchen, all of which are whitewashed; beyond even the basic structure are flourishes like “little half-windows with white curtains” (8). The Burdens’ house is not merely notable in comparison to the surrounding homes; it is an image of comparative opulence. This relative wealth is irrevocably associated with Jim’s relocation to the prairie that forces minimal trauma and enjoys maximum comfort. His subjectivity, overall, remains unburdened because it merely reconstitutes itself in a new space rather than undergoing radical change.

Though Jim and the Shimerdas relocate to the plains simultaneously, the Shimerdas’ onerous and traumatic experience in acclimating to the Nebraska landscape differs greatly from Jim’s. While Jim is able to accept his surroundings, someone has prepared the way and the land for him; he arrives to a pre-built house and a family well established within the community. The Shimerdas, by contrast, arrive cold and must struggle to survive in a land and community that resists accepting the Bohemian family on equal footing as the migrants from other portions of the United States. Much of the dissimilarity between Jim’s experience and the Shimerdas’ is constituted by the limited nature of relationships the Shimerdas are able to cultivate with Black Hawk’s people and its landscape. The Shimerdas, because of the language barrier, are confined to a relationship with one individual at first, Peter Krajiček, who represents relations that are openly exploitative or hostile. Jim’s narrative says it plainly: “The Shimerdas were the first Bohemian family to come to this part of the country. Krajiček was their only interpreter, and could tell them anything he chose. They could not speak enough English to ask for

advice, or even to make their most pressing wants known” (13). Krajiek, rather than helping the Shimerdas become settled, takes advantage of their vulnerability by selling them a homestead, complete with a dwelling place that more closely resembles a cave, at an exorbitant cost. That no one outside of their national identity is willing to help the Shimerdas means that they are destined to be not only unsettled, but also impoverished. The only relationship the family has through which to integrate themselves into a new country and community determines that their relations with the rest of the community and the prairie are marked by toil and condescension because they become a group to be pitied or provided for rather than engaged in terms of mutually beneficial exchange.

While Krajiek is the figure most directly responsible for the Shimerdas’ increased struggle, and this connection openly exploits the Shimerdas for the gain of another power, this relationship does not develop in a vacuum. In his study of geography and power, John Allen reiterates the amorphous nature of power as is often “disguised by resources” (4). Behind the Shimerdas’ inability to attain necessary resources are relations of power that restrict their opportunities to provide these resources, like land, food, and means of income, for themselves. The Burdens figure into the network as catalysts for the Shimerdas’ struggle because they are, as Allen describes, part of a dominant group that constructs spaces “in their own likeness” thereby excluding those who do not resemble them from equal access to power. The spaces that belong to the Burdens—like developed farms and homes—are inaccessible to the Shimerdas (11). The vast differences that exist between the Burdens’ situation on the plains and what the Shimerdas endure upon their arrival suggests that even without actively cheating the

Shimerdas of money, the Burdens—and those of the dominant group in Black Hawk—are invested in the social structure that allows these people to be taken advantage of because they are subsidiary. People like the Shimerdas cannot provide for themselves, and therefore must subject themselves to the dominant group. The Burdens' connection to Mr. Shimerda is seemingly benign, but contrasting Mr. Shimerda's old identity—his nature as a skilled, valued labor and scholar—with Jim Burden's identity as it transforms in *My Ántonia* clearly illustrates the vast networks of unequal exchange at play.

One means through which a dominant group forcibly directs the subject formation of a sub-dominant group is through help, or charity. Jim, for instance, recalls taking provisions to the Bohemian family after they first arrive to the prairie because “they had come to live on a wild place where there was no garden or chicken-house, and very little broken land” (12). As the Burden household approaches the Shimerdas' home, Jim describes the land as “rough” and notices that it is broken up by a creek with “broken, grassy clay cliffs” and a ravine. These, Jim acknowledges, make “the land of little value for farming” (13). The lack of human constructs like the Burdens' garden and chicken-house indicates also the struggle the Shimerdas undergo in establishing themselves in a new land. The only human construct Jim detects that exists apart from the Shimerdas' land is “a sort of shed, thatched with the same wine-colored grass that grew everywhere. Near it tilted a shattered windmill-frame, that had no wheel” (14). When the Burdens approach “this skeleton,” Jim notices, finally, a “door and window sink deep in the draw-bank” (14). These existing constructs are brittle or outright dysfunctional. The only security and identity available to the Shimerdas upon their arrival comes from the ground.

There is little else to mediate their experience with Black Hawk. The relationships the Shimerdas cultivate with the land and other inhabitants of Black Hawk are irrevocably tied to the identity they are able to forge for themselves in the prairie.

The Burden's trip to bring the Shimerdas food also allows Jim to see that in addition to having little more than a cave to live in during the harsh Nebraskan winter, they also have limited opportunities to earn an income through which to better their circumstances. Without money to buy better farm land, the Shimerdas are stuck in a relationship with the land marked by toil and sacrifice. Beyond their rocky beginnings, it seems the Shimerdas will have excess difficulty preparing the fields for crops, and that the land is of "little value for farming" exacerbates the difficulties the Shimerdas already face as poor immigrants in a new country and limits the scope of betterment available to them (13). Even with this knowledge, the Burdens restrict their relationship with the Shimerdas to charity that changes little. During the scene when the Burdens bring the newly arrived Shimerdas food, Mrs. Shimerda points to the cave and says "house no good." Even with her first-hand knowledge of how harsh a prairie winter can be, Mrs. Burden seems rather unmoved. She responds with a platitude: "You'll get fixed up comfortable *after while*, Mrs. Shimerda. Make good house" (14 emphasis mine). In spite of their awareness of the plights their neighbors face, the Burdens do very little to alter the relations available to them.

Ántonia makes the Burdens' lack of helpfulness clear just before her father's suicide when uses the same language and logic to chastise Jim for not doing more for her family and preventing her fathers' death. "Your grandfather is rich," Ántonia tells Jim.

“Why he not help my papa? Ambrosch be rich too, *after while*, and he pay back” (46 emphasis mine). The use of “after while,” according to both Mrs. Burden and Antonia, suggests that circumstances of the present should not prevent action in the present. Though Mrs. Shimerda is hungry, poor, and all around disadvantaged, Mrs. Burden believes these setbacks should not be considered discouraging because they will even themselves out “after while.” Antonia, likewise, states that even though, when they arrived, the Shimerdas could not have paid for any substantial supplies or assistance the wealthier Burdens provided, this should not have prevented Mr. Burden from lending aid because the debt would have been repaid “after while.” But while Mrs. Shimerda has no choice but to accept the offhanded platitude Mrs. Burden provides, Jim does not seem to hear Antonia’s criticism. This shows that the two families do not exist on equal footing and relations between them are not reciprocal. The Burdens have greater capacity to act meaningfully in regard to the Shimerdas than the Shimerdas in regard to the Burdens.

While the Shimerdas are forced to engage in a constant battle to glean food and shelter from the land, Jim, and others like him, have easy access to constructs that displace the wildness of the prairie and, unwittingly or not, contribute to the Shimerdas’ subsidiary position. These relations have a large cultural component. In *Distinctions*, Pierre Bourdieu explicates that taste and culture are ciphers internalized best and earliest by the educated and privileged, so that to outsiders, it seems an innate part of their make-up. These tastes and cultural consumptions then “fulfill a social function of legitimating

social differences” (7).³ Cather’s treatment of taste in *My Ántonia*, though written half a century before Bourdieu’s *Distinctions*, understands social power similarly. The irony of *My Ántonia* is that in certain social groups, represented by Mr. Shimerda, having access to that “sacred frontier” is a mark against their ability to cope with the American frontier rather than a means for scaling the ladder of socio-economic status, as is typically expected of those with the advantage of high culture. Mr. Shimerda’s atypical relationship with high culture illustrates how the social stratification in *My Ántonia* is mediated by a person’s relations to the established community and the land.

Jim, as an educated adult, retroactively discerns that Mr. Shimerda was a man ill-suited to the brute labor expected of him. “The father was old and frail and knew nothing about farming,” Jim recalls. “He was a weaver by trade; had been a skilled workman on tapestries and upholstery materials” (13). Beyond the skillset necessitated by the former trade, Mr. Shimerda is educated and familiar with high culture. “My father, he went much to school,” Ántonia tells Jim. “He know a great deal; how to make the fine cloth like what you not got here. He play horn and violin, and he read so many books that the priests in Bohemie come to talk to him” (61). Mr. Shimerda, as someone more inclined toward artistic or academic pursuits than physical labor, has a particularly hard time adjusting to the requirement that his body take precedence over his mind as he tries to work the landscape to sustain his family. Though acquisition of high culture behooves Mr. Shimerda in Bohemia, it has the inverse effect on him in Nebraska. As an

³ Bourdieu also refers to a “sacred frontier” or a plane that allows a certain “legitimate” culture to remain unsullied by those considered inferior (6). The term “frontier” suits an argument that looks at the trend of assimilating the wild plains, an American frontier, into the economically viable “American” monolith of the late 19th and early 20th century.

immigrant, he is assigned to a class without access to high culture. While the Bohemian priests consulted Mr. Shimerda and respected his knowledge, in the plains, he communicates with the outside world through *Ántonia*, who translates for him. Mr. Shimerda's voice, powerful to the priests in Bohemia, must become weak in the United States, only heard as mediated through a young girl of no standing. As Mr. Shimerda's struggle attests, a culture is often imposed upon individuals when they relocate to new environments according to the relations that new environment makes available to them. Using Bourdieu's terminology, Mr. Shimerda is forced to attempt an especially drastic transformation of himself since even the most personal aspects of his identity, in formation since childhood, conflict with what the prairie and social scape of Black Hawk require him to become. It is not easy—or perhaps even possible—to alter the internal cipher through which one decodes the world. The network of relations available to him on the prairie dictate that he cease to be a skilled worker and turn to farming – thereby meeting demand for crops and re-territorialized spaces. The work of the plow chafes most the man with soft, skilled hands and dignified manner (15).

In addition to his struggles with the demands of prairie life on his personal habits, Mr. Shimerda also has an exceptionally hard time processing the shock of a new system of exchange. Mr. Shimerda cannot establish relations with white “Americans” on their own terms because he does not understand the language, so he attempts to have his neighbors relate to his prior self and experiences. For instance, when Mr. Shimerda catches Jim examining his gun, “a queer piece from the old country,” he wishes to explain the gun's history. *Ántonia* translates: “It was belong to a great man, very rich,

like what you got here; many fields, many forests, many big house. My papa play for his wedding, and he give my papa fine gun, and my papa give you” (23). Mr. Shimerda’s description of the “many fields, many forests, many big house” from his homeland, with the addendum “like what you got here,” reveals that he looks for these familiar landmarks in Nebraska. That he seeks to give the gun to Jim in a traditional manner is telling of Mr. Shimerda’s desire to recreate a social structure he understands and can use to his advantage. Jim, however, is uncomfortable with the exchange and confesses he “was glad the project of one of futurity” (23). Jim’s reaction, as representative of the greater white-dominated local culture, suggests that Black Hawk is not willing to allow Mr. Shimerda to partake in status he previously earned and enjoyed; bringing the immigrants trifle charity is far more palatable than treating them as equals. Jim does not want the gun—indicative of Mr. Shimerda’s former cultured identity—and the community by and large does not wish to acknowledge that such an identity ever existed.⁴ In Bohemia among the forests, fields, and big houses, Mr. Shimerda knows how to earn a nice gun and has the skill set to attain it. In the new world with its unbroken land, he must work to plow under his former self with the same vehemence that he plows under the unforgiving ground. These forces eventually drive him to remove his self, and his labor, from the scenario, thereby becoming one with the same ground that he has been expected to dominate.

⁴ Though Jim, as a little boy, has little direct influence on the Shimerda’s lives, if his general disinclination to validate Mr. Shimerda as an equal with whom to make exchanges is replicated in Mr. Shimerda’s relations with the rest of Black Hawk, his crisis of identity becomes clear. It is also interesting to note that the gun intended for Jim is the same weapon that brings about Mr. Shimerda’s self-accomplished death. The agent for Mr. Shimerda’s suicide is a relic of his past, one his new neighbors do not wish to acknowledge or accept when offered to them.

The tension that forces Mr. Shimerda to become “other” via his death does not begin when he moves to the prairie. Rather, as *Ántonia* reveals later on, tensions in his marriage and the social pressures surrounding it compel him to seek out and remain in a place he does not fit and these other circumstances create a distinction between types of immigrant subjectivities Black Hawk can withstand—and indeed relies upon—and those it cannot. When Jim responds callously to *Ántonia*’s concern for her father’s symptoms of depression, insinuating Mr. Shimerda should not have immigrated if he knew it would make him unhappy, *Ántonia* tells him: “My *mamenka* make him come. All the time she say: ‘America big country; much money, much land for my boys, much husband for my girls’” (45 emphasis original). Mrs. Shimerda is presented as someone who can survive in alternate circumstances because her ambition and her nature differ greatly from her husband’s. Part of her resilience stems from the fact that she is less cultured—less genteel—than Mr. Shimerda. *Ántonia* tells Jim that the marriage between the two was a result of an unplanned pregnancy that created scandal in the neighborhood. “He did not have to marry my mother,” *Ántonia* says. “He lived in his mother’s house, and she was a poor girl come in to do the work” (115). As a former servant in Mr. Shimerda’s home, Mrs. Shimerda is inured to a state of poverty and never internalized the codes of the privileged. Her identity, her self, can survive in circumstances that deny her access to high culture whereas Mr. Shimerda cannot unlearn the cipher that is part of his subjectivity.

The variations within the Shimerda family also differentiates between immigrants that, though disdained for coarse behavior, can accept the social and physical spaces

reserved for them and others who have, at some point, closely resembled the dominant group via access to culture. When Mr. Shimerda visits the Burdens' home, he is stricken by its beauty and responds with gratitude for being allowed to share in it. The response strikes Jim, who goes on to say: "I suppose, in the crowded clutter of their cave, the old man had come to believe that peace and order had vanished from the earth, or existed only in the old world he had left so far behind. ... His face had a look of weariness and pleasure like that of sick people when they feel relief from pain" (44). In the following week, Mrs. Shimerda visits the Burden house and responds to it with jealousy.

She ran about examining our carpets and curtains and furniture, all the while commenting upon them to her daughter in an envious, complaining tone. In the kitchen, she caught up an iron pot that stood on the back of the stove and said: 'You got many, Shimerdas no got.' I thought it weak-minded of grandmother to give the pot to her. (45)

Jim sees Mrs. Shimerda's frustration as in poor taste and is greatly offended by her audacious behavior. While Mrs. Shimerda's stubbornness and discontent mean that she will scrap with whatever forces that stand in her way, she also sees the unfairness in a bitter light and remarks upon it in a way that makes Jim feel uncomfortable. Even so, Mrs. Shimerda is, in many ways, far less disruptive to the social relations in place because her subjectivity conforms to presuppositions that immigrants have less class and are greedy; therefore, members of the dominant group in Black Hawk can justify relations that preserve their own privilege because these immigrants are "lesser". By contrast, Mr. Shimerda and his new environment cannot co-exist without rupture, either of the social relations in Black Hawk or of his self. Mr. Shimerda's gentle and refined

personality, though highly romanticized by Jim, is a potential article of censure for Jim's subjectivity for in many ways, he reminds the dominant group of themselves while being subjugated within the network of relations available to him.

The problem of Jim's romantic gaze is a topic of much consideration among Cather critics. In her essay "Social (Re)vision in the Fields of *My Ántonia*," Jan Goggans argues that Jim's narrative as a whole is untrustworthy because it constructs the subjectivity of the people about whom he writes. These constructions are unavoidable since any narrator is involved in a similar act, but Goggans argues that Jim shapes the characters of his tale for strategic and self-serving purposes. For example, in Goggans' view, Jim's *Ántonia* becomes an "idealized, idyllic, and isolated example of how beautiful the prairie once was" that "will immortalize him" (161). While Jim's representation of *Ántonia* undoubtedly is motivated by self-serving nostalgia, his tendency to romanticize the work of the pioneers extends far further than his personal fond memories. The ways in which Jim constructs the subjectivities of the other characters reflects and emulates an overall tendency of the dominant group to enforce certain types of subjectivities onto others as a means of establishing their own identity *as* the dominant group. Jim's construction of Mr. Shimerda's suicide, likewise, serves a purpose in preserving certain identities while undermining any subjectivity that threatens the narrative the dominant group composes for itself.⁵

Jim's primary inclination is to consider Mr. Shimerda's suicide either a gesture of longing for the old world or part of a pathological depression. "I knew it was

⁵ As Ian Marsh reveals, suicide, in particular, is often subject to interpretations that strip the suicidal person of agency (9).

homesickness that had killed Mr. Shimerda, and I wondered whether his released spirit would not eventually find its way back to his own country,” Jim writes on one occasion (50). Soon after, he states: “Mr. Shimerda had not been rich and selfish; he had only been so unhappy that he could not live any longer” (52). In both of these cases, adult Jim looking back goes no further to hypothesize the source of unhappiness or the factors underlying homesickness though this narrator commonly interjects his present-day thoughts and reflections in other scenarios. Rather, it is brought upon by a far distant place.

The other impulse of Jim’s gaze is to shift the focus away from Mr. Shimerda and onto himself. After the suicide, Jim believes he has a unique understanding of Mr. Shimerda and a connection with his spirit. As he reflects on the spiritual consequences of the suicide, “it flashed upon me that if Mr. Shimerda’s soul were lingering about in this world at all, it would be here, in our house, which had been more to his liking than any other in the neighborhood” (50). In this case, Jim privileges his family over Mr. Shimerda’s when he assumes the spirit would choose their house rather than his own family’s. Later that night, Jim places himself in the role of honorary vessel when “such vivid pictures came to me that they might have been Mr. Shimerda’s memories, not yet faded out of the air in which they had haunted him” (51). Jim responds to Mr. Shimerda’s suicide in two ways. First, he absolves his family of any guilt to be had over the Shimerdas’ poor circumstances by distancing the event from Mr. Shimerda and his

family. Jim then manages to use the suicide to privilege the Burden family, himself in particular, by establishing an air of kinship with Mr. Shimerda's spirit.⁶

Jim's tendency to interpret Mr. Shimerda's suicide in such a way that establishes a positive connection to the deceased while distancing himself from any negativity is mirrored in the larger reaction by the community. When Mr. Shimerda's body is first found, Jake Marpole, a connection of the Burden family, suggests Krajiek is guilty of murder but the evidence of the scene does not lend itself to such an interpretation. "I seen bunches of hair and stuff sticking to the poles and along the roof. They was blown up there by gunshot, no question" Otto Fuchs says (49). Mrs. Burden also attests to the impossibility of the prospect of murder when she exclaims "don't you go trying to add murder to suicide" (49). The desire to blame the event on Krajiek rather than Mr. Shimerda himself is also a means of stripping Mr. Shimerda of any agency while also displacing guilt onto distant others, like Krajiek, so that those closer to home may rest easier. When Mr. Shimerda is considered a victim of homesickness, a pathological depression, or a vicious foreigner, his suicide cannot be used as a launching point of critique for practices at play. Such a critique could cause the Burdens and Black Hawk at large to examine their own positions relative to Mr. Shimerda in a way that undermines their dominance and security.

The behaviors of the Black Hawk community regarding Mr. Shimerda's suicide illustrate that suicide is not a self-contained act; instead, it affects and reveals the

⁶ Margaret Doane discusses the prevalence of "gruesome, violent" deaths in Cather's novels and notices how rarely the communities reach out to help those most bereaved (50-1). Jim is participating in this trend by placing himself in the role of victim or bereaved rather than reaching out to Mr. Shimerda's family.

“relationship between authoritative discourses and practices” (Marsh 10). In *Suicide: Foucault, History, and Truth*, Ian Marsh takes on precisely this problem: the common representation of the suicidal person as a “tragic and tormented figure” (9). Marsh’s approach is to consider “other meanings of self-accomplished death” (4) by providing examples of historical suicides that “could be read as relational, philosophical, and political as opposed to internal, pathological, and medical” (9). Theoretical understandings of the individual’s capacity to act within a broader range of relations contend with Marsh’s overall goal. Foucault, for instance, states: “Individuals are vehicles of power,” which means that Mr. Shimerda is more than “a point of application” of power (98). Rather, Mr. Shimerda is an active participant in the experiences that shape him and he has agency in his reactions to those experiences. His conflicted subjectivity can be interpreted as unwillingness to relent to external pressures. Mr. Shimerda’s termination of that living, breathing subjectivity should be interpreted as more than a forced response by the powers-that-be, whoever they may be. As John Allen states: “Subjects are constituted in the spacing and timing of their own practices as much as they are by those who seek to shape their conduct” (9). Mr. Shimerda’s suicide, therefore, is more than capitulation to oppressive forces that act upon him; rather, it is a practice he executes of his own choice. However traumatic it may be for Mr. Shimerda’s family and acquaintances to cope with his violent death, reading the suicide as an act of cowardice or capitulation undermines its potential to serve as critique or make strange the familiar.⁷

⁷ Marsh considers at length Foucault’s process of “making strange, or unfamiliar, that which has come to feel most true, most natural, most necessary, and most real” (6).

Though Jim's impulse is to read Mr. Shimerda's death as a sign of Mr. Shimerda's weakness, certain details he includes in the narrative indicate that alternate interpretations are reasonable. For instance, when Otto Fuchs relays the news of Mr. Shimerda's suicide to the Burdens, Mrs. Burden becomes distraught. "How could he forget himself and bring this on us!" She exclaims (48). Fuchs responds with: "I don't think he was out of his head for a minute" (48) and emphasizes the meticulous grooming routine Mr. Shimerda underwent before killing himself; he bathed, shaved, and took care in his dress, traits insupportable in a farmer's daily life of dirt and toil. Fuchs interprets these acts as indicators of Mr. Shimerda's intentionality in committing suicide and his disinclination to surrender the subjectivity disallowed him in the prairie. "He was always sort of fixy and fixy he was to the last," Fuchs says (48).

Even though the conversations Jim relays allow but a brief glimpse beyond the highly romanticized account of Mr. Shimerda's suicide, Jim's visual account of Mr. Shimerda's grave is a fruitful object of study for it calls into account a vast array of relations that allows for an alternative interpretation of Mr. Shimerda's suicide. Once Jim finishes relaying his thoughts and observations at the time of Mr. Shimerda's death, he describes Mr. Shimerda's grave and the landscape surrounding it as they appeared in some middle phase between his childhood and his current temporal state. This concluding paragraph of "The Shimerdas" chapter sixteen establishes Mr. Shimerda's grave as a central image that provides a visual account of the tensions and violence at work in the prairie's ongoing cultivation and will be a primary focus for the rest of this essay.

Years afterward, when the open grazing days were over, and the red grass had been ploughed under and under until it had almost disappeared from the prairie; when all the fields were under fence, and the roads no longer ran about like wild things, but followed the surveyed section-lines, Mr. Shimerda's grave was still there, with a sagging wire fence around it, and an unpainted wooden cross. As grandfather had predicted, Mrs. Shimerda never saw the roads going over his head. The road from the north curved a little to the east just there, and the road from the west swung out a little to the south; that the grave, with its tall red grass that was never mowed, was like a little island; and at twilight, under a new moon or the clear evening star, the dusty roads used to look like soft grey rivers flowing past it. (59)

The spatial rendering of the grave as well as its function relative to the prairie, human constructs, and human action paint a picture in the style of Jim's romanticism that also captures the dynamism of the forces at play and allows Mr. Shimerda to exist not only as a victim, but an agent in his own right.

Foucault's concept of heterotopia, as discussed in the lecture "Of Other Spaces," facilitates a reading of Mr. Shimerda's suicide as disruptive to a narrative of pathologized self-death.⁸ According to Foucault, there are "certain [sites] that have the curious property of being in relation with all other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they are having to designate, mirror, or reflect" (24). In other words, a heterotopia—literally, "other place"—has two primary components. First, the heterotopia is connected to its context in such a way that lays bare the ongoing relations in its milieu. These representations then serve as a means of challenging or interrupting those relations by existing as "counter-sites . . . in which all

⁸ While the concept of heterotopia is one of Foucault's less developed conceptions, Peter Johnson suggests that the heterotopia and its "ambivalent relation to power" can be understood more clearly by putting it in conversation with concepts of utopia. Johnson's conclusion is that "heterotopias are fundamentally disturbing places" that "display and inaugurate a difference and challenge the space in which we feel at home" (84).

the other real sites that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (24). Mr. Shimerda’s grave fulfills precisely these functions when it mirrors the network of relations that compelled him to alter his subjectivity while also illustrating that these relations may be subverted by individuals who do not or cannot relent.

A close reading of Jim’s rendering of the grave with Foucault’s heterotopia in mind allows for a nuanced view of the relationality of forces, which fulfills the first function of the heterotopia: illustrating the relations or representing the sites surrounding it. The relations discussed earlier in regards to Mr. Shimerda’s subjectivity re-enter as the grave is irrevocably attached to a human identity and simultaneously embedded in the landscape. The grave becomes an important symbol of how the prairie and its inhabitants constitute and deconstruct each other—the human displaces the earth, and the earth enfolds the human. In the first two clauses of Jim’s description of the grave, we see the beginning of a paragraph hinging on the prepositions over, under, and around. Though “over” in the grammatical context of the second clause—“once the open-grazing days were over”—is not used as a visual image, when combined with descriptions of the land later on in the paragraph, it adds to a vertical spatial effect (57). Once we cross *over* these open-grazing days and Mr. Shimerda’s death (and a gap in Jim’s narrative), the fields are suddenly “*under* fence” (all emphasis mine). The grave, conceptually, consists of Mr. Shimerda’s body *under* the ground, and in the third sentence, the grave takes on an even more romantic appearance “*under* a new moon or the clear evening star” (emphasis mine). These prepositions create vertical positioning with the grave under the landscape

and the landscape under the influence of humans. They are both lower, on a hierarchical understanding of vertical power, than man-made roads and fences. These constructs overtake the prairie—literally—as they have strived to overtake Mr. Shimerda’s subjectivity in a more metaphorical manner.

The same sorts of prepositions also contribute to a horizontal understanding of the relations at work, though not in a sense in which horizontal means more equal. Rather, horizontal spatiality as understood in a timeline illustrates the tension between dominant and subdominant groups and forces. “When the open-grazing days were over” begins Jim’s discussion of the grave (57). When we imagine days that are “over,” we tend to place them on a timeline, a horizontal axis, that posits the grave and the wilderness of the prairie as part of the past with an arrow pointing “right” toward the conceptually progressive present and hypothetical future. Those in the past are “over” and have no capacity for action in the present and future. Boundaries are also understood on a horizontal plane as they manifest “around” certain parts of the prairie and echo the vertical power dynamic. Humans must confine raw land within tight horizontal borders so that the rest may be used for some purpose, whether facilitating mobility via vehicular transportation or economic mobility through the increasing industrialization of agriculture. Mr. Shimerda’s grave, like the increasingly domesticated landscape, is placed strategically in horizontal space. It has a “sagging wire fence *around* it” and it becomes, over time, “like a little island” that has no real influence outside of its allotted space (57, emphasis mine).

In “*My Ántonia* and the National Parks Movement,” Joseph Uργο also takes up Cather’s use of horizontal boundaries and illustrates how parceling out what can remain wild and what can be given up to “progress” is a topic of great concern (48). Uργο interprets Mr. Shimerda’s the grave through this lens, arguing that “Shimerda’s grave, finally, is in itself an attenuated national park, a patch of preserved landscape, ‘with its tall red grass never mowed.’” Instead, Uργο argues that the grave is “consciously preserved, untouched by roads and unsurveyed by the development companies, set aside to allow tired driver to wish him well” (52). While Mr. Shimerda’s grave is, in many ways, an intentional signal to an image of a past time, there is a difference between it and the national parks image Uργο invokes. Uργο’s language suggests that those who build the roads or plow under the prairie leave the grave alone out of respect or awe for a previous time; they preserve an image of the past for others to enjoy. Jim’s perception of the grave, however, illustrates that the boundaries drawn around it are not meant to protect the grave but rather banish it and its unfavorable connotations from the nation’s and dominant group’s understanding of itself.⁹

While the image of Mr. Shimerda’s grave invokes an understanding of power that de- and re-territorializes the plains and certain human identities, the grave also becomes a pictorial representation of how these relations are inverted, thereby adding the second component of Foucault’s heterotopia—the subversion of relations—to the depiction of

⁹ The image of Mr. Shimerda’s grave as detached from the cultivated prairie and set aside by conscious boundaries becomes politically significant through critical examination of Cather’s participation in contemporary discourse. Guy Reynolds, for example, studies the modernist elements of Cather’s environmental images such as her “interest in lines, grids, boundaries: lines inherent in the land or imposed by man, but all tending toward abstract geometry” (182).

these relations. When Jim describes Mr. Shimerda's grave, he often focuses on the roads, thereby drawing attention away from Mr. Shimerda and to his grave's surroundings, placing the man and his suicide in a static and subsidiary position relative to the plains and human constructs much in the way that Jim has previously focused his gaze away from Mr. Shimerda and his family and onto himself. Jim attributes action to the other fixtures of the scene when he describes: "The road from the north curved a little to the east just there, and the road from the west swung out a little to the south" (57). This statement makes up the first part of a much longer sentence that assumes a grave that is still—"still there" and unmoving—and depicts the roads performing actions around it. They curve. They swing out. By contrast, Mr. Shimerda's body in his grave rests passively without potential for action which makes the plot subject to any action the humans surrounding it choose to make. Interestingly enough, Jim does not use language that attributes these actions to people; even so, those aspects of the scene that are allowed to act are the products of human innovation that changes the appearance and function of prairie lands. By contrast, the landscape of Mr. Shimerda's grave is not described as performing any obvious action. The red grass does not grow, it is simply "never mowed," gaining textual presence only through its relation to the human in the same way that Mr. Shimerda and his suicide only gain textual presence through their significance to Jim.

Though Mr. Shimerda's grave is not presented as an object of significance to Black Hawk and the prairie, the spatial depiction of this images suggests lingering resistance in the face of enforced change. The grass, noticeable for its presence on Mr. Shimerda's grave, is only allowed uninhibited growth because it is confined to the burial

site; other areas of the prairie are being “ploughed under and under” (59). Mr. Shimerda’s grave forms a “little island” in the midst of cultivated fields, becoming an image that subverts the relations proximal to it. Though the “little island” remains static while roads and living humans have capacity for action, it inverts the typical relations when it becomes the motivator *for* those actions. The grave’s position at a crossroads lends to its preservation over time, and its reason for being at a crossroads—Mr. Shimerda’s suicide—also serves the role of reversing the relations between the dominant group and subdominant groups.¹⁰ The suicide forces the community at Black Hawk into a position it does not like. Mr. Shimerda cannot be buried in traditional cemeteries because of beliefs about suicide, and Mrs. Shimerda’s decision to bury Mr. Shimerda at a crossroads is duly upsetting. “I don’t know whose wish should decide the matter, if not [Mrs. Shimerda’s]. But if she thinks she will live to see the people of this country ride over that old man’s head, she is mistaken,” says Jim’s grandfather (56). That Mr. Burden preemptively knows that the grave will remain troublesome for a utilitarian agenda is telling. Rather than existing as an image of respect for the dead, the grave remains untouched because it cannot be subsumed within the system of relations in Black Hawk. This horizontal understanding of the grave rejects a totally submissive reading of the image. While the grave may be understood as defenseless in some respects, it signals interruption of those very constructs that continually threaten it and have contributed to

¹⁰ “It developed that Mrs. Shimerda and Ambrosch wanted the old man buried on the southwest corner of their own land; indeed under the very stake that marked the corner. Grandfather had explained to Ambrosch that some day, when the country was put under fence and the roads were confined to section lines, two roads would cross exactly on that corner... Grandfather asked Jelinek whether in the old country there was some superstition to the effect that a suicide must be buried at a cross-roads” (56).

its existence. The wire fence around it “sags,” and the roads that otherwise would have met over Mr. Shimerda’s “head” must alter their paths (57).

Even a reading of the grave as subversive must be tempered with the knowledge that its defiance, like the prairie grass, remains only so long as no one cuts it down. The grave as a defiant image is also possible only so long as there are Jims to remember its history. Otherwise, it becomes a nameless patch of grass without a message and the end of the novel gestures toward this erasure of Mr. Shimerda through forgetting. At previous moments in the text, Jim remembers the grave whenever he recalls or visits the prairie of his childhood. During his first visit to *Ántonia* after she gives birth, they “sat down outside the sagging wire fence that shut Mr. Shimerda’s plot off from the rest of the world” (151). After his next visit, Jim closes out his narrative with a description of himself again wandering the plains, looking for images of the past. He once again encounters a portion of the old road and remembers the prairie as it was before that winding path was overtaken by larger, more efficient constructs of mobility. The grave, in this scene, is conspicuously absent. However, Cather’s introduction, which occurs last in the temporal frame of the novel, suggests that Jim has not forgotten Mr. Shimerda entirely. Cather’s frame narrative accounts for her use of Jim’s voice, and her persona watches as Jim hands over his written account. At the last moment, Jim changes the draft’s title from “*Ántonia*” to “*My Ántonia*”—not only adding a sense of possessiveness to the tale, but also echoing Mr. Shimerda’s affectionate regard for his daughter.¹¹ Mr. Shimerda’s actions, though understood as weakness or pathology in many cases, have

¹¹ Just after the suicide, Jim’s narrator recalls “I used to think of the tone in which poor Mr. Shimerda, who could say so little, yet managed to say when he exclaimed, “*My Án-tonia!*” (62).

lasting impact on those who shared in its network of relations. In this way, Mr. Shimerda, his suicide, and his grave become more than symbols of victimhood; they represent the relational configuration of Black Hawk, but in a manner that signals disturbance in those who were involved in that configuration no matter how well s/he wishes the sleeper.

While reception of *My Ántonia* —and Cather’s works more generally—focuses on its narrative of “the indomitable spirit of humankind” or “the human spirit triumphant,” Cather continually reminds the reader that while there are Ántonias to celebrate and Mrs. Shimerdas to tolerate, there are also Mr. Shimerdas to mourn. Her use of Mr. Shimerda’s grave symbolizes that the process of transforming wild prairies and foreign peoples into materials suitable for national cohesion requires a multitude of suicides. The land and the identities of people must become “other” since the United States’ economic and political existence demands such sacrifices as the expense for survival. Mr. Shimerda’s suicide, ironically enough, enables him to avoid a more insidious form of self-death, and his remains interrupt horizontal notions of progress and vertical concepts of power as they function in a commonly-accepted narrative of Americanism. If *My Ántonia* is a celebration of human resilience, Mr. Shimerda and others who succumb to violent ends cannot be excluded from the message. These small islands are victorious because they remind us that progress comes at a grave price.

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IS THIS STILL SHELLMOUND?: THE PLANTATION'S TROUBLED
BOUNDARIES IN *DELTA WEDDING*

Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding* (1946) presents the image of a plantation in flux as Dabney Fairchild prepares for her wedding and her family attempts to make room for the new generation on the already-crowded Shellmound. These changes introduce new layers of anxiety to the plantation's spatiality that, in turn, compel the Fairchilds to re-orient themselves in plantation space. Nine-year-old Laura McRaven becomes re-immersed into plantation life after her mother's death just in time for the wedding ceremony, and she asks a version of "is this still Shellmound" at least twice. The Fairchilds, Laura's maternal relatives and controlling family of the large cotton plantation, choose not to answer.¹² Instead, they opt to ignore Laura or respond evasively. To the Fairchilds, plantation boundaries need no further definition because their imagined insularity provides clearly drawn and unmoving borders. As Shelley, the eldest cousin, writes in her diary, "altogether we have a wall...we are solid to the outside" (110). Underneath the family's security, however, are renewed and exacerbated anxieties about who will inhabit or inherit parts of the plantation. These anxieties reveal that while Shellmound's boundaries are rigidly understood in the familial imagination, they must operate fluidly in the plantation's material form to accommodate ongoing changes to its spatial function.

¹² In the concluding chapter of the novel, as the family is in route to a picnic at Marmion, Laura asks "is it still Shellmound?" (301). Soon after, she rephrases her question: "is all of this Shellmound?" (317). The title of this essay combines the two questions into one.

In many respects, Shellmound's depiction of the tension between plantation ideality and its performance calls to mind older representations of the Southern plantation that insist upon containment and stability. John Pendleton Kennedy's *Swallow Barn* (1832), for instance, illustrates the concern of plantation society with spatiality and borderlines. Meriwether, *Swallow Barn*'s planter-patriarch, considers the recent invention of the steamboat as a beneficial in some regards, but ultimately finds it threatening to the plantation. He insists "This annihilation of space, sir, is not to be desired" (72). Soon after, another member of his class asserts that "the home material of Virginia was never so good as when her roads were at their worst" (73). In fact, much of Kennedy's plot is based on border disputes over the Apple Pie Branch that follows a familiar logic: change in the plantation's spatial function is undesirable. Boundaries should remain rigid and any suggestion of fluidity becomes cause for contention and anxiety. In *Delta Wedding*, the Fairchild family recreates the ideal of integrated spaces and stability when it imagines Shellmound as a whole resistant to interior division and outside influence. But the Fairchild family also lives in a world in which these boundaries are continually interrupted by cycles of scarcity and abundance relating to the reproduction of bodies, spaces, and family identity in addition to the plantation itself. In this way, the novel becomes an interesting addition to plantation discourse by offering an example of how the plantation both adapts and subsists in the face of challenges to its iconic form.

Tension between rigid and fluid boundaries is a topic scattered, in various forms, throughout Welty scholarship, and recent additions to the criticism note its relevance to

Delta Wedding and the plantation. Kelly Sultzbach, for instance, uses ecophenomenology to argue that borders between the human body and the environment are permeable even while they allow for individual social identities to remain intact. Suzanne Marrs follows the scholarly precedent that examines Welty's literary devices to study the "imagined" or fictional plantation in *Delta Wedding* as it compares with its remembered—or to use Marrs' language, "actual"—inspiration from Welty's childhood (83).¹³ Marrs essentially draws a border between the plantation as it appeared in Welty's lived experience and its representation in fiction; the core plantation of *Delta Wedding*, Shellmound, exists in similar modalities: Shellmound's function as a material entity and its performance as a social construct. The plantation's material and social registers are both subject to further division, this time as a result of interpretation; the Fairchild family's conception of the plantation, both material and social, differs from the plantation's function relative to other groups.

The Fairchild's perception of Shellmound amounts to a highly idealized, nostalgic construct that serves a purpose in identity formation and preservation. In their minds, Shellmound consists of a strong perimeter, exclusive access, and controlled internal divisions that never detract from the whole. But even though *Delta Wedding* is told through the eyes of the Fairchilds, the novel demonstrates that this family's experience with the plantation does not define it entirely. Ultimately, the family requires that new

¹³ Dorothy Griffin's discussion of the inside/outside dynamic of Shellmound's houses also invokes the concept of boundaries (71) as does Ruth Weston's understanding of circles and border figures like George (104). Anthony Wilson also draws a line between actuality and ideality when he describes that in plantation discourse, swamps are "physical reminder[s] of the barrier between the actual and the ideal" (xiii).

generations of Fairchilds redraw pre-existing borderlines pertaining to race and labor as well as sex and biological reproduction. Anxiety, however, is always embedded in the complicated process of reproducing the plantation—i.e., Shellmound and the Fairchild familial identity—and these tensions compel the Fairchilds to look even harder for a rigidly drawn form of the plantation as its material actuality deviates from that ideal. This essay will first examine Shellmound’s spatial function as the Fairchild ideal is troubled by the problem of scarcity. The tensions resulting from the plantation’s spatial configuration parallel concerns about sex as it pertains to human reproduction and the demands it places on plantation spaces. When the plantation spaces are altered to compensate for the changed needs of the Fairchild family, anxieties relating to race and labor are renewed since boundaries must accommodate new relationships with race and labor. These trends, while deviating from the plantation’s – or more specifically, the Fairchild’s – ideal configuration, also reinstitute that ideal as a means of coping with change.

Any discussion of boundaries and the plantation engages in discourse between several forms of thought, and recent conversations about space provide a theoretical access point for issues of borders and reproduction. In “The Production of Locality,” Arjun Appadurai asserts that the local, as an abstract social ideal, exerts influence on local subjects and the neighborhoods in which those subjects become realized (206). Appadurai’s argument is particularly relevant to plantation discourse in *Delta Wedding*. Appadurai’s distinction between “locality” as abstract and “neighborhood” as manifestation is a useful model making clear the distinction between two modalities of

the plantation. As per Appadurai's understanding of neighborhood, the plantation's first register is its physical presence that codes certain spaces according to class, race, and the like. These codes are formed in its second register, the social register, which, as in Appadurai's understanding of locality, is a social concept pertaining to members of that local group – the Fairchilds. The local subject, or each identity formed by the plantation, is responsible for local culture's survival and transmission, and each reproduction carries the potential for "the creation of contexts which might exceed material and conceptual boundaries of the neighbourhood" (Appadurai 210). In other words, when the Fairchilds are understood as individuals who participate in the creation and survival of plantation culture, each has the power to either maintain the plantation as is or contribute to its rupture.

Patricia Yaeger comes to a similar conclusion in her introduction to *The Geography of Identity* when she argues that "space must be recognized as a social product that relentlessly reproduces the social" (4).¹⁴ As Yaeger asserts, anxiety that accompanies the process of reproduction compels subjects to return to a narrative of space that provides clear borders and lends itself to identity formation (18). Yaeger's thought is applicable to the Fairchilds' apprehensive relationship with the transmission of the plantation and the anxiety that leads to the family's reification of their identity-forming imaginary construct: the idealized plantation with clearly demarcated boundaries. The simulation may seem secure as the reader sees, through several gazes, a

¹⁴ Yaeger cites Jean Baudrillard's concept of the hyperreal and also discusses Henri Lefebvre's concept of social space. As Lefebvre states in *The Production of Space*: "(social) space is a (social) product" (16) and the nature of space is concealed by an illusion of substantiality (29).

plantation culture that easily excludes those it does not want. However, the novel also strips the ideal plantation of its security by depicting Shellmound's borders as continually troubled by the plantation's inability to sustain its rate of growth. These factors contribute to the paradoxical existence of rigid boundaries in the plantation's idealized register and ruptured boundaries in its spatial realization. Such tensions lead to moments of cognitive dissonance for the Fairchild family in which members must ground themselves in unfamiliar territory. Laura, for instance, asks "is it still Shellmound?" when introduced to Marmion (317). The co-presence of rigid and fluid boundaries allows the plantation to survive even as it undergoes change in its materially and socially realized forms.

Overarching Whiteness: Establishing the Ideal

According to the Fairchild ideal, the plantation stands apart in both its material and social registers. As John Allen says, "Exclusion ... has less to do with closed doors and high walls, and rather more to do with spaces constructed by dominant groups in their own likeness" (11). As the reader, like Laura, is (re)introduced to the plantation in the novel's opening, the prevailing image is cotton—the plantation's product that functions both as a profitable export and a visualization of pale, domineering uniformity. As Laura travels to Shellmound, she uses this well-known plantation image to orient and identify herself in space; she notices the instant when hills and trees give way to Delta flatland and cotton fields (Welty 2). These fields, at first, exist as one impregnable whole. Laura watches as the Delta assumes one visage at sunset: "[t]he sky, the field, the little track

and the bayou, over and over—all that had been bright or dark was now one color” (3-4). The sky and land merge into one, and when Laura looks to the horizon, the fields become a “milk-white edge” (3). The uniformity is not simply an image of fields but of *one* field, as Laura takes them in “one after the other, like all one field but Laura knew they had names” (5). The cotton fields, as images of expansiveness and sameness, become emblematic of the plantation as contained and separate from its surroundings while being paramount over outsiders, even those who technically exist within the same border lines. Laura, as an outsider, sees the cotton fields as one holistic entity that prevails over the Delta and overtakes the interior spaces and bodies associated with them. Likewise, the plantation as a whole seems to cohere as separate from the Delta around it. As a previous visitor to Shellmound, Laura is somewhat aware of Shellmound’s internal functions and her vision adopts a visual-spatial organization present in the mindsets of the other Fairchilds; however, Laura remains enough of an outsider that her gaze is useful for understanding how Shellmound appears to those not already immersed into plantation life. As Laura’s arrival to Shellmound attests, to the outsider looking in, the Fairchilds’ ideal stands: the plantation’s material register appears as an insular white monolith.

The Fairchilds’ ideal conception of plantation spaces as subverting racial others underneath the appealing image of whiteness is matched by a tendency to cast sameness on the family and place all others in visual opposition. The Fairchild family, like their cotton fields, is associated with pale colors and a sameness that, seemingly, cannot be interrupted by its individual members or outsiders. When Laura arrives at the train station, she sees her cousins as a group rather than immediately perceiving them as

individuals. Neither does she does recognize who anyone is outside of the blanket Fairchild identity (4). Like cotton, these Fairchilds – literally “fair child” – become synonymous with fair features that wash out everything around them. Laura notices: “each mane of light hair [that] waved like a holiday banner, so that you could see the Fairchilds everywhere, even with everybody meeting the train” (4). Ellen, the maternal figure at Shellmound, notes with pride her children’s hairlines “on the fresh skin silver as the edge of a peach, clean as a pencil line” and “their coloring—their fair hair and their soot-dark high eyebrows and shadowy lashes” (26). Though Ellen claims these traits “[move] her deeply and freshly in each child,” they are, nevertheless, invariable (26). The sameness of Shellmound’s cotton fields and uniformity of the Fairchild appearance constitute an idealized version plantation. The Fairchild children’s light coloring becomes noticeable when images of paleness, the “silver” of their skin and the “fair hair,” are made distinct by contrasts. Their hairlines are “clean” as “pencil line[s]” and dark brows and lashes provide a frame for pale skin and hair (26). In the same way, Fairchild whiteness becomes dominant only through the spatial exclusion of racial others, and this hard boundary must remain intact for the ideal plantation to retain its form.

Spaces that take on the likeness of the Fairchilds, however, must take into account racial others. Cotton, as a plantation image of whiteness, cannot exist as the plantation’s primary fiscal yield without the enforced labor of racial others. Images of sameness and whiteness work to smother identities underneath overarching whiteness. They subvert racial others under dominant whiteness while also excluding these others so they may stand in stark relief against whiteness, thereby forming whiteness. As a result, these

bodies are spatially marginalized; racial others are expected to live on plantation fringes and laborers are not seen as part of plantation houses. The material register of the Fairchilds' ideal plantation also requires a boundary, or an image of difference, for identity to take form. As Arjun Appadurai discusses in his definition of locality, a tangible local identity relies on contexts of alterity (208). In the case of invisible boundaries, like those assumed to be around plots of land, physical thresholds provide a basis of exclusion through which an identity category emerges. Bridges often serve this purpose in *Delta Wedding* since they are devices meant to provide access across inlaid borders and, as such, become associated *with* those borders. When the cousins leave the train station in route to Shellmound, Laura notes every time she and her cousins cross a bridge. First, the cousins cross the Yazoo bridge to look at the town before "they went across the bridge again, homeward" (5). On the *other* side of the Yazoo River "were the gin and compress, the railroad track, the forest-filled cemetery where Laura's mother was buried... and Brunswicktown where the Negroes were" (5). Here the river provides a moat around the idealized plantation, separating it from certain machines, reminders of death, and the homes of African Americans. The plantation's material register exists in relation to the spatial stratification within the plantation's social register. These registers work with and against one another comprise the dynamic spatial function of the plantation.

As soon as the cousins pass "over the bayou" that places these localities at a distance, "*there* was Shellmound" (6 emphasis mine). The narrative, to this point, has highlighted bodies in motion as the young Fairchilds make their way to the plantation via

train or car. But the instant the first big house at Shellmound comes into sight, the motion stills, replaced by the immovable image of “the tall, white, wide frame house with a porch all around, its bayed tower on one side” (6). For a moment, Laura’s gaze is anchored to a central plantation image, and those other spaces across the river flee from her consciousness. Motion returns as the Fairchilds “curve in at the gate,” thereby crossing another threshold (6). Here, white images again proliferate as the “snow-white moon” hangs above the house and “little white blooms” (7).¹⁵

The image of Shellmound’s white house marks a shift in Laura’s perception of color. With the exception of the cotton fields, images existing away from Shellmound are colored dark. From her seat on the train, Laura watches the conductor of the Yellow Dog, a Mr. Terry *Black* who lights a “black lamp” which then fills the air with soot, some of which lands on her arm as she spies a “black mule” twice (2-5). As she travels through the town with her cousins, Laura notes that Fairchild’s Store looks like a “row of *dark* barns” (5 emphasis mine), and through Brunswicktown, she sees “Negroes” smoking “in every doorstep” (5).¹⁶ Against this backdrop, the house at Shellmound stands tall and white and with this central image established, tangible boundaries form between the grounds of Shellmound, its smaller undesirable regions, and the town itself. Laura does not need ask “is this still Shellmound?” at this point because her gaze is focused toward the big house and the perimeter appears secure and differentiated from

¹⁵ The white images also invade the house where racial others exist as subsidiary to or in service of those images. Laura remembers “the cotton lint on ceilings and lampshades” that Violet must remove each day (8). The Fairchilds cannot contain the boundary-crossing residue and must order servants to remove these traces from the house.

¹⁶ For the remainder of this essay, I will occasionally refer to African American characters as negroes, thereby reproducing the novel’s terminology.

outlying areas by its associate with whiteness. When an identifiable center is privileged, the ideal seems within reach.

Over (Re)production: Challenging the Ideal

Though Laura's early look at Shellmound illustrates a Fairchild ideal, as the novel proceeds, her experience also depicts how the established material and social registers of the plantation become distant from that ideal because of issues pertaining to reproduction. Laura's visit to the cemetery illustrates precisely this point as its use of physical spaces is problematized by the Fairchilds' reproductive proclivity, a key fixture in the plantation's social register. Like many of the spaces Laura crosses over in her arrival to Shellmound, the cemetery exists in the town, a place the Fairchilds resist claiming as part of their estate, but unlike other peripheral spaces, the cemetery cannot exist as permanently distant from the Fairchild family. As a memorial to deceased loved ones and the eventual resting ground for each individual family member, the cemetery is a necessary part of the Fairchild family identity. This does not prevent the Fairchilds from attributing to the cemetery a boundary reminiscent of their plantation ideal, a border that makes access to the cemetery exclusive and, most of all, under the family's control. Fairchilds cemetery, at first glance, consists of boundary that is exclusive and unyielding.

The cemetery, an irregular shape of ground, four-sided but narrowing to almost a triangle, with the Confederate graves all running to a point in the direction of the depot, was surrounded by a dense high wall of honey suckle, which shut out the sight of the cotton wagons streaming by on two sides, where the roads converged to the railroad tracks, the river, the street, and the gin. (173)

The Fairchilds, as we have seen elsewhere, depend upon a fixed outer boundary to maintain illusions of control over space. The perimeter of the cemetery, like the assumed boundary around Shellmound, has a specific function of placing images pertaining to labor and non-Fairchild life at a distance from designated Fairchild space. The honeysuckle blocks view of cotton wagons—labor images—and the railroad, street, and gin. It is not only that the family wishes to steel themselves against thoughts of death, but also that they have control over who is allowed to cross established borders. They reserve the privilege for themselves while others who do so are called into question. Laura, for instance, notices that the Fairchilds “*let her see the grave,*” thereby inviting her to remember her mother, but only in a space and time of their choosing (176 emphasis original). Since the family cannot eradicate reflections of death entirely, they force these thoughts into the cemetery, a well-defined space where Laura is allowed to ruminate about her past (175). The perimeter does not effectively protect the Fairchild insularity, though, because allowing Laura to visit her mother’s grave also enables Laura to remember that she has not always belonged to Shellmound, thus calling to mind Annie Laurie’s first departure from the plantation, her marriage and removal to Jackson. Though the cemetery space can be static—bodies seldom move once placed there—it also reminds the family of their inability to keep all members contained to plantation grounds and interrupts their imagined distance from the rest of the Delta. Though called “Fairchilds,” the cemetery does not belong solely to the Fairchild family but is instead used by and named for the whole town: Fairchilds, Mississippi. Within the “dense high wall of honeysuckle” that separates the cemetery from the town, the Fairchilds must

come into contact with the outside world, a world that will not always make exceptions for them (173).

The spatial logics of a cemetery space that can be walled off from encroaching adjacent territories are further confounded by scarcity of plots available, meaning that the Fairchild's ideal containment of death and family members to this one outlying space cannot last much longer. In "Of Other Spaces," Michel Foucault interprets the spatiality of cemeteries as an interplay between a whole meant to contain death to one locale and the compartmentalization of that whole as emphasis rests on individual plots (25). A similar understanding of cemetery spatiality illuminates how issues with material plantation spaces trouble the plantation's social register, in particular its conceptions of sex and child birth. When Laura and her older cousin, Shelley, encounter Dr. Murdoch in the cemetery, he refers to burying future Fairchilds "over against the Hunters" (176), implying that within the confined space of the cemetery there is an even smaller portion available for the Fairchild family as they come to rest on—or *in*—even ground. The necessary division of the cemetery's internal space also leads to thought about reproduction because future Fairchilds must be considered in the cemetery's spatial arrangement. "How many more of you are there?" Murdoch asks Shelley. "You'll have to consider your own progeny too... Look. Dabney and that fellow she's marrying will have three or four at the least" (176). Murdoch realizes that adding more Fairchilds is incompatible with the confinement the Fairchilds idolize. The cemetery's perimeters cannot effectively separate the family from the reality of death, and neither can these walls withstand the numerous Fairchilds and their continued rate of growth. The rigid

outer border will have to become fluid; the cemetery will expand or Fairchilds will be buried elsewhere. Either way, the boundary is ineffective.

While the cemetery represents the trouble of the idealized plantation's outer boundary, it also subverts conceptions of the plantation as a whole resisting compartmentalization since burial of individual bodies foregrounds the prominence of interior boundaries. The quantity of individual bodies that belong to the plantation further troubles the plantation ideal by exceeding what that ideal can support. Murdoch's commentary lays this concept bare as he considers older Fairchilds in terms of individual burial plots: "Primrose and Jim Allen naturally go here," he says (176). Murdoch continues to work the mental jigsaw that allocates space to each living Fairchild, but becomes alarmed when he figures in projected progeny. The result is "pretty crowded" (177). The mental manipulation of space allows Murdoch to foresee a time when that space runs out, and he commands Shelley to "[t]ell your mother to call a halt" (177).

What Murdoch understands and tries to convey to Shelley is that the most tangible threat to the Fairchild's ideal plantation is the family's profusion, and this threat figures into the anxiety surrounding reproduction and sex in the novel. Murdoch's warning seems to touch on anxieties already present in the Fairchild family, for the night of the wedding, Shelley asks her father: "how could you keep getting Mama in this predicament—again and again?" (301). Shelley refers to Ellen's ninth pregnancy, a topic of much anxiety throughout the novel, and insists "we don't *need* any more" and "I couldn't love any more of us," suggesting that there is interplay between issues of space

and familial relationships (302 emphasis original).¹⁷ It is no coincidence, then, that this scene occurs the night after the wedding when Shellmound is full of guests and more than one Fairchild is displaced from her bed. In fact, a similar anxiety remains an undertone throughout the family at large as other characters are painfully conscious of childbirth and pregnancy. Later portions of this essay will return to integrate discussion of this anxiety as it intersects with themes regarding race, spatiality, and inheritance.

Transit(ion): The Plantation's Troubled Boundaries

Laura's watchful eyes provide a useful lens through which to observe the underlying mechanisms that establish the Fairchild ideal plantation in opposition to the world around it. While Laura's process of acclimating to Shellmound serves as a valuable gateway into understanding plantation spatiality, the central Fairchilds also demonstrate awareness—both conscious and subconscious—of their contrived efforts to reproduce and maintain an ideal plantation that survives only at static moments when family members are focused on the identifiable monolith. When the Fairchilds look away from the primary plantation house, however, boundaries become less tangible and subsidiary regions begin to detract from the plantation as a holistic image. Ruth Weston alludes to the relationship between a focal center and deviation from it in Welty's prose when she describes "the connection between freedom and control ... the fixed center and the impassioned, circular 'spin' outward from it" (80). The relation between the house at Shellmound and its other regions mirrors this conception of movement, and the security

¹⁷ I arrive at the number nine by totaling the children – Shelley, Dabney, Orrin, India, Roy, Little Battle, Ranny, Bluet – and Mary Shannon, the miscarried infant in the cemetery.

of regional borders becomes destabilized when such movement takes central Fairchilds to the plantation's margins, where they are immersed in social and material contexts that are both unfamiliar and uncomfortable. These moments of transit, when family members are displaced from the part of the plantation to which they belong, coincide with the acquisition of knowledge or unnerving experiences that disrupt the Fairchilds' idealized plantation.¹⁸ In these instances, the Fairchilds refer back to the zones of the plantation that seem stable or recognizable, thus illustrating their contradictory need for boundaries permeable enough to withstand change but impenetrable when they are required for purposes of validation.

Just after Laura arrives at the plantation, Ellen leaves the house at Shellmound, where she exists as mother-figure and member of the controlling generation, to bestow her graces upon Partheny—Ellen's former nurse—in her home. Partheny, like most other African Americans in the novel, lives in the segregated Brunswicktown. To tend to Partheny, Ellen must traverse spaces that frighten her, spaces that coincide with images of darkness and entanglement and Ellen contends with these two images when she travels across the bayou bridge toward Brunswicktown.¹⁹ The parting image of the house at Shellmound features bright light from a sun "like a hot *white* stone" (emphasis mine), and a front yard "covered with all the lace curtains of the house drying on stretchers" before the wedding (87-8). All of these images are associated with the color white, but the next

¹⁸ Patricia Yaeger refers to Shellmound's understood spatial logics when she notices "in this violently partitioned landscape, things flow back and forth with incredible speed and vehemence and with various degrees of transgression" (*Dirt* 203).

¹⁹ Anthony Wilson reads images of darkness and entanglement, common to swamps and bayous, as indicative of trouble for the plantation (xiii-xiv).

section is filled with images of darkness and entanglement. As Ellen makes her way through the shady bayou space, she clears vines from her path and notes, with surprise, that the woods are denser than she remembers (89). These details mark the difference between the plantation grounds and wilder spaces that the plantation does not or cannot control. She is also leaving a space where whiteness is sacred and entering place space reserved for racial others.

Though Ellen first notes that the shade of the bayou is “nice,” she quickly recalls that Indians once burned their pottery on the banks of the bayou she is passing through, the same Indians whose mounds comprise grounds on top of which Shellmound was built (89). At this moment, Ellen is immersed in a foreign, non-whitewashed place, and stands apart from people and spaces that lend her security. As a response to feeling dislocated, she listens “for sounds of the fields and house, walking along almost anxiously enough to look back over her shoulder—wondering if something needed her at home” (89). Here, Ellen labels her feeling of anxiousness as concern that she will not be within reach when someone calls for her at the plantation house; however, it seems that Ellen is engaging in a comforting gesture by projecting her discomfort onto her familiar role as mother. She seeks out more than the house alone by grounding herself using those affiliated with labor in cotton fields that, to her, represent clearly demarcated boundaries; she listens for “the songs of the cotton pickers” which she notes “were far away, so were the hoofbeats of the horse the overseer rode” (89).

Images of entanglement escalate, emphasizing Ellen's unease as she makes her way toward the runaway "through the pulling vines and old spider webs." As she does so, she is compelled to assign the runaway a space of belonging, thereby locating and isolating her within a certain set of boundaries. "Whose girl are you?" she asks (90). The possibility that the runaway has no designated place troubles Ellen, as revealed by her statement: "if you don't belong anywhere, then I'll have to think" (90). In this moment of suspense, Ellen must connect back to the plantation; she becomes "dimly aware of the chimney to the overseer's house stuck up through the trees" (90). The gesture assures Ellen of the plantation's proximity and codes bayou space as still associated with Shellmound even though, in other circumstances, the overseer's house is used as an image of difference. Looking back to familiar plantation places is both a soothing gesture and one that heightens Ellen's discomfort. If even the laborers and overseer are far away – people who, in the ideal, exist at a distance from Shellmound house – Ellen is ever farther removed from her designated space. The comfort is further negated given that the overseer will be marrying her daughter in a few days' time, thereby perturbing her secure space. Ellen relies on a fleeting perception of idealized plantation spatiality to manage her unease, but even to her, this ideal seems very far removed from her experience in the bayou.

Ellen's encounter with the runaway girl further upsets any comfort she takes in the compartmentalization of the plantation and its satellites in its material register, and it also illustrates how the material and social registers are interrelated. When Ellen crosses identity-forming thresholds, her spatial categorization of racial others and sexual or

reproductive propriety are also disturbed. Anthony Wilson's understanding of the swamp as a "shelter for the dispossessed" (xv) becomes useful to the passage since encountering someone who, like a runaway, does not respect boundaries increases Ellen's anxiety. She immediately assumes that since the girl is ensconced in bayou space she "belongs" to the negro race; Ellen first believes the runaway to be Pinchy's daughter. Classifying the girl as a racial other and daughter of a woman in her employ gives Ellen a measure of authority with which to command her movements and assign her a place. "Come out, child," Ellen demands. When the girl obeys, Ellen reveals her shock; she cries out: "Aren't you a Negro?" (90). Dissonance emerges between what Ellen supposes to be the role of the bayou – a place associated with racial others – and the evidence that something white and beautiful could take solace there: "So she was white. A whole mystery of life opened up" (90). Not only is the runaway white, she is exceptionally white, and beautiful beyond even Ellen's daughters. With skin "white to transparency," the runaway sheds a beauty that "none of [Ellen's] daughters" had (91). To Ellen, the runaway's beauty and whiteness is at odds with her compulsion to flee wherever it is she originated from and her presence in bayou space. Any belief that only negroes flee assigned spaces, and that only negroes and Indians are affiliated with dark spaces apart from the plantation is disrupted. Ellen attempts to make sense of it all by referring back to Shellmound, but not even this gesture can eliminate the rent torn between an ideal she relies upon and her experience apart from established plantation grounds.

She reads the girl as a sexual object by warning her that "you'll bring mistakes on yourself that way" (92). Ellen clarifies her use of the word "mistake" by saying "I was

speaking about men—men, our lives” (92). The implication is that the girl could end up pregnant in addition to being detached from a home. Upon returning to the plantation, Ellen mentions the encounter to George, who reveals he “took her to the old Argyle gin and slept with her” (103). Ellen’s prediction has come true, but now that sexual anxiety touches her family. “She had feared for the whole family, somehow, at a time like this ... when this girl, that was at first so ambiguous, and so lovely even to her all dull and tire—when she touched at their life, ran through their woods” (105). This fear is associated with glaring proof that the world is “still real, still bad,” and hopelessly distanced from the Fairchild family ideal (104). Ellen then notices that, in light of George’s relations with the girl, “now it was not over” (105). Combined with George’s confession, Ellen’s encounter with the runaway reminds her that there may be illegitimate Fairchilds dispersed throughout the world—a fact that troubles Fairchild, and the plantation’s, insularity.

Ellen’s role in the reproduction of plantation bodies seems to become troubling to her as a result of the interaction with the runaway and George’s actions. After the fact, as she processes her fear, Ellen reflects on her weariness. To her, “sometimes now the whole world seemed rampant, running away from her, and she would always be carrying another child to bring into it” (102). Ellen’s weariness about childbirth is a byproduct of a world that runs away from security-providing boundaries, ensuring that the process of reproducing the plantation and plantation bodies is anxiety-ridden; there is no assurance that her children will not run away from the boundaries she and the rest of the family work so hard to maintain. Crossing permeable plantation boundaries forces Ellen’s

idealized gaze to falter as she comes face to face with the knowledge that containment, while necessary for Shellmound to maintain its status and privilege, is illusory.

The bayou, for Ellen, is deviant from any ideal she holds, but for the runaway, places like the bayou may very well facilitate her wishes and desires. The classification of space, then, is determined by individual circumstance and perception. Though Ellen and the runaway are both detached from secure locations while within the bayou, each woman experiences a different degree of displacement. To Ellen, the bayou connects back to the plantation but to the runaway it is simply a way to get to “the big road” (92-3). The girl’s intent to brazenly cross through the liminal space of the bayou to someplace else entirely troubles whatever security Ellen may ascribe to the bayou’s adjacency to the plantation. Unlike Ellen, who constantly shifts her gaze to the plantation where she knows a sense of belonging, the runaway “never looked back” (93).

Ellen, as an adult member of the Fairchild family, is quite conscious of her anxieties when she crosses plantation boundaries. But even younger members of the family, whose moments of transit feel more like adventure than risk, are compelled to look back to what they know – their construct of the plantation – to orient themselves in unfamiliar space. Roy and Laura, at eight- and nine-years-old, undergo a similar journey as Ellen’s when they escape the trappings of the wedding rehearsal dinner to visit Marmion. From the onset of the adventure, fluid boundaries take precedence. “They ran down to the bayou” begins the section, and the next few paragraphs contain vivid images that echo Ellen’s trek in route to Brunswicktown in which darkness and entanglement

mark departure from the integrated plantation (226). The boat the children use to cross the river is “dark, unpainted, the color of the water,” and they cross the bayou “in heavy shade” (226). Grape vines fill the banks, but to the children, the promise of a falling muscadine outranks the unnerving presence of tangled vines. Before they know it, the children enter the Yazoo river – the river of death – and approach the “dark waterlogged landing” at Marmion (227). Their arrival is marked by the acknowledgement that they are “on the other side of the river from where they had come” (227), the same river that that keeps the town, negro homes, and other undesirable localities apart from Shellmound (227). Once they have breached this border, the children must encounter a version of plantation spaces and bodies that interrupts their idealized understanding of Shellmound.

When the children finally arrive on Marmion’s grounds, they, like Ellen, encounter a figure who intrudes upon their conceptions of the plantation’s spatiality and social/racial stratification. While the runaway, from Ellen’s journey in the bayou, illustrates the alarm Fairchilds experience when they find those who match their own “whiteness” in places coded dark, Aunt Studney, “coal-black, old as the hills, with her foot always in the road,” is associated with the violation, by racial others, of the boundaries on which the integrated plantation depends. The children are alone and divorced from plantation spaces in which they feel secure when they meet Aunt Studney, and the experience unnerves them. As a result, Laura emulates the behavior of Ellen by attempting to assign Aunt Studney a place:

“Where does she live?” asked Laura a little fearfully.

“Oh, back on our place somewhere. Back of the Deadening. You’ll see her walking the railroad track anywhere between Greenwood and Clarksdale, Aunt Studney and her sack.”

“Are you scared of Aunt Studney?” asked Laura.

“No. Yes, I am.”

“I despise Aunt Studney, don’t you?”

“Papa’s scared of her too. Me, I think that’s where Mama gets all her babies.” (228)

Just after she learns that Aunt Studney is a known border-crosser, Laura gears the conversation toward fear and hatred. In return, Aunt Studney refuses to acknowledge the Fairchilds by repeating the phrase “ain’t studyin’ you.” Roy assures Laura “she says that to everybody – even Papa” (228). Each time Roy speaks of the Fairchild family as a whole, he adds on a phrase like “even Papa,” thus illustrating that Aunt Studney manages to subvert the authority of even the most dominant figure of the plantation, its patriarch. In this way, Aunt Studney both crosses and creates another border in her interactions with the Fairchilds. She has been excluded to a home far away from the central house, “back of the Deadening,” but she never stays put. Instead, she willfully enters other spaces. Though Aunt Studney is dark and the children meet her in a dark space across the river – a space typically permissible for racial others to inhabit according to the Fairchild ideal – the Fairchilds are undergoing an active process of giving it to Dabney as a place to live. Aunt Studney’s movements must be restricted in order for the house to be deterritorialized from its position as outlier and reterritorialized as part of the central, idealized plantation. That Aunt Studney resists the Fairchild impulse to confine her to places of their own choosing makes her an anxiety-inducing figure.

Though timid of Aunt Studney at first, Laura is determined to succeed where other Fairchilds have failed by forcing Aunt Studney to show what is in her mysterious sack. Laura pushes the issue by insisting upon seeing into Aunt Studney's sack, but Roy insists this is a fruitless endeavor because "she won't let any of *us* look in, even Papa" (229 emphasis original). Aunt Studney's sack, like the runaway's encounter with George, makes her an outsider who comes to represent the mystery of childbirth in the children's eyes. The sack, in this instance, is affiliated with three interruptions to the Fairchild ideal: Aunt Studney's resistance to racial paternalism, tendency to trespass the borders established for her, and unwillingness to allow Laura or any other Fairchild to invade her personal space to satiate curiosity or fulfill their desire to see where the babies come from.²⁰ Laura's insistence on seeing in the sack commences once she learns of Roy's belief that the sack is where his mother "gets all her babies," an assumption fraught with ambivalence since it is fine for his siblings to emerge from there while he immediately denies that he came from such a place (228). "Do you think Ranny came out of that sack?" Laura asks. "Sure," Roy responds. "I don't know if *I* came out of it though" (228 emphasis mine). This exchange is followed by a description of Roy's expression; he gives Laura "a hard glance, and looked as if he might put his fist to her nose" (228). Even if, at eight- and nine-years-old, the children do not have knowledge of sex and reproduction sufficient to express more specific concerns related to it, Roy's response and Laura's dogged desire to see inside the sack alludes to the fact that that they

²⁰ The Fairchild's idealized version of Shellmound is but one conception. Various "others" in the novel, primarily racial "others" like Howard and Aunt Studney, undoubtedly view Shellmound through a different, less rose-tinted lens (or in Howard's case, a rose-tinted lens that remains as unappealing to the eye as thorns to the flesh).

have, at least, internalized some of the fears of their older relatives. They too express a preoccupation with the reproduction of bodies while also fearing the process.

Not only does Aunt Studney show up on Marmion's grounds and disregard the external boundaries of the plantation and the town, she also invades the house, a move that heightens the otherness of the place and the anxiety Laura feels. "Look! She's going into Dabney's house!" Roy exclaims, and Laura, needing to orient herself in space, responds with "is this Dabney's house?" (229). The two follow Aunt Studney past Marmion's threshold and into a surreal and empty space. Laura, who cannot believe that Marmion belongs to Dabney, asks for clarification from Roy twice: "Did you say this was *Dabney's* house?" (231 emphasis original). It seems impossible, through Laura's understanding of Shellmound, that this mysterious and hectic Marmion could ever belong to Dabney, thereby existing as part of the family plantation. Her question regarding who owns Marmion becomes "is it still the Delta in here?" (231). She does not ask "is this still Shellmound?" because Marmion, complete with its dislocation from centralized "whiteness" and the presence of Aunt Studney, seems completely detached from the idealized version of plantation that they have inherited from their parents.

Soon after the children enter the house, their trip to Marmion becomes more chaotic than adventurous. Aunt Studney maintains a presence unaffected by Fairchild behaviors, desires, and accusations, which only adds to the effect. Bees swarm the whole house as Roy sprints through the upper levels and Laura, obviously anxious, notes: "there were bees inside everything, inside the piano, inside the walls. The place was alive. She

wanted to cry out herself. She heard a hum everywhere, in everything” (232). But even amidst the pandemonium, Aunt Studney manages to deflect Laura’s interest in her sack and Roy’s accusatory question: “Aunt Studney, Why have you let bees in my house?” (232). “Ain’t studying you,” Aunt Studney responds in lieu of recognizing Roy’s self-imposed authority as she holds “the mouth of her sack” (233). While crossing borders meant to keep her away from the Fairchilds and prevent them from invading her personal belongings, she simultaneously sets up boundaries of her own. No one is allowed to look into her sack, neither the owner of the plantation on which she resides nor the insistent and curious little girl. None of the Fairchilds are going to be recognized – or studied.

While Roy projects confidence and acts as though he knows the answers to all of Laura’s questions while ignoring Aunt Studney’s behavior, he also feels the need to understand where he is in relation to the plantation. He climbs up to the tower, looks for a familiar landmark, and exclaims: “I see Troy riding Isabelle in Mound Field” (232). Moments later, when bees swarm the house, Roy again situates himself and Laura in relation on the plantation by observing: “I see Troy! I see the Grove—I see Aunt Primrose, back in her flowers! I see *Papa!* I see the whole creation” (232). Naoko Thornton interprets this scene as indicative of the Fairchild’s confinement to the plantation and “lack of freedom to move and see beyond the boundaries they have prescribed” (38). While, as Thornton argues, the Fairchilds produce their own boundaries, they also have the freedom to move beyond them. The core anxiety of the scene – and by extension, the novel – rests in the disturbance of the plantation boundaries they have drawn and use to preserve their identity. The children’s journey to Marmion is,

in itself, an instance of Fairchilds crossing boundaries and then watching as those boundaries are destabilized. The family may pretend not to see beyond Shellmound, but their impulse to look to their boundaries and reaffirm their position in space relative to the plantation speaks to the instability their self-imposed borders and their consequential desire to see them reaffirmed. Roy's perception of the plantation as "the whole creation" only comes by way of flash-freezing the image of stable zones within the whole, a technique the other Fairchilds use.

As the bride in a novel entitled *Delta Wedding*, Dabney's character is the fulcrum for many of the exacerbated anxieties and tensions the other Fairchilds experience. She is the first daughter of her generation to marry and return to Shellmound, and this event makes visible the dissonance between the idealized, integrated plantation and the plantation's spatial actualization in which boundaries are troubled. Like Roy, Laura, and Ellen, who refer back to familiar plantation images to ground themselves in troubling scenarios, Dabney encounters disturbing truths about her future at Shellmound when she moves away from the central house. Dabney's first episode of transit follows a familiar pattern as she makes her way to The Grove to visit her maiden aunts. As in the scene in which Ellen encounters the runaway, Dabney's anxiety is predicated by vivid plantation images of whiteness. As Dabney begins her journey, she perceives cotton-related images with an element of whimsy. She notices that "the cotton twinkled like stars" and "here and there and far away the cotton wagons ... stood up to their wheel tops in the white and were loaded with white, like cloud wagons" (37). These white images are associated

with the security she feels proximal to Shellmound house where whiteness overtakes everything.

Even black bodies are overtaken by Dabney's idealistic purview. Instead of seeing African Americans as laborers, she sees a group of well-wishing negroes who "lift up and smile glaringly and pump their arms—they knew Miss Dabney was going to step off Saturday with Mr. Troy" (37). But even though Dabney's vision of the plantation and plantation labor matches the rest of her family's—it neglects to take seriously anything that disrupts the ideal—she, unlike her relatives, congratulates herself for doing something radically different by becoming engaged to the plantation overseer. This optimistic stance is concurrent with the prevalence of whimsical whiteness. In the same moment that she links cotton to clouds and twinkling stars, she spots Troy across the field on his black horse, and for a moment, she seems to revel in her daring. "That he was at this distance obviously not a Fairchild still filled her with an awe that had grown most easily from idle condescension" (38). In the next moment, however, her confidence is interrupted by reflections on the family's ridicule of Troy and pending anxieties about how her life will change after marriage. Dabney shuts her eyes, describing a "dark cloud—that intensity under her flickering lids" (38). The cloud, an image in which she had taken solace, is still present but discolored, a response associated with her situation in space. When Dabney passes through the fields, she trespasses into plantation locales reserved for laborers and racial "others," and in these "white" fields perpetuated by "black" labor, she is reminded of events and undercurrents that deviate from her ideal conception of the plantation.

Dabney's attitudes toward labor and race both subvert and reaffirm the Fairchild ideal; she marries the plantation overseer, which asks the outraged Fairchilds to accept a member of the working class into their unit, but her treatment of racial others reveals that the whitewashed ideal is intact in her mindset. Here, Dabney is a character that illustrates the conflicted nature of the Fairchild's relationship with Shellmound that relies upon a contradiction between the plantation's spatial function and the family's idealized perception of that spatial function. As Dabney travels away from Shellmound house, her presence in the fields and her pending marriage to the overseer are at odds with her imaginary detachment from racial others and labor. Here, Dabney illustrates the conflicted nature of the Fairchilds' relationship with Shellmound that relies upon a distinction between material places and idealized ones. Her belief that the negro laborers at Shellmound care about her engagement and wish her well is troubled when she deviates from spatial security and the idealized racial paternalism she has internalized is interrupted by the sight of "Pinchy wandering in the cotton rows, Roxie's helper, not speaking to them at all but giving up every moment to seeking" (39). Pinchy forcibly interrupts Dabney's vision of negroes who "lift up and smile" because she does not take into account Dabney's presence (37). Dabney's encounter with Pinchy, like Roy and Laura's with Aunt Studney, creates a fissure in an ideal that projects upon black laborers a sense of engagement with the Fairchilds' lives. Just as Ellen is startled by the runaway, Dabney's thoughts are undermined by a girl who, like Aunt Studney, pays her no mind.²¹

²¹ It is also interesting to note that when Ellen first encountered the runaway, she mistook her for Pinchy.

Spatial dislocation forces Dabney to see racial others who do not occupy social and material spaces the Fairchilds set aside for them, but even African Americans who fill the role Dabney assigns them in her internal monologue become disruptive when she encounters them away from Shellmound house. As Dabney rides closer to The Grove, Man-Son, one of the cotton pickers, acknowledges her in the joyful manner she ascribes to the race at large. But this makes Dabney uncomfortable. “How strange—he should be picking cotton,” Dabney thinks. Suddenly, her thoughts drift to a memory of her uncle George emerging from the bayou waters to break up a fight between two negro boys, one of whom is the now grown Man-Son. This remembered point of contact between a Fairchild and African Americans makes Dabney apprehensive and speculative. When Man-Son comes closer to her, she reacts strongly. “‘Man-Son, what do you mean? You go get to picking!’ she cried. She trembled all over, having to speak to him in such a way. ‘Yes’m, Miss Dabney. Wishin’ you and Mr. Troy find you happiness.’” The boldness that Man-Son, a cotton picker, demonstrates in encroaching upon imagined distances between the race is unnerving to Dabney and immediately after, Dabney focuses her eyes on the image of the cotton fields that “tremble like a veil in the light” (46). As a soothing gesture, Dabney must refer back to her consciousness as it was when she first departed from Shellmound by anthropomorphizing cotton as a veil, a white image that also invokes the security of her impending wedding. The attempt is ineffective, however, for the cotton trembles just as she did when forced into contact with Man-Son. Even when Man-Son behaves in an amiable way towards Dabney, their co-presence in the fields is a fissure in Dabney’s ideal plantation spatiality. Though compliant with the Fairchild’s

racial paternalism by acting the part of well-wishing, loyal servant, Man-Son crosses a boundary, like the runaway and Aunt Studney. The episode illustrates that the plantation as an idealized space is not infallible. The mirage trembles when Fairchilds move away from a stable center.

Once inside the house at The Grove, negroes and troubling memories fade from Dabney's consciousness and reproductive anxiety becomes paramount. Though settled inside of a house and away from the fields, Dabney's presence at The Grove is still a moment of dislocation away from central Shellmound because the house itself is a disruption of the plantation ideal. It is unusual and revealing that The Grove is one of three big houses that have, at one point or another, housed the controlling family of Shellmound as opposed to one clearly discernible big house, which is perhaps the most recognizable image within plantation mythology. As Dorothy Griffin states in her study of architecture and myth in *Delta Wedding*, Shellmound's plantation houses are "special places within places" and "imagistic of man's attempt to fix himself in the universe" (522). Following Griffin's logic, the co-presence of three houses suggests that the number of people using Shellmound to "fix" themselves in "the universe" exceeds the capacity of one big house. Ruth Weston also interprets the Fairchilds' use of several houses in a positive light; she considers it to be the factor that allows the family to maintain unity in light of "the physical fluctuation in the lives of individuals" (100). While the houses may serve a purpose in allowing several groups of Fairchilds to live on the plantation at once, the histories of these houses, coupled with anxiety about reproduction and inheritance suggest that the family's unity is, in fact, troubled. The

multiple plantation houses of Shellmound reflect that increased demand for space determines the perpetual destabilization of outer boundaries and interior spaces.

As the first Fairchild of her generation to marry and return to Shellmound afterward, Dabney's character is most closely connected to anxieties about the inheritance of plantation spaces and the transmission of the Fairchild ideal to a new generation. Dabney seems to have a subconscious preoccupation with matters of reproduction and inheritance, for when she spends time with their two maiden aunts at The Grove, Dabney's gaze is drawn to the painting of her grandmother on the wall. She notices the defiant pose her grandmother assumes in the portrait and posits that she "folded her arms because she would soon have her first child" (52). Dabney's thoughts correspond with the conversation going on in the room as the aunts share news about Mary Denis Summers, Dabney's recently married older cousin. They state that "Mary Denis Summers has come through her ordeal" and given birth to a boy (53). The thought of childbirth correlates with Dabney's attention to a painting onto which she projects turbulent emotions about or in response to pregnancy.

This is not confined to Dabney. Rather, the anxiety carries over to her aunts when thoughts of sex and reproduction come closer to home. When India mentions the honeymoon, for instance, the aunts object vehemently. "Little girls don't talk about honeymoons," they say (59). Dabney seems to internalize this objection, among the general threads of anxiety pertaining to her mother's pregnancy—which she remembered

while riding through the field—and Mary Denis’s delivery.²² After these these troubling thoughts, talk about the wedding is soothing to Dabney as she devotes her attention to the ceremony, particularly the image of “me in pure white!” (55). The association of weddings with the color white is another way to invoke Fairchild ideal “whiteness” that washes out any shadow of doubt—almost literally. But even though Dabney takes solace in wedding talk, anxiety and aggression brew underneath the surface. She cannot help but also think of her groom and her family’s hurtful response to her choice. Upon leaving, Dabney’s angst brews over and she uses intentional mention of reproduction and any sex acts that might lead to conception as a weapon against her aunts: “I hope I have a baby right away” (62). In response, “Aunt Primrose took a little sacheted handkerchief and touched it to her lips, and a tear began to run down Aunt Jim Allen’s dry, rice-powdered cheek. ‘I’ve done enough,’ Dabney thought, *frightened* ... ‘I’ve done enough to them’” (62 emphasis mine). Though Dabney haves aggressively toward her aunts, she is not empowered by the exchange. Instead, she is frightened by it. This suggests the extent to which anxiety about reproduction pervades the consciousness of the Fairchild family as a whole, in all of its generations.

Plantation Heirs: Transmission of Shellmound

The reproductive anxiety the Fairchilds experience, like their nervousness about race, cannot be detached from the plantation’s spatial organization. In the previous section, though the aunts have responded to Mary Denis Summers’ delivery with

²² When she rides through the field on the way to The Grove, Dabney reflects on the tension in her relationship with her mother then suggests “perhaps it was only her mother’s condition” (41).

excitement, the prospect of Dabney's progeny upsets them greatly. The difference is a matter of inheritance, which is an undercurrent to many of the Fairchild anxieties about reproduction and plantation spaces. As Naoko Thornton writes: "the acquisition, repossession, and alienation of property will be a continuous source of anxiety, and often injustice, among [Fairchild] family members" (45). Mary Denis Summers, who is married a northerner, may reproduce with no undue alarm because she lays no claim to plantation spaces. Dabney, however, intends to remain at Shellmound and becomes a potential usurper of spaces the aunts call their own.²³ Jim Allen and Primrose, who currently reside in The Grove, have no security in it. As Dabney recalls on her way through the fields: "The Grove was really Uncle George's house now; but he had put his two unmarried sisters in the house" (51).²⁴ The sisters are there only by the generosity of their brother and could be uprooted at any time. Similar displacements seem to have happened before since Dabney remembers living in the Grove as a child and must have, at some point, moved to Shellmound (44).²⁵ Even George's claim on The Grove is troubled by the family's insistence on it being "Denis's place" (47).

George continues to divide up internal plantation spaces when he alludes to building new houses to placate his sisters, should he displace them. The suggestion provides one solution to the problem of insufficient space for plantation heirs; however,

²³ Even Shellmound, the least contentious of the three houses, is destabilized by confusing inheritance practices and issues of scarcity. Robbie Reid remembers that the deceased Rowena "had let Mr. Battle have it before she ever lived in it herself" (190).

²⁴ Dabney's reflections about The Grove's transmission to various subsets of the Fairchild family occur when she is riding through the fields away from Shellmound. This consists with the general trend elaborated upon elsewhere in this essay: the Fairchilds encounter people, spaces, or thoughts that trouble the plantation ideal when they navigate non-central plantation spaces.

the temporary fix creates even more dissonance between the ideal plantation as an integrated monolith and a realization fraught by deviance from the ideal. Anxieties about who occupies or owns The Grove become stronger when the possibility arises that a new controller could change the house from its traditional intent, thus connecting the reproduction of plantation bodies and plantation spaces with what plantation spaces are allowed to reproduce. Land production *vis-a-vis* The Grove is a heated topic of discussion at the end of the novel when George ponders what he would do with the place if he were to take it over. He mentions planting fruit trees or vegetables, thus interrupting the uniformity of the plantation's cotton fields (321). The family responds with shock, illustrating that George adds greater unease to the potential change-over by disrupting not only the occupation of plantation spaces, but what those spaces are allowed to (re)produce. Both detract from the plantation's unified external appearance.

Issues of reproduction and inheritance as they unsettle the Fairchilds' notion of the plantation are most clear in regard to Marmion, the abandoned house across the river that Dabney seeks to claim for herself. The Fairchilds' relationship with Marmion integrates the general practices at work in Ellen's trip Brunswicktown, Roy and Laura's visit to Marmion, and Dabney's to The Grove. But, unlike the other instances, Dabney's trip to Marmion illustrates that it is in the process of being re-coded as part of the integrated plantation. The impulse of the Fairchild family as a whole to consider Marmion as an outlier is challenged by Dabney's insistence on claiming it for herself. There is a divide in the Fairchild ideal as Dabney's idealistic view of the place is troubled by the reality the Fairchilds encounter—a Marmion that is a dark space frequented by the

likes of Aunt Studney and will require much labor to become inhabitable. Since Dabney is the Fairchild most invested in glossing Marmion by attributing to it characteristics of idealized plantation mythology, her consciousness in this instance is indicative of the larger Fairchild ideal regarding the plantation.

When Dabney attempts to include Marmion as part of their idealized conception of the plantation, she ignores race relations, labor, and Shellmound's proximity to non-plantation spaces. But, as in other moments, the house's problematic nature comes to light when she makes her way to its locality, thereby crossing borders established in the plantation ideal. Dabney then enters into circumstances that interrupt notions of race and labor as confined to the spatial stratification in the Fairchild ideal and enforced by its boundaries while exacerbating anxieties about reproduction. In these instances of boundary subversion in the plantation's actual realm, Dabney, like the Fairchild family as a whole, turns to her imagination of the plantation to gloss the unfamiliar and the frightening.

The day of the wedding rehearsal, Dabney again rides out toward Marmion and the fringes of Shellmound, passing "through Mound Field and Far Field, through the Deadening, and on toward the trees, where the Yazoo was" (157). As she approaches the distant spaces, she looks "through the trees and across the river" where she "could see Marmion" (157). At first, Marmion takes on some of the characteristics of Shellmound, in particular its whiteness. Dabney sees "the house reflected in the Yazoo River—an undulant tower with *white* wings at each side" (157 emphasis mine). As she continues to

gaze upon the house, Dabney is incognizant of the darkness present in Laura and Roy's experience there and instead takes in "the magnificent, temple-like, castle-like house, with the pillars springing naked from the ground, and the lookout tower, and twenty-five rooms, and inside, the wonderful free-standing stair—the chandelier, chalice in golden light..." (160). Dabney's focus is Marmion's former grandiosity; the number of rooms and opulent features supplant the house's dilapidation and presence in unfavorable space. This is a recognizable case of the "look back" mentality.²⁶ While Ellen and Roy look for plantation images to ground themselves when they feel insecure, Dabney's gesture is one of perception. She seeks recognizable plantation images from her memory and imagination to compensate for unsettling aspects of the present. Dabney envisions the fairy tale image to ease her discomfort about the future.²⁷

While Dabney is able to locate a past image in her perception of Marmion, she cannot completely avoid the thoughts that trouble her ideal for she remembers "Marmion had been empty since the same year it was completed, 1890—when its owner and builder, her grandfather James Fairchild was killed in the duel" (157). After, the family "went back, though it crowded them, to The Grove" (157) and the house was left to fall

²⁶ Dabney's pianist friend, Mary Lamar Mackey, is from a plantation named for this phenomenon: Lookback Plantation(13).

²⁷ The trend of looking backward toward recognizable plantation spaces is echoed throughout representations of the plantation, though typically through a temporal scope to the distant past. In Allen Tate's *The Fathers*, members of the planter class enjoy a large-scale jousting tournament while the young protagonist reads Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, thereby using traditions and narratives from long-past feudal societies to add a sense of longevity to their culture. Kennedy's *Swallow Barn* also includes a fox hunt reminiscent of medieval times. In *Delta Wedding*, it is notable that Marmion is also the name of a poem by Sir Walter Scott, the author noted for reference to the romanticized, feudal past.

into disrepair complete with waterlogged boards, insect infestation, and other damage.²⁸ These features mean the structure must also become associated with labor and racial others Dabney would much rather evict from her consciousness. Though restoring Marmion will have incredible costs, she dismisses the very labor that makes her life possible. With defiant naïveté, she declares: “all the cotton in the world was not worth one moment of her life” (158). It seems odd that the privileged daughter of a cotton plantation and fiancée of that plantation’s overseer should discount the value of the plantation’s primary export. Without cotton, there would be no Marmion or Shellmound; the “moments of her life” that Dabney looks forward to would not be part of her future. Likewise, Dabney pretends not to see the labor and black workers that give her future at Marmion. Her father, Battle, must dispatch “a yard full of Negroes” to set Marmion to rights, and instructs them to do so in three days, insisting that “Miss Dabney wants Marmion *now*” (299). Rather than take seriously Marmion’s historical association with cotton—both as a source of income and the duel that causes the house’s state of dilapidation—and its projected future as part of a cotton plantation (both of which require her to become disillusioned with its grandeur), Dabney essentially “looks back” to her ideal residence, the biggest of the big houses, as it must have appeared before it fell out of favor.

The general tendency to institute an ideal even more strongly when it is endangered is well represented in Dabney’s relationship with Marmion, and her

²⁸ Not all of the Fairchilds see Marmion romantically. Laura notices that “the porch was covered with leaves, like the river, and there were loose joggling boards in it” (230).

compulsion to possess Marmion and her need to institute idealized grandeur to make up for its failings both result from tension in the plantation's spatial register. Since Dabney seeks to remain at Shellmound and is marrying Troy, the overseer, her options are to bring Troy into Shellmound, relocate to the overseer's house herself, or change the plantation's shape to include a "big" house of her own. She chooses the latter because it is the closest she can get to the plantation's idealized form. But no matter how strongly Dabney clings to the ideality of Marmion, her possession of it cannot effectively circumvent problems of inheritance and the instability of plantation spaces. At the end of the novel, Dabney pipes up: "I'm glad [George] doesn't want to take Marmion away from me" (325). By insisting on having Marmion, Dabney renews a precedent in the younger generation of Fairchilds that ignores traditional inheritance practices, thus destabilizing anew every plantation space. Her statement suggests that others have more claim to the house than she does. Annie Laurie, Laura's mother, seems to have had original possession of Marmion which means her daughter, Laura, may stand in line to claim the property.²⁹ Any claim Laura may have to Marmion, however, is contentious since Annie Laurie gave it to Denis when she married and moved away (190). Since Denis was Virgie Lee's husband and Maureen's father, they too have ties to Marmion. The only reason Dabney is able to possess Marmion is because Annie Laurie and Denis are dead, Laura is too young to make a claim, Virgie Lee is insane, and Maureen verbally

²⁹ Annie Laurie makes a doll at Laura's insistence and names it "Marmion" (306). When Laura arrives to Shellmound in the present day of the novel, she is a new potential heir to the house, the doll is described as "suspended in a travel case" (5). Like the doll, the house exists in a state of suspension. Laura later perceives tensions between herself and her cousins about Marmion's status when she and Orrin argue whether Marmion is a house or Laura's dolly (5).

hands it over: “You can have my house-la, and a bite-la of my apple too,” Maureen tells Dabney (39). That the house and the apple are given equal importance in Maureen’s mind illustrates the dubious practice of allowing a little girl—and a brain damaged little girl at that—to give over her property. But the Fairchilds allow the gesture to stand and even acquiesce to Dabney’s impatience for the place. Dabney’s vehement desire to have Marmion is also a mark of desperation; if she doesn’t take Marmion, she will inherit no plantation house of her own. The family acts upon an undercurrent of anxiety when it not only gives in to Dabney’s desires but does so with an immediacy and urgency that speaks to the stressed nature of the plantation’s boundaries.

Reclaiming Marmion from its status as an abandoned outlier and incorporating it into Shellmound as a home for Dabney and future generations of Fairchilds extends the bounds of the idealized plantation—where the controlling family lives—into closer proximity with the plantation’s less desirable portions. This extension not only pushes boundaries outward toward town, but also forces them to subsume the bayou and the river as part of its internal whole, thereby associating Marmion and the future plantation’s realization with these fraught and anxious spaces. In addition to absorbing undesirable spaces into itself, giving Dabney Marmion also forces the family to come into contact with Marmion’s violent history. The Fairchilds’ distaste for plantation satellites and their insistence on avoiding thoughts of death—as evidenced by their treatment of the cemetery—suggests that taking Marmion into itself, as a space tainted by death, is a last resort. The extension of the family into Marmion and the subsequent inflation of the plantation’s boundaries is not a process the Fairchilds would tolerate were they not

stressed by limited space and the increasing tension between the idealized rigid border and the vulnerable one that exists in reality. Even when Marmion is repaired and becomes again Shellmound's grandest house, at least in scale, it can never be central and serves only to trouble already fraught plantation boundaries. It reaffirms a plantation ideal in appearance but ultimately troubles Shellmound's insularity and cohesiveness by reflecting that the reality stands at quite a distance from that desirable, imagined past.

The fraught nature of plantation boundaries becomes quite clear when the Fairchild family vacillates between absorbing Marmion into Shellmound and divorcing it from Shellmound. Battle, Dabney's father, jokingly suggests that since she will be moving across the river, he will either give her an airplane or build a bridge to facilitate her easy back-and-forth to Shellmound (120). In such instances, the Fairchilds are inclined to divorce Marmion and Dabney from the insularity of Shellmound. Dabney herself seems to consider Marmion as a separate plantation by asserting that once she and Troy move there, he will "manage the *two* places" (38 emphasis mine). But outside of this reference, Marmion is referred to as an abandoned part *of* Shellmound, not an independent plantation. Even if reviving Marmion also means revitalizing unused fields across the river, if Troy – Dabney's husband – manages both places, it becomes part of one Fairchild monolith. Ranny responds to Battle's comment by suggesting that navigating between Marmion and Shellmound is not such a hard task: "If [Dabney] goes down the other side of the river to the bridge at Fairchilds and goes across and comes up this side, she could come home" (120). Ranny's suggestion that Dabney could easily return depicts the conflict here. Marmion cannot be easily included into Shellmound

because the family has treated it as an outlier for decades and reclaiming it forces their boundaries to change in visible and momentous ways. The larger family ideal of an integrated, insular plantation resists including Marmion as part of itself, but the family *must* reclaim it if they are to keep Dabney as part of themselves. The Fairchilds adapt to conflict by projecting their ideal onto troubled spaces, even if it means looking to an idealized version of the plantation that is not possible in its material realization.

As more people lay claim to plantation heritage, the breach between the idealized plantation and its material manifestation grows stronger because the idealized version of the plantation can only support so many individual bodies before spatial logics must be reconfigured to make room for all of its heirs. During the picnic, the final scene of the novel, these problems and coping mechanisms are reiterated once more. Laura asks again: “is all of this Shellmound?” Battle, the patriarch of the plantation, responds with levity: “[r]emains to be seen!” (317). Though Battle’s tone is lighthearted, the response itself reflects a central anxiety of the text. It remains to be seen what Shellmound will look like in the future. In all likelihood, the plantation’s material and social presence will continue to grow and change as its viability varies over time, but this does not mean that the plantation’s ideal register will weaken or cease to exist. If anything, the family ideal becomes stronger under pressure as future generations emulate the “look back” tendency. The ideal will continue to co-exist with the plantation’s material presence to produce a larger entity capable of withstanding new and increased anxieties. Though the Fairchilds’ idealized image of the plantation requires the perception of stasis in regards to both its material presence and its socio-cultural

practices, the novel also reveals that the plantation is never a static entity. Shellmound becomes a fulcrum where the modalities of the idealized plantation and its actualized spatial function meet; while these modalities may seem mutually exclusive, they work together to comprise a dynamic whole that can withstand fissures to the ideal even while resisting them. In this way, the plantation absorbs troubles into itself, creating a precarious balance between rejecting change and adjusting to new contexts. “It’s all happened afore,” Laura says in the concluding picnic scene (318). And it will likely happen again.

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