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**Colored, Cut and Coiffed: Hair as a Symbol of Identity
in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea***

by

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Introduction

Jean Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) presents an imaginative reinvention of the character Bertha Mason from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason, Rochester's mad Creole wife who never speaks for herself but is vilified by her husband, is portrayed as a savage and degenerate lunatic, crawling on all fours with "a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane" (Brontë 258). In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys revises this character as Antoinette Cosway, a beautiful young woman with flowing black hair: she manipulates images of hair throughout the narrative to portray the Creole woman's experience of marginalization in the postcolonial West Indies, a perspective completely ignored by Brontë's text. Antoinette's narrative is set in Jamaica and Dominica in the 1830's, just after the colonialist institution of slavery has been abolished: the novel highlights the deep-seated hostilities and prejudices and the emerging shifts in social dynamics between West Indians and English colonists. Antoinette and her mother, Annette, white Creole women with English ancestry and connections to former slave owners, are deeply resented by their black West Indian neighbors, and without proper connections to English society they are ostracized by the elite English population. Without a people to identify with, Antoinette struggles to define her own place in society.

Rhys orchestrates precise and evocative imagery of hair as the primary vehicle of gender, racial, and national identity in order to convey Antoinette's struggles to become incorporated in West Indian society, a society in the tumultuous beginning stages of decolonization. Images of hair represent the gender, racial, and national identities of Antoinette and of all the various characters in the novel. The long, black hair Antoinette inherits from her mother is a mark of her femininity, her sexuality, and her mental and emotional state. Rhys criticizes Victorian standards

with the progression of these images, according to which women should not express strong emotion and never have a sexual desire lest they be deemed mentally insane. It is the attractive, seductive, and above all exposed quality of these images of hair that leave Antoinette the targeted victim of patriarchal Victorian standards as seen through her relationship with the dominating, imperialist, Englishman Rochester. Hair is also the image that most clearly separates Antoinette from her black West Indian counterparts such as Tia, H  l  ne, and Louise, who are most often described with images of hair coverings such as handkerchiefs. Through Antoinette's encounters with these different characters, images of hair highlight her experience of marginalization from the dominant social groups in the text, the West Indians and the English, as well as portraying her precarious existence as a woman in Victorian patriarchal society.

Review of Literary Criticism

Across the wide span of scholarly discourse on Jean Rhys's novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, there is a clear concentration on the issues that identity presents for Antoinette. However, despite the amount of attention paid to this crucial aspect of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, no argument has yet been made for the efficacy of the images of hair in portraying the theme of identity. Instead, many Rhys scholars have argued that the intricacies involving identity that Antoinette faces in *Wide Sargasso Sea* are inextricably linked to the actual circumstances of Jean Rhys' life. Contemporary knowledge of these circumstances comes from several sources, most notably, an unfinished autobiography, *Smile Please* (1979), which Rhys worked on in the last years of her life. *Smile Please*, which reveals the source of much of the material for *Wide Sargasso Sea*, is a series of vignettes that recounts Rhys's childhood in Dominica. Diana Athill, Rhys's editor and friend, wrote the foreword to *Smile Please*, in which she emphasizes the connection between Rhys's own experiences and those she recounts in her novels but with a particular caution that

Rhys's novels "were not autobiographical in every detail, as readers sometimes suppose, but autobiographical they were" (6).

Despite this caution, critics have gone on to examine the profound connections between Rhys's heroines' lives and her own. In her study of Rhys's life and work, *Jean Rhys* (1985), Carole Angier asserts that *Wide Sargasso Sea* "is Mrs. Rochester's story; but it is also, of course, Jean's story. It is Jean's whole story" (98). She finds abundant evidence for this claim in *Smile Please*. In *Smile Please*, Rhys mentions direct connections between the context she created for *Wide Sargasso Sea* and her childhood. For example, it is her mother's Dominican estate, Geneva, that inspires Coulibri: "I tried to write about Geneva and the Geneva Garden in *Wide Sargasso Sea*" (33). Rhys remembers circumstances that lend to the narrative frame in the novel: "It was during my grandfather's life, sometime in the 1830s that the first estate house was burnt down by the freed negroes after the Emancipation Act was passed" (Rhys, *Smile* 33). She also recounts the personal anguish she experienced as a result of racial tensions in Dominica: "Side by side with my growing wariness of black people there was envy" (Rhys, *Smile* 50). Angier is inclined to see a clear translation from Rhys's experiences to her writing: "Although Antoinette's story is so firmly set in the 1830's, her experiences of rejection and fear echo Jean's own feelings in childhood. We know that this is so from everything she wrote about her childhood" (103). Elaine Savory, in *Jean Rhys* (1998), approaches the aspect of autobiography in Rhys's writings with a slightly different perspective than Angier's: "My purpose in reinterpreting the story is to point out the centrality and specificity of her Caribbean experience" (2). Savory insists that Rhys' Caribbean identity is essential to understanding her themes and motives in writing (1). Savory calls *Smile Please* a "heavily self-edited published account of her young life" (4). She insists that historical documentation must be included with this account for a true portrait of Rhys's

childhood experience. Rhys spent the first 16 years of her life in Dominica before moving to England in 1907 (Savory xxi). According to Savory's research, at the time of Rhys's birth in 1890, the majority of Dominica's population were Africans who still had "vivid memories of the slavery which ended in 1834" (4). Also, at that time, Dominica was still many decades away from obtaining an independent status from British colonial rule (Savory 5). Savory maintains that Rhys "had an intense ambivalence towards both the Caribbean and England and was, in her culturally complex identity as she grew older, unable to entirely belong anywhere" (3). As a white Creole woman, Rhys embodied the divided national and racial identity that her character Antoinette represents.

The themes of identity and belonging in *Wide Sargasso Sea* have resonated with critics interested in the biography of Jean Rhys, but even more so with those interested in the implications of *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a postcolonial text. Set primarily in Jamaica in the 1830s, the backdrop of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is that of a lush and beautiful country occupied by people bitterly divided by British imperialist institutions. During the 1600s, Britain had colonized a major portion of the West Indies, and in the 1700s, the colonizing forces established plantations run by slaves imported from West Africa ("West Indies"). As a result of these colonial efforts, a racist, hierarchical society developed made up of three distinct classes: the abundantly wealthy white plantation owners, the black slaves, and the racially mixed illegitimate offspring of the first two groups ("West Indies"). Finally, in 1833, the Emancipation Act abolished slavery in the British West Indies. However, the act was unable to effectuate a great reordering within the actual structure of society due to the fact that white people still owned the land in monopoly and therefore were still able to exploit the freed slaves for their labor ("West Indies").

Resulting from the fractious social order colonization created in the West Indies, national and racial identity are crucial dimensions of *Wide Sargasso Sea* that fire the curiosity of postcolonial critics who seek to understand Antoinette's haunting question: "I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all?" (93). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a leading postcolonial theorist, makes a distinct connection between colonialist themes in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Antoinette's confused identity in "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism" (1985). She writes,

In the figure of Antoinette, whom in *Wide Sargasso Sea* Rochester violently renames Bertha, Rhys suggests that so intimate a thing as personal and human identity might be determined by the politics of imperialism. Antoinette, as a white Creole child growing up at the time of emancipation in Jamaica, is caught between the English imperialist and the black native. (250)

Spivak goes on to analyze Antoinette's failed processes of identification wherein she attempts to define herself according to what she sees in others, a process conveyed by images of mirroring (250-251). These attempts fail because Antoinette attempts to absorb the identity of those individuals whom Spivak terms "Other." For example, Spivak states that Tia is "the Other that could not be selfed, because the fracture of imperialism [...] intervened" (250). Spivak concludes that Antoinette is unable to "self" or absorb the identities of the "Others" that she encounters because of the postcolonial politics present in the text. Instead, Antoinette is forced to "act out the transformation of her 'self' into that fictive Other, set fire to the house and kill herself, so that Jane Eyre can become the feminist individualist heroine of British fiction" (Spivak 251). Spivak suggests that the Other Antoinette absorbs is the original Bertha Mason (250). This action parallels the historical actions of imperialism wherein the colonial subject's identity was

consistently displaced by colonizing forces. While many scholars incorporate Spivak's argument that Antoinette's identity is determined by postcolonial politics contained within *Wide Sargasso Sea*, some diverge on the specific implication of these politics. In "An/Other Side to Antoinette/Bertha: Reading 'Race' into *Wide Sargasso Sea*" (2000), Carmen Wickramagamage aligns the basis of her assertion about Antoinette's identity with Spivak's, stating, "[I]f Antoinette appears victimized by others in the present historical moment of the narrative, it is as a result of her social inscriptions as a white Creole woman in the post-Emancipation West Indies" (29). However, she breaks with Spivak to offer an interesting approach to defining Antoinette's identity, arguing that "[t]here is very little doubt in Antoinette's mind where she belongs: the white Creole plantocracy . . . Antoinette is not a woman who is troubled by a lack of cultural identity; she is a woman who perceives herself troubled by others on account of her cultural identity" (30-31). Wickramagamage is inclined to attribute Antoinette with a concrete and affirmative conception of her identity. However, while Antoinette is aware of her status as a white Creole woman, she is not comforted by it; rather, she repeatedly attempts to reject this image of herself by absorbing the Other.

Among the many scholars who have ascribed to a postcolonial reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, there are a group of writers who agree that the novel's postcolonial aspects can be analyzed in conjunction with a feminist perspective, for both of these themes are essential to understanding the complexities Antoinette faces regarding her gender and national identity. In "Navigating the *Wide Sargasso Sea*: Colonial History, English Fiction, and British Empire" (1997), Laura Ciolkowski begins by focusing on "the connections forged by Rhys's text between a politics of imperialism and a politics of gender, between English nationhood and English womanhood, and between the local geographies of English fiction and the global terrain of

colonialism in the nineteenth century” (340). Antoinette’s conflicted national identity is a direct parallel to her conflicted gender identity, and she suffers as a result of her inability fully to reconcile herself with either. Ciolkowski begins her argument by focusing on the issues race and nation pose for Antoinette, eventually concluding that “Rhys’s Antoinette Cosway must navigate her way through these treacherous landscapes of Creole and English identity” (342). Ciolkowski extends her postcolonial analysis to deduce political implications on gender identity. She claims that Rochester’s arrival on the textual scene presents another challenge to Antoinette’s fragile gender identity: “He is determined to resolve Antoinette's ambivalence first into the singular tones of English womanhood, and second, once his failure to cast Antoinette as the chaste mother of English sons is totally clear, into the equally singular tones of a savage Otherness” (342-343). Ciolkowski sees the intrinsic connection between gender identity and national identity play out in the marriage of Antoinette and Rochester, wherein Rochester works to assimilate his wife to the ideals of English femininity. After he fails, Rochester is eager to disassociate from Antoinette, whom he considers his national and racial Other, by treating her as a lesser sexual object.

Within the context of the division of the self versus the Other, many scholars have noted the special significance of the image of the mirror in *Wide Sargasso Sea* in revealing Antoinette’s issues with identity. Spivak sees the images of mirroring as a variation on a narcissus theme wherein Antoinette sees her desired identity in the form of mirror images that are Other than herself (250). Lee Erwin, in “‘Like in a Looking-Glass’: History and Narrative in *Wide Sargasso Sea*” (1989), goes further to specifically define the identity that Antoinette grasps to absorb as the racial opposite of herself. He states that “[t]he impossible desire evident in Antoinette's narrative, that is, to occupy a racial position not open to her, can only realize itself in

the gaze of the Other, in an attempt to perform the impossible feat of seeing herself from the place from which she is seen” (155). This desire is markedly present in Antoinette’s interactions with Tia and with the girls at the convent. Ronnie Scharfman, in “Mirroring and Mothering in Simone Schwarz-Bart’s *Pluie Et Vent Sur Télumée Miracle* and Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea*” (1981), accords a great meaning to the use of mirror images. He offers an analysis of a diseased bond, called a “non-reciprocal pre-Oedipal bond,” between mother, Annette, and daughter, Antoinette (Scharfman 100). He writes that as a direct result of this non-functioning bond, Antoinette’s story “is the narrative of a subject’s painful inability to constitute itself as an autonomous identity, to belong to a place in any secure way, to be inserted into a larger community, even to have a name” (99-100). Scharfman blames Annette’s lack of motherly care and attention for Antoinette’s dilapidated identity. Despite her efforts, Antoinette is unable to develop the sense of self and belonging that identification with her mother would enable: rather, “Antoinette, who is fascinated with her mother’s beauty, watches it more than she interacts with it. She watches her look at herself in the mirror, watches her when she sleeps, watches her when she brushes her hair, watches her when she dances. But she never sees herself reflected there” (100). The images of mirroring most revealing, according to Scharfman, are those that show Antoinette’s failed attempts to mirror her mother and other mother figures. This failed mirroring drives her incomplete sense of identity throughout her life.

Analysis

While the use of mirroring images in revealing the irreconcilable opposites in Antoinette’s life is crucial to the development of the theme of identity, the most poignant and effective technique Rhys employs to portray the social complexities the Creole woman faces is hair imagery. In conjunction with mirroring images, Rhys creates purposeful, vivid images of

hair and different kinds of hair coverings to convey Antoinette's struggles with identity and to convey the national, racial, and gender identity of the various characters she interacts with. Thus, hair is used as a literary symbol in *Wide Sargasso Sea* to parallel Antoinette's pursuit of identity while conveying a sketch of the social milieu of the postcolonial West Indies. Set in Jamaica and Dominica directly after the Slave Emancipation Act of the early 1830s, there are demarcated social groups because of these circumstances, as Antoinette notes in the opening lines of the text: "They say when trouble comes close ranks. So the white people did. But we were not in their ranks" (15). Antoinette and her family are former slave owners living in the islands in near poverty. They are shut out by the elite class of wealthy English people for their lack of money, and they are deeply resented and antagonized by the poor oppressed former slaves. Rhys manipulates images of hair to show the social dynamics wherein both the previously dominant white English colonists and the previously enslaved black West Indians begin to redefine their social status as the colonial system begins to deconstruct. Antoinette struggles because she no longer maintains the dominant position in society of a white English slave owner, yet she cannot easily merge with the former slaves who do not welcome her presence.

Images of hair convey this struggle by representing the redefinition of power that is beginning to take place among the two major social groups, the black West Indians and the white English, with the abolition of slavery. Rhys focuses on the role of women within this social transition to criticize Victorian standards of womanhood perpetuated by Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. A hair image works to define the separation between the two prominent groups in the text. More than anyone else, the black West Indian women are portrayed through images of their hair coverings, most often handkerchiefs. While the handkerchiefs superficially seem to suggest a sense of subordination carried over from the era of slavery, in conjunction with the

characterization of the women who wear them, they are more accurately seen as a symbol of power, autonomy, and strength. This strength is derived from the ability to remain removed and concealed from the white English colonizers who so recently exploited and controlled them. For example, Mr. Mason gravely misjudges his servant Myra's intentions shortly before she aids in the burning of Coulibri, maintaining that she and all the West Indians "are children – they wouldn't hurt a fly!" (32). Myra is described with a specific image of her handkerchief, which highlights her ability to conceal her agenda from Mr. Mason: "The handkerchief she wore round her head was always white. Never striped or a gay color" (32). Here, Antoinette relates her perception of Myra as a religious extremist to the color of her hair covering: for Antoinette, the process of relating personality traits to the appearance of one's hair is natural. Yet Mr. Mason, whom Antoinette calls "without a doubt English" (33), is a clear portrayal of a colonialist concerned with plantation economics and he does not recognize the humanity of the West Indians.

The portrayal of Christophine, the sole strong, independent woman in the text, contributes to the poignancy of the image of hair handkerchiefs. Antoinette applies the method of assessing images of hair to associate with qualities of identity, personality, and social status to Christophine: "She wore a black dress, heavy gold earrings and a yellow handkerchief – carefully tied with the two high points in front. No other negro woman wore black, or tied her handkerchief Martinique fashion" (18-19). The hair covering Christophine wears is directly associated with her Martinique identity. Further, the particular appearance of her handkerchief separates her from all other women and emphasizes her as an important and influential woman. Christophine is known and feared in the community for her obeah practices. She does not draw her strength from a husband; rather, it is her own skills in obeah that serve to empower her. She

tells Antoinette, “Woman must have spunks to live in this wicked world” (92). She openly challenges the white people she works for, chastising Annette for her lack of care and concern for Antoinette and then confronting Rochester about his emotional abuse toward Antoinette: “Don’t think I frightened of you either” (136). Rochester, like Mr. Mason in his encounter with Myra, misinterprets the meaning contained in the image of Christophine’s hair covering because as a representative of the colonialist mentality, he is ignorant of the social dynamics that extend beyond white English people. He describes Christophine: “she seemed insignificant. She was blacker than most and her clothes, even the handkerchief round her head, were subdued in color” (60). Because of his imperialist and prejudiced perspective, Rochester perceives the subservience of a hair covering for a reserved character and insignificant presence. In actuality, Christophine’s hair covering shows her ability to conceal her strength and intellect from Rochester. All of these relevant aspects of her character are captured in the yellow, Martinique-style handkerchief.

The image of the black West Indian women’s hair coverings or handkerchiefs is made more comprehensible as that of power, strength, and independence when examined in juxtaposition with the opposing hair images of the white English women, most notably, Antoinette, Annette, and Aunt Cora. These women never wear the handkerchiefs West Indians do: rather, their hair is portrayed in various states such as long and flowing, plaited and styled, or tangled and wild. These hair images all correspond to the women’s mental or emotional state: plaited, coiled, brushed, or otherwise manipulated and managed, hair is symbolic of a woman’s mental composure and her ability to act in accordance with prescribed social standards while unmanaged, undone, or unruly hair is symbolic of a woman’s mental instability and defiance of social standards of behavior. Additionally, the appearance of a woman’s hair is associated with her sexuality. Images of long, flowing, shiny hair connote sensuality and desire. In the same way

loose hair represents a mental loosening, it also represents a sexual freedom. Therefore, the exposure of a woman's hair is equated with the exposure of her emotions, desires, and motivations, and consequentially, of their autonomy to the domination of Victorian patriarchal institutions. According to Victorian standards, emotional expression and sexual desire were considered scandalous, criminal behavior for women and justification to label a woman insane and have her confined. In the patriarchal society depicted in the novel, a woman's exposure quickly leads to her exploitation and objectification by the dominating man in their life, most often the husband: this pattern is made manifest in the lives of both Annette and Antoinette through a progression of images of their hair.

Antoinette's perception of her mother's place in society, women's place in society, and the place in society she will one day take, is conveyed through her perceptions of her mother's hair. Antoinette looks to her mother's hair to understand her thoughts, actions, and feelings. These images of hair suggest the social and cultural burdens Annette carries as a white Creole woman, a role in life that Antoinette will eventually inherit. Annette is a young, white, Creole widow living in the West Indies with her two children on the brink of poverty. She is shunned by high English society because she doesn't have the wealth necessary to associate with them, and she is antagonized by the black population whom she has indirectly helped to disenfranchise. She is isolated to an extreme degree, and she feels the constant danger that surrounds her. Antoinette describes a time when Annette was mentally stable and accessible and provided a sense of safety and security that her daughter sought in her: "Once I made excuses to be near her when she brushed her hair, a soft black cloak to cover me, hide me, keep me safe. But not any longer. Not anymore" (20). Antoinette senses the danger around her in the same way her mother does and is aware that her mother can no longer protect her. Her mother's hair is portrayed as the vehicle of

this protection, and it is the primary image that Antoinette analyzes to determine her mother's mental state as her mother continues to isolate herself. Along with the image of the "cloak," which shows the hair to be smooth and flat like cloth, the image of her mother brushing her hair to keep it managed and in order connotes the sense that her mother was composed and in control. This image is a reflection of the immense change that has taken place in Annette and in her relationship to her daughter. Antoinette emphasizes that this image of her mother as a composed and controlled presence, and the comfort she derives from this image, are no longer a part of her life or accessible to her.

As Annette's presence in Antoinette's life diminishes, Christophine steps in to take over the role of caretaker: these two mother figures represent the duality of Antoinette's national identity through images of hair. Christophine and Annette are both from Martinique; however, only Christophine expresses this facet of her identity by wearing her handkerchief in a particular style. Annette, on the other hand, is judged harshly for her Martinique background: "She was my father's second wife, far too young for him they thought, and, worse still, a Martinique girl" (15). Annette does not participate in her English nationality either: Antoinette perceives this by comparing her to a picture of "'The Miller's Daughter,' a lovely English girl with brown curls and blue eyes" (32), concluding that her mother is "so without a doubt not English" (33). As a result of this distinction between her two mother figures, the adopted one who embraces her national identity, and the biological one who is rejected for hers, Antoinette is made aware of her restricted participation in her national identity.

Antoinette perceives her and her mother's experience of isolation and marginalization in society as Creole women through the appearance of Annette's hair: "'Marooned,' said her straight narrow back, her carefully coiled hair. 'Marooned'" (23). The double-entendre of the

term “maroon,” which signifies a hopelessly abandoned person in one sense but is also a specifically West Indian term for a fugitive slave, suggests the complex situation the women face. Not only are they isolated by their society, but their situation has become dire because their former slaves have abundant reasons to resent them and to retaliate. Additionally, Annette’s hair is “carefully coiled,” which requires an act of maintenance and shows regard for her appearance according to social standards. To escape the social exile depicted in the opening section of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Annette has pushed her daughter farther away so that she can pursue her newfound English acquaintances, the Luttrells, and reestablish her former social connections. Antoinette ascribes the word “marooned” to the image of her mother’s hair to project her own feelings of abandonment: as Annette has regained hope of joining society, it is Antoinette who is “marooned” now, for her mother has abandoned her to pursue her own desire for safety and status in the leftovers of English society.

Annette’s path away from Antoinette leads her into her marriage with Mr. Mason and a resurgence of her sexuality that does not fail to resonate with Antoinette, who equates this side of her mother with specific images of her hair: images of flowing, loose hair. In the brief passage where Antoinette describes her mother’s courtship with Mr. Mason, Antoinette watches the couple dance: “They stopped and she leaned backwards over his arm, down till her black hair touched the flagstones – still down, down, then up again in a flash laughing. She made it look so easy - as if anyone could do it, and he kissed her – a long kiss” (27). The image of her mother carelessly splaying her hair across the ground while she dances and laughs with her new husband clearly translates to an image of seduction. Later, Antoinette is portrayed with similar hair images to convey the sexual dimension of her marriage: but not before she witnesses the disturbing circumstances that cause her mother’s marriage and sanity to disintegrate.

As Coulibri Estate is burned to the ground, the juxtaposition between images of maintained hair and images of wild, undone hair is most emphatic in the contrast between Annette and Aunt Cora. Annette is devastated by the fire that kills her disabled son Pierre. Throughout the devastating scene, Annette's emotional suffering is portrayed by the step-by-step destruction of her hair from the "carefully coiled" and brushed images of the beginning of the novel to a wild, half-burned image. All the while, Aunt Cora and her hair-style remain composed and controlled. When the scene begins, Antoinette sees her mother and immediately notices the state of her hair. She thinks, "She was dressed, but she had not put up her hair and one of her plaits was loose" (34). As before, Antoinette looks to her mother's hair to determine her mental state, and in this scene the one loose plait reveals a "loosening" in her mother's composure. Before she sees the plait again, she sees her Aunt Cora: "Aunt Cora was sitting on the blue sofa in the corner now, wearing a silk black dress, her ringlets were carefully arranged. She looked very haughty, I thought" (35). Here, Antoinette does the same with her aunt as she does with her mother in ascribing a mental or emotional state based on the appearance of hair. Aunt Cora's hair, being "carefully arranged," shows that she has presence of mind and is in control. Antoinette's association with a sense of Cora's haughtiness is significant in that remaining calm and reserved in such a strenuous and tense situation connotes a level of arrogance or emotional removal. This coincides with the Victorian standard that women must remove themselves emotionally from their environment to remain composed and stoic even in the most extreme and strenuous situations, which disallows women to have natural and genuine human reaction. Aunt Cora has internalized and accepted this circumscription and doesn't challenge it. Yet this social standard allows Annette and later Antoinette to be labeled "insane."

The mental and emotional devastation that Annette suffers because of her marginalized status as a Creole woman, the disregard from her husband, the violent expulsion from her West Indian home, and the death of her son is captured in the succinct and loaded image of her singed plait. Emphasizing her circumscriptions as a woman, another contrast between Aunt Cora's "carefully arranged" hair and Annette, who has not put up her hair, introduces the image of Annette's burned hair. Antoinette thinks of Aunt Cora, "She smelled of vanilla, I remember" (36). This comforting smell gives way to another description of her mother's hair: "Then there was another smell, of burned hair, and I looked and my mother was in the room carrying Pierre. It was her loose hair that had burned and was smelling like that" (36). This poignant image of Annette purposefully parallels the murder of her disabled son Pierre with the burning of her hair. The loss of her son in circumstances that she foresaw yet was unable to avoid because of her husband's Eurocentric ignorance provokes Annette's feelings of desperation and powerlessness, which are interpreted as insanity. According to stereotypes of Creoles presented in the text, madness or insanity is a trait that is considered to be characteristic of white Creole women, as Daniel Cosway asserts in his letter: "*soon the madness that is in [Annette], and in all these white creoles, come out*" (88). Pierre's label of "idiot" also coincides with the stereotype presented in the text that Creoles pass along defective or degenerate genes. Therefore, Annette's burned hair shows the harmful prejudices against her as a white Creole woman.

After Coulibri has burned to the ground, the image of Antoinette's severed plait aligns her with her mother and her singed hair: her inevitable fate to follow her mother as a marginalized white Creole woman is made clear through this parallel. Antoinette's first words upon waking after the nightmarish events are "I saw my plait, tied with red ribbon, when I got up," I said. 'In the chest of drawers. I thought it was a snake'" (41). Aunt Cora replies, "Your

hair had to be cut. You've been very ill, my darling" (41) without explaining any comprehensible reason for removing of one of Antoinette's plaits. A precise parallel is drawn between Antoinette and her mother in that they both have lost one of their plaits, and they have both suffered through a painful event. In addition to what Antoinette witnessed as Coulibri burned, she suffered a great injury at the hands of her former friend, Tia: she tried to identify with Tia to become incorporated into West Indian society and was violently refused. The damage to their hair reflects the mental and emotional suffering Annette and Antoinette have both been through, as well as their loss of identity. Annette is reduced to a madwoman, and Antoinette is further marginalized from West Indian society. Images of hair continue to present a criticism of Victorian standards regarding women that are forced upon Annette, Antoinette, and all women alike within this patriarchal society. Aunt Cora tries to comfort Antoinette by telling her that her hair will grow back, to which Antoinette retorts, "But darker" (41). Antoinette reveals her intuition that she is destined to suffer burdens similar to her mother. Therefore, life has taken on a pessimistic tone, symbolized by the darker hue of her hair. Antoinette notices that Aunt Cora "looked thin and old and her hair wasn't arranged prettily so I shut my eyes, not wanting to see her" (42). The change in Aunt Cora's hair from styled and maintained hair to disheveled, unattractive hair criticizes Victorian standards by showing that even the women most resigned to their circumscriptions of composure are subject to their emotions. Later, when Antoinette goes to visit her mother in the house where she is kept by a black couple who exploit her as a sexual object, she knows her because of the burned hair: "I recognized her hair, one plait much shorter than the other" (43-44). Because Annette is now completely isolated from her daughter, Antoinette can only look to her mother's hair for signs of her identity. In this last exchange

between mother and daughter, Annette literally flings Antoinette away from her, enacting the emotional rejection that has already taken place.

Once Antoinette's relationship with her mother has been severed, she is quickly and unceremoniously sent to the convent, where she continues to look to different women characters' hair as a symbol of their identity. Antoinette attempts to identify with the young women around her by mimicking images of their hair. At the convent there are no mirrors: this omission works to support the emphasis on humility, yet it alters Antoinette's sense of identity significantly. The lack of a looking glass in this environment damages her sense of identity by disallowing self-knowledge, self-acceptance, and self-confidence. The De Plana sisters, Louise and H  l  ne, are clearly admired by the nuns for the appearance of their hair: "They sit so poised and imperturbable while [Mother St. Justine] points out the excellence of Miss H  l  ne's coiffure, achieved without a looking-glass (49). These young women are a positive example of womanhood for Antoinette: they are confident and secure with themselves, shown by their ability to style their hair without the aid of a mirror to confirm their appearance. She approaches H  l  ne: "Please H  l  ne, tell me how you do your hair, because when I grow up I want mine to look like yours" (49). H  l  ne explains the process of pushing, combing, and pinning, but Antoinette protests, "Yes, but H  l  ne, mine does not look like yours, whatever I do" (49). H  l  ne is too polite to say "the obvious thing" which is that their hair looks different because H  l  ne is black, and Antoinette is white. During her time at the convent, Antoinette has conceptualized her desired identity: as Erwin argues, she strives to assume the identity of her racial Other (155). Similar to her encounter with Tia, Antoinette tries to mimic the images she sees in Louise in H  l  ne, for they occupy the accepted, desirable position in society that she longs for yet cannot achieve because of her marginalization as a white Creole.

During this crucial moment of individualization, as Antoinette delineates the ideals of gender and racial identity that she wants to achieve (however impossible), she is simultaneously compelled to forget the ideals of womanhood she drew from her mother. Images of hair symbolize the struggle between these two conflicting desires. In a free-association-type thought, Antoinette concludes that “France is a lady with black hair wearing a white dress because Louise was born in France fifteen years ago, and my mother, whom I must forget and pray for as though she were dead, though she is living, liked to dress in white” (50). Antoinette, who admires Louise’s “black curls which smelled of vetiver” (50), draws a parallel between this hair image and her mother’s long black hair by attributing both to the idea of France. Yet because the nuns encourage her to carry on as if her mother had already died, she begins to focus on the role other women have in society, such as Louise. She is drawn to the examples both these women provide for her but is more optimistic about Louise’s future, about which she says, “Anything might have happened to you Louise, anything at all and I wouldn’t be surprised” (50). This thought expresses a hope to escape the restricted role in society that her mother could not, yet with her impending arranged marriage, this hope is dashed.

With marriage, Antoinette completely loses her already shaky sense of identity to her dominating husband in a progression symbolized by images of hair. Her husband, Rochester, represents the English colonist, grounded in Victorian ideals. He introduces their marriage, and his narrative voice which takes over Antoinette’s, in terms of a colonial conquest: “So it was all over, the advance and retreat, the doubts and hesitations. Everything finished, for better or for worse” (59). He dominates her as a sexual object and exploits her for his own selfish purposes, namely to gain the inheritance he lost to his elder brother. As he reveals his perspective, it becomes apparent that Rochester appraises the people around him through images of their hair,

just as Antoinette does. However, Rochester does not aim to relate to or absorb the different racial, national, and gender identities he encounters. Rather, Rochester defines the people who are different from him as deviant and therefore attempts to control and invalidate them. When Rochester appraises the hair of black West Indians, he is degrading, demeaning, and dehumanizing, calling them “creatures” (60) and “savage” (66). Through images of hair, Rochester shows his prejudiced perspective against black West Indian people as a representative of the English colonialist mentality: a mentality based on the assumption that black inhabitants of the colonies were inferior based on racial distinction, hence their development of slavery and the slave trade. When Rochester considers the black West Indians, one of the important aspects he takes into account is their head coverings. Due to his racial and national prejudices, he feels repulsed by all that is black and foreign: as an English colonizer, he attempts to dominate the foreign surroundings, which he deems inferior and antagonistic. This is clear in his appraisal of Hilda, which culminates in the description of her hair: “She was a young girl of about twelve or fourteen, wearing a sleeveless white dress which just reached her knees. The dress was spotless but her uncovered hair, though it was oiled and braided into many small plaits, gave her a savage appearance” (66). Though her hair is plaited and oiled, which shows an attempt to control, change, or manipulate its appearance, the mere fact that it is visible, that it lacks the barrier of a covering, is displeasing and frightening for Rochester. Rochester strives for distance and barriers between himself and that which is different from him, namely, the West Indian people whom he cannot understand and can no longer control and dominate.

Rochester also pays particular attention to Antoinette’s hair because he also feels alienated, different, and removed from her in the same way he does from the West Indians. As a Creole woman with English heritage who has spent her entire life in the islands, Rochester

identifies Antoinette partially with both groups of women, although she herself has never been able to do so. Rochester watches with distinct unease as his wife associates with a Dominican woman, Caroline. Antoinette's own comfort causes him to consider her share in West Indian culture. He describes Caroline as "a gaudy old creature in a brightly flowered dress, a striped handkerchief and gold ear-rings" (60). As Rochester watches Antoinette converse with Caroline affectionately, he analyzes the head covering which Antoinette has donned: "she was wearing a tricorne hat which became her. At least it shadowed her eyes which are too large and can be disconcerting . . . Long, sad, dark, alien eyes . . . Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either" (61). Rochester becomes aware of Antoinette's potential share in West Indian culture when he analyses her head covering, one which fails to distract from her "alien" attributes or, in other words, not distinctly English eyes. This initial consideration emerges into a full out redefinition of her racial identity when he hears rumors that she may have a mixed racial background, as Rochester considers any racial identity that is not "pure" to be a contamination of the unacceptable racial Other.

The text brings attention to the tensions and issues that surround racial divisions and prejudices using images of hair. Most clearly through Rochester's perspective, but also through Antoinette's, images of hair show the presence of biracial characters. As a child, Antoinette encounters a boy who has a unique blend of features, and she is instantly repelled by him: "he had a white skin, a dull ugly white covered with freckles, his mouth was a negro's mouth Worst, most horrible of all, his hair was crinkled, a negro's hair, but bright red, and his eyelashes and eyebrows were red" (44). Antoinette's harsh reaction stems from the recognition of her own marginalized identity in the features of this boy. While this boy is accepted in society regardless of his racially mixed identity (shown by the playmate that accompanies him), Antoinette's

marginal identity isolates her. Later in life, Antoinette attempts to transcend this boundary by having an affair with Sandi, one of her father's grandchildren who is of a mixed racial background, that continues through her marriage to Rochester. While her action helps to confirm Rochester's disassociation from his wife based on her supposed racial Otherness, it fails to do so for Antoinette, and she continues to experience the same rejection, further intensified by the retaliation Rochester enacts.

Images of her hair connote Rochester's convoluted intentions of lust and tyranny towards Antoinette. When Antoinette has finished primping for Rochester, he notices her hair right away, and it changes his attitude towards her from disdain to attraction: "I wondered why I had never realized how beautiful she was. Her hair was combed away from her face and fell smoothly far below her waist. I could see the red and gold lights in it" (72). Antoinette has manipulated her hair to achieve a seductive effect, acting on her mother's example and her only model of courtship. This revelation about her beauty leads to toasts to happiness and love and eventually a sexual encounter. Rochester is clearly intoxicated with her beauty and feels lust for her, but there is a lack of care, and there is no attempt to relate to her. The morning after this intimate evening, a contrasting image of hair shows the destructive side of Rochester's character. Rochester wakes and sees Antoinette: "Her hair was plaited and she wore a fresh white chemise. I turned to take her in my arms, I meant to undo the careful plaits, but as I did so there was a soft discreet knock" (76). Rochester directly states his desire for and attraction towards Antoinette here, but there is a sinister and destructive intent present. She has obviously taken pains to make herself appear composed and acceptable to him with her careful plaits, and his intent is to "undo" her. As the image of managed, styled hair is associated with mental stability, Rochester's declaration that he

intends to “undo” Antoinette’s hair is synonymous with an intent to break her down mentally and emotionally.

Rochester’s feelings of alienation from Antoinette stem from images of her hair, similar to his reaction to West Indian people’s hair. He defines Antoinette through images of her hair in a way to understand her racial identity and justify his discomfort and displeasure with her. Antoinette, who is constantly struggling with her own identity, is quick to bend to his pressures: “Antoinette said, ‘Don’t put any more scent on my hair. He doesn’t like it.’ The other: ‘The man don’t like scent? I never hear that before’” (72). Dressing women’s hair with scent and oils is referenced several times in the novel but only in conjunction with black characters such as Louise. Antoinette is ambivalent about this custom, which reflects her ambivalences about where she belongs in society. In one instance, she is repelled by the scent of another girl’s hair oil: “Her hair had been plaited and I could smell the sickening oil she had daubed on it” (44). Yet at the convent, she admires the scent of Louise’s hair oil, vetiver. Antoinette has imitated this custom in her attempts to absorb the qualities of a racial Other, yet she perceives Rochester’s disdain for these same qualities and again works to modify herself in order to belong to her social and racial unit, in this case her new white English husband.

When Rochester discovers information concerning Antoinette’s family background, it confirms in his mind that Antoinette belongs to the Other racial group, that of the black West Indians, which he considers inferior, savage, and irreconcilable. The ensuing deterioration of their relationship is conveyed through images of hair. Daniel Cosway’s assertion that Mr. Cosway, Antoinette’s father, is also the father of a number of racially mixed children, including himself, and that Antoinette had a romantic affair with a racially mixed man, Sandi, a claim which Amelie supports, leads Rochester to affirm unequivocally that his wife is the racial Other

he fears and disdains. Rochester immediately severs all relations with Antoinette, who is left distraught and abandoned. Antoinette tries to reaffirm her matrimonial connection with Rochester through the only access he's ever made available to her: sexual seduction. She takes advantage of Rochester by slipping him Christophine's obeah potion. This complicated encounter is supported by images of hair. Rochester remembers, "She poured wine into two glasses and handed me one but I swear it was before I drank that I longed to bury my face in her hair as I used to do" (124). Rochester's momentarily renewed sexual desire for Antoinette is conveyed by an image of her hair. This relation changes drastically the next morning: "When I was awake the feeling of suffocation persisted. Something was lying across my mouth; hair with a sweet heavy smell" (124). Because he is concentrating on her presumed racially mixed identity, the scent of the oil she puts in her hair is more pronounced to him as a sign of this identity. The image of Antoinette's hair is the way Rochester relates to her sexually: now that he wants to distance his sexual desires, he associates her hair with the very negative connotation of suffocation.

After this encounter, Rochester is motivated to destroy Antoinette's fragile sense of identity by comparing her to Amelie, their black servant, through images of hair. He rejects Antoinette as a wife because of her perceived racial Otherness then embraces Amelie as a lover despite her seemingly obvious racial Otherness: this hypocritical behavior renders Antoinette powerless, as it portrays her as a meaningless sexual object. The parallel Rochester tries to create between Antoinette and Amelie aligns their racial identities. Similar to his treatment of Antoinette, Rochester relegates Amelie to a sexual object through images of her hair. Rochester is able to use Amelie as a sexual object to serve his purposes despite his racial prejudices because her "white girl's hair" suggests that she is racially mixed in the way he assumes

Antoinette is: “Brown and white she would be, her curls, her white girl’s hair she called it, half covered with a red handkerchief, her feet bare” (108). Later, as Antoinette is trying to explain the circumstances of her childhood, Rochester only notices her appearance: “She raised her eyebrows and the corners of her mouth turned down in a questioning mocking way. For a moment she looked very much like Amelie. Perhaps they are related, I thought. It’s possible, it’s even probable in this damned place” (115). Rochester conveys his disdain for the miscegenation that he considers rampant when he assumes that Antoinette and Amelie could be related.

As Antoinette finally succumbs to the mental and physical torment Rochester has inflicted on her, her pain becomes visible through her hair, similar to Annette’s experience. The image of Antoinette’s hair is most often plaited or combed and consciously arranged. After Rochester’s affair with Amelie, he meets Antoinette and sees that “her hair hung uncombed and dull into her eyes which were inflamed and staring, her face was very flushed and looked swollen” (132). Rochester is “shocked” by the sight, unjustly so as this is exactly the effect he has been trying to create since their first night at Granbois when he stated his desire to “undo her careful plaits.” Antoinette, who is fully aware of her husband’s affair with Amelie, asks him, “is she much prettier than I am? Don’t you love me at all?” (134). Antoinette is aware of the parallel Rochester has drawn between her and Amelie and is desperate to understand her failure to keep Rochester’s favor when Amelie has succeeded. Rochester responds crudely, “‘No, I do not,’ I said (at the same time remembering Amelie saying, ‘Do you like my hair? Isn’t it prettier than hers?’)” (134). Rochester is unconcerned with the actual pain his wife experiences: he is more occupied with confirming the connection he has concocted between the two women he has used as sexual objects. Rochester defines Antoinette as a mad woman to justify his inhumane treatment of her as a sexual object. He equates her mental state with her sexuality, both of which

are symbolized by her hair: “She’ll loosen her black hair, and laugh and coax and flatter (a mad girl, she’ll not care who she’s loving). She’ll moan and cry as no sane woman would – or could” (149). Rochester interprets Antoinette’s sexuality as madness. He is hypocritical in this assessment in that he was able to deny his racial prejudices momentarily to have an emotionless sexual affair with Amelie. However, he is describing the standards of madness for a woman here, and sexual availability is unacceptable. He associates unkempt hair or loose hair with mental instability and sexual indecency, yet this is the very state that he has strived to create for her in many ways: by the careful undoing of her plaits, by the constant and violent sexual advances.

In the third and last part of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rochester completes his efforts of objectifying Antoinette by bringing her to England where he confines her in an attic room; in this environment of complete isolation she becomes the mad Creole wife from Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*, and this final stage of her narrative is supported by images of hair. She is isolated from her self through the absence of a mirror and her already lacking sense of identity deteriorates. Unlike at the convent, where the lack of a mirror forced Antoinette to identify with the young women around her, here Antoinette is completely isolated from the women around her, Leah and Grace and Ms. Cook, who consider her less than human. She says, “[T]here is no looking-glass here and I don’t know what I am like now. I remember watching myself brush my hair and how my eyes looked back at me. The girl I saw was myself yet not quite myself” (162). Antoinette remembers the image of her hair when she considers her identity, for hair has been the one comprehensive image that she has used continually throughout her life to define people. In her appraisal of a memory of her own hair, she recognizes her lack of a solid, unified self.

During her imprisonment, Antoinette has a dream that recurs throughout the novel for the third and final time: during this period of unconscious reflection, she is able to confront her

issues of identity by coming into contact with a mirror and an image of her hair. This contact with a mirror parallels the memory she has of brushing her hair in the mirror as a young girl, when she recognized a lack in her identity. She says, “It was then that I saw her – the ghost. The woman with streaming hair. She was surrounded by a gilt frame but I knew her” (169). There is a major difference between the states of Antoinette’s hair in these two paralleled images. Whereas in the first instance she was brushing or maintaining the smoothness of her hair, in the second image her hair is “streaming,” suggesting a wild, roaming quality. The difference in the state of Antoinette’s hair at these two periods of time parallels the difference in her conception of her identity. In her youth, she was ambivalent and confused about her identity, which is portrayed by her observation that her reflection is only partially herself and partially unidentifiable. Now, trapped in a doomed existence, Antoinette has confronted her identity, and although she is terrified to see herself as the “madwoman” that her mother became (madness symbolized by the streaming hair), she clearly recognizes that she is this woman when she says, “I knew her” (169).

Conclusion

At the end of her final dream, after lighting the house on fire, Antoinette is standing on the edge of the roof, and in this moment she faces the reality of her identity. She is forced to succumb to the definition that social constraints have forced upon her as a “mad” Creole woman. Her only escape from this identity is an escape from life itself: “The wind caught my hair and it streamed out like wings. It might bear me up, I thought, if I jumped to those hard stones. But when I looked over the edge I saw the pool at Coulibri. Tia was there. She beckoned to me and when I hesitated, she laughed” (170). The image of the wind catching her hair like wings is symbolic of her last fleeting hope in creating her own autonomous identity; however, reminiscent of the wing-clipped parrot Coco jumping from Coulibri as it burned, Antoinette’s defective

“wings” will fail her as well. Her other option would be to make the symbolic leap to Tia. She has previously pursued the symbolic activity of absorbing the identity of the Other as an alternative to creating her own identity. In the end, she chooses to continue her impossible pursuit of the Other: to jump to Tia, then wake and enact her dream.

Considering the resoundingly negative trend of Antoinette’s challenges with identity in the West Indies and in England, is it any surprise that she eventually descends into madness and plummets to her death? The answer to this question depends on how to interpret Antoinette’s final act of jumping from the roof of Thornfield Hall: is this a success or a tragedy? Keeping in mind that Rhys had little choice but to throw Antoinette off the roof if she wanted to keep a true connection between her novel and Brontë’s, it becomes necessary to consider her careful revisioning of the final scene. Mary Lou Emery, in “The Politics of Form: Jean Rhys's Social Vision in *Voyage in the Dark* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*” (1984), sees the end in an idealistic light, arguing that “the choice [to jump] signifies a victory and a triumph. In the dream Antoinette creates the self that others have denied her . . . she returns to the island and her ties with its culture and people” (11). On the other hand, Jason Foster, Will Wright, and Steven Kaplan focus on Antoinette’s final state of madness in their article “Individuation and the Creative Self in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *The Lover*” (2000) to argue that “Antoinette’s death is bitter-sweet . . . She never does individuate, and therein lies the tragedy” (471). While Antoinette’s culminating leap certainly suggests a sense of fulfillment in her aim of finally reaching Tia, her efforts are still reduced to a madwoman’s ravings. Antoinette’s end is not a happy one, nor did Rhys mean it to be.

Rhys’s motivation in recreating Bertha Mason as Antoinette Cosway was to challenge Brontë’s portrayal by reiterating the prejudices, circumscriptions, and intense ambivalences

regarding identity that the Creole woman faces. Rhys's development of the image of hair to convey Antoinette's experience of marginalization as a Creole woman stems from Brontë's use of the image of hair to dehumanize Bertha Mason. Her defining image is her wild and tangled dark hair, which portrays her as a mad, animalistic Creole. These images of her hair reduce Bertha to a stereotypical portrayal of the racial and national Other that is objectified to the sake of the imperialist self, in this case, Jane Eyre. Rhys takes this initially restricting image of hair and rewrites it in a multitude of different ways to show the complexities of the Creole woman within the social dimensions of the postcolonial West Indies.

Rhys accomplishes her revision of Antoinette and of the postcolonial politics that inform her experience most poignantly through precise and subtle images of hair. From the very onset to the dramatic end of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, images of hair work to highlight Antoinette's ineffectual pursuit of identity. Antoinette tries to understand the women in the text by defining images of their hair in order to gain her own sense of womanhood. However, at the same time, she is also searching to understand her racial and national identity, and many of the women around her represent the racial and national Other that she cannot absorb. Through images of these women's hair, which Antoinette is unable to mimic or incorporate into her own identity, Antoinette's rejection from society is communicated. Her unsuccessful pursuit of identity is further aggravated by her husband, Rochester, who relegates Antoinette to a merely sexual object and defines her as his racial Other. Additionally, Rhys manipulates these images to convey social critiques about the role of women in Victorian patriarchal societies, about prejudice and division between races, and about the colonialist perspective. Although hair may seem like a superficial and trivial image to dwell on in a literary work, Rhys unequivocally proves that it is the most unassuming and subtle image that effects the most meaning.

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