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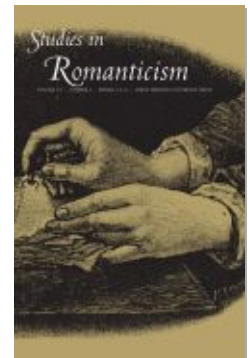
Yam Grounds and Sugar Time: A Contrapuntal Reading of  
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MATTHEW ROWNEY

# Yam Grounds and Sugar Time: A Contrapuntal Reading of *Mansfield Park*

IN *MANSFIELD PARK*, FANNY PRICE'S JOURNEY TO GENTILITY PARALLELS SIR THOMAS Bertram's journey to Antigua. They are, in fact, two sides of the same coin. The plot centers on growth and refining—both in training Fanny to become a marriageable young lady and in addressing sugar production issues on Sir Thomas's Antigua estate. Fanny must undergo a process to become “sweet” (her most common descriptor) just as surely as the plantation sugar cane on which her fortunes depend.<sup>1</sup> As Brian Southam puts it, “physical and commercial geography . . . go hand and hand with moral geography.”<sup>2</sup> Or as Sarah Marsh makes explicit, “every dimension of English life is inflected in *Mansfield Park* by the racial ideology of unfree labor emerging from its West Indian colonies.”<sup>3</sup> Sweetness appears, not simply as an aesthetic experience, but as a key to the multifaceted reproduction of imperial power.

These seemingly disparate forms of sweetness meet in the various meanings (the *OED* gives over 30 senses) of the word “sweet.” Mary Carruthers explains, “From the very start, ‘sweetness’ was both profoundly ambivalent and morally difficult” due to the way it could represent both purity and temptation, presenting a thorny problem to Church fathers when it came to translating scripture.<sup>4</sup> The same combination of purity and temptation, it is worth noting, is visible in Edenic European depictions of Caribbean islands. Fanny's sweetness similarly derives from either her purity (for Edmund) or her role as an object of temptation (for Henry). The narrator of *Mansfield Park* begins and ends her treatment of Fanny in terms of her sweetness. In chapter two, Fanny is introduced as having a “sweet” voice, and the novel's closing describes Fanny's

1. The word “sweet” appears in some form thirty-one times in the novel. It is used to describe Fanny fifteen times.

2. Southam, “The Silence of the Bertrams: Slavery and the Chronology of *Mansfield Park*,” *The Times Literary Supplement* (February 17, 1995): 14. Though Southam summarizes Said here, his phrasing is apt.

3. Marsh, “Changes of Air: The Somerset Case and *Mansfield Park*'s Imperial Plots,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 53, no. 2 (2020): 218.

4. Carruthers, “Sweetness,” *Speculum* 81, no. 4 (2006): 1003.

“sweetness of temper.”<sup>5</sup> And sweetness, as Carruthers shows, is historically tied to literary production: “No word is used more often in the Middle Ages to make a positive judgment about the effects of a work of art.”<sup>6</sup> This usage continued into the early modern period (e.g. Milton’s “Sweetest Shakespear fancies childe”), though it appears to have largely faded in Austen’s day, as sugar poured into England and transformed its cultural habits.<sup>7</sup>

This essay seeks to build on the work of Deidre Lynch, who reads the development of Austen’s heroines in terms of “botany’s accounts of vegetable propagation and the new modes of naturalizing sex that those accounts legitimate,” understanding Fanny’s growth in terms of “the accelerated schedules and unseasonable rhythms of hothouse gardening.”<sup>8</sup> I too seek to think of Fanny’s development in terms of plant growth, but I locate these plants, not in English greenhouses and hothouses, but in Caribbean provision grounds and boiling houses. Yam cultivation by enslaved people on provision grounds presents a foil to the protoindustrial production of sugar, and both contribute to the transformation of sweetness. The agroecology of yam cultivation will provide the basis here for a contrapuntal reading of the novel, one that attends to the plantation / provision “plot” (as Sylvia Wynter describes it) as essential context for reading the plot of *Mansfield Park*. In his definition of contrapuntal reading, Edward Said argues that we need to read this type of ignored history back onto the texts of empire, to “draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present.”<sup>9</sup> In a similar vein, Toni Morrison argues for “strategies for breaking” silences that were “the order of the day.”<sup>10</sup> Attending to the temporal structures of sugar production and of yam cultivation provides a strategy for breaking the silences that *Mansfield Park* both acknowledges and perpetuates.

It is well-known that the Austens had ties to Antigua through their close relations with the slave-owning Nibbs family. Especially close was the relation between Jane’s father, the Rev. George Austen, and James Langford Nibbs, a third-generation Antiguan plantation owner. Brian Southam and Gregson Davis have convincingly argued that the plantation-owning father and his wastrel eldest son were the model for Sir Thomas Bertram and his son Tom, and Nibbs offers an important bridge for my argument here concerning the relationship

5. Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. Claudia L. Johnson (New York and London: W. W. Norton & co., 1998), 11, 320, henceforth cited parenthetically in the text as *MP*.

6. Carruthers, “Sweetness,” 999.

7. The extent to which sugar grew in daily use in England is detailed by Sidney Mintz in *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern Industry* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 73.

8. Lynch, “‘Young Ladies are Delicate Plants’: Jane Austen and Greenhouse Romanticism,” *ELH* 77, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 689, 712.

9. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 66.

10. Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 51.

between the Antiguan and English estates.<sup>11</sup> More recently, Devoney Looser has unearthed new information concerning the closeness of the Austens and the Nibbses, as well as abolitionist activity within the Austen family, demonstrating a complex set of relations toward the slave trade that developed over time, but leaving open the question of just what Austen's own views were.<sup>12</sup> Responding to Looser, Anurag Jain objects that Austen's or her family's opinions should not be our main concern. As he puts it, "Slavery was a social and economic phenomenon that inscribes and intrudes the imaginary of her texts."<sup>13</sup> This essay seeks to demonstrate the ways "sweetness" allows for a reading of this inscription and intrusion.

The connection between the two estates in the novel becomes more visible in thinking through *MP* alongside another M. P.: Mary Prince, who documents her own experience in Antigua at around the same time that Austen's novel is set. In her narrative, Prince describes a visit to Date Hill in Antigua. In its elevated position, Date Hill overlooked the nearby plantation of James Langford Nibbs, the very estate for which Jane Austen's father served as co-trustee.<sup>14</sup> Prince would certainly have viewed the sugar mill there (Fig. 1).

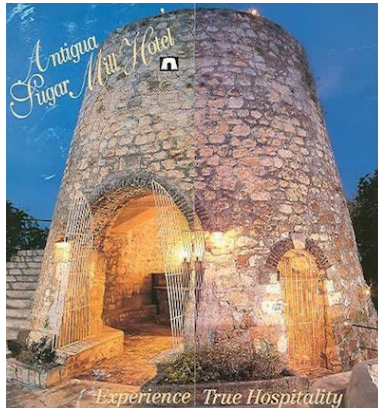


Figure 1. From an advertisement showing the sugar mill at Date Hill converted into a bar. The hotel closed in the 2000s. Sugar Mill Hotel (c. 1970), Antigua Tourism Authority.

11. Southam, "Silence," 14; Davis, "Jane Austen's Mansfield Park: The Antigua Connection," among Papers delivered at the Antigua and Barbuda Country Conference (<https://www.open.uwi.edu/sites/default/files/bnccde/antigua/conference/papers/davis.html>, 2004), n.p. Nibbs was a student of Austen's at Oxford, and stood as godfather to James Austen, who is possibly named after Nibbs.

12. Looser, "Breaking the Silence: The Austen Family's Complex Entanglements with Slavery," *The Times Literary Supplement* 6164 (May 21, 2021): 3–4.

13. Janet Todd and Anurag Jain, "Jane Austen and Slavery," *The Times Literary Supplement* 6165 (May 28, 2021): 6.

14. Agnes Meecker, "Date Hill," *Antigua Sugar Mills: A Griot Institute Project* (The Antigua Sugar Mills Project, <https://sugarmills.blogs.bucknell.edu/>, 2022).

Prince explains the reason for the trip as follows: “My master and mistress went on one occasion into the country, to Date Hill, for change of air, and carried me with them to take charge of the children, and to do the work of the house.”<sup>15</sup> A “change of air” is the same motivation claimed for Fanny’s removal to Mansfield Park: her mother was “sanguine in the hope of her being materially better for change of air” (*MP*, 10), and as Marsh points out, the same rhetoric was used in the Mansfield case in describing English air as “too pure for slaves to breathe in.”<sup>16</sup> It is of further significance that Prince tells us she is living in “the middle of the town” of St. Johns when she moves to Antigua, the administrative center of the island and its main port, a place where Nibbs (and, thus, Sir Thomas) would have business and would sail in and out of (*History*, 80). Both the narratives and their historical figures cross over the same ground again and again.

One way that Prince and others gain agency in her narrative is through the selling of yams: “I took in washing, and sold coffee and yams and other provisions to the captains of ships” (*History*, 81). At Date Hill, she notes how the field slaves “are worked very hard and fed scantily,” and “those that have yams or potatoes or firewood to sell, haste to market to buy . . . salt fish, or pork” in order to supplement their insufficient rations (*History*, 82). The reality of Antiguan plantation life that Prince documents is central to understanding the wealth and social status of families like the Bertrams. The daily consumption of the yam here is the counterpart to the daily consumption of sugar in the Bertrams’ breakfast-room. Unlike sugar, which required intense labor and must be processed very quickly because of its tendency to ferment, yams grow with relatively little assistance in a crop cycle that spans a full year.<sup>17</sup> Yams grow—sugar is refined; this difference in agency is significant. The indoor, exploitative, processed, commercial, and hurried production of sugar contrasts with the outdoor, nourishing, organic, culturally-rooted, and seasonal growth of the yam. Yam cultivation offers a sustainable model of relation with the land while sugar production creates a destructive and parasitic regime. In the following section I will be concerned with how yam cultivation in the Caribbean interrogates cultural practices depicted in *Mansfield Park*, and helps to create a more global and ecological context for our understanding of the novel. The final section of the essay then turns to the time-discipline of sugar production and its relation to both the novel’s time-discipline and methods of reading in the period.

15. Prince, *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave, Related by Herself*, ed. Moira Ferguson (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 82. Henceforth cited parenthetically in the text as *History*.

16. Marsh, “Changes,” 211.

17. E. I. Ile, et al., “Phases of Dormancy in Yam Tubers (*Dioscorea rotundata*),” *Annals of Botany* 97 no. 4 (2006): 497.

## Sweetness of Another Kind

*Mansfield Park* opens with a focus on the subject of growth within an economics of familial relation. Mrs. Norris contrasts the advantages of having Fanny “grow up in this neighbourhood” with the idea of her “having been suffered to grow up at a distance from us all in poverty and neglect.” Mrs. Norris marks growth, not in terms of stages of childhood development so much as in economic terms. The “advantages” she mentions are those refinement would bring: “the means of settling well, without further expense to anybody.” This is contrasted with a non-productive growth at a distance. In response to Sir Thomas Bertram’s concern about “cousins in love” (*MP*, 7), Mrs. Norris makes the somewhat bizarre claim that distance would be much more likely to “make either of the dear, sweet-tempered boys in love with her” (*MP*, 8). As strange as her claim is in this context, the attraction of the distant is an overarching theme of imperial growth, inseparable from the kinds of growth in the Caribbean on which the Bertrams depended for their wealth and status. Though Sir Thomas hesitates at first, he is quickly and easily won over, taking Mrs. Norris’s cue in describing the “distinction” necessary “between the girls as they grow up” (*MP*, 9). Growth here is carefully tied to issues of economy and class, and highly abstracted from its physical and developmental processes.

Sir Thomas is, of course, a planter. The growth of the yam in Africa and the Caribbean provides a contrast with the growth outlined by Mrs. Norris and echoed by Sir Thomas. If sugar is a necessary basis of the advantages Fanny could hope for in marriage, the yam was central in a different kind of familial economy. Describing traditional ceremonial practices in West Africa, Jude Obidiegwu and Emmanuel Akpabio explain: “No important ceremony—be it burial, traditional marriage, or thanksgiving—will be complete without involving yam as the main dish . . . and as part of important gift items.”<sup>18</sup> Yam cultivation is imbricated in familial and social relations to such an extent that it shapes ways of thinking about one’s place in a larger cultural fabric. The processes of traditional yam cultivation in Nigeria, where different family members took on various roles, including clearing, tilling, barn-preparing, staking, harvesting, and tying, provide a counternarrative to the forced “cutting, hauling, grinding, clarification, filtration, evaporation, and crystallization” of sugar production.<sup>19</sup> This illustrates the difference between growth and refining that is important to how the novel depicts these

18. Obidiegwu and Akpabio, “The Geography of Yam Cultivation in Southern Nigeria: Exploring its Social Meanings and Cultural Functions,” *Journal of Ethnic Foods* 4, no. 1 (2017): 32.

19. Obidiegwu, “Yam Cultivation,” 32. Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, trans. Harriet de Onís (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 1995), 33.

processes. The Bertrams rely on sugar profits, central to a growing global capitalist economy, in contrast to the growth of the yam, with ties to ancient cultural constructions intimately bound with the earth.

Prince reiterates in her narrative that “To be free is very sweet,” redirecting the historical force of sweetness toward liberation (*History*, 85). Though sugar is by far the most common source of sweetness in England in Austen’s day, there is another kind of sweetness that is sourced in the knowledge, labor, experience, and history of the African diaspora in the Caribbean. As Judith Carney explains, not only is the yam “thought to be one of the first food crops Africans domesticated,” it also

revolutionized New World tropical food systems. [It was] easily planted and required little labor to cultivate and process into food . . . The yam became so central to the regional food supply of the Caribbean that plantation provision grounds were frequently called “yam grounds.” Yams produced prolific yields, stored well without spoilage, and could be cooked in many different ways. Their cultivation quickly spread throughout tropical America . . . The African yam remains one of the most significant food crops that slaves pioneered in the Americas.<sup>20</sup>

Though the varieties of yam brought from Africa are not especially sweet to the taste, the above qualities of the yam make it “sweet” in one of the many ways defined by the *OED*: “not corrupt, putrid, sour, or stale; free from taint . . . in a sound and wholesome condition.”<sup>21</sup> This meaning has relevance for how the word “sweet” is deployed in *Mansfield Park*, just as the yam provides an important foil to sugar, making possible a contrapuntal reading of the novel. Sylvia Wynter provides the framework for such a reading in her description of the “plantation-plot dichotomy” in which the form of the provision grounds “was, like the novel form in literature terms, the focus of resistance to the market system and market values.” Wynter goes on to locate this resistance in a form of folk culture: “Around the growing of the yam, of food for survival, [the enslaved] created on a plot a folk culture—the basis of a social order—in three hundred years.”<sup>22</sup> The yam as a site of resistance to a market system built around the sugar industry also sheds light on Fanny’s relationship to the natural world in the novel.

The ancient cultivation of the yam and its associated cultural rituals demonstrate a form of what Michel Serres calls a “natural contract” in which a reciprocity exists between people and the land. Serres draws a contrast between our ancestors who “lived out in the often intemperate

20. Carney, *In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa’s Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 16, 113.

21. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “sweet,” *adj.* and *adv.*, 3a.

22. Wynter, “Novel and History, Plot and Plantation,” *Savacou* 5 (1971): 99.

weather” and our contemporaries who now live “only indoors, immersed only in passing time.”<sup>23</sup> This is especially relevant in terms of the outdoors of the “yam grounds” and the indoors of the sugar boiling houses, the first associated with a long tradition of close interaction with the natural world, and the second an early example of the increasing effort to create distance from that world. Fanny, the most careful observer of the natural world in Austen’s fiction, comments on this distinction:

You will think me rhapsodising; but when I am out of doors, especially when I am sitting out of doors, I am very apt to get into this sort of wondering strain. One cannot fix one’s eyes on the commonest natural production without finding food for a rambling fancy.

(MP, 144)

While we might recognize here a Wordsworthian feeling for the primacy of the natural world (the “common things” that are central to his work), I think we can also valuably read this preference for the outdoors in relation to the longer stretch of human history that Serres evokes.<sup>24</sup> As I’ve noted, the yam is representative of this longer history (of “finding food”), and sugar of modern methods of production that disrupt (or un-“fix”) these older ties to the earth. Just prior to this connection of the “wondering” self to the experience of the outdoors, Fanny describes plant growth in a way that mirrors her own development:

[E]very time I come into this shrubbery I am more struck with its growth and beauty. Three years ago, this was nothing but a rough hedgerow along the upper side of the field, never thought of as anything, or capable of becoming anything; and now it is converted into a walk, and it would be difficult to say whether most valuable as a convenience or an ornament; and perhaps, in another three years, we may be forgetting—almost forgetting what it was before.

(MP, 143)

This scene of conversion is a rare glimpse into Fanny’s understanding of her own growth and potential. Though Fanny recognizes the human hand involved in the transformation of the landscape, there is something beyond this that lends the scene importance, a recognition, perhaps, of a shared fate. This is formally signified by her equivocations as the description progresses, from

23. Serres, *The Natural Contract*, trans. Elizabeth MacArthur and William Paulson (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 28.

24. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York and London: W. W. Norton & co., 1979), 1:119.

“never thought of as anything” to “it would be difficult to say” to “perhaps . . . we may be forgetting.” It is important that this uncertainty is not a sign of insecurity but points directly to a mode of potential growth over time. It is worth noting that Fanny’s only direct use of the word “sweet” comes in her description of the “wilderness” at Sotherton, and that this description breaks into the heated conversation between Edmund and Mary as to what profession Edmund is best suited to pursue (*MP*, 67). Fanny reminds us that the natural informs the social, and not the other way round.

Fanny’s thinking through her relation to plant growth in the long term rather than the short term has further relevance to considering her development. Yams go through a period of dormancy as part of their growth cycle. As one study puts it, “Yam tubers exhibit dormancy, which prevents precocious sprouting (germination), prolongs storability and maintains food quality . . . Harvested tubers remain dormant (i.e. incapable of developing an internal shoot bud or external shoot bud/sprout) for 30 to 150d depending on date of harvest, species, and growing and storage environmental conditions.”<sup>25</sup> This period of dormancy not only contrasts with the hectic process of sugar production, it brings a relation of consumption/consummation to bear on the question of whether or not Fanny is “out.” Modern horticulturalists (something like Lynch’s hothouse gardeners) seek to shorten this period of dormancy in order to improve crop yield over time, but as with the question of Fanny’s status (“Pray, is she out or is she not?—I am puzzled.—” [*MP*, 36]), “dormancy is not well understood.”<sup>26</sup> We can first find a reference point to Fanny’s dormancy in Mrs. Norris’s disappointment that Fanny is slow to adjust to life at Mansfield: “It required a longer time . . . than Mrs. Norris was inclined to allow, to reconcile Fanny to the novelty of Mansfield Park” (*MP*, 12). The first active attempt to shorten Fanny’s “dormancy” can be seen in the nearly universal push for Fanny to take part in the theatrical production. In response to Mrs. Norris’s efforts to force Fanny onto the stage, Edmund objects:

“Do not urge her, madam,” said Edmund. “It is not fair to urge her in this manner. You see she does not like to act. Let her chuse for herself, as well as the rest of us. Her judgment may be quite as safely trusted. Do not urge her any more.”

Edmund, ever a defender of tradition in the novel, resists compelling an expedited process of turning Fanny into a consumable object. Mrs. Norris responds savagely to this insistence on allowing Fanny to proceed at her own pace:

25. Ile, et al., “Phases,” 497.

26. Ile, et al., “Phases,” 497.

“I am not going to urge her,” replied Mrs. Norris sharply; “but I shall think her a very obstinate, ungrateful girl, if she does not do what her aunt and cousins wish her—very ungrateful, indeed, considering who and what she is.”

(*MP*, 103)

Fanny’s obstinacy, or her dormancy, is anathema to the planting class’s goals of maximum production and maximum profit. And Mrs. Norris’s language foreshadows Sir Thomas’s in reproving Fanny for not making herself amenable to Henry Crawford’s advances. Try all he can, she “prevents precocious sprouting” and “prolongs . . . and maintains [her] quality” (or sweetness) through what is for her a necessary stage of dormancy. Questions of latency and potentiality that are central to the depiction of Fanny’s development are also central to understanding the growth of the yam and its cultural role in Caribbean life.

Kamau Brathwaite has pointed to the central role of the yam in this cultural history, finding there a relation to consumption that is sacramental rather than profligate. Elizabeth DeLoughrey provides a succinct summary:

The Jamaican term *nyam* derives from a number of West African languages for the word for “to eat,” or *nyami*. In poems such as “*Nam(e) tracks*,” Brathwaite excavates “underground resources,” what he terms the *nam* of his Barbadian motherland. He explains *nam* as a “secret-name, soul-source, connected with *nyam* (eat), *yam* (root food), *nyame* (name of god).” The act of planting naturalizes the relationship between people and place. Thus the diasporic subject and his or her descendent “would plant his yam and with it *nyame:onyame:yam* of god. A little piece of Africa on mourning ground.” “*Nam* is the heart of our nation-language which,” says Brathwaite, like the cultural distinction between the provision grounds and the plantation, “comes into conflict with the cultural imperial authority of Prospero.” Thus *yam/nam* is a signifier of subterranean cultural roots and the vehicle of articulation and reassemblage itself.<sup>27</sup>

The yam develops in rhizomatic fashion across divides of the natural and cultural, establishing roots beyond what either can attain. Through its connection to the provision ground and its history, it offers a site of resistance to imperial authority. In a similar way Fanny resists the (Prospero-like) authority of Mrs. Norris and Sir Thomas. Fanny’s resistance to the theatrics and to Henry have often been read as a sign of a kind of insipid piety,

27. DeLoughrey, “*Yam, Roots, and Rot: Allegories of the Provision Grounds*,” *Small Axe* 34 (2011): 61.

but when read through the necessary context of the plantation zone, her supposed passivity is related to a larger resistance to the increasing changes brought about by modern methods of consumption.

Beyond the way sugar and yam operate as foils for each other, they were also intimately bound within a larger system of global relations. The growth cycles of both plants determined, to a large extent, the timing of slave ship journeys. As Stephen Behrendt explains, “varying ecological realities in Africa and the Americas placed seasonal restraints on how slave buyers and sellers organized the transatlantic slave trade,” restraints of a type clearly familiar to Sir Thomas and likely involved in his travel to Antigua.<sup>28</sup> For centuries, slavers depended on the yam harvest in West Africa to supply food for the Middle Passage.<sup>29</sup> Travel was thus scheduled according to both the harvest of yam and sugar cane: “Ecological conditions determined the yam-slaving season at Old Calabar that positioned most captains to arrive in Jamaica during labor-intensive sugar and coffee production.”<sup>30</sup> The very ports and routes of slaving ships were determined by the seasonal movement of winds and currents, as was the timing of Sir Thomas’s return to Mansfield.<sup>31</sup> Though Henry Crawford jests that “if Mansfield Park had had the government of the winds, just for a week or two, about the equinox, there would have been a difference” (*MP*, 155), Fanny is uncomfortably aware of what this “difference” suggests (both in terms of Henry’s pursuit of Maria and Edmund’s increasing infatuation with Mary), and the unusual force of her response to Henry reflects this knowledge. In the context of the slave trade, the experience of a week or two of calm usually meant a significant death toll due to the conditions in which the enslaved were kept: “Entrapment in the equatorial doldrums or unusual summer westerlies and southwesterlies in the North Atlantic could double or triple the number of days on the Middle Passage, increasing mortality risks for those on board.”<sup>32</sup> Middle Passage slave mortality also varied with the yam supplies ships were able to procure.<sup>33</sup> Crawford’s jest connects the amateur theatricals to events unfolding on a global stage, and Fanny’s resistance to the theatrical is suggestive of other resistances.

The successful growth and harvest of yams and sugar cane underlie the structures of imperial power that provided wealth and social status to families like the Bertrams. While the plantation system created multiple

28. Behrendt, “Ecology, Seasonality, and the Transatlantic Slave Trade,” in *Soundings in Atlantic History: Latent Structures and Intellectual Currents, 1500–1830*, ed. Bernard Bailyn and Patricia L. Deanult (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 46.

29. Behrendt, “Ecology,” 55.

30. Behrendt, “Ecology,” 81.

31. Behrendt, “Ecology,” 47.

32. Behrendt, “Ecology,” 48.

33. Behrendt, “Ecology,” 59.

levels of ecological dissociation, members of the African diaspora formed “connections between the process of biotic and cultural creolizations.”<sup>34</sup> Michael Reyes offers an insightful analysis of a specific example of ethnobotany carried out by Eugène Nau in Haiti which finds a “hidden logic” of Taino symbolic structure in Nau’s system of organization, foregrounding Amerindian naming of plants over European classification.<sup>35</sup> For Nau, the plants’ value “has less to do with botany, and more to do with how this knowledge served to strengthen a connection between nineteenth-century Haitians, the fifteenth-century Taino, and the land which they understood as having inherited from them.”<sup>36</sup> This example, one out of many, indicates the importance of the multifaceted relationships between indigenous peoples of the Americas and Africans and their descendants over hundreds of years of contact. Knowledge and culture develop in underground partnerships across cultural and linguistic divides, much like the rhizomatic development of the yam (or, indeed, recalling what Paul Gilroy identifies as the “rhizomorphic, fractal structure of . . . the Black Atlantic”).<sup>37</sup> Nalo Hopkinson explains how “language, custom and belief are growing things. Chop them up and, like yams, they just sprout whole new plants.”<sup>38</sup> This sprouting up defines a kind of sweetness that resists the plotted and scheduled method of regimes of reproduction, whether in terms of sugar production in the Caribbean, or in the strategic marriages of the English gentry. It is precisely “language, custom and belief” to which Austen regularly appeals.

Sweetness is a quality that reaches across people and things, and Fanny becomes “sweet” in ways that both yams and sugar become sweet. Her development is explicitly tied to forms of development taking place off stage. This comes to a head in the famous passage regarding Fanny’s question about the slave trade.

[“]Your complexion is so improved!—and you have gained so much countenance!—and your figure—nay, Fanny, do not turn away about it—it is but an uncle . . . You must really begin to harden yourself to the idea of being worth looking at . . .

“Oh! don’t talk so, don’t talk so,” cried Fanny, distressed by more feelings than he was aware of; but seeing that she was distressed, he had done with the subject, and only added more seriously—

34. DeLoughrey, “Yam, Roots, and Rot,” 2.

35. Reyes, “Caribbean Ethnobotany before Roumain: Eugène Nau’s Nineteenth-century Contribution to an Understanding of the ‘Indian Flora of Haiti,’” *Caribbean Quarterly* 63, no. 4 (2017): 470, 473.

36. Reyes, “Caribbean Ethnobotany,” 476.

37. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London and New York: Verso, 1993), 4.

38. Hopkinson, qtd. in DeLoughrey, “Yam, Roots, and Rot,” 62.

“Your uncle is disposed to be pleased with you in every respect; and I only wish you would talk to him more. You are one of those who are too silent in the evening circle.”

“But I do talk to him more than I used. I am sure I do. Did not you hear me ask him about the slave-trade last night?”

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

“And I longed to do it—but there was such a dead silence! [”]

(*MP*, 136)

Fanny’s physical development is subject to the panopticon of the male gaze—“the idea of being worth looking at” internalizes this phenomenon. She has ripened and sweetened into an object “worth” both admiration and speculation. Her distress, in which she urges Edmund to be silent, is ostensibly a mixture of both a performance of modesty and an excitement at receiving this kind of attention from Edmund. The “more feelings than he was aware of” are also feelings that we as readers are not explicitly made aware of, feelings bearing on the important silence that follows. This silence is reflected in Edmund’s claim that Fanny is “too silent” and asks us to consider the relation between these silences that turn things and people opaque, that establish connections between an English and Antigua estate only to remain silent about them. These silences mirror each other and demonstrate the relation between Fanny’s growth and that taking place in the Caribbean, especially the silent subterranean growth of the yam, with all its invisible potential.

### Sugar Time

The slow time of yam growth contrasts with the haste in which sugar must be refined. The historical forces involved in producing Fanny’s sweetness are also those involved in the production of sugar, just as the marriage market is underwritten by the global trade in commodities and their desirability. As Mimi Sheller writes, “Sugar brought together the domestic realm and the world market, with women playing an especially important role in domesticating this once exotic luxury good.”<sup>39</sup> *Mansfield Park* also brings together the domestic realm and the world market, revealing the ecological at the root of the social and the colonial at the heart and hearth of empire.

In “Young Ladies are Delicate Plants: Jane Austen and Greenhouse Romanticism,” Deidre Lynch recounts how developments in botanical science came to be applied to literary constructions of gender. She proposes “that the blooming girls of Austen novels are not so much ‘lilies of the field’ as they are

39. Sheller, *Consuming the Caribbean: From Arawaks to Zombies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 82–83.

flowers bred up in . . . what we now call container gardening.”<sup>40</sup> The repeated description of Fanny as “sweet” suggests her relation to another kind of plant growth, that of sugar cane. Both Fanny and sugar cane must undergo a complex process before becoming “refined,” and enjoying/producing the financial reward that refinement brings. What Fernando Ortiz, cited above, describes as the “cutting, hauling, grinding, clarification, filtration, evaporation, and crystallization” required to produce sugar parallels Fanny’s character development. Cutting and hauling represent Fanny’s removal and transportation to Mansfield, grinding “the pains of tyranny, of ridicule, and of neglect” (*MP*, 106) in the cruel indifference and condescension of the Bertram family, clarification the development of her relationship with Edmund, filtration the shedding of older habits and frames of mind, evaporation the process of her emergence from the social background (her “coming out”), and crystallization her final positioning at the center of the novel’s moral and power relations. Though Fanny may be sweet, it requires an intensive and time-sensitive process for this sweetness to be exploitable for others.

The relationship between sweetness and capitalist time is captured by Kyla Wazana Tompkins: “the sweetness so beloved to the western palate is the literal referent of capitalist time discipline put to the service of one of the cruelest labor-extraction schemes ever known to human history.”<sup>41</sup> Sugar provides a kind of chronotope for ways of thinking about the transforming attitude to time in Austen’s day and the construction of time in Austen’s novels. *Mansfield Park*, as much as it and Fanny have been read as static, is marked by bustle and hurry.

The several steps involved in the production of sugar during the Romantic period are instructive in this context. Ortiz describes the process in colonial Cuba:

The cane must be ground as soon as it is cut or else the yield of juice shrinks, ferments, and spoils. This characteristic of the sugar cane is responsible for social and historical consequences of incalculable importance . . . The offhand manner in which it can be treated in the field is transformed into the most breathless haste once it has been mutilated [in the boiling house] to steal its juice, and not a moment can be lost.<sup>42</sup>

This account is not unique, and is given similarly by Thomas Tryon, a Caribbean observer at the turn of the eighteenth century, who claims that to work in a boiling house is “to live in a perpetual Noise and Hurry.”<sup>43</sup>

40. Lynch, “Young Ladies,” 694.

41. Tompkins, “Sweetness, Capacity, Energy,” *The American Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (2019): 853.

42. Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint*, 33.

43. Tryon, qtd. in Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 47.

That a similar form of “breathless haste” and “perpetual . . . Hurry” is common to the action of *Mansfield Park* is not mere coincidence—it suggests the “incalculable importance” of the connection between commodity production and consumption and social relations. Late in the novel, Fanny describes this haste in terms of business. Describing a note she receives from Mary Crawford, Fanny “was persuaded of it having the air of a letter of haste and business” (*MP*, 296). An even more telling relationship is expressed when Sir Thomas’s “business in Antigua had been prosperously rapid” (*MP*, 123). Haste is tied to business in such a way as to define a certain quality of modern commerce and the industrialized time that increasingly came to define the individual relation to place.

The literature on the development of attitudes to time in this period is vast, and my treatment of the topic here is necessarily cursory, and interested largely in how hurry marks a number of developments both within and outside of Austen’s novel. In *Telling Time*, Stuart Sherman discusses the convergence of Foucault and Thompson around a significant change brought about by the beginning of the nineteenth century:

E. P. Thompson and Michel Foucault, whose approaches to cultural time differ greatly in other respects, concur on this point: that by the early nineteenth century clocks (and their textual counterparts the time-table and time-sheet) had made of time minutely measured a central tool of power, a device indispensable to the “discipline” of large multitudes (workers, students, soldiers, prisoners).<sup>44</sup>

This discipline, and its relation to hurry, comes into play at a key earlier moment in the novel involving Fanny’s emotional turmoil on observing Edmund’s flirtation with Mary Crawford:

the great clock at Mansfield Park, striking three, made her feel that she had really been much longer absent than usual, and brought the previous self-inquiry of whether she should take leave or not just then, and how, to a very speedy issue. With undoubting decision she directly began her adieu . . .

Fanny’s hurry increased; and without in the least expecting Edmund’s attendance, she would have hastened away alone; but the general pace was quickened, and they all accompanied her into the house.

(*MP*, 147–48)

The clock marks, not a time, but a sense of being out of time. As with industrialized time, the clock does not indicate a certain portion of the day so

44. Sherman, *Telling Time: Clocks, Diaries, and English Diurnal Form, 1660–1785* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 19.

much as a felt obligation (a discipline of “self-inquiry”) that masks, in this case, Fanny’s despair. This is emphasized by the “speedy issue,” the increasing “hurry,” the felt need to “have hastened” and the quickening of the “general pace” that no doubt also mirrors a quickening of Fanny’s pulse. Clock time stands in contradistinction to older ways of understanding time based on natural cycles. Michel Serres notes that the French language encodes this older sense through the use of the same word for time and weather (*temps*), and as I have mentioned above, this coincides with a tendency of modern life to take place indoors.<sup>45</sup> It is not surprising, then, that the hurried collective movement begun by the clock is “into the house.”

Time-discipline appears in three other moments of the novel, where watches are associated with a male (rational, cultural) regulation of a perceived female (emotive, natural) sense of time. In each case, watches are used as a way to regulate female behavior.<sup>46</sup> It is hardly surprising that time-discipline enacted through time-pieces was used elsewhere as a means of regulating bodies. Though only one example, Manuel Moreno Fraginals’s description of a common practice on sugar plantations is illustrative: “From the end of the eighteenth century, tasks were measured with watch in hand, and systems for gaining seconds in manual labor were studied.”<sup>47</sup> This use of the watch to regulate labor falls in line with both Foucault and Thompson’s assertions regarding time-discipline. What is worth more sustained attention is how the use of watches to measure labor in the Caribbean mirrors this use in England. Thompson describes how a new time-discipline was imposed at the end of the eighteenth century through “the division of labour, the supervision of labour; fines, bells and clocks; money incentives; preachings and schoolings; the suppression of fairs and sports.”<sup>48</sup> Many of these same methods were being used on sugar plantations in the Caribbean, described by Mintz as “precocious cases of industrialization.”<sup>49</sup> provoking the question as to where they were used first. Bell towers, for example, were used for centuries on Caribbean plantations to regulate the labor of slaves. Whatever the case may be, it is clear that new methods of time-discipline did not arise in England alone, but were deeply integrated with those in use in the plantation zone.

This time-discipline not only adheres in the exercise of power, it is also relevant to considering habits of reading. Christina Lupton, in *Reading and*

45. Serres, *The Natural Contract*, 27–28.

46. The first example is Edmund’s production of his watch in a dispute with Mary Crawford (*MP*, 68). The second and third both relate to Sir Thomas checking his watch in regards to Fanny’s movements (*MP*, 150, 191).

47. Fraginals, *The Sugarmill: The Socioeconomic Complex of Sugar in Cuba 1760–1860*, trans. Cedric Belfrage (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1976), 144.

48. E. P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,” *Past & Present* 38 (1967): 90.

49. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 59.

*the Making of Time in the Eighteenth Century*, argues that practices of reading literary works can offer sites of resistance to the seemingly irresistible pull of capitalist time.<sup>50</sup> There do appear to be examples of this in *Mansfield Park*, especially the depiction of Fanny's reading in the East Room, but when text appears in the novel, it is usually not literary, and is marked with the same sense of hurry that otherwise pervades the novel. I cited the note from Mary Crawford earlier, but there are various other occasions, such as the prized note Fanny receives from Edmund, "written in haste" (*MP*, 182), Lady Bertram's remark that Fanny is "quick" in carrying messages (*MP*, 17), Tom Bertram reciting his lines from "Lovers' Vows," "so quick he would be unintelligible" (*MP*, 115), Mrs. Norris seeing in the play "all the comforts of hurry, bustle and importance" (*MP*, 92), but later in a hurry "to get out of the subject [of the play] as fast as possible" (*MP*, 130), Henry Crawford's delight in the "bustle" (*MP*, 154) of the play and Lord Bertram's description of "the bustle and confusion of acting" (*MP*, 131), the "few hurried happy lines" Fanny receives from William "written as the ship came up the channel" (another association of hurry with business—might the ship carry sugar?), another note from Mary Crawford, "read in too much haste and confusion" (*MP*, 207), which prompts Fanny's "rising in haste, the haste of embarrassment and wanting to get away" (*MP*, 209) and brings about Henry Crawford's repeated entreaty to Fanny not to hurry in the writing of her response (*MP*, 210). There is further the "rapid rate" at which Fanny and Mary Crawford's "correspondence had begun" (*MP*, 267), Henry's hurrying of Mary to write to Fanny (*MP*, 267), and Fanny's opening of one of Mary's letters "with the most anxious curiosity" (*MP*, 281). The way text is bound up with hurry throughout the novel is, of course, a comment on its production and consumption at the time Austen is writing. There is a significant anxiety from the eighteenth century onwards that the vast increase in production of all sorts of text would have an adverse effect on the reading public. This was something important to Romantic authors including Keats and Wordsworth, the latter inveighing against the effects of "rapid communication of intelligence," and describing "frantic novels" in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* as a blight upon the national literature.<sup>51</sup> There was a consistent impression that literature was increasingly becoming trivialized into "a quick succession of busy nothings" (75), like those exchanged over the dinner table in *Mansfield Park*. The shared hurry associated with both sugar production and the novel's depiction of text establishes a shared context for the consumption of each.

50. Lupton, *Reading and the Making of Time in the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018).

51. Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*," *William Wordsworth: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 599.

The changing meaning of sweetness might be seen as an example of how vast quantity (of sugar, of text) transforms the perception of quality.

In presenting both characters and text as in a hurry, Austen meaningfully addresses the phenomenon described by David Harvey as “an overwhelming sense of *compression* of our spatial and temporal worlds,” a sense of the combined speeding up of everyday life and a shrinking of the world into a “global village.”<sup>52</sup> Though theorists such as Foucault and Thompson have tended to discuss this transformation in terms of Enlightenment thought or European industrial development, I argue that the time of sugar production in the Caribbean is an overlooked contributor to the formation of modern time-discipline.

Jonathan Sachs recognizes the necessity of just such a connection between text and commodity consumption, writing, “we might ask about the relationship between commerce and print media as related qualities within informational time and a more general sense of temporal acceleration.”<sup>53</sup> Like Sachs, Deidre Lynch identifies a dramatic change to the perception of time in the second part of the eighteenth century. Lynch claims that during this period time itself changed as part of a process aided by “an intensified determination to integrate literary experience into the continuum of everyday experience.”<sup>54</sup> In Lynch’s telling, this shift was marked by habitual reading practices, in which “pages and pendulums . . . turn alike in rhythmic unison.”<sup>55</sup> This practice of plotting reading as an act of self-improvement provides a commentary on the plots of reading as well as the plantation plots that undergirded the leisure of families like the Bertrams and so many others in the period. Pages and pendulums turn in unison with sugar mills in a newfound relation of the consumer to the consumed.

If the use of text is tied to the production of sugar through shared systems of technology and time-discipline, then this puts Fanny’s sweetness in another light. Edmund’s comments on Fanny’s physical development discussed at the end of the previous section offer a starting point for this consideration. Only a few chapters after Edmund’s comments, Henry Crawford first uses the word “sweet” to describe Fanny, mentioning that she “has a sweet smile” (*MP*, 158). Not long after this he announces to Mary that he plans to marry Fanny, and she exclaims “You will have a sweet little wife!” (*MP*, 199). But this is just a prelude to an outpouring of this kind of usage, which soon comes to a head in Henry’s litany: “The gentleness, modesty, and sweetness of her character were warmly expatiated on; that sweetness which makes so essential a part of

52. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 240.

53. Sachs, *The Poetics of Decline in British Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 71.

54. Lynch, *Loving Literature: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 157.

55. Lynch, *Loving Literature*, 154.

every woman's worth in the judgment of man" (*MP*, 200). Henry's meaning is obscure, as his use of "sweetness" doesn't appear to quite match any of its common uses. Sweetness is here extrapolated to represent, not ideal womanhood, exactly, but ideal womanhood from a male perspective. This notion of "worth" added to what we know of Henry's desire for possession, links Fanny's sweetness to that of sugar. Henry's decision is, of course, a hasty one. When Mary asks her "When did you begin to think seriously about her?" (*MP*, 199) he simply cannot say. The same appears to be true for Edmund's recognition of his own feelings for Fanny, which transform rather rapidly and with little hint to the reader as to how or when. In the same chapter, Henry again refers to her "ineffable sweetness" (*MP*, 202) and a few chapters later, in an overture to Fanny, he says "[y]ou have given the name such reality of sweetness, that nothing else can now be descriptive of you" (*MP*, 233). Fanny is no longer sweet; she and sweetness are the same thing.

Commodities like sugar increasingly became identified as sites of social transformation. According to Mintz, "Tobacco, sugar, and tea were the first objects within capitalism that conveyed with their use the complex idea that one could *become* different by *consuming* differently."<sup>56</sup> This is just the type of transformative possibility held out by the depiction of Fanny Price—not simply that Fanny provides an example of transformative development that others could follow, but that through interaction with the text one could "become different by consuming differently." Lupton, citing de Certeau, indicates how "'readers are travellers; they move across fields they did not write, despoiling the wealth of Egypt to enjoy it themselves.' Readers in this construction are immune to the logic of accumulation and expropriation, for reading overlays as free movement even the very texts that represent the logic of historic or capitalist time."<sup>57</sup> This notion of "consuming differently" is posited early on in the novel. Just after her arrival in Mansfield Park, Fanny has a taste of sugar in the form of a gooseberry tart: "she could scarcely swallow two mouthfuls before tears interrupted her." To taste is to know, as the Latin verb *sapio* tells us. And though Mrs. Norris opines that "this is not a very promising beginning" (*MP*, 12), it is perhaps just the right place to begin considering the historical role of sweetness.

### Conclusion: Getting Away from It All

In a description of Martinique, Édouard Glissant writes: "These beaches are up for grabs. The tourists say they own them. They are the ultimate frontier, visible evidence of our past wanderings and our present distress."<sup>58</sup> What is

56. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 185.

57. Lupton, *Reading and the Making of Time*, 13.

58. Glissant, "From the Landscape," *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1989), 11.

an ultimate frontier for the inhabitants of Martinique is an ultimate image of leisure for the tourists who occupy this space. The modern-day Bertrams of the world no longer own sugar plantations, but they still visit the Caribbean, largely to escape the clock and calendar time that now organizes their daily lives. Thus ironically they are brought full circle, first measuring work in the boiling house with watch in hand, then returning to that same space to seek refuge from the notion of time they have helped create. The past is repurposed and repackaged into a convenient fiction that does not displace the underlying historical reality, but clandestinely demonstrates its own reliance upon it.

This repurposing relies on a scotomization, in which unwanted perceptions are blocked from view. This type of scotomization is dramatically unfolded in *Mansfield Park* on the level of character, plot, and history. Bertram is blind to his failure as a parent, he is removed from the action, and the destination of this removal remains invisible to the reader. But as Glissant asserts, there is “visible evidence” to counter this blindness and to continue to contest and re-envision this space.

The repurposed mill I introduced early in this essay (Fig. 1) is not an isolated example. Nearly every island that produced sugar in the Caribbean has a sugar mill that now houses a bar, restaurant, or accommodation, one mill even serving as a wedding venue. This historical presence of sugar production in contemporary Western life is a sign of how the plantation economy imbricates leisure in the West today. The precarious sweetness of the contemporary misguided projection of paradise onto the Caribbean is just as removed from the reality of its origins as was the precarious sweetness of sugar consumption in the Romantic period. We should remember that Fanny’s satisfaction, at the novel’s end, in the “thoroughly perfect” *Mansfield Park* (*MP*, 321) is inherently rooted, to use the narrator’s words, in “satisfactions very sweet, if not very sound” (*MP*, 111).

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