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Displacement and the text: exploring otherness in Jean Rhys' Wide Sargasso Sea, Maryse Condé's La migration des coeurs, Rosario Ferré's The House on the Lagoon, and Tina De Rosa's Paper Fish

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DISPLACEMENT AND THE TEXT: EXPLORING OTHERNESS IN JEAN RHYS'
WIDE SARGASSO SEA, MARYSE CONDE'S *LA MIGRATION DES CŒURS*,
ROSARIO FERRE'S *THE HOUSE ON THE LAGOON*, AND TINA DE ROSA'S
PAPER FISH

A Dissertation

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Comparative Literature

by

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Abstract

This dissertation is a study of how some displaced Caribbean and Italian American women examine identity within a literary tradition that considers them “Other.” I have chosen four culturally diverse novels to explore, each one written by a different female author: Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Maryse Condé’s *La migration des cœurs*, Rosario Ferré’s *The House on the Lagoon*, and Tina De Rosa’s *Paper Fish*. I identify the causes of the protagonists’ displacement, and analyze the actions they take to make themselves heard in a tradition that has formerly silenced them. The role of the mother is especially important in these novels, for the unstable relationship each protagonist has with her mother parallels her uncertainty with regard to her mother country and her mother language. All of the protagonists, with one exception, enter an unhealthy marriage which further pushes them into a marginalized space. Ultimately, they are not only labeled “Other” because of their ethnicity, but also because of their gender.

I argue that through the text the protagonists carve out an identity they were previously denied. In Western literature, there has been little authentic representation of characters considered “Other.” In authoring her own text, however, the “Other” writes for herself. The appropriation and revision of the Western canonical text, the usurpation of power through writing, and the determination to reveal the ethnic experience are all strategies these authors employ to establish their presence within the dominant literary tradition.

Introduction: Identity in Literature

Because I, a *mestiza*,
Continually walk out of one culture
And into another,
Because I am all cultures at the same time,
alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro,
me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio
Estoy norteadada por todas las voces que me hablan
*Simuláneamente*¹

Gloria Anzaldúa's poem *Una Lucha de Fronteras/A Struggle of Borders* exceeds the basic definition of identity, whose etymology derives from the Latin *identidem*, meaning same. Identity is often associated with the idea of sameness, of generic character, and collective identity involves individuals who are connected through their own sameness. For instance, they share a common nationality, language, religion, value system, or other similar attribute. Complications emerge when a powerful entity seeks to impose its shared beliefs or identity on a weaker one. In so doing, the stronger body becomes the standard; it is viewed as the entity with which one should *identify* (i.e. become identical to) while the weaker is perceived as Other. Therefore, one can argue that identity can only be defined through difference. For example, a common religion is more unifying when placed against a different religion, or a national language is solidifying when held against a foreign language. As William Boelhower states in his book, *Through a Glass Darkly*, "The Indian was the white man's first radical contact with the Other, and the American self inevitably had to be defined in relation to him."² If one agrees that identity is formed on the basis of difference, then one can admit that identity

¹ A soul buzzing between two worlds, three, four/my head buzzing with contradictions./I am pointed Northward by voices that speak to me/ simultaneously.

² William Boelhower, *Through a Glass Darkly: Ethnic Semiosis in American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 9.

is not fixed, but fluid and changing, dependent upon what the exclusionary entity is. For example, in British culture, colonial groups in the West Indies possibly felt unified against a culture that was different from their own. Conversely, in a later generation a Creole may feel that he/she is an outsider in the Caribbean setting, since he/she does not represent the majority.

In regard to culture, it is often the more powerful entity that sets the standard and is seen as possessing “sameness” and rendering the other culture “different.” This exists most often in the First World, which is largely Western. Colonialism is among the strongest examples of the imposition of Western identity on the Third World. As Edward Said claims, colonial domination is justified by the West through the rationalization that the colonial subject is inferior and must be dependent on the West as an authoritative voice.³ His book *Culture and Imperialism* examines how empire went beyond a profit making enterprise and sought to instill cultural change within the colonies. Consider also Thomas Macaulay’s “Minute on Indian Education,” in which he insists on an objective whose goal is to convert the Indian culture to the values of the West:

We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population.⁴

Macaulay describes how (Western) knowledge will benefit the Indian peoples and uses language, a key element to identity, as an example of how the West can improve Indian culture by replacing their dialects with Western ones. This assumed benevolence is what postcolonial critic Gayatri C. Spivak terms as “epistemic violence,” in which one belief

³ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc, 1993), 9.

⁴ Thomas Babington Macaulay, *Selected Writings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 239.

system is forcibly replaced by another. In her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” Spivak examines the ambivalent relationship between the colonized and colonizer, in which the “subaltern” is subordinate to the West but nonetheless never fully assumes the dominant Western identity as his/her own. Of this dual character Spivak says, “One must nevertheless insist that the colonized subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous.”⁵ In other words, whatever identity of “sameness” the colonial subject had before colonization cannot be recuperated in postcolonial society. Said also contends that though colonialism is now in the past, the effects of imperialism remain, that it “lingers where it has always been, in a kind of general cultural sphere as well as in specific political, ideological, economic, and social practices.”⁶ As a result of imperialism, the identity of the colonial subject is split: the subject’s identification is not fully with the Western ideal, but the incorporation of these ideals in the culture has uprooted the previous identification. Therefore the new identity is characterized by what critics such as Homi Bhabha and Gloria Anzaldúa call “hybridity.” The works I will focus on for this dissertation render the hybrid as an autonomous voice in a culture that seeks to generalize the ethnic Other.

The fluid notion of identity that exists in culture also exists in literature, and the notion of identity has changed in literary culture. As I have mentioned, Western tradition is a dominating force and it has been the Western tradition and its canonical texts that serve as the authoritative voice. In literature, this voice determines the characters’ identity and influences the reader’s understanding of these characters. In these texts, characters from other ethnicities are viewed as Other and are set up in opposition to the

⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge Press, 1995), 26.

⁶ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 11.

white European, such as Bertha in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* or Heathcliff in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. These Others are different and therefore unable to be a part of the "sameness" which constitutes a white, European identity. The common factors that make up the Other(s) are never a subject of the text; they are merely compared to the Western standard and are depicted as diverging from this standard.

Enter postcolonial criticism and literature, as well as cultural studies and multi-cultural texts. These contemporary literary voices are changing the notion of identity, for they argue that "sameness" is an impossible goal for multi-cultural writers to achieve; what they have in common is the collective experience of their differences. In arguing that the West has constructed the Third World as Other, postcolonial and ethnic literature (these two often overlap in their conceptions of the First World and of their own displacement) are creating a new history for their nations through the text. It is a history that exposes the oppressive and often crushing influence of the West as well as reveals elements of the culture that are ignored in texts of white European origin. The ethnic protagonists in these literary works battle several demons: the temptation to reject elements of their ethnicity in order to embrace and be accepted by the West, the longing to be acknowledged as a unique identity without having to sacrifice the ethnic background, and the need to break from certain harmful traditions in their culture to create a new, more developed self. This "self" is highlighted by the expansion of cultural studies, a new field of criticism which explores the concept of identity through dominating social norms. This field focuses on popular culture, viewing identity as a moving target dictated by changing hegemonic forces. Texts are seen as a product of culture, and the identity of the author often plays a role in the text. Because much of this

representation has been from mainstream cultures, the intervention of the Other's text in the realm of the "norm" is of interest, for the text then underlines the tension between the mainstream culture and the marginalized Other. Contrary to what the canonical texts have done, the Other represents himself/herself. In considering this new representation, one can then take a closer look at the canonical text and examine the imperial elements present in that text. These elements were once unnoticed by readers and critics. Said explains that the authors' intended audience was Western, but that today that audience has changed, and that "we now know that these non-European peoples did not accept with indifference the authority projected over them, or the general silence on which their presence in variously attenuated forms is predicated. We must therefore read the great canonical texts, and perhaps also the entire archive of modern and pre-modern European and American culture, with an effort to draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented in such works."⁷ Said's statement demonstrates that the result of the Other's text is twofold: readers will better comprehend the experience of the marginalized *and* they will be able to reinterpret the canonical works with deeper meaning.

Writer and critic Gloria Anzaldúa is an example of the "marginalized" who recognizes the value of cultural studies and its effect on the multi-cultural text. Born of Mexican and American blood, Anzaldúa appreciates the complexities of being *mestiza* (mixed) and analyzes the conflict of having ties to two or more cultures. She poses the question, "which collectivity does the daughter of a darkskinned mother listen to?"⁸ Being caught between two identities, Anzaldúa explains that on one level she is

⁷ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 66.

⁸ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands = La frontera: the New Mestiza* (San Francisco : Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 78.

cultureless because she has no specific “native” land and because she challenges beliefs held in the Anglo *and* Hispanic world. However, she points out that because of her hybridity, she *is* cultured because “all countries are mine because I am every woman’s sister or potential lover,” and “I am participating in the creation of a new culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet.” ⁹

This “new story” is the text, which calls attention to the history of those whose stories were either left untold, or were told from the point of view of the “standard” uniform cultures. Anzaldúa reasons that the perception of identity must be modified and that one cannot simply identify with any one unwavering location or language. The section on Anzaldúa in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* elaborates on this idea:

The old notion that we can know who we are by tracing our roots, by referring back to some stable point of origin, has to be abandoned. There is no pure, single source. All identities are hybrids, formed over time through the interaction of multiple cultures and constantly being transformed by new encounters in the “borderlands” between one culture and another. ¹⁰

Anzaldúa wishes to celebrate her plurality and carve a place for it in literature. Her essays are a concrete illustration of her multi-ethnic identity, for she incorporates English and Spanish in her writing. Anzaldúa also integrates feminism in her philosophy and believes that this new, hybrid identity must include independence for women in cultures that are considered patriarchal. This element of feminism is present in all of the texts studied in this dissertation.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁰ Vincent. B. Leitch, general editor, *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 2001), 2208.

The subject of cultural displacement and how this is represented in literature is the main topic of my dissertation. I have always been interested in the conflict felt by authors and their characters when they have ties to two or more cultures but are unable to identify fully with any one ethnicity or language. Writers and their texts may then be suspended and feel limited in each, a phenomenon that is difficult to represent to those of more uniform cultures. The authors I wish to focus on in my dissertation have origins in mixed cultures; therefore the question of identity is a major subject in all of their works. By identity, I refer to cultural and racial identity and how the authors and their characters deal with the complexities of living within a society that regards them as heterogeneous. In these texts the characters grapple with problems such as deciding which language they should speak or which model they should emulate (e.g. Antillean or European, European or American). The fact that my chosen authors are women further complicates their already precarious position in patriarchal societies. As women they are doubly seen as “Other” and must work harder to make themselves heard within this society.

It is my argument that in these novels the text gives a voice to the displaced. Each author incorporates uncommon stylistic techniques in her text, and her innovative use of literary textuality reflects her sense of suspended identity. She appears to challenge the canonical status of well-known texts by placing the true identity of the author in doubt and by experimenting with narrative styles and techniques that tend to de-center the authority of generic tradition. The works that I have chosen to concentrate on are Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Maryse Condé’s *La migration des cœurs*, Rosario Ferré’s *The House on the Lagoon*, and Tina De Rosa’s *Paper Fish*. Condé’s work will also be supported by her memoir, *Le cœur à rire et à pleurer*.

Four Women: Four Novels

There may be some question as to why I chose these four women, as well as these particular novels, to focus upon for this dissertation. One may argue that so much has been written about *Wide Sargasso Sea* that it seems a difficult task to contribute any new criticism to this novel. However, I believe that the unusual combination of novels I have chosen to study makes this dissertation unique. Most of these texts are what I refer to as *revisionary* texts, for the protagonists and their authors revise an existing work, incorporating their vision into that text in order to make readers aware of a new and different literary history. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said states that “In reading a text, one must open it out both to what went into it and what its author excluded. Each cultural work is a vision of a moment, and we must juxtapose that vision with the various revisions it later provoked...”¹¹ By pairing *Wide Sargasso Sea* with another (re)visionary work, *La migration des cœurs*, I hope to provide even more insight into the idea of rewriting a classic text. In introducing *The House on the Lagoon* to this combination, I add another woman writer who also focuses on the idea of revising a text. In this case, the revisions are done by her controlling husband, but these revisions remain in the margins, thereby solidifying the Puerto Rican woman writer’s unusual position as the focal point of the work. *Paper Fish* is a work that has been overlooked and ignored in the literary tradition, and by comparing this novel to the others I hope to bring more awareness to this extraordinary book. All of these books contain a unique style and a multiplicity of voices: *Wide Sargasso Sea* is narrated by both Antoinette and Rochester, *La migration des cœurs* is narrated by a multitude of characters, in *The House on the*

¹¹ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 67.

Lagoon the voices of Isabel and Quintín are heard, and *Paper Fish* reveals the feelings of not only Carmolina but also of her grandmother and her parents. Each work has its own unique qualities, but they share a common purpose: to force a new voice into mainstream fiction.

Jean Rhys

After years of relative obscurity, Jean Rhys reappeared upon the literary scene with her ground-breaking novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a post modern prequel to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Rhys' Creole heritage deeply influenced her life, and her relationship with the Caribbean and with England often appears in her work. Born in Dominica, Rhys was a white West Indian who belonged to a generation of slave owners, a part of her history that becomes a subject in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. She moved to England when she was seventeen, where she pursued her studies but also became involved in musical theater. Unfortunately, Rhys' life did not appear to be a happy one; her failed relationships with men and her continual poverty led to feelings of alienation and despair. This continual sadness is a focus of her unfinished autobiography, *Smile Please*, and her earlier novels contain autobiographical elements that involve self-destructive women being victimized by older men. Francis Wyndham, a longtime friend, describes Jean Rhys' despondency after one particular love affair:

More mysteriously, ever since the end of her first love affair she had also been cursed by a kind of spiritual sickness – a feeling of belonging nowhere, of being ill at ease and out of place in her surroundings wherever these happened to be, a stranger in an indifferent, even hostile world. She may have wanted to think that this crippling sense of alienation was merely that of a native West Indian exiled in a cold foreign land, but in fact she believed that the whole earth had become inhospitable to her after the shock of that humdrum betrayal.¹²

¹² Francis Wyndham and Diane Melly, *The Letters of Jean Rhys* (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1984), 11.

This combination of betrayal by both place and lover surface in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, where the protagonist Antoinette is deceived by what should be her protectors: her husband and her mother country of England. The novel contains a postcolonial argument which points to the West Indian's Creole ancestry as the reason behind this rejection. According to letters, Jean Rhys spent roughly twenty years writing the novel, which was finally published in 1966.¹³ It has since become a major work that has inspired much discussion and debate among postcolonial theorists, particularly about where in the canon Jean Rhys fits in. Just as she felt displaced in a world where she never felt she fully "belonged," Jean Rhys appears to also inhabit a literary world that is unsure of her place in literature. Critics heatedly debate over whether her work should be considered Caribbean, and whether or not she is an "English" or a "West Indian" writer. *Wide Sargasso Sea* certainly challenges cultural definitions as well as pinpoints double culture as a source of deep anxiety.

Maryse Condé's Migration

Maryse Condé is one of the few Caribbean women novelists *and* critics of post colonial literature. Her thought provoking work challenges the stereotypes of race and gender in colonial society, exploring the affect of imperialism in Africa and the Caribbean. Condé was born in Guadeloupe, the youngest daughter of a family of eight, but throughout her life has lived in several different places, such as Africa, France and the United States. Her claim that being too familiar with a place only serves to "mythify" it has set Condé apart from other postcolonial figures such as Césaire and Glissant. In interviews, Condé expresses a feeling of disconnection from her native Guadeloupe,

¹³ The earliest mention of *Wide Sargasso Sea* in her letters is Oct. 1945. See p. 39 of Francis Wyndham's *The Letters of Jean Rhys*.

explaining that her speaking French instead of Creole was problematic and that her writing has made little impact on the people there.¹⁴ Though Maryse Condé is a black woman born in the West Indies, and Jean Rhys is a White Creole of English ancestry, they both share a similar experience of disconnection, which is precisely why I bring them together in this dissertation.

Condé's novel *La migration des cœurs* is, like Jean Rhys' novel, a "rewrite" of a classic English text. However, Condé chose another sister's work to Caribbeanize by taking Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and placing it in a postcolonial setting. While in Brontë's text they linger in the shadows, in Condé's revision race and class are brought to the forefront, as Razyé (Heathcliff) is described as the dark black boy adopted into the mulatto Gagneur family. Though he is objectified by the family, he forms a special bond with his new sister, Cathy. As in the original novel, his childhood friend and confidante rejects Razyé to marry into rich society. However, in Condé's novel the reasons extend beyond class, for Cathy's marriage to a white Creole is an attempt to reconcile the conflicted identity within her, one that contains both black and white blood. By placing *Wuthering Heights* within the context of colonization and identity, Condé demonstrates that Caribbean literature is deserving of critical attention.

Rosario Ferré's Puerto Rican Novel

Rosario Ferré was born in Puerto Rico in 1938, the daughter Luis Ferré, a powerful political figure in Puerto Rican history. Luis Ferré was governor of the commonwealth between 1968 and 1972, and was a supporter of statehood. The debate over statehood or independence is one that remains strong in Puerto Rico and takes on significance in Ferré's

¹⁴ Vèvè Clark, "Je me suis réconciliée avec mon île. Une interview de Maryse Condé," *Callaloo* (1989) : 85- 133.

novel, *The House on the Lagoon*. Puerto Rico is unusual in that the island has never had full autonomy, being first part of Spain but then handed over to the United States because of the U.S.'s victory in the Spanish-American War. Having lost its citizenship to Spain and waiting on American citizenship, Puerto Ricans lived several years with no citizenship at all, which Ferré comments on in her novel: "Not to be citizens of any country, however insignificant, was uncomfortable enough" (15). *The House on the Lagoon* describes a displacement that is twofold: not only are the inhabitants displaced but they are living on an island that is displaced. The past shifting of ownership has Puerto Rico's people divided on where they belong, and this lack of unity persists today. According to some historians, the lack of direction is unique to Puerto Rico, for it remains alone in a Caribbean sea of islands that have either obtained independent status or status as an overseas department.¹⁵

Ferré scandalized the public when she went against her father's political views and wrote an open letter in support of independence.¹⁶ Yet shortly after publishing *The House on the Lagoon*, which was her first novel written in English, Ferré began to advocate statehood because, as she explained, "The U.S. has evolved enormously in 26 years."¹⁷ Ferré's position is that the U.S. would now be accepting of Puerto Rico's cultural identity, specifically its *Spanish speaking* identity. The connection between language and identity will be further explored in this dissertation.

The House on the Lagoon develops overlapping themes involving family, politics, history, and literature. At the crux of the novel is Isabel, the unhappy wife of a wealthy importer, who secretly begins to write a novel about the family's past. When her

¹⁵ José Trías Monge, *Puerto Rico : The Trials of the Oldest Colony in the World* (Yale University Press. New Haven, 1997), 142.

¹⁶ Charles Hanley, "Books and Authors: Rosario Ferré," *Puerto Rico Herald*, May 21, 1998.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

husband Quintín, an amateur historian, finds her manuscript he becomes enraged over what he believes is a distortion of the facts. In retaliation he begins to “correct” what she has written, thus constructing a very unusual text that calls into question the legitimacy of literature and history. One of the dominant issues in the novel is the struggle between independence and statehood, a problem which brings into focus the conflict of identity that is present in all the works treated in this dissertation. Ferré’s novel describes how Puerto Ricans are caught between the need to identify with their island culture and the temptation to assimilate into American culture.

Ferré stresses that women’s rights is a problematic subject in Puerto Rican culture, and her novel incorporates this perspective by depicting women’s struggle against patriarchy. In an interview given in 1991, Ferré speaks about how Puerto Rican women are devalued, and relates her experience of how her gender prevented her from working at the family newspaper: “They wouldn’t let me even consider a career as a journalist. Women weren’t supposed to work at that time, so I got married and had three children. After ten years I got a divorce and then went to the University of Puerto Rico to do my master’s degree in Spanish and Latin American literature.”¹⁸ In *The House on the Lagoon*, women’s desire for autonomy is a central theme, and this autonomy is not limited to “white” females but also extends to Afro Caribbean women. In her novel Ferré exposes Puerto Rico as a racist society that supports a system of class and color distinction. This exposure is an important addition to her novel, and Ferré’s attempt to bring Afro Caribbean women to the forefront of her book is a positive step in the direction of literature that highlights cultural difference.

¹⁸ Donna Perry, *Backtalk: Women Writers Speak Out* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press), 85.

Tina De Rosa

Tina De Rosa was born in Chicago, the daughter of both Lithuanian and Italian ancestry. Because of her close relationship with her Italian grandmother, De Rosa identified primarily with the Italian side of the family and these images of Italian American life are reflected in her novel *Paper Fish*. The novel reads like a lyrical poem which describes the relationship between the protagonist Carmolina and her grandmother, as well as the pain the family endures as immigrants struggling in a society that does not accept them. This pain is magnified and symbolized by the other daughter Dorian, who is born with a severe mental handicap and is a silent figure in the work. Carmolina also suffers as she fails to understand her younger sister's predicament, for since Dorian has no voice, the reader understands that it is Carmolina who is responsible for representing the family's past.

Italian American and Caribbean: An Unlikely Comparison?

At first glance, author Tina De Rosa seems an unlikely addition to this dissertation. After all, what similarities does *Paper Fish*, an Italian American work, share with the other novels of study? This is a question I must address, since some readers may think that an Italian American work put alongside the Caribbean works would be an arbitrary insertion. First, I point to the problem of the Other that is present in the three Caribbean novels, and argue that Italian Americans were also considered Other in their American environment. As for Italian American writers, they were not regarded in literary circles as literature worthy of study. In his brilliant book, *Italian Signs, American Streets: The Evolution of the Italian American Narrative*, Fred Gardaphé relates a story of his youth in which he was encouraged to study literature that did not

involve his own ethnic background.¹⁹ His experience mirrors other Italian American authors, who, for the sake of “objectivity,” were discouraged from writing about their own culture. As a result, Gardaphé and others did not consider Italian American works in the same category as other American and English works. This view persists today, making Italian American literature almost a non-entity. It is safe to say that Caribbean literature is making great strides and is now being taught and studied in the realm of postcolonial fiction; the same cannot be said of Italian American literature. *Paper Fish*, like many Italian American works from women, is an outstanding book that has been undervalued and understudied. In pairing it with the more popular works of Caribbean fiction, more light can be shed on the significance of Italian American women writers.

Another common link between Italian American works and Caribbean literature is the emphasis on the pressure to assimilate to the dominant tradition. This is exemplified in the Caribbean characters of my novels of study who attempt to show allegiance to France or England. For example, in *La migration des cœurs*, Cathy rejects her confidante and childhood friend, Razyé, in favor of the European model. She does all she can to suppress the African influence that is present in her culture, which is achieved by the suppression of her native language: she adopts proper French in place of her native Creole. Critics such as Glissant speak against assimilation, arguing that the colonial power presents itself as generous to the colonial subject, when in fact the opposite is true. In Puerto Rico, for instance, the “gift” of the American passport may be what lulls the commonwealth into complacency, preventing it from uniting in a demand for independence. The same could be said for Martinique and Guadeloupe in their

¹⁹ Fred Gardaphé, *Italian Signs, American Streets: The Evolution of the Italian American Narrative* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 1996), 7.

relationship to France. In the case of Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the Creole who has more familiarity with island culture is rejected from the English circles, a similarity to the experience of Italian Americans who, because of their birthplace, do not fully identify with their mother country and are rejected by Anglo Americans. The first Italians who immigrated often did so because they were unwanted by their home country, most notably Southern Italians. Imagine the difficulty, then, when they arrive in the U.S. and are rejected by American culture. What choice is there but to try to assimilate, and shake off the influence of the country of origin? Fred Gardaphé writes about this need to blend in with American culture, explaining that “without a strong show of leadership by Italian American intellectuals, Italian Americans will opt to assimilate into mainstream American culture at the expense of losing contact with both the past and the present of Italian culture.”²⁰ As in the Caribbean, a linguistic shift is characteristic of this assimilation. Later generations of Italian Americans were not taught Italian in their households, or forbidden to speak it.

Another parallel between Italian American culture and the culture of the Caribbean is the question of race and color. The idea of race may seem like a surprising similarity, yet it is important to remember that historically, Italian Americans were not always considered “white,” nor do they necessarily consider themselves “white.” In fact, for many Italian Americans, to be considered “white” is to be seen as having assimilated so far into American culture that they reject elements of their Italian tradition. This brings to light the notion of “passing,” which blacks have done in order to avoid discrimination (a subject present in many works of African American literature), and

²⁰ Gardaphé, *Italian Signs, American Streets*, 6.

Italian Americans have done the same. The idea of passing for Italian Americans did not begin when they immigrated to the United States; the strategy existed in Italy as well. Southern Italians were often considered inferior in regions of Northern Italy, and their dark complexions contributed to this racist attitude:

Italy's history of African, Arab, Greek, Norman, and Spanish settlements defied all theories of racial purity, but southerners' dark complexions and "primitive" cultural practices were, to many Northerners, evidence of their racial inferiority. Southern Italy was more than a geographical space with flexible boundaries, it was a metaphor for anarchy, rebellion, poverty, and the lack of "civilization." Indeed, the saying "Europe ends at Naples. Calabria, Sicily, and all the rest belong to Africa" can still be heard throughout Europe, and these ideologies of southerners as backward continue to inform national political movements.²¹

This type of racism is eerily consistent with American attitudes toward blacks and European attitudes toward Afro Caribbeans. Because of these discriminatory practices, educated Southern Italians were presented with the temptation to pass as Northern Italians, leaving behind certain aspects of their Southern culture. In her essay "Figuring Race," Edvige Giunta recalls how her mother forbade her to speak Sicilian dialect, and how her unaccented Italian was applauded in the North. Giunta writes about the unusual position of suffering discrimination by Italians when she *was* Italian, and her ambivalence towards passing: "... I became acutely aware that passing is a strategy for survival adopted to escape damning racial identification, but one adopted at a certain cost in terms of one's sense of cultural and personal integrity. I may speak Italian, but there is something inauthentic about my Italian identity: I have adopted and adapted, but remain an outsider."²²

²¹ Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno, *Are Italians White? How Race is Made in America* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 9.

²² Edvige Giunta, "Figuring Race." in *Are Italians White? How Race is Made in America*, ed. Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno (New York: Routledge, 2003), 228.

The depiction of Italian Americans in literature and mainstream media is another example of how they can be seen as Other. This stereotyping is also suffered by Afro Caribbeans and African Americans, who in literature and media are reduced to housekeepers, servants, “mammies,” and, more recently, gun-wielding drug dealers.²³ Similarly, Italian Americans are often depicted as mafiosos and “wise guys,” or the heavily accented and ignorant street Italian. These personas are so ingrained in American society that almost everyone is culpable of conjuring these types of images when hearing the words “Italian American.” If one considers Italian American literature, Mario Puzo’s *The Godfather* perhaps is the first to come to mind, while his novel *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, a work that focuses on the Italian immigrant, is barely recognized. However, (and one could argue that this is because Italian Americans are now viewed as “white”), these negative representations of Italian Americans are largely accepted by the American public and they are rarely viewed as harmful or discriminatory. For these reasons, it is important to reconsider the notion of ethnicity and how it is represented in Italian American literature. In his article “We Weren’t Always White: Race and Ethnicity in Italian American Literature,” Fred Gardaphé writes about how Italian Americans’ whiteness is a result of “making it,” in America, and how this whiteness is contingent on many conditions:

As long as they [Italian Americans] behave themselves (act white), as long as they accept the images of themselves as presented into the media (don’t cry defamation), and as long as they stay within corporate and cultural boundaries (don’t identify with other minorities), they will be allowed to remain white. This has caused many Italian Americans to be left out of most discussions of multiculturalism.²⁴

²³ In these more recent depictions, I refer mainly to American media.

²⁴ Fred Gardaphé, “We Weren’t Always White: Race and Ethnicity in Italian American Literature,” *Literature Interpretation Theory* 13, no. 3 (July – Sept 2002): 187

Gardaphé goes on to say that by embracing “whiteness” Italians are not only left out of these discussions of ethnicity, but that they are forgetting their history. He implies that Americans of Italian descent are fooling themselves if they believe that they are white, and that the renunciation of their language, food, culture, and other important facets of their identity contributes to this mistaken notion of “whiteness.”

Though Italians may have been considered, as several critics maintain, “white on arrival,” they nonetheless remained racially suspect in the eyes of many white Americans. Like African Americans, Italian immigrants were subject to violence and hostility, including forced segregation, unfair wage labor, and even lynching. Italian immigration in the South was fertile ground for this type of reaction. On Southern plantations, Italian immigrants worked alongside blacks, and according to what few articles are published on this subject, there was little hostility between the two groups. In Louisiana in particular, Italian Americans and African Americans worked and lived among each other, which put Italians in the unusual position of being not white, not black, but somewhere in the middle. They had the right to vote and to become citizens, yet their proximity and closeness to blacks incited anger in Southern whites. Additionally, even then Italian Americans were associated with criminality and organized crime, and white Americans used this as a justification for violence against them.²⁵

Despite this collective history, the tragedy is that today many Italian Americans are regarded as extremely racist against African Americans. Many critics attribute this response to the acquired knowledge of the color line witnessed by Italian Americans after

²⁵ For more information on Italian immigrants in the South, see Matthew Frye Jacobson’s *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press) and Vincenza Scarpaci’s essay “Walking the Color Line: Italian Immigrants in Louisiana,” in *Are Italians White? How Race is Made in America*, ed. Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno (New York: Routledge, 2003), 60 – 79.

they immigrated to the U.S. In Louisiana as well as the north, the obvious privileges afforded to whites and the violent reaction toward blacks prompted a desire in Italian Americans to gravitate towards a white identity and distance themselves from people of color. Stefano Luconi argues this point in his essay “How Italian Americans Became White,” which details how Italian Americans began to identify with a white ethnicity in their shared racism toward black Americans. Luconi refers to much later decades, such as the 1960s and 70s, when, as he states, “Italian Americans put aside their previous ethnic rivalries with Irish Americans, Jews, and other immigrant groups of European extraction in order to join the common fight against busing for racial balance in local public schools and the racial integration of their neighborhoods...In this process they acquired a racial identity as white Europeans that they had until then lacked.”²⁶ The unfortunate result of a newer, whiter identity among Italian Americans is a forgetfulness of the shared history that Italian Americans and African Americans endured. Therefore in addition to the stigma of criminality, Italian Americans have to counter the idea that they are racist, as their conflict with African Americans is highlighted and their parallels with them disregarded. In this dissertation I bring in De Rosa’s *Paper Fish* and put it alongside the Caribbean novels because the characters in all the novels share a history of oppression. Though many Americans consider Italian Americans “white,” it is important to consider Italian American literature as ethnic literature.

The subject of gender is important to this dissertation, as all the authors of study are women. As I have already stated, as women, the authors and their protagonists are doubly marginalized as they are labeled as ethnic and Other from a racial point of view

²⁶ Stefano Luconi, “How Italian Americans Became White,” in *Close Encounters of an Other Kind: New Perspectives on Race, Ethnicity and American studies*, ed. Roy Goldblatt, Jopi Nyman and John A. Stotesbury (Joensuu, Finland : University of Joensuu, 2005), 268.

and also from their patriarchal position in society. Italian American women are no exception, and their place in literature is tenuous because, as many Italian American women writers have pointed out, they have had virtually no prior tradition of literariness. Most immigrants were Southern Italians who spoke dialect, (Italian to them was also a foreign language) and illiteracy was high. Additionally, their roles were restricted to the family unit; therefore there was an absence of independence among Italian immigrant women. Furthermore, family matters were considered private and to write about them would be a scandal. Books were regarded with suspicion and distrust, for they were a means of assimilation to American ways. Fred Gardaphé relates how his interest in books rendered him strange in the eyes of his family.²⁷ In her forward to *The Dream Book*, Helen Barolini writes that the immigrants' struggle to survive held precedence over education, and that the tradition of illiteracy and wariness of American culture contributed to the skepticism surrounding books: "When you don't read, you don't write. When your frame of reference is a deep distrust of education because it is an attribute of the very classes who have exploited you and your kind for as long as memory carries, then you do not encourage a reverence for books among your children. You teach them the practical arts, not the abstract ones."²⁸ Even in their own nation, Southern Italians were seen as separate from the educated classes, and when this did not change upon immigrating to the U.S., then it is natural that education would be suspect and that there would be a scarcity of written work from Italian American women.

In the Caribbean, as in Italian American communities, there is a strong oral component to the tradition, although the writing component is often connected to

²⁷ Gardaphé, *Italian Signs, American Streets*, 3.

²⁸ Helen Barolini, *Chiaroscuro: essays of identity* (Madison : University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 148.

assimilation as well. Education in colonial societies has sprung from a violent source. However, in past years there has been a push for literary works from writers native to the Caribbean, and they are giving a voice to the Caribbean experience. Criticism in this field is also abundant, but there is still a marked absence of women. While names like Edouard Glissant and Aimé Césaire are immediately recognizable, there continue to be few known female critics. The reason for this absence, as is with the Italian Americans, could be because of their restricted roles in the patriarchal tradition. Throughout this dissertation, the role of women and the ways in which they achieve independence beyond their roles as wives and mothers is an important issue.

In his essay “The Double Burden of Italian American Women Writers,” Fred Gardaphé states that women become both writers *and* critics of Italian American literature because there is a great void in this area of literature and criticism. He goes on to say that Italian Americans, women in particular, are ambivalent about putting individual accomplishment over family and collectivity. This is another similarity to the Caribbean works, for Caribbean authors and critics have maintained that in African culture, it is the collective group, and not the individual, that is deemed important. However, this sense of collectivity is seen as a unifying force, while in Italian American culture the writers/critics are pressured to put their ethnicity aside in their intellectual pursuits. In so doing they experience the crisis of displacement, as Gardaphé underlines: “The earliest Italian Americans who became intellectuals, more often than not, adopted a model in which alienation from one’s birth community, and often one’s birth class, was a

requirement for acceptance in the club.”²⁹ With the absence of their own ethnicity, there is then an absence of work that details the difficulty of being the ethnic “Other,” and so there is no model young Italian American Women have with which to identify. This situation is very close to what Glissant calls a “non-histoire,” in the Caribbean – there are few works describing the plight of the colonial subject, and therefore the role of the writer is to tackle this task. Similarly, the role of the Italian American writer is the same, but the outcry against the “non-histoire” is weak. Writers such as Fred Gardaphé and Mary Jo Bona say this cry must be louder and that Italian Americans must lay claim to their tradition. Edvige Giunta, another important Italian American woman writer, says that writing is a form of defiance:

Writing often means, directly or indirectly, daring to write of one’s life. It means asserting the right to break the silence imposed from the inside – the family and a culture which, in order to protect themselves, often choose to sacrifice their own – and from outside – the American culture and media willing to accept and reproduce only stultifying images of Italian womanhood.³⁰

This defiance is present in Caribbean works as well, most notably *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in which Jean Rhys produces a text which confronts the representation of the West Indies in British fiction. More specifically, she challenges the notion of the Creole woman as an unbalanced sexualized object by rewriting history.

Rewriting history is a technique which creates an important link between *Paper Fish* and the other novels of study. In each of these texts the protagonists are struggling against traditions set by their culture, rejection from the dominant culture, and fighting

²⁹ Fred Gardaphé, “The Double Burden of Italian American Women Writers,” in *Breaking Open: Reflections on Italian American Women’s Writing*, ed. Mary Ann Mannino and Justin Vitiello (West Lafayette, Ind. : Purdue University Press, 2003), 267.

³⁰ Edvige Giunta, “Strains of an Immigrant Past: Inherited Habits of Being,” in *Breaking Open: Reflections on Italian American Women’s Writing*, ed. Mary Ann Mannino and Justin Vitiello (West Lafayette, Ind. : Purdue University Press, 2003), 275.

for the need to form an independent identity. The authors are not seeking conformity to a new culture, but instead they are filling a literary void by giving authorship to the Other instead of the Other being subjected to the authorship of the dominant tradition. Writing serves as a tool that provides some stability in a life that is teetering between two different worlds. Writing puts into words the point of view of the Other, which standard culture cannot understand, and in so doing allows readers of all cultures to appreciate the feelings of conflict and isolation felt by this Other. As an Italian American De Rosa speaks of her bi-culturalism as a blessing and a curse, but one that fuels her writer's imagination:

I know that where I belong is with myself, knowing that I don't really belong anywhere. That is the inheritance, that is the curse, of being born into a world and into a family that wants you to enter another. You say partially goodbye to one, partially hello to another, some of the time you are silent, and if you feel a little bit crazy – and sometimes you do – you write about it.³¹

The above quotation echoes the sentiment felt by the characters and their authors in the other novels of study. This turmoil of semi-belonging to two cultures is a sentiment that will be explored through various themes found in all of these novels.

An Overview of Chapters

In chapter one, *Mothers, Mother Tongues and Mother Countries*, I explore how each protagonist's ambivalent relationship to her mother contributes to her feeling of displacement, and how this feeling extends beyond the familial line and into the relationship to her mother country. The theme of motherhood is a common topic in Caribbean literature, most notably with women authors. For example, Haitian author Edwidge Danticat employs ambivalence and motherhood in her novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. The novel's narrator, Sophie, must leave her native Haiti and her beloved aunt

³¹ De Rosa, Tina, "An Italian-American Woman Speaks Out," *Attenzione*, May 1980 : 38 – 39

to reunite with her mother in New York, a mother who at first could not raise her because Sophie was a product of rape. In this work Sophie longs for her mother country of Haiti, while she feels alien both to her mother and to her new surroundings in New York. Another example of a novel that incorporates motherhood is Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*, which involves a narrator whose mother died giving birth to her. The pain of this absence follows the narrator throughout her life, just as it does Little Cathy in *La migration des cœurs*.

In Condé's *La migration des cœurs*, as well as in Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the protagonists fail to establish a connection to their mothers and to their mother country. This is especially true for Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Before losing her to illness, Antoinette is rejected by her mother and then by her mother country, England. This issue of failed relationships between mother and mother country can be extended to colonial society, where Caribbeans were encouraged to emulate a European system. However, that same system rendered them inferior, and so they are left with an unclear idea of who they are.

Like Antoinette, the female protagonists in *The House on the Lagoon* and *La migration des cœurs* have lost their mothers and are left in a marginalized space. Through marriage, another focus in all the works, they are further marginalized. For example, in *The House on the Lagoon* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Isabel and Antoinette are dominated by their husbands. In *La migration des cœurs*, Cathy rejects her Caribbean heritage through her union to Amyeric. In *Paper Fish*, Carmolina is also rejected by her mother Sarah but finds solace in another maternal figure, her grandmother Doria. Unlike the women of the other novels, Carmolina is able to establish a connection to her ancestry

through the mother figure of Doria. This connection is a transformation that occurs late in the novel, which mainly focuses on Carmolina's struggle with identity. She, like the other female characters in these novels, feels that she is Other. In order to fill the void, the women use the text as a tool to draw themselves closer to their culture. I develop this idea further in chapter two.

In chapter two, *Otherness and the Text*, I concentrate exclusively on Maryse Condé and Jean Rhys. What these novelists have in common is their technique of "rewriting" a canonical text, and I explore how Jean Rhys challenges the representation of the mad Creole in *Jane Eyre* by writing her untold story, and how Maryse Condé incorporates Caribbean elements into the plot of *Wuthering Heights* in order to bring the conflict of race and class to the surface. I explore the idea of Jean Rhys being identified as a Caribbean author and the problems and implications of this categorization, and I also look at Condé's position as author and how she is simultaneously connected to and detached from Caribbean culture. In order to provide a detailed reading of the work, I analyze the many symbols in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, from the meaning of Antoinette's dress to the use of mirrors, doubling, and zombification. I explain how these symbols support the idea of the text as bringing the protagonist closer to a Caribbean identity. In Condé's work, I detail the Afro Caribbean nuances implemented in the text which make it distinctly Caribbean.

Chapter three concentrates on the role of the text and how the protagonists use it to their advantage in *Paper Fish* and *The House on the Lagoon*. In Ferré's novel, the concept of race becomes a central issue and Isabel's novel brings many oppressed characters into focus, thus exposing the true nature of Puerto Rican society. As in

Condé's novel, Ferré emphasizes Afro Caribbean culture in her text, and I expand on these elements. For example, I explore the meaning of Elegguá, an African god that becomes a symbolic figure in the novel. I also argue that with her text, Ferré achieves an important reversal by having her character Isabel force her husband, the patriarch that she fears, into the margins. She does so quite literally, for his words are found only on the edges of her manuscript. This reversal of power is similar to what Rhys achieves when she creates a new text from the story of *Jane Eyre*, taking the peripheral figure of the madwoman out of the margins and placing her into the forefront. The authorial power that these protagonists attain is a fundamental aspect to this dissertation, and in *Paper Fish* this authorial power is also present in Carmolina. In addition to Ferré's novel, in chapter three, I explore how Carmolina has author/ity through her use of mirrors and the text. Her journey toward self-reliance, which is symbolically related to Italian immigration, enables her to identify both with her culture and with herself. In studying *Paper Fish* I also felt it necessary to examine the history, or lack thereof, of Italian American women writers. Because their history was undervalued, there are few Italian American texts by women who write about the Italian American immigrant experience, and this is why *Paper Fish* is of critical importance.

Chapter four focuses solely on *The House on the Lagoon*, where it was important to comment on José Luis González's essay, "Puerto Rico : the Four-Storyed Country." Since in Ferré's novel the house is so central, becoming a character in itself, it seems a just comparison to study the work in conjunction with González's essay, which divides Puerto Rican history and identity into a structure of four stories. I also use the house to examine how there is a continual building up and breaking down of oppositions in Ferré's

novel. Among these oppositions are the desires of Isabel and Quintín, whose feud over her manuscript is symbolic of the larger debate over literature and history. The relationship between literature and history is something I explore in this chapter, and I use Glissant and Condé as examples of literature serving a historical purpose. Through a study of diverse texts which highlight a historical reality that was once shadowed, I conclude that literature and history do not have to be at odds. This idea applies to the epilogue in *Paper Fish*, which, along with the other endings of each novel, is described in the conclusion of this dissertation. Though it appears as if nothing remains to remind us of Carmolina's Italian American neighborhood, there is De Rosa's text to fill our minds with her historical past.

The Death of the Authors

Throughout the course of this dissertation I often use the terms author and character synonymously. I am aware that there are many who claim that the line between fiction and biography should not be crossed, and that it would be incorrect to assume that the author is writing of her own experiences when describing her protagonists. To this claim I point out that in many cases, the authors of my dissertation admit to their work being largely autobiographical. In the case of Italian American fiction, many writers feel they must put their true experiences to paper in order to preserve the memory of their ancestors, whose tradition did not include recording the events of the past. Fred Gardaphé's describes *Paper Fish* as a work of "autobiographical fiction,"³² and in an interview with Lisa Meyer, De Rosa is defensive when Meyer sees Dorian as a symbol

³² Gardaphé, *Italian Signs, American Streets*, 133.

in the novel, because, as De Rosa states “I can see how you are thinking that, but you must realize Doriana is my sister.”³³

Many critics have concluded that Rhys’ work also contains autobiographical elements, and evidently Rhys was ambivalent about writing a autobiography because, as the forward to *Smile Please* states, her life had already been “used up” in her novels.³⁴ In that autobiography Rhys relates one of her first experiences with writing, filling up several exercise books under the title: *This is my Diary*.³⁵ These journals would be the first writings for her novel *Voyage in the Dark*, and they involve the love affair that Francis Wydam speaks of in *The Letters of Jean Rhys*. Though *Wide Sargasso Sea* may be more fictional than her other novels, Antoinette suffers the same feelings of isolation at the hands of a dominating male that her other, more autobiographical characters endure. In addition to this experience, the seductive Caribbean backdrop, an element not present in most of her other work, is the landscape of Rhys’ childhood. These examples provide evidence of why Antoinette cannot be viewed as completely separate from Jean Rhys, nor can Carmolina be entirely disconnected from Tina De Rosa. Maryse Condé’s *La migration des cœurs* is perhaps the most fictional of the four, but the childhood confusion over her identity in her memoir is mirrored in the work. In these types of novels, where one is attempting to reclaim a lost history, it would be a mistake for the reader to pull the author away from the text. This is not to say that if the reader knew nothing of the author, the text would not have a life of its own. However, the fact that the female author has felt the same displacement which is described in her characters

³³ Lisa Meyer, “Breaking the Silence: An Interview with Tina de Rosa,” *Italian Americana (ItalAm)* 17, no. 1 (Winter 1999) : 81.

³⁴ Jean Rhys, *Smile Please. an unfinished autobiography* (London, New York : Penguin Books, 1981), 4.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 104.

deepens the reader's understanding of her text. It is also important to keep in mind that in literature that treats ethnicity, it is helpful to examine the cultural history as it pertains to the text. In his book, *Through a Glass Darkly*, William Boelhower comments on teaching ethnic literature, making the assertion that "It was clearly impossible to explain how ethnic literature functions by remaining at the most literary level alone. The course, therefore, was mostly about preliminary cultural contexts within which ethnic literature could be defined as such."³⁶ In the case of the authors I am studying, the "cultural context" includes their personal history and how this affects their writing.

In addition to my view on the autobiographical aspects of the works, I would also like to comment on the theoretical features of this dissertation. Throughout these chapters I explore the ideas of many critics, such as Gayatri Spivak, José Luis González, and Fred Gardaphé. However, because a main argument of this dissertation also points to the text as a way of giving an identity to the displaced subject, I make a deliberate effort to concentrate on that text in order to reveal new meanings within it. My analysis of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, most notably the symbolic meaning of Antoinette's white dress³⁷ and Rochester's representation as author in the text, are insights that are absent in the many critical works.³⁸ As for the Italian American work, there is very little criticism on *Paper Fish*, therefore my goal is to bring something new to the understanding of this novel, particularly with the idea that Carmolina can be viewed as an author.³⁹ Literary theory, while valuable, can become a distraction at the expense of the text. My analysis

³⁶ Boelhower, *Through a Glass Darkly*, 9.

³⁷ Sandra Drake, whose article "All That Foolishness/That All Foolishness: Race and Caribbean Culture as Thematics of Liberation in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*," *Crítica: A Journal of Critical Essays* 2, no. 2 (Fall 1990), I cite repeatedly in chapter 2, makes the connection between the white and red colors which represent England and the Caribbean. However, while she heavily concentrates on Antoinette's red dress, she does not mention her white one.

³⁸ These meanings are explored in chapter 2.

³⁹ This idea is explored in chapter 3.

of these works rests firmly on the texts themselves and only has recourse to theory when there is a clear advantage to doing so. In juxtaposing these four novels and exploring both the common and distinctive qualities of each, I will show why identity in terms of “sameness” must be redefined. By finally occupying some space of standard literature, one that was originally reserved only for those of white European origin, the *mestiza* is no longer the silenced, inferior woman but instead a hybrid that crosses borders and enriches literary and cultural knowledge.

Chapter I: Mothers, Mother Tongues and Mother Countries

Wide Sargasso Sea, *La migration des cœurs*, *The House on the Lagoon* and *Paper Fish* all describe the characters' longing to connect to the mother country. This longing conflicts with the equally strong desire to be accepted by the culture into which the characters were born. One interesting element found in the majority of the texts is that the ambivalent relationship that each character has to her mother country is analogous to the relationship she has with her birth mother. Language is also related to this relationship, as often the closeness or distance the character feels to her maternal language is indicative of that to the mother and to the ancestral past. The inability for some of the characters to form a stable identity is a result of their need but strained capacity to connect to their mother country. Their inability to connect to their biological mother adds to this anxiety and furthers this instability. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, for example, Antoinette longs for a relationship with her mother, one that does not exist, yet her ironic misfortune is to more closely resemble her as she blindly follows the same path through a destructive marriage. Her desire for a mother leads her to her "native land" of England – a place that also betrays her. In *Paper Fish*, Sarah leaves her mother and her mother language and becomes silent and lost, but Carmolina finds a balance between her Italian past and American future through her relationship with the grandmother figure, Doria. *La migration des cœurs* contains many characters who become orphans, and a childhood devoid of a mother partially explains these feelings of alienation. In *The House on the Lagoon*, the relationship between mothers and daughters is also strained, and often marriage becomes the unhappy solution. This chapter explores the concept of

identity through motherhood, the connection to the mother country and maternal language, and the ways in which the protagonists are adversely affected by marriage.

Dreaming of England: Antoinette's Mother Country in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Jean Rhys spent most of her life in England after the age of seventeen, and the disappointment and misery she experienced mirrors Antoinette's suffering when she returns to the "mother country." Like Antoinette, Rhys felt that she did not have a country or a residence that she could consider "home" and in her autobiography she often complains of England as cold and dark. In letters, Rhys mentions that the reason her protagonist starts the fire in Thornfield Hall is a simple one: "She is cold – and fire is the only warmth she knows in England."¹ Teresa O'Connor comments on Rhys' vagabond lifestyle in England: "As soon as Rhys arrived in London she began what was to be a mode of living that persisted almost her entire life – the taking of lodging in temporary, and often inhospitable, quarters."² During this time Rhys struggled with financial instability, love affairs that ended badly and estrangements from family which caused her to perceive England as a cruel and unforgiving place. This view of England perhaps evoked nostalgia for Dominica, for though Rhys returned to the beloved island only once and experienced some disillusionment, Dominica still stood in stark contrast to England, as O'Connor points out:

In Rhys' developing symbology, England provided the antithesis to "home," an anti-home. If Dominica was light, England was dark; if Dominica was warm, England was cold; if in Dominica the male seduction was "mental" and paid for with chocolates, in England it approached prostitution; if Dominica was dominated by the rejecting figure of Rhys' mother, England proffered an endless line of hostile

¹ Wyndham, *The Letters of Jean Rhys*, 6.

² Teresa O'Connor, *Jean Rhys: The West Indian Novels* (New York: New York University Press, 1986), 72.

landladies; and if Rhys' island suggested an expansiveness of the soul, England offered finite closure, infinitely.³

The idea of England and Englishness first appears in *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a place of possible refuge and safety for Antoinette, but the novel soon depicts the country much like Jean Rhys describes it in her letters and autobiography – dark, cold, and hostile. Because England is for the colonial settler the “mother country,” it is natural for Antoinette to look to England as a possible home when she is shunned by the people of the island. However, just as Antoinette's relationship with her mother is devoid of warmth, England also rejects Antoinette as daughter. In the following pages I will explore how Antoinette's relationship with her mother is symbolic of her relationship with England and how Antoinette's Caribbeanness contributes both to the divide between her, her mother, and the mother country.

The relationship that Antoinette has with her mother Annette is one without much dialogue or understanding, yet Antoinette fatalistically follows in her steps, marrying an Englishman, leaving the island, and succumbing to madness. Even before her mother suffers from madness she does not have an endearing relationship with Antoinette, favoring instead Pierre, her handicapped son. Antoinette reflects upon her mother's demeanor: “I hated this frown and once I touched her forehead trying to smooth it. But she pushed me away, not roughly but calmly, coldly, without a word, as if she decided once and for all that I was useless to her” (20). When her mother does become ill, Antoinette goes to see her, and is once again pushed away: “Why you bring this child to make trouble, trouble, trouble? Trouble enough without that” (48). It is not completely clear why Annette is unloving towards her daughter, but Antoinette feels that her mother

³ *Ibid.*, 79.

is ashamed of her for her assimilation to the black Caribbean. The fact that the island people show hatred toward the family, and that the family is in financial ruins following emancipation, causes Annette to see the results of that hatred and financial despair in Antoinette. Antoinette conveys this feeling to Rochester:

Then there was the day when she saw I was growing up a white nigger and she was ashamed of me, it was after that day that everything changed. Yes, it was my fault, it was my fault that she started to plan and work in a frenzy, in a fever to change our lives. Then people came to see us again and though I hated them and was afraid of their cool, teasing eyes, I learned to hide it. (132)

Antoinette embodies the idea of dislocation for her mother; she is evidence of their poverty, their alienation and their desolation. At some point Annette turns to England to remedy the situation, in the form of a new, English husband. Mr. Mason rescues the family from poverty but cannot save them from the people's hatred. His "Englishness" and racism are clear in his underestimation of the potential violence of the people. For instance, he refuses Annette's pleas to leave Coulibri, believing that the natives are childlike people who pose no threat to their lives: "Live here most of your life and know nothing about the people. It's astonishing. They are children – they wouldn't hurt a fly" (35). Mr. Mason's tone is paternalistic and is representative of England as the imperialistic authority that views other islands, races, and peoples as insignificant. Antoinette and her mother know that the opposite is true and that the people could pose a threat, and their viewpoint demonstrates that they do not fully connect to England. As white Creoles, they are different, as illustrated when Antoinette ponders Mr. Mason's naïve view of the Caribbean. Her thoughts separate her from English people: "none of you understand us...I wish I could tell him that out here is not at all like English people think it is" (30). Despite the knowledge that she is different, Antoinette still longs to

equate England with comfort and though she sees the disparity between herself and Mr. Mason, she sees his presence as positive:

Then I looked across the white tablecloth and the vase of yellow roses at Mr. Mason, so sure of himself, so without a doubt English. And at my mother, so without a doubt not English, but no white nigger either. Not my mother. Never had been. Never could be. Yes, she would have died, I thought, if she had not met him. And for the first time I was grateful and liked him. There are more ways than one of being happy, better perhaps to be peaceful and contented and protected...(36)

England is seen as protection for English descendants, and Mr. Mason is seen as the protector and rescuer. Though they are not completely English, Antoinette feels that England will protect her family, convincing herself that her mother would have died without his help. But as the reader knows, Mr. Mason's actions, or inaction, leave the family unprotected and this inaction ultimately leads to Annette's death. These events offer a glimpse of an England that provides little safety for those who do not fully belong, and this idea is completed when Antoinette is treated cruelly by her English husband and when she returns to her mother country, which I will discuss below.

Antoinette's desire to have a close relationship with her mother is developed in parallel with to her wish to have a relationship with England. She looks at England as an alternative when she feels rejected by her beloved island, and this idealized view of England surfaces even at the beginning of the novel. Her favorite picture is of an English girl "the Miller's Daughter" (36), and when her marriage with Rochester worsens, she actually believes that England could be a place of refuge. Not surprisingly, she imagines an England with beautiful and natural scenery, a setting comparable to her island, to convince herself that England is a place of light:

Cool green leaves in the short cool summer. Summer. There are fields of corn like sugar-cane fields, but gold colour and not so tall. After summer the trees are bare, then winter and snow. White feathers falling? Torn pieces of paper falling? They say frost makes flower patterns on the window panes. I must know more than I know

already. For I know that house where I will be cold and not belonging, the bed I shall lie in has red curtains and I have slept there many times before, long ago. How long ago? In that bed I will dream the end of my dream. But my dream had nothing to do with England and I must not think like this, I must remember about chandeliers and dancing, about swans and roses and snow. And snow. (111)

The combination of summer and winter, of images such as cane fields with snow, demonstrate both that Antoinette is a hybrid – not fully English nor fully Carribean; and that she is quite ignorant of England's reality. Antoinette has a need to identify with England, though it is clear by this passage that even as she romanticizes the country, she cannot suppress a feeling of danger associated with the place. This is why she says, "I will dream the end of my dream...but I must not think like this" (111). Antoinette's frightening dreams are always of a foreboding place which she refuses to admit is England, for it is painful to accept that Antoinette's mother country, through the character of Rochester, has contributed to colonizing her and making her a slave. In contrast, Christophine, who has a strong identity and is likened to a surrogate mother to Antoinette, questions that a place such as England exists: "Why you want to go to this cold thief place? If there is this place at all, I never see it, that is one thing for sure" (112). Critic Judith Raskin attributes Christophine's rejection of England to the fact that she does not need a different place in which to ground her identity: "In contrast to Antoinette's persistent desire for an allegiance to this place, England, Christophine recognizes that England is as much a construct of "belief" as of "knowledge" or truth. Unlike the white Creole, she asserts her identity as separate from its existence."⁴ Christophine realizes that Antoinette is using England as a fantasy, that Antoinette's conception of England is a false one which will not provide her with the comfort she is

⁴ Judith Raskin, *Snow on the Canefields: Women's Writing and Creole Subjectivity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 151.

seeking. However, since Antoinette, as Raskin concludes, is unable to belong to the people and culture of Jamaica, she clings to her ancestry in hopes of finding a space that will accept her. She attempts to go home, only to find that “home” is just as Christophine described, a cold thief place that threatens to destroy any shred of self that belonged to Antoinette.

Rochester’s relationship with Antoinette and the island reveals that she does not really belong to her mother country though she is of English descent. Instead, Antoinette’s return to the mother country defines her displacement most clearly and this section of the novel is filled with the most despair. Throughout the work, Antoinette has several dreams that foreshadow the danger England represents, yet she will not consciously admit that England is unwelcome territory. Antoinette’s first dream occurs early in the novel, when she is still living in Coulibri. In this dream she is in a forest: “I dreamt that I was walking in the forest. Not alone. Someone who hated me was with me, out of sight. I could hear heavy footsteps coming closer and though I struggled and screamed I could not move. I woke crying” (26). When Antoinette wakes from her nightmare, her mother, another figure who hates her, is standing over her. It is only thoughts of “the tree of life, the barrier of the cliffs and the high mountains” (27) that comfort her and assure her that she is safe. In other words, it is not England, her mother country, nor her actual mother, who protects her. Only the island and its natural surroundings offer consolation.

Antoinette’s second dream, which occurs when she is living in the convent, further confirms that England is a hostile place. It is no coincidence that this dream happens just after a visit from her stepfather, whose goal is to see Antoinette married to

his brother, Rochester. His presence disrupts the peace Antoinette feels in the cocoon of the convent, a matriarchal place of maternal warmth and safety. In contrast, Mr. Mason is a danger to that safety. Just as he is the immediate cause of Annette's suffering, Mason is also the catalyst for Antoinette's doomed marriage. Her second dream seems to be a continuation of the first, but Antoinette ends up somewhere else:

Again I have left the house at Coulibri. It is still night and I am walking towards the forest. I am wearing a long dress and thin slippers, so I walk with difficulty, following the man who is with me and holding up the skirt of my dress. It is white and beautiful and I don't wish to get it soiled. I follow him, sick with fear but I make no effort to save myself; if anyone were to try to save me, I would refuse. This must happen. We are now under the tall dark trees and there is no wind... We are no longer in the forest but in an enclosed garden surrounded by a stone wall and the trees are different trees...(60)

Antoinette appears to be in a wedding dress, which represents her marriage, and is following her betrothed (Rochester). The trees are "different trees," which indicate that she is in a different place, away from her comfortable surroundings. The fact that she makes no effort to save herself foreshadows her voyage to England with Rochester, for when they leave the island she does not protest or refuse, and she does not listen to Christophine's earlier warnings to leave. Later in the dream, there are "stairs leading upwards" which should remind the reader of the attic in Thornfield Hall. When she wakes up she tells the nun she has dreamed of Hell, not realizing that the place she had been dreaming of is England. However, the reader sees the prophecy and understands that Hell is synonymous with England and that rather than being a place of refuge, it is a place of oppression and confinement. This dream is further evidence that Antoinette is displaced; she is an unloved daughter in her mother country. In her book Raskin also analyzes Antoinette's transition from fanciful notions that England would welcome her home to the grim truth that her nightmares have become a reality:

Antoinette finds that her place of escape is also her place of imprisonment; her dream of an England of snow, cornfields, and millers' daughters progressively becomes her dream of violence and destruction. Each time Antoinette has her dream, England becomes more menacing and she becomes more active. This "dream" is never referred to as her "nightmare" for by the end of *Wide Sargasso Sea* the violence is visited upon the English institution (Thornfield Hall) and English literature (*Jane Eyre*) is the dream of the awakened and furious colonized figure.⁵

The violence Raskin speaks of begins in Antoinette's last dream, which occurs in England while she is trapped in Thornfield Hall. At this point Antoinette, though she was never accepted by her mother, has essentially become her mother. Annette loses hope when her son dies from the fire in Coulibri, and Mr. Mason's solution is to leave her in the hands of caretakers who abuse her. In Antoinette's case, Rochester is the Englishman who replaces Mr. Mason, and though he promises Antoinette protection, he rejects her as he realizes how different, how non-English she is. Rhys employs repetition to connect Antoinette to her mother as they both enter the world of "madness." It is important to note that the idea that they are mad is questionable from Rhys' point of view. What the English determine as "mad" is in Rhys' novel a response to being ill-treated and unloved. Christophine says, "They drive her to it...They tell her she is mad, they act like she is mad. Question, question...In the end – mad I don't know – she give up, she care for nothing" (157). When Annette and Antoinette begin to feel hopeless, they are described in almost identical terms. Early in the novel, Antoinette notices her mother's frown: "A frown came between her black eyebrows, deep – it might have been cut with a knife" (20), and later, Rochester notices the same expression on Antoinette's face: "The cold light was on her and I looked back at the sad droop of her lips, the frown between her thick eyebrows, deep as if it had been cut with a knife" (138). Mother and daughter experience the same fate when they try to save themselves in the form of a relationship

⁵ Raskin, *Snow on the Canefields*, 148.

with their mother country through their marriages to English men. Inevitably, the English side betrays them. Antoinette is unwilling to admit this, and when she sees that Rochester is pulling away, she tries even harder to connect with him, going so far as to use obeah as a love potion. As Christophine warns, this method is only reserved for islanders, not for béké. As she predicts, the plan backfires and Rochester has even more hatred for her and in his revenge, takes her away to England. This is part three of the novel, and Antoinette's experience in England very clearly shows the reader that her mother country offers no protection.

When Antoinette is trapped in the attic in Thornfield Hall, she refuses to acknowledge that she is in England, telling her keeper, Grace Poole, "I don't believe it...and I will never believe it" (183). The idea that Antoinette's mother country has renounced her "daughter" is too painful for Antoinette to bear; it is easier to deny that she has returned. Once again the idea of England as a menace appears in the form of a dream, which is when Antoinette is most active. In the dream, she sets fire to the house and in so doing, reenacts the fire at Coulibri. At Coulibri the oppressed people, enraged at the former slave owners, use their power to burn the estates. Similarly, Antoinette represents the oppressed slave who takes revenge on her English oppressors, England and Rochester. This position is one that she could not assert in Coulibri, where she was considered the colonizer. The fire, therefore, could be seen as an act of triumph on her part, rather than an act of self-destruction. I will discuss this idea in chapter two, when I examine the idea of intertextuality in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The concentration here is on the idea of Antoinette taking revenge on her mother country. During her fantasy dream of England, I mention that Antoinette merges island images with English ones and this

characterizes her confusion involving her double culture. Similarly, in the fire dream, Antoinette again sees images that merge her island and England into one, as if the two worlds to which she does not fully belong are both being destroyed. “I saw the chandelier and the red carpet downstairs and the bamboo and the tree ferns, the gold ferns and the silver, and the soft green velvet of the moss on the garden wall” (189).

For Antoinette, the return to England has only caused more suffering in her life, suffering caused by failed relationships, whether it be with a husband, with a mother, or with a place. Through her suffering in Thornfield Hall, she conjures images of the past to comfort her, though her true experience of that past was also one of anguish. Earlier, when feeling rejected by the islanders, Antoinette was nostalgic for England, a fanciful and non-existent place. She creates a relationship that she does not have with her mother country, and then, upon its rejection of her, Antoinette re-creates nostalgia for Jamaica. For example, in the final dream she sees Tia, a childhood friend who betrayed her, which demonstrates Antoinette’s desperate wish for a connection to her island home. In his article, “Nostalgia and Narrative Ethics in *Wide Sargasso Sea*,” John Su comments on how the depth of regret depicted in *Wide Sargasso Sea* defines nostalgia in a historical context:

If Said’s history depends on narrative to transform our interpretation of events, its truth claims still depend upon evoking actual historical occurrences. In contrast, history in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is defined by images of communities never formed, empathy never felt, suffering never shared – in other words, history is defined by *what never occurred*. Antoinette, Tia, Rochester, and Jane all are submitted to cruelty on the basis of race or gender or primogeniture, but only Rochester and Jane form anything resembling a satisfying relationship. Our awareness of lost opportunity becomes clearer only because of Rhys’ poignant depictions of communities that never were.⁶

⁶ John Su, “Once I Would Have Gone Back...But Not Any Longer”: Nostalgia and Narrative Ethics in *Wide Sargasso Sea*,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 44, no. 2 (Winter 2003): 166.

I agree with Su's idea that Antoinette's history, notably her English history, is characterized by nostalgic notions of things that have not actually happened and will not happen. This is ironic, considering her future is defined by nightmares that *do* come to life. This idea creates a reversal in a literary context, for normally it is the Caribbean culture that has been dealt the hand of a "non-histoire" that I will further detail in chapter two, in as much as the Caribbean had previously been defined by Westerners. However, Su's statement that Jane and Rochester have what resembles a "satisfying relationship," is dubious. By Rhys' negative portrayal of Rochester, she calls into question what type of husband Rochester can be to a wife, be it a Creole *or* an English wife. And though Jane is not a presence in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys' portrayal of Antoinette is suspiciously close to Jane's experience as a child depicted in *Jane Eyre*. In Brontë's work, Bertha and Jane were seen in opposition to each other, but in Rhys' version the reader is able to see similarities in the two women that present them as doubles. In *Jane Eyre* the reader sympathizes with the fact that Jane was an orphan, that Jane was locked up in the "Red Room" and mistreated by her aunt. In *Wide Sargasso Sea* the reader now has an opportunity to sympathize with Antoinette and her feeling of alienation, because she too is orphaned, forced into exile, and locked in the attic of a house with red curtains.⁷ Antoinette has been rejected by her mother, her English ancestry, and her mother country, and perhaps she is now seen as a sister to Jane and is given a chance to be accepted by the reader. Though within the pages of the novel Antoinette only has history through nostalgia of non-events, it is through the text that Rhys offers to Caribbean literature the life and history of the madwoman. Antoinette wakes from her

⁷ Mary Lou Emery's *Jean Rhys at "World's End": novels of colonial and sexual exile*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990) also draws parallels between Jane and Antoinette.

dream thinking, “Now I know what I must do” (190). The determination expressed in the narrative voice could be Rhys’ resolve to tell the madwoman’s story.

The West Indian Landscape of *Wide Sargasso Sea*

While the first part of *Wide Sargasso Sea* focuses on Antoinette’s inability to identify with the island people, the second half focuses on her inability to identify with England, which is demonstrated through her relationship to Rochester. This separation from England is partially defined by him, for he clearly sees how different and non-European Antoinette is. It is Antoinette’s otherness that ultimately leads to the demise of their relationship, and her connection to the natural surroundings of the island contributes to this otherness. In an effort to draw nearer to Rochester, Antoinette begins to forsake elements of her Caribbeanness. According to Glissant, it is a problem for the Caribbean to look outside the community and to assimilate to a European model. He incorporates the importance of landscape in this belief and supports the idea that if one is alienated from the Caribbean then he/she is also alienated from the land:

Le rapport à la terre, rapport d’autant plus menacé que la terre de la communauté est aliénée, devient tellement fondamental du discours, que le paysage dans l’œuvre cesse d’être décor ou confident pour s’inscrire comme constituant de l’être. Décrire le paysage ne suffira pas. L’individu, la communauté, le pays sont indissociables dans l’épisode constitutif de leur histoire.

The relationship with the land, one that is even more threatened because the community is alienated from the land, becomes so fundamental in this discourse that landscape in the work stops being merely decorative or supportive and emerges as a full character. Describing the landscape is not enough. The individual, the community, the land are inextricable in the process of creating history.⁸

⁸ Édouard Glissant, *Le discours antillais* (Paris : Éditions de Seuil, 1981), 199, and Édouard. Glissant, *Caribbean discourse : selected essays*. Translation by J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), 105.

Though Antoinette does not fully belong to the Caribbean, her desperate attempt at full Englishness results in an alienation from the land in which she grew up. This alienation can be viewed in conjunction with Glissant's cautioning not to abandon the land. Antoinette's rejection of the Caribbean will be examined further in chapter two. This section treats the relationship between Rochester and Antoinette and its association to landscape.

Kenneth Ramchand's book *The West Indian Novel and its Background* provides one of the earliest readings on *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Though his treatment of the work is little more than intensive plot summary (for the book is rather dated), his interpretation pays close attention to Antoinette's relationship to the land, specifically when she and her new husband journey to their honeymoon house: "On the simplest level, we and the husband (with whose narration Part II opens) are made to see Antoinette's 'blank face' and protective indifference giving way to animation as they move on the long journey through virgin land to the cool remote estate in the hills, farther and farther away from the scenes of her earlier distress."⁹ Ramchand's reading of Antoinette's involvement and subsequent disillusionment with the landscape are part of what he labels as a "terrified consciousness" that White West Indians experienced as a result of decolonization. Other critics view Rhys' colorful implementation of the landscape as evidence that *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a fully West Indian novel. For example, Wally Look Lai claims that the function of the landscape in the work earns its stature as West Indian: "The West Indian setting, far from being incidental, is central to the novel: it is not that it provides a mere background to the theme of rejected womanhood, but rather that the

⁹ Kenneth Ramchand, *The West Indian Novel and its Background* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), 234.

theme of rejected womanhood is utilized symbolically in order to make an artistic statement about West Indian society and the aspect of West Indian experience.”¹⁰ According to Look Lai, Rhys is successful in not simply describing the landscape but making it a fundamental part of her work. Antoinette’s connection to the land also rouses Rochester’s hostility towards her, and her need to quell this hostility leads her to abandon this land. Rochester’s striking lack of affinity to island culture is one of the first signs that he will not adapt to his new life in Jamaica. From the beginning, he is uneasy with the lush surroundings, describing the island as a place that is “not only wild but menacing” (69) and overwhelmed with color: “Everything is too much, I felt as I rode wearily after her. Too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near” (70). It is likely that Rochester’s original intentions did not include coming to the island to take control over Antoinette, but that he succumbs to rage when he realizes he has control neither over the island nor its inhabitants. In a landscape that is so diverse from his own, Rochester cannot assert any authority whatsoever as a white European and this causes him to despise the island and his wife for her association to its beauty. Delia Konzett’s book, *Ethnic Modernisms*, analyzes Rochester’s lack of control :

Rochester, as the scene from the wedding ceremony shows, knows that he can at best give a good performance of white respectability but ultimately remains as unconvinced of his assumed mask as the black locals. Mastery is reduced to a weak assertion of status and in the end Rochester will come to realize the absolute hollowness of his identity as an Englishman. Moreover, he learns that mastery is not only an illusion but also something altogether unattainable, leading him to an irrational hatred of Antoinette and Jamaica.¹¹

¹⁰ Wally Look Lai, “The Road to Thornfield Hall,” *New Beacon Reviews*, 1 (1968) : 40.

¹¹ Delia Caparso Konzett, *Ethnic Modernisms: Anzia Yezierska, Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Rhys, and the aesthetics of dislocation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 137.

The frustration that Rochester experiences is intensified through Antoinette's understanding and familiarity of the island. It is Antoinette who educates Rochester on how to prepare for his new surroundings: she instructs him to put his coat on when they are riding into a cooler climate (70), and to watch out for fire ants when he bathes (86). She also chases away a giant crab with a rock that she throws "like a boy" (87). Rochester's authority is therefore undermined by Antoinette's knowledge of the Caribbean. He admits as much to her: " 'I feel very much a stranger here,' I said. 'I feel that this place is my enemy and on your side' " (129).

In addition to Antoinette being more comfortable on the island, Rhys links the exotic quality of the landscape to Antoinette's sexual awakening. Her newly discovered sexuality proves too much for Rochester, who is repelled by her desire. Mary Lou Emery's book examines Rochester's feelings about Antoinette's growing desire and how this also is in contrast to his European "civilized" world: "Madness and feminine sexuality must be suppressed in the interests of civilized morality. Only on this wild island could they flourish so abandonedly, and so Rochester evolves his plan for Antoinette, a plan about which he need no longer feel any obligations to consult her."¹² Rochester attributes Antoinette's desire to the island's abundance, and it is another example of his lack of control over his surroundings. Because his authority as an Englishman is not recognized on Caribbean soil, Rochester must leave the island in order to possess Antoinette. In his article "The Place of Jean Rhys and Wide Sargasso Sea," Kenneth Ramchand again focuses on the function of landscape, observing how the relationship between Rochester and his wife is parallel to his view of the Caribbean geography: "The different stages of the changing relationship between English husband

¹² Emery, *Jean Rhys at "World's End,"* 50.

and White West Indian wife are marked by the husband's changing and confused attitudes to the landscape; and the difference in temperament between Antoinette and her husband is measured out for us in his reading of the natural world which he identifies with his wife."¹³ Toward the end of part two, Rochester's uneasiness about his natural surroundings has grown into revulsion, a feeling he automatically transfers to Antoinette. Once again, Antoinette is inextricably linked to the landscape, which makes her unequivocally Other in the eyes of the Englishman.

I hated the mountains and the hills, the rivers and the rain. I hated the sunsets of whatever colour, I hated its beauty and its magic and the secret I would never know. I hated its indifference and the cruelty which was part of its loveliness. Above all I hated her. For she belonged to the magic and the loveliness. She had left me thirsty and all my life would be thirst and longing for what I had lost before I found it. (172)

Rochester's intense hatred of the island's beauty is also mentioned in *Jane Eyre*, and it is interesting to explore the function of landscape in the two works. While Rochester is telling Jane the story of his marriage to "Bertha," he mentions how the atmosphere of the island was stifling and oppressive: "The air was like sulfur-steams – I could find no refreshment anywhere." The humid air, which is so oppressive, symbolizes how he felt weighed down by the burden of his mad, alcoholic wife. However, a European wind rouses his desire to go home, and it is this juxtaposition between the island atmosphere and the English one that renders the island as harmful and England inspirational:

A wind fresh from Europe blew over the ocean and rushed through the open encasement; the storm broke, streamed, thundered, blazed, and the air grew pure. I then framed and fixed a resolution. While I walked under the dripping orange trees of my wet garden, and amongst its drenched pomegranates and pine-apples, and while the refulgent dawn of the tropics kindled round me – I reasoned thus, Jane: -- and now listen; for it was true Wisdom that consoled me in that hour, and showed me the right path to follow.

¹³ Kenneth Ramchand, *An Introduction to the study of West Indian Literature* (Sunbury-on-Thames : Nelson Caribbean, 1976), 95.

The sweet wind of Europe was still whispering in the refreshed leaves, and the Atlantic was thundering in glorious liberty; my heart, with living blood – my being longed for renewal – my soul thirsted for a pure draught. I saw Hope revive – and felt Regeneration possible. From a flowery arch at the bottom of my garden I gazed over the sea – bluer than the sky: the old world beyond; clear prospects opened thus: -

“Go,” said Hope, “and live again in Europe: there it is not known what a sullied name you bear, nor what a filthy burden is bound to you.” (263)

Whereas the European wind and sea from England are refreshing, pure, liberating, and reviving, the West Indies atmosphere is ripe and “dripping” with fruit, but the air is stifling and oppressive. This could be read quite ironically in terms of Rhys’ text, for in *Wide Sargasso Sea* England is not a place of liberation as Rochester describes in *Jane Eyre* but is instead a place of enslavement and horror. This passage in Brontë’s text was perhaps instrumental for Rhys when she began writing *Wide Sargasso Sea* and is conceivably the reason why she chose to concentrate so heavily on the topography of the island.

The idea of the English landscape being superior to that of the Caribbean is not a new concept in literature, as Helen Tiffin affirms. In her essay “Man Fitting the Landscape,” Tiffin states that “For colonized peoples, an English landscape – which most Trinidadians of V.S. Naipaul’s generation had never seen – became both normative and ideal, while the Caribbean was regarded as at best exotic, and at worst, aberrant or second-rate.”¹⁴ According to Tiffin, plantation life and agriculture were ways in which European colonizers “tamed” the Caribbean landscape. In addition to this, they attempted to cultivate the land by introducing the concept of the English garden, which they favored over the wilder Caribbean terrain. This garden appears in *Wide Sargasso*

¹⁴ Helen Tiffin, “Man Fitting the Landscape: Nature, Culture, and Colonialism,” in *Caribbean Literature and the Environment: Between Nature and Culture*, ed. Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, Renée K. Gosson, and George B. Handley (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 200.

Sea, but its description in its post-emancipation state starkly contrasts an ordered English landscape: “Our garden was large and beautiful as that garden in the Bible – the tree of life grew there. But it had gone wild. The paths were overgrown and the smell of dead flowers mixed with the fresh living smell...All of Coulibri Estate had gone wild like the garden, gone to bush. No more slavery – why should anybody work?” (19). Tiffin cites more of the same passage, aligning the wildness of the garden to the colonizer’s view that a post-emancipation Jamaica is one of regression. Certainly this view pertains to Rochester, whose distaste with the environment is really an extension of his discomfort with the people of the island. His wife’s difference is marked by her Caribbeanness, which Rochester sees when he looks into her eyes: “Long, sad, dark alien eyes. Creole of English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either” (67).

In contrast to Rochester, Antoinette identifies with the lush environment. One of her first childhood descriptions is of the garden at Coulibri, which she loves despite its recent wildness. “This never saddened me. I did not remember the place when it was prosperous” (19). Her nonchalance about the overgrown island is an example of Antoinette’s non-Englishness, because she, unlike those who remember the days of slavery, does not lament the lack of order in the garden. Though Antoinette is still “béké,” her association and love of her natural surroundings is her main source of comfort. The islands are much more suited to her than England, as Christophine points out to Rochester: “She is Creole girl, and she have the sun in her” (158). At one point in the novel, when Antoinette seeks counsel from Christophine, she establishes her connection to the land: “The sky was dark blue through the dark green mango leaves, and I thought, ‘This is my place and this is where I belong and this is where I wish to stay.’ ”

(108). Unfortunately, Antoinette abandons this thinking because she is so desperate to remain with Rochester. The latter ultimately takes her away from the Caribbean and gains satisfaction from knowing that he is uprooting her from a place that she loves: “She said she loved this place. This is the last she’ll see of it...No sun....No sun. The weather has changed” (166). This changing weather, of course, signifies England, where there is very little sun. This is the frightful England of Antoinette’s dreams, of Rochester’s cold Atlantic Sea, far from her warm tropical Sargasso Sea. While trapped in the hellish England that is Thornfield Hall, Antoinette eventually journeys back across the Sargasso sea, a subject that is revisited in chapter two. For now, I will turn to Maryse Condé’s text, and how maternal images, mother country, and marriage appear in her work.

Maternal Images in Condé’s Memoir

Maryse Condé’s memoir, *Le coeur à rire et à pleurer* contains many elements of motherhood and mother country that are present in *La migration des cœurs*. The central figure in the memoir is without question Condé’s mother, whom Condé, the narrator, admires and fears. The relationship between the narrator and her mother compels the reader to ponder the link between the mother figure and maternal language, which influences the daughter’s sense of identity.

In her memoir, Condé is raised in Guadeloupe but she is shielded from her African heritage because her parents choose to identify with white European culture and distance themselves from black customs. Her parents claim to love Paris more than their native country, and pride themselves on their flawless French. Their intense longing to be European leaves Condé with an unclear idea of who she is or where she belongs, for Condé knows that she is different. Condé is also unsure of who her mother is because of

her reluctance to assimilate to her Afro Caribbean culture. Though Condé, like many of the other protagonists, has an unstable relationship with her mother, she nevertheless writes that utter happiness was in her mother's belly (26). This happiness stems from origin, and throughout the memoir peace is found when Condé is connected to her mother and mother country. Though Condé's mother distances herself from the mother country, there are rare glimpses of Afro Caribbean culture in her mother and these glimpses are always associated with birth images. This association further emphasizes the relationship between mother country, maternal language and mother. For example, Condé's mother aids another woman in giving birth to her child, and she gives the woman orders in Creole. Condé is struck by the event because it is the first time she has ever heard her mother speak her native language (3). Condé experiments with her memoir and uses her authorial skills in recounting events at which she was not present; specifically her mother's pregnancy. It is interesting that during the pregnancy Condé mentions that her mother sings in Creole, her native language. Also important is Condé's description of the changes her mother's body undergoes, for the description parallels Guadeloupe's island topography. Condé deftly interweaves the cultural with the physical by associating her mother's pregnancy with both language (cultural) and environment (physical):

L'arbre de son corps n'était pas flétri, desséché. Il pouvait encore porter des fruits. Devant sa glace, elle regardait avec ravissement s'arrondir son ventre, rebondir ses seins, doux comme une paire des pigeons ramiers. Ses cheveux poussaient, poussaient, touffus comme une forêt et elle faisait son chignon et fredonnant, chose rare, une vieille chanson créole qu'elle avait entendu chanter sa mère morte cinq ans plut tôt : Sura an blan, Ka sanmb on pigeon blan... (19)

Her body's tree had not withered or dried. It could still bear fruit. In front of the mirror, she would look with satisfaction at her rounding stomach and firm breasts, soft like a pair of ring doves. Her hair grew, grew, thick like a forest and she would pull it back and, curiously enough, she would hum, an old Creole song that she had heard her departed mother sing five years earlier: Sura an blan, Ka sanmb on pigeon blan... (*translation mine*)

The fact that Condé compares her mother's pregnant body to a luxurious forest is significant because it links her to the natural surroundings of the island and not Europe with its architecture or buildings. In fact, later in the memoir Condé describes her distaste for Paris, which is the complete opposite of lush island scenery:

Paris, pour moi, était une ville sans soleil, un enferment de pierres arides, un enchevêtrement de métro et d'autobus...(97).

Paris, for me, was a city without sun, a prison of arid rock, a tangle of subways and buses... (*translation mine*).

Also significant is the fact that her mother speaks Creole in the environment of birth, tying together the relationship with mother tongue and native land. Condé has a similar experience when she visits Gourbeyre, a tropical place that her parents dislike but with which she immediately identifies. Once again, there are maternal images in Condé's description:

A l'entour, le paysage se mit à changer. Des mornes arrondirent leurs ventres. Des bananeraies aux longues feuilles vernissées prirent la place des champs de canne à sucre et s'étagèrent sur les hauteurs. L'eau des cascades inonda le bas-côté de la route...Je regardais de tous mes yeux et j'avais l'intuition que j'étais née, sans le savoir, dans un coin du paradis terrestre. (106)

All around, the countryside began to change. The morns rounded their stomachs. The banana trees with their long glossy leaves took the place of the sugarcane fields and rose in tiers on the hilltops. Cascades of water flooded the shoulder of the road....I looked with gaping eyes and I had the feeling that I was born, without knowing it, in a corner of earthly paradise. (*translation mine*)

Maternal images are everywhere within this natural environment: the morns rounding their stomachs evoke the idea of pregnant women, the vegetation is described as ripe and blossoming, and water is gushing, an image easily linked to a woman whose water breaks before birth. This description is also similar to that given of the narrator's pregnant mother, and the narrator links birth to Gourbeyre when she mentions the feeling of being born in that part of the world. The fact that Condé feels a stronger sense of identity when

she is closer to nature is not unlike the feeling of safety and security Antoinette feels around the island tropics in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In an interview, Condé comments on the power of nature and how it is an integral part of the Antilles: “When I went back to Guadeloupe, I realized again that nature has a power, a presence. You cannot forget it. It is even more important than the people.”¹⁵ The idea of environment and native country will be examined further in this chapter but for now I wish to turn to Condé’s fiction, which also makes reference to motherhood and native land, although in the context of absence.

Motherless Sons and Daughters in *La migration des cœurs*

In the other novels and in Condé’s memoir the characters feel displaced in part because of strained relationships with their mothers and their mother countries. In *La migration des cœurs*, however, the lack of identification with country or mother is based on the fact that many characters have *no* mother. Almost every character is born without maternal guidance: Justin, Justin-Marie, Cathy, Little Cathy, and baby Anthuria never know their mothers and identify this absence as the root of their suffering. Many of the former slaves who narrate sections of the book often begin their tale with the remark that they know nothing of their true family. Razyé, of course, has no knowledge of his origins, and it is for this reason that he becomes completely broken when Cathy rejects him. Before she deserted Razyé, Cathy served as every significant figure in his life, including a maternal one:

Pourquoi n’avait-il pas une maman comme tous les êtres humains? Même les esclaves dans leur enfer savaient le ventre qui les avait portés. Il se demandait quelle figure donner à ses rêves et qui était cette inconnue à jamais...Razyé se torturait. Un temps, Cathy lui avait servi de tout à la fois: de papa, de maman, de soeur. Son corps

¹⁵ Barbara Lewis, “No Silence: An Interview with Maryse Condé” *Callaloo* 18, no. 3 (1995) : 549.

le protégeait. Blotti contre sa poitrine, il trouvait la douceur du sein et du ventre qu'il n'avait jamais connus. A présent, elle l'avait déserté. (46)

Why didn't he have a maman like all the other human beings? Even the slaves in the depths of their hell knew the womb that had carried them. He wondered what face he should give his dreams and who was this mother he was never to know...Razyé was suffering agony. There was a time when Cathy had been a papa, a maman and a sister to him. Her body had protected him. When he curled up against her he found the softness of the breast and the womb he had never known. Now she had deserted him. (38)

All that we know of Razyé's origins is that he is found on the heath, hence his name. The name, which is central to identity, and his only known birth place connects Rayzé to the earth and to his natural surroundings. Though there is no literal mother for him, and his "home" is the heath, critic Françoise Lionnet describes his predicament as a freedom that the other characters do not share. Razyé cannot be defined by lineage that is unknown, and lineage and race are a source of great anxiety for most of the main characters in Condé's novel as well as those in this dissertation. Lionnet describes how Razyé is set apart from this anxiety: "...he is linked to landscape, free from cultural vestments and baggage that accrue when one is wedded to the idea of "home" that suggests a history, a line of descent, and a legitimate tradition, rather than a temporary dwelling or a practice that remains open to the future because it is not defined by set pedigrees and clear genealogies."¹⁶ The idea of lineage is responsible for Little Cathy's struggle in all its opposing forces. Her skin color convinces her that she does not belong to the Linsseuil family, yet breaking from her upbringing is not so easy. When she becomes the school mistress in *Marie Galante*, the people are suspicious of her because of her language. They notice that she is not fluent in Creole but in French, and they are critical of her

¹⁶ Françoise Lionnet, "Narrating the Americas : Transcolonial Métissage and Maryse Condé's *La Migration des coeurs*," in *Mixing Race, Mixing Culture: Inter-American Literary Dialogues*, ed. Monika Kaup and Debra J. Rosenthal (Austin : University of Texas Press, 2002): 83.

teaching. Her obvious difference prevents her from finding work in Roseau and even her new husband, Razyé II, knows that Little Cathy cannot escape her past: “Yes, deep down she remained the daughter of Aymeric de Linsseuil, born and bred on the Belles-Feuilles estate” (338).

Cathy, Little Cathy’s mother, also grapples with identity problems that are much more faceted than being born without her mother. In this novel the mixing of blood and class also contributes to the theme of identity, and Cathy is wrestling with what she speaks of as two Cathys battling for control, and the “pure” white Cathy is whom she wishes to be victorious, which would in turn mean leaving her companion Razyé, also an integral part of herself:

Si Justin n’avait pas fait à Razyé ce qu’il lui a fait, je ne songerais même pas à ce mariage. Mais de la façon dont Razyé est à présent, je ne pourrai jamais me marier avec lui. Ce serait une dégradation! Ce serait comme s’il n’y avait jamais plus qu’une seule Cathy, la bossale, la mécréante descendant tout droit de son négrier... Avec lui, je recommencerais à vivre comme si nous étions encore des sauvages d’Afrique. Tout pareil! (48)

If Justin hadn’t done what he did to Razyé, I wouldn’t even be thinking of marriage. But the way Razyé is now, I could never marry him. It would be too degrading! It would be as if only Cathy the reprobate existed, stepping straight off the slave-ship. Living with him would be like starting over as savages in Africa. Just the same! (41)

Cathy sacrifices happiness and self to marry into a richer, whiter class in hopes of purifying her African blood, and thus breaks all ties with her former life. She views skin color as opposing forces: whiteness exemplifies purity and righteousness while blackness represents savagery and indecency. During her stay with the Linseuill family, Cathy reemerges cultivated and refined, having replaced her Creole language with proper French and imitating Western European culture. She is ashamed of her background and is eager to stifle that part of her existence, despite the fact that she has happiness and even freedom in this existence with Razyé. This transformation underlines Glissant’s claim

that Caribbean peoples look outside their community for a resolution to their problems. In Cathy's case, she does just that – she seeks to identify with France through assimilation and, in so doing, rejects her Antillanité. Critic Beverly Noakes develops a theory that in Caribbean cultures, entering into a higher class system and acquiring wealth affects not only one's social standing, but one's race as well:

The economic factors underlying changes in class structure have often fascinated Caribbean novelists, and in this region, the interaction of race and money has been a distinctive feature in the formation of the middle class. At the same time, a metaphorical change of skin colour through the acquisition of money may also, for a Caribbean group, signal a change in cultural affiliation.¹⁷

Cathy convinces herself that it is necessary to have a higher social standing and so she develops an affinity for the European model. Her bond with Creolité is never re-established in her lifetime, but it is somewhat restored through blood. There is hope in Cathy's daughter, Little Cathy, who is born with dark skin (her brothers and sisters are extremely light), thus bringing back the African bloodline into the family. Little Cathy also breaks away from her wealthy upbringing and her brothers and sisters, with whom she could never relate, to enter a world that was familiar to her mother. Little Cathy begins teaching in the poverty-stricken town of Marie-Galante and therefore comes face to face with hardships she had never endured as a young girl. She completes this "return" by meeting and marrying Razyé II, whom Condé strongly hints is actually Little Cathy's brother. In Brontë's text, the couple would be happy and accomplish through their mortal lives what Cathy and Heathcliff never could: a bond of open love. This is, of course, how *Wuthering Heights* ends; young Cathy reconciles with Hareton, whose savagery gives way to a learned young man. Little Cathy is able to rehabilitate him, and she essentially

¹⁷ Beverly Noakes, "Money, Race, and Cultural Identity in the work of Maryse Condé," *Essays in French Literature* 37 (November 2000) : 126.

reverses the damage Heathcliff had inflicted. The novel ends with the couple's marriage and a restoration of order. In Condé's version however, the ending is not so neat. Little Cathy never makes it back to L'Engoulvent, and though she educates Razyé II, he reverts to his former self. Little Cathy's death leaves another daughter without a mother, yet she fantasizes of being reunited with her own:

Chose curieuse, voire choquante, elle n'avait pas de chagrin en songeant à la petite malheureuse qu'elle avait créée pour rester sans maman en ce bas monde. Elle se préoccupait seulement d'elle même. Alors, elle cesserait d'être une orpheline. Le coeur battait comme celui d'une esclave qui voit la cote de Guinée sur l'horizon, elle imagina le moment de sa réunion avec sa maman...Elle se rassasierait de tous les baisers qu'elle gardait en réserve depuis petite. Elle découvrait l'odeur de sa peau, de ses cheveux. Puis, brusquement, elle réalisait sa naïveté. Il n'y a pas d'autre odeur que celle de la charogne. (301)

Strangely, even shockingly, she felt no grief for the unfortunate little baby she had created who would remain motherless here below. She could only think of herself. She would cease to be an orphan. With heart beating like a slave who sees the coast of Guinea on the horizon, she imagined the reunion with her mother...She would have her fill of all the kisses she had been storing up since childhood. She would discover the smell of her skin and hair. Then suddenly she realized how naïve she was. There would be nothing to smell but the smell of a corpse. (309)

As in many of these novels and also in Condé's memoir, maternal images are connected to one's maternal land. Cathy equates her reunion with her mother with that of a slave being freed and finally seeing home again. Unfortunately, the hope of a return is short lived. For a brief moment, Little Cathy is hopeful that her death will give her a sense of closure with her mother, yet this hope quickly vanishes with the dreaded certainty that death is no solution. Interestingly, many of the characters in the novel have the same hopes, but they ultimately reach the same conclusion. This idea will be discussed further in chapter two, which involves the implications of an author re-writing a text. In developing the maternal images within the text, it is important to examine language in Rosario Ferré's *The House on the Lagoon*, where one's mother tongue is emphasized as a key element to identity.

Language as Identity in *The House on the Lagoon*

In the *The House on the Lagoon*, Ferré is sensitive to the notion that one's maternal language is an integral part of identity, and the conflict between English and Spanish is one of the reasons for discord among Puerto Ricans. Ferré's novel also contains characters of African descent, and the significance of the mother tongue is a central focus of their culture. This is demonstrated in the form of a story told by Petra early in the novel. Petra is a strong and mysterious African woman who works for the family, and the story of her ancestor Barnabé is passed down through many generations. Barnabé is a tribal chieftain who is captured and enslaved, and as a result he and other new slaves are forced to deny fundamental elements of their culture. Among the most difficult of their renunciations is their native language, a rule which pains Barnabé, for he finds it inconceivable that he be forbidden from speaking his own tongue:

Bernabé, like the rest of the adult bozal slaves recently arrived from Angola, spoke Bantu. But if anyone was caught speaking it, even if he was speaking only to himself, he would be repaid with fifty lashes. Barnabé had a terrible time accepting this. One's tongue was so deeply ingrained, more so even than one's religion or tribal pride; it was like a root that went deep into one's body and no one knew exactly where it ended. It was attached to one's throat, to one's neck, to one's stomach, even to one's heart. (60)

The intense observation of language in this passage contributes to the theme that runs consistently throughout the novel, reminding the reader that language affects everything, from political view to spiritual belief. In this passage language is explicitly described as being an inseparable part of the self, in the physical as well as the cultural realm. Unfortunately, Barnabé is caught planning an uprising and, as punishment, his tongue is cut out. This brutal reaction illustrates how colonial violence literally cuts out African culture and replaces it with colonial culture. Yet though Barnabé has lost his "langue" in the

physical sense, it remains intact through the oral tradition, for his story is passed down to future generations before it is recorded to the written form of Isabel's novel.

The complexity of language corresponds to the debate over independence and statehood in Puerto Rico. Those in favor of independence cite fear of losing the Spanish language as a main reason for their cause, believing that to support Puerto Rico's annexation to the United States would mean to support English as its primary language. In his article, "Speaking English in Puerto Rico: The Impact of Affluence, Education, and Return Migration," Amílcar Antonio Barreto claims that Puerto Rico began to develop its own cultural identity in response to the American invasion, and that the Spanish language was a tool used to create that identity: "Americanization gave the Spanish language a social meaning it would not have acquired otherwise...Puerto Rican intellectuals actively promoted the articulation of a new ethnic identity seeking to distinguish Puerto Ricans from Americans – *us* from *them*."¹⁸ Under the Foraker Act, which established civilian government in Puerto Rico, there was a push for English to be the official language, and schools began to teach classes in English, a change that was unwelcome by most of the Puerto Rican population.¹⁹ Today, though English shares space with Spanish as the co-official language, the majority of Puerto Ricans do not identify with English nor speak it fluently.²⁰

Barreto's article also mentions that it was Puerto Rico's elite who wished to forge this national identity, a sentiment echoed by critic José Luis González, whose essay "Puerto Rico: The Four Storeyed Country" essentially states that there was no national

¹⁸ Amílcar Antonio Barreto, "Speaking English in Puerto Rico: The Impact of Affluence, Education, and Return Migration," *Centro Journal* 12, no.1 (Fall 2000): 6.

¹⁹ Trías Monge's *Puerto Rico*, 55.

²⁰ See p. 184 of Trías Monge's *Puerto Rico (Ibid.)*, where he states that only 19% of Puerto Ricans speak English with ease.

identity before Americanization. Interestingly, (or perhaps because of his thesis) González barely mentions language in his essay, with the exception of the last page that urges the reader to master English. In learning English, González believes that Puerto Rico will have a chance to appropriate the language to aid in a decolonization process. In this way Puerto Rico will not concede to the American influence. The idea of appropriation used to overturn outside influence is a technique that authors such as Jean Rhys and Maryse Condé employ by adopting the colonial language and rewriting the canonical text. Though González maintains he does not believe in the colonial relationship between the U.S. and Puerto Rico, his essays tend to have a pro-American sentiment, mainly because he insists that Americanization has aided the oppressed Afro Puerto Rican groups of the island, and that it is Puerto Rico's elite who are unsupportive of Afro Puerto Ricans and therefore wish to forge a national identity in order to gain more control. González's essay is more thoroughly explored in chapter four, but for now is only introduced in terms of its view of language.

Despite whether or not the affiliation of Spanish to a Puerto Rican identity was created through questionable motivation, the reality is that Puerto Ricans now *do* identify with their language as a source of national pride, and this identification adds to the fragmentation of Puerto Rican society, causing divides between those of differing political views. In Ferré's novel, the support of the Spanish language, and hence, independence, is often an idea felt by the women of the novel. Their political support can be seen as an extension of their feelings toward their marriage, for Puerto Rico's independence from the U.S. is metaphorically a need for Puerto Rican women's independence from the patriarch. As women, certain characters in the novel seek

autonomy and are therefore sympathetic to Puerto Rico's desire for autonomy as a country. For example, Coral fiercely defends the preservation of her language to her politically apathetic boyfriend, Manuel. She sees English as an intrusion on a culture that is already suffering an identity crisis: "Independence for the island was the purest ideal anyone could strive for, but statehood was anathema. It meant English would be our official language and we would have to *talk* and *feel* in English...Just think, we're in a country that in its five hundred years of existence has never been its own self. Don't you think that's tragic?" (341). Coral's belief that English is an "outsider" language, while Spanish represents the self, parallels the sentiments of many Caribbean writers. For the Caribbean author, Creole is the language of "home." In her book *Searching for Safe Spaces*, Myriam Chancy explains how English enhanced her feelings of exile when she emigrated from Haiti to Canada: "I associated English with all that remained to be lost: my native tongue and the fragments of *créole* that, I hoped, were still clinging to the deep recesses of my memory."²¹ According to Chancy, language is what connects her to her country of origin, similar to Coral's view that English as an official language will distance her from her Puerto Rican culture.

Coral is probably the most political woman in the novel but many of the other female characters, such as Abby, Isabel, and even Rebecca are supportive of independence in their desire to be strong independent women. Rebecca, for example, espouses this political belief as a reaction against the male figures that dominated her life. As a child she was always under the thumb of her overprotective father, who denied her a university education. In order to console herself she identifies with the French stamps

²¹ Myriam Chancy, *Searching for Safe Spaces: Afro-Caribbean Women Writers in Exile* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), xii.

from her collection, whose initials RF (Révolution Française) correspond her to her own, Rebecca Francisca: “Rebecca swore to herself that one day she would gain freedom and fly to all parts of the world, like the letters her stamps gave wings to. ‘Every woman should be a republic unto herself’ she often whispered into her pillow before she went to sleep at night.” (97). Unfortunately, when Rebecca marries, control is merely transferred from father to husband, therefore her personal wish for independence shifts to a political one: “If she couldn’t be independent herself, she would say, at least her country should have control over its destiny” (97). Rebecca’s love of the arts is used as an attempt to gain more independence from her husband and to develop an identity outside the role of a married woman. Rebecca’s poetry, her controversial dancing, and her love of art inspire independence, yet this also incites anger in her husband, who after a particularly scandalous dance beats his wife so badly that she gives up her artistic joys and instead becomes a mother to more children.

Motherhood and Marriage in *The House on the Lagoon*

As in all of these novels, motherhood is a theme and the struggles that the sons and daughters have with their mothers are prevalent in *The House on the Lagoon*. Many of the women characters do not want children as they are viewed as a hindrance to their independence. Isabel’s grandmother becomes celibate in order to avoid another pregnancy, and Rebecca enjoys her artistic endeavors for years before becoming pregnant with Quintín. She is satisfied with her only child, but her husband disapproves of her dancing and poetry readings. He wishes for more children and would prefer to see Rebecca in the role of wife and mother. He eventually gets his wish, and Rebecca becomes more submissive with each pregnancy: “Rebecca bore her frequent pregnancies

patiently, seemingly reconciled to her fate. But she was exhausted. She put away her dancing shoes and her poetry books and slowly faded from view” (69).

In the novel there are also instances in which women are driven in the opposite direction; that is, they are pressured *not* to have children. Isabel is an only child because her grandmother forces Isabel’s mother, Carmita, to have an abortion. The grandmother feels that she is doing Carmita a service and offering her more independence. However, Carmita almost dies in the process, and the procedure leaves her unable to conceive. Isabel witnesses her mother’s abortion, and the image is forever burned in her mind. The mother, Carmita, is grief stricken over the aborted child, and consequently falls into a deep depression. Through the fog of this depression, she neglects Isabel: “All of a sudden it was as if Carmita wasn’t there anymore. Her eyes grew absent and her black clothes, wet with tears, were always cold when I hugged her. It was as if she lived in a perpetual mist. She wouldn’t let me kiss or embrace her, because I reminded her of the dead baby” (37). This scene is reminiscent of *Paper Fish*, for Sarah pays little attention to Carmolina in favor of her handicapped daughter, Doriana. However, the scene has a much more striking resemblance to *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Antoinette’s mother, Annette, favors Pierre, her son, who also has a disability. She endures a deep depression after his death, and thus she also lives in a fog and deserts Antoinette. Isabel’s mother suffers another tragedy, the suicide of her husband, and therefore she is linked to Annette in another way: they both become insane. Isabel eventually commits her mother to an asylum.

With her parents both tragically dead, Isabel, like many other characters in these novels, is now an orphan. When she and Quintín fall in love, Quintín is cautioned by his

parents about marriage. Here we see another parallel to *Wide Sargasso Sea*, for Quintín, like Rochester, is warned of a possible backlash of family history: “Carmita went mad and Carlos killed himself. Quintín’s parents cautioned him, pointing out these things and insisting that he should think carefully before making a decision. Psychological problems were often inherited, and Carmita’s madness was not to be taken lightly. His children might develop it; Isabel, too” (247). Friends of Quintín’s family even sometimes call Isabel’s family “white trash” (247) which bears a resemblance to the “white cockroaches” insult to the white Creoles of the Caribbean islands. Quintín marries Isabel despite the warnings, but he in turn becomes very controlling. In fact, after her first child and at Quintín’s insistence, Isabel undergoes a procedure that prevents her from getting pregnant again. Therefore, Quintín has control over Isabel in an area most fundamental to women: reproduction.

Isabel shows similar characteristics to Rebecca, leaning towards independence and an inclination to follow the arts. Before her marriage, Isabel, who had seen many strong women become meek throughout years of marriage, made her own wedding vow, which was not to her husband, but to herself: “Rebecca had wanted to be a writer and a dancer, but she became neither, because of her unhappy marriage. I swore I wouldn’t let that happen to me” (208). Yet it does happen, and it is Isabel’s writing that is the measure of her independence. Early in the novel, she describes a passion for writing and pursues an education in literature. She mentions how she wrote poems and stories in the early part of her marriage. Yet as her marriage progresses, her independence wanes. Isabel becomes another housewife, another Rebecca:

I was content to be Quintín Mendizabal’s wife and willingly took over the role of mistress of the house on the lagoon. I kept myself looking as young as possible, was concerned that our children perform well at school, saw that the cooking and the

laundering were impeccably done, took care that Brambon fed the dogs and kept the mangroves properly pruned so that they wouldn't encroach on the house. I even joined several charity associations, like the Carnegie Library Ladies Club, the Red Cross Charity Ball Committee, and the Cancer Committee, and would often give tea parties for it's members. Once in awhile I also invited Quintín's friends to the house, San Juan's most successful businessmen and their elegant wives. (329)

Isabel does not seem to realize that she has become the wife and mother that she swore she would not. She has lost her author/ity as a person and as a writer, and this loss can be compared to an observation Isabel makes early in the novel, where she presents an interesting comparison between Puerto Rican statehood and marriage. This comparison parallels the difficulty of women attempting to gain independence in marriages ruled by a patriarchal society:

The way I see it, our island is like a betrothed, always on the verge of marriage. If one day Puerto Rico becomes a state, it will have to accept English – the language of her future husband – as its official language, not just because it's the language of modernity and of progress but because it's the language of authority. If the island decides to remain single, on the other hand, it will probably mean backwardness and poverty. (184)

The language of *authority* is key in this passage; in essence, Puerto Rico would give authority and autonomy over to the U.S. and allow its language, Spanish, to fall by the wayside; it is a sacrifice made in exchange for security in this "marriage." Here again I am reminded of Glissant's criticism of the French Caribbean's assimilation to France. Critic Michael Dash comments on Glissant's opinion of Martinique's relationship with France:

Caribbean Discourse offers a historical perspective on the unchecked process of psychic disintegration in Martinique. History – or, to use Glissant's term, "nonhistory" – is seen as a series of "missed opportunities" because of which the French West Indian is persuaded of his impotence and encouraged to believe in the disinterested generosity of France, to pursue the privilege of citizenship and the material benefits of departmental status.²²

²² Michael Dash, Introduction to *Caribbean Discourse* by Edouard Glissant (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989): xviii.

Dash's description of Martinique's inability or refusal to relinquish certain European advantages in favor of a more solid Caribbean identity is a stunning parallel to Puerto Rico's situation. The island is divided on sacrificing their U.S. security for the difficulties that independence may cause. Similarly, women in the novel who marry are giving up a part of their independence and identity for comfort and financial security. Rebecca is forced to give up her artistic endeavors for her husband, yet has nothing to worry about financially. Isabel, who is independent at first, gets married and lives off the riches of her husband. It is only through her novel that she reclaims her independence. Though she is passive when Quintín mistreats her, she exposes his nature through the written text, and in so doing, regains a sense of identity.

The idea of women giving up their identity through marriage in Ferré's novel is represented in all the works studied in this dissertation. Antoinette loses her name as well as her association to the island when she marries Rochester, Cathy denies her African heritage and her love for Heathcliff when she marries into a lofty white society, and Carmolina's mother sacrifices her ties to her Lithuanian culture when she marries into an Italian family. In some of these novels there is reclamation of what has been lost, for Carmolina represents a generation of Italians who is able to maintain identity and culture but also progress in a modern world. In an act of revolt, Antoinette takes revenge on Rochester by setting fire to his estate; and the text itself encourages the reader to reconsider events in Brontë's text. Condé's novel focuses upon the despair and alienation that is felt when one denies or is denied their origins, and her incorporation of island elements in a text that is representative of the British culture is a way to bring Caribbean authority to the forefront. Similarly, Ferré's character, Isabel, uses her authorial power in

the text to free herself from her husband. While the women of the Caribbean novels have unhappy marriages that are to the detriment of the self, in *Paper Fish* Carmolina experiences a rather unusual marriage which validates the self, and this “marriage,” paired with her authorial power, clears the way for an Italian American female identity.

A Marriage to Self: Carmolina’s Autonomy in *Paper Fish*

Tina De Rosa’s extraordinary yet overlooked novel is a largely autobiographical work which focuses on the complexities of being Italian American. As explained in the introduction, the novel centers on the relationship between young Carmolina and her Italian grandmother, with whom she has an intensely close relationship. She does not experience the same closeness with her parents, Marco and Sarah, who are silent yet nonetheless significant figures in the work. Marco is Italian American but Sarah is Lithuanian, which the reader learns late in the novel. This multi-cultural background is the same one in which De Rosa grew up, but her identity was defined more by her Italian side not only because of her relationship with her grandmother but also because she knew virtually nothing about her Lithuanian heritage. Edvige Giunta explains this in more detail in the afterword of the novel:

De Rosa’s silence about her Lithuanian ancestry depends not only on the fact that her paternal grandmother kept alive her *italianità* in the family, but also on the seeming reluctance of her maternal relatives to discuss their origins and the reasons for the family’s emigration. Her mother’s lore, which fascinated the young De Rosa, remained vague, almost mysterious. By contrast, she was exposed in her daily life to the Italian language and customs, both in her household and in Little Italy where she grew up.²³

Though this crossing of cultures (Lithuanian and Italian) is not the main focus of the novel, it does appear in fragments and takes on special significance because it facilitates a

²³ Edvige Giunta, “A Song from the Ghetto,” in *Paper Fish* by Tina De Rosa (New York: Feminist Press, 1996), 124.

comparison of Sarah's feelings of displacement and loss with Carmolina's, and the final scene in the work reveals Carmolina's ability to overcome that feeling by merging self-identification with her cultural background. In other words, Carmolina is able to preserve her *italianità* without sacrificing her independence, something her mother is unable to achieve.

A glimpse into Sarah's thoughts reveals that she longs for her past, which included her identity as a Lithuanian:

Sarah did not find it easy, at first, living with the old mother and three sisters and brother. The house was set on a corner in the Italian neighborhood on the other side of the city from where her own family lived, from where her mother spoke Lithuanian over the sweet blue bed sheets and the crocuses of her neighbors who laughed and responded in Lithuanian...Now she had left behind her the small white houses of the south side of the city, the picket fences between the yards; the gutteral and minced Lithuanian in the throats of her family, her neighbors, was stilled. (48-49)

In these reflections there is an emphasis on Sarah's original language and ethnicity, which is no longer available to her when she marries into the Italian culture. The Lithuanian language is described tenderly in Sarah's memory, and it is paired with other pleasant images from her past. There is particular attention paid to the language's *sound*, which is now silenced for Sarah. She enters the BellaCasa family but has trouble adjusting to the new language, and wonders how it will affect her unborn child. "In the mornings they exchanged slow Italian over cups of thick black coffee. Sarah could never quite catch up and wondered which language the baby would speak. In silence she sat at the breakfasts where large bowls of pastina and butter were passed and felt the cold hand creep up from her chest and snap her words in two" (46). Sarah's fond memories are linked to language and she is nostalgic for her mother tongue, which is connected to her real mother, who speaks Lithuanian. When she changes languages she is uncomfortable and feels as if she is forced into silence, illustrated by the almost violent image of a hand that breaks her words.

This silence eventually supersedes her Lithuanian identity and she remains silent for most of the novel. In fact, the small fragments that disclose her longing for the past provide the most revealing look into Sarah's thoughts. The fact that she wonders which language the child will speak is significant because, as the reader is well aware, the baby speaks no language. Doriana is born with a mental handicap and is unable to speak, a main example of the silence that pervades the novel. Silence is a subject I will return to further in this dissertation, but for now I will focus on the representation of marriage in the work.

Sarah's wistfulness in regard to her Lithuanian heritage is brought on through her marriage into an Italian family. The idea of marriage and its meaning in regard to culture and identity surfaces in the novel through an unusual juxtaposition: Sarah's own marriage and Carmolina's symbolic one. Both scenes involve a bride and a maternal figure: Sarah is wearing her wedding gown, gazing into a mirror while her mother observes her. Carmolina is also before the mirror in a gown with Grandma Doria. What renders the scene unusual is that while Sarah is preparing to marry Marco, Carmolina has no groom – she is only doing this so her grandmother, who does not have much time to live, can envision Carmolina on her wedding day. In Sarah's wedding scene her mother appears unhappy; Sarah implores her mother to tell her she looks beautiful but her mother cannot do so, saying only: "You look like a bride" (46). Sarah's mother understands that Sarah will give up part of her identity through marriage. In contrast, Carmolina's grandmother is joyful: "her old mouth repeated, repeated in Italian, that Carmolina was beautiful, was beautiful" (114). In marrying Marco, Sarah leaves her mother and her mother language, but Carmolina's "marriage" is different because throughout the entire novel she is in search of an independent self which is often denied to women in the Italian tradition. Carmolina is not

getting married to a man to then leave the family but instead she undergoes a marriage to self. Critic Fred Gardaphé comments on Carmolina's symbolic marriage: "De Rosa's presentation of this scene signifies a defiance of the Italian tradition. Carmolina achieves her adult identity not by attaching herself to a man, but by taking it from her grandmother, who acknowledges it through the blessing she gives her granddaughter." ²⁴

Tina De Rosa also clarifies the marriage scene in her interview with Lisa Meyer. She comments on how Carmolina's marriage is not about becoming a traditional Italian wife but instead about pursuing other opportunities. However, De Rosa notes that Carmolina will not desert her family and that she will return:

She's marrying her future. She knows that her life will not be traditional. She's not necessarily going to have a man at her side. And when Grandma Doria gives Carmolina those three little coins that she used the first time she ran away, the grandmother is telling her to run away. "This time I give them to you on purpose.." ...She knows the grandmother is going to die soon. And she sees this little shadow that is her sister. Carmolina knows that eventually she is going to have to come back and set her sister free. ²⁵

In the other three novels, marriage has signified disaster for the protagonists: Antoinette is broken down and imprisoned by her husband, Cathy turns her back on her true love Razyé and her ancestral past, and Isabel's marriage defines her as a submissive wife and she loses one of her sons. As I remark in later chapters, some of these protagonists redeem themselves, but in order to do so they leave the marriage.

In *Paper Fish* Carmolina's "marriage" is not to her detriment but instead serves as a way to solidify her identity as a woman without sacrificing her identity as an Italian. In Italian culture the daughter leaves home when she gets married, and this marriage symbolizes her entrance into adulthood and her independence as a woman. However,

²⁴ Gardaphé, *Italian Signs, American Streets*, 57.

²⁵ Meyer, "Breaking the Silence," 64.

these women are merely changing over from one patriarch to another, as in the case of Rebecca in *The House on the Lagoon*. The fact that Italian women immigrated with men, and never alone, further defined their role as wives and mothers, as Helen Baroloni points out:

Italian women who came to this country did so as part of a family – as daughter, wife, sister, or “on consignment,” chosen, sometimes by picture or sometimes by hearsay from an immigrant’s hometown to be his wife. But always in the context of a family situation. There was no pattern of the independent Italian woman emigrating alone to better her lot as there was, for instance, of Irish women who, advantaged by having the language, came over in droves to be hired as maidservants, many then living out their lives unmarried and alone. But an uneducated Italian woman could not exist, economically or socially, outside the family institution which defined her life and gave it its whole meaning. She came bonded to the traditional role.²⁶

Carmolina, however, breaks from tradition by entering into a marriage of self; it is a marriage that solidifies her autonomy as a person. The marriage also affirms her identity as Italian, which is shown through mirrored images of the past and present: Grandma Doria and Carmolina get ready separately and are each looking into a mirror. Doria sees herself and her mother’s picture in the mirror; Carmolina looks into a mirror and sees herself, her mother, and even her sister, who occupies the corner of the glass. When Doria comes to see Carmolina in her gown, they both speak to each other in the mirror. It is a reflection of generations, and when Doria tells Carmolina that it is her turn, she is urging Carmolina to seek out her independence but also to keep her memories alive. Fred Gardaphé explains that the third generation, free from some of the struggle endured by the first and second, is responsible for preserving the history of their ancestors: “While the earlier battles were fought and won on the economic and sociological front, the battle for the grandchildren of the immigrants has moved to the cultural front.”²⁷ In *Paper*

²⁶ Barolini, *Chiaroscuro*, 152.

²⁷ Gardaphé, “We Weren’t Always White,” 189.

Fish the relationship between the first generation (Doria) and the third generation (Carmolina) is what secures the immigrant's story in the literary tradition.

Hansen's Law and the Grandmother Figure in *Paper Fish*

Many Italian American critics point specifically to the third generation as accomplishing goals that the first and second generations were either unable to or wary of doing. The success of the third generation was a topic of study for historian M.L. Hansen, whose theory on the third generation immigrant is referred to as "Hansen's Law." In his essay "The Third Generation in America," Hansen first details the difficulties that the sons and daughters of immigrants (the second generation) faced, as they were a target of criticism from *both* cultures. Not only were they considered foreigners by the Americans that surrounded them, but their parents were dissatisfied with how their sons and daughters were, according to them, becoming Americanized. With this, as Hansen labels it, "strange dualism," the second generation embodies the displacement felt by the Caribbean characters in the novels of this dissertation who do not fully belong to one culture but instead partly belong to two. This partial belonging was not enough for the parents of the first generation, who believed that "language, religion, customs and parental authority were not to be modified simply because the home had been moved four or five thousand miles to the westward."²⁸ What is the result for the second generation, then, who are equally condemned by both their parents and the society in which they live? According to Hansen, the response is to eradicate any element of their ancestral past:

He [the immigrant] wanted to forget everything: the foreign language that left an unmistakable trace in his English speech, the religion that continually recalled

²⁸ M.L. Hansen, "The Third Generation in America," *Commentary* 14, no. 5 (1952): 494.

childhood struggles, the family customs that should have been the happiest of all memories. He wanted to be away from all physical reminders of early days, in an environment so different, so American, that all associates naturally assumed that he was as American as they.²⁹

This second generation's desire to escape from the culture of their parents explains the silence that envelops the Italian American tradition. For example, writer and critic Louise DeSalvo explains how her father considered his history a burden and threw out many papers, photographs, certificates, and other reminders of his past.³⁰ This has been the experience of many third generation writers, and though in *Paper Fish* the reader is not privy to the inner workings of second generation characters Marco and Sarah, it is precisely this elusiveness about them that underlines Hansen's theory. Marco and Sarah are suffering, their suffering is illustrated by their silence, and the characters we learn most about are Carmolina and her grandmother Doria. Carmolina is the child of the third generation, a generation that Hansen points to as the redeemer of immigrant culture: "After the second generation comes the third and with the third appears a new force and a new opportunity which, if recognized in time, can not only do a good job of salvaging, but probably can accomplish more than either the first or second generations could have ever achieved."³¹ It is the third generation of Italian Americans that seeks independence yet also remains very conscious of the Italian ancestry. In order to gain knowledge of this ancestry, the third generation turns to the person who has not let go of the old country: the first generation immigrant, or the grandparent. More specifically, it is the grandmother who is the source of inspiration for many Italian American women writers. Edvige Giunta, Helen Barolini, and Louise DeSalvo are just a few writers who stress the

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 494.

³⁰ Louise DeSalvo, "Color: White/Complexion: Dark," in *Are Italians White? How Race is Made in America*, ed. Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 20.

³¹ Hansen, "The Third Generation in America," 495.

significance of their relationship to their Italian grandmothers. She is often the earliest source of information available to the family's past, as Helen Barolini explains: "The grandparent is a rich mine of the Italian American imagination – mythical, real, imagined, idealized, venerated, or feared. The grandparent embodies the tribe, the whole heritage, for that, in overwhelmingly the most cases, is as far as a present-day Italian American can trace his or her descent."³²

Like the other protagonists in the novels I am treating, Carmolina does not have a close relationship with her mother. Sarah is quiet and distant, visibly pained by her other child's illness. This is reminiscent of Annette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, who cannot be a mother to Antoinette because she is hindered by the loss of her handicapped son. As previously noted, in *Paper Fish* the reader becomes familiar not with Sarah or Marco but with Doria. We learn that her transition to American life has not been an easy one, and that her thoughts often turn to Italy. She imparts these thoughts to her granddaughter, Carmolina, whose strong relationship with her grandmother keeps her in close contact with Italian culture. Critic Mary Jo Bona does not directly mention Hansen's theory, but she does comment on the ways in which later generation Italian women begin to assert more independence and explore the self, while at the same time remaining close to the family. Bona explains that one effective way to attain this independence and still preserve cultural values is through memory and through written language: "Instead of perceiving the family and home to be a reflection of the larger world, however, the Italian American woman writer has used the family setting as the starting point for her

³² Barolini, *Chiaroscuro*, 141.

exploration of self.”³³ The text is used as a tool to achieve independence from what can be a restricting family unit, yet it is also used to preserve this sense of community. In the next chapter I explore how each protagonist uses the text in order to reconcile feelings of otherness and establish a sense of identity.

³³ Mary Jo Bona, “Broken Images, Broken Lives: Carmolina’s Journey in Tina de Rosa’s *Paper Fish*,” *MELUS: The Journal of the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 14, no. 3 (Fall – Winter 1987) : 88.

Chapter II: Otherness and the Text

The primary focus of this chapter is to define how the text is used to speak for the silenced, otherwise known as Other in the canonical text. For Jean Rhys and Maryse Condé, the use of the text is exceptional, because they both take a work from the English canon and make it their own through rewriting it. The act of possession has significance, for by possessing, then changing, a revered work of literature, the authors are attempting to reverse the power structure. They write about the Caribbean lands that were colonized and reveal the aftermath of this colonization. For Jean Rhys, this idea is somewhat problematic since she is (and writes about) a white Creole and is therefore part of this colonial history. She focuses on her alienation as a result of this history, presenting herself also as a victim. Maryse Condé also grew up under European influence, which left her unsure about her historical past. She writes about this confusion in her memoir, but she also imparts this turmoil to the characters of *Wuthering Heights* in her revisionary work, *La migration des cœurs*.

In the section on *Wide Sargasso Sea*, I argue that through the text, Antoinette takes control of her story and that she makes a symbolic return to her native Caribbean. The experience of being oppressed by her husband and the memory of her island home compels her to act, and this action gives her an identity that was formerly withheld. I explore many important facets of the novel that are connected to identity, such as how the mirror functions in the text. I also explore how the colors white and red signify the difference between England and the Caribbean. In Condé's novel, I study the differences between *La migration des cœurs* and *Wuthering Heights*, and why these distinctions

make the work definitively Caribbean. The island landscape, the focus on race, and the narration are some examples I use to demonstrate the Caribbeanness of this text.

Power Through the Text: Jean Rhys' Caribbean

“Anyhow this book has woken me up as some books do. So I'm determined to not be killed by loneliness whatever way I die.”

The Letters of Jean Rhys.

After nearly 27 years of silence, Jean Rhys reappeared in 20th century fiction with what is considered her masterpiece, *Wide Sargasso Sea*. If this book has “awoken” the author, this awakening is transferred to her protagonist Antoinette, who in the final pages of the novel wakes from her zombified state to take revenge on her oppressor, Rochester, and to challenge the canonical validity of the text *Jane Eyre*. In the above quotation, Rhys is determined not to die of loneliness, a feeling that also plagues Antoinette, who experiences loneliness and alienation in a world where she is marginalized because of her race, gender, and cultural difference.

Wide Sargasso Sea explores the implications of displacement through Antoinette, formerly known only as the madwoman in the attic in Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*. Rhys' own cultural background is rooted in Caribbean and English tradition, though the opposing nature of these cultures (i.e. England's association with colonization and slavery) made it difficult for Rhys to form attachments on her native island of Dominica. Born in 1890, the daughter of a Welsh father and a Creole (a white West Indian) mother, Rhys felt antagonism directed towards the “English” side of her heritage. Though Rhys identified more with Dominican than with English culture, her ancestry complicated her relationships with the island people. Rhys' maternal grandfather was a slave owner who arrived in the

West Indies from Scotland at the end of the 18th century. Rhys describes her longing to truly fit in among the Caribbean people, but how strained race relations made this impossible: “I thought a lot about them. But the end of my thought was always revolt, a sick revolt and I longed to be identified once and for all with the others’ side which of course was impossible. I couldn’t change the colour of my skin.”¹

In her book *Snow on the Cane Fields*, Judith L. Raitskin explains Rhys’ unusual position as a white Creole:

Her ambivalent assessment of her family’s responsibility for the atrocities of slavery and of the potential glamour or corruption inherent in power deny her an easy identification with either Whites or Blacks. In most of her writing, she focuses less on the disadvantaged position of Blacks (as Schriener did in her portrayals) than on her own exclusion, alienation, and envy as a white Creole living among blacks.²

Wide Sargasso Sea certainly dissects the problems of individuals who feel trapped between two cultures, but what makes the work so fascinating is that Rhys does so through the rewriting of Charlotte Brontë’s text *Jane Eyre*, giving a story and life to the enigmatic madwoman in the attic. By focusing upon the identity issues of the white Creole, Rhys creates a text that can stand alone, while also forever changing the way the reader interprets *Jane Eyre*. Antoinette/Bertha is no longer the raving madwoman whose illness runs in the family but instead she becomes a sympathetic character with whom the reader establishes a connection. Through her unusual portrayal of “Bertha,” Rhys defies the classic English text by encouraging the reader to view Antoinette as the tortured victim and Rochester as a cruel manipulator.

In this chapter, I will argue that the only hope that the displaced person has for gaining identity is through the text. Antoinette Cosway, in her life before becoming the

¹ O’Connor, *Jean Rhys: the West Indian Novels*, 36.

² Raitskin, *Snow on the Cane Fields*, 100.

madwoman “Bertha,” has roots in Western European civilization but only knows life as that of the Caribbean Creole. Though she shares their culture, the black natives can only look upon her family with disdain. It is a family which is not English enough for England nor Caribbean enough for the Caribbean and is therefore exiled on its own island home, having no place to truly “belong.” The fact that they are descendants from a generation of English slave owners only fuels the animosity of the islanders. The family continues to carry the stigma of slavery and is therefore viewed as a family of colonizers. This term becomes very significant in the novel, for Antoinette and her mother, the former “colonizers” eventually become “colonized” by their English husbands. The consequence of this colonization is madness for both Antoinette and her mother, leaving the reader to wonder if Antoinette’s family is paying for the sins of its ancestors.

Jean Rhys: A Caribbean Author?

The problems of cultural identity that Antoinette experiences are parallel to those of literary identity that Jean Rhys confronted. Rhys always felt as if she were an outsider in Dominica but these feelings intensified when she went to England, the “mother country.” Here, West Indians were not always well received, for they were a reminder of a shameful history and looked upon as inferior. Edward Brathwaite explores the effect of black Caribbean culture on whites of European descent, commenting on their difference of dress, language, and diet and how these differences were not necessarily accepted by Europeans in the “mother country.” In his book *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica* he offers many quotations from English observers who view Creoles of English descent as uneducated and improper. One observer is uncomfortable with the black influence on the white Creole:

“Another misfortune is the constant intercourse from their birth with Negro domestics, whose drawling, dissonant gibberish they insensibly adopt, and with it no small tincture of their awkward carriage and vulgar manners; all which they do not easily rid of, even after an English education, unless sent away extremely young.”³ Another observer also comments on the non-Englishness of the Creole, emphasizing the spoken dialect of the islands: “The Creole language is not confined to Negroes. Many of the ladies, who have not been educated in England, speak a sort of broken English, with an indolent drawling out of their words, that is very tiresome if not disgusting.”⁴ In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, this sentiment is felt by Rochester in his observation of Antoinette, for he, like the English observers above, cannot understand why Antoinette is so affectionate with her black nurse and confidante, Christophine: “‘I wouldn’t hug and kiss them,’ I’d say, ‘I couldn’t’” (91). He is also unnerved, like the English observers in the above quotations, by Antoinette’s language: “She’d be silent, or angry for no reason, and chatter to Christophine in patois” (91).

In her book Elizabeth Nunez-Harrell describes the West Indian as “an outcast, a sort of freak rejected by both Europe and England, whose blood she shares, and by the black West Indian people, whose culture and home have been hers for two generations or more.”⁵ Being both a writer in Europe but also an outsider, where in the literary canon does Rhys’ work belong? Most of her novels involve a protagonist from the West Indies trying to adapt to a European setting. Rhys herself, though she disliked England, lived there for most of her life, returning to Dominica but one time. Mary Lou Emery

³ Edward Brathwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 42.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁵ Elizabeth Nunez-Harrell, “The Paradoxes of Belonging: The White West Indian Woman in Fiction,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 31, no. 2 (Summer 1985): 287.

discusses the ways in which Rhys is doubly marginalized in that she is neither considered alongside Caribbean writers such as Derek Walcott or Edward Brathwaite, nor is she considered among European women writers. In the case of the former, she cannot share their African ancestry or historical past, as she is linked to a colonizing culture; in the case of the latter, her difference separates her from a community of fellow women writers.⁶ In her autobiography *Smile Please* Jean Rhys speaks with a tone of self-defeat as she describes her isolation: "I knew in myself that it would never happen. I would never be part of anything. I would never really belong anywhere, and I knew it, and all my life would be the same, trying to belong, and failing. Always something would go wrong. I am a stranger and I always will be, and after all I didn't really care."⁷ Some West Indian authors are also quick to exclude the white Creole and deny him/her a place in West Indian literature. Consider the following passage from Brathwaite, who though his above examples indicate that the black Caribbean influences the white Creole, and that Europe criticizes this influence, still defines someone who is "West Indian" as "someone of African descent" who shares "a common history of slavery"⁸: "White creoles in the English and French West Indies have separated themselves by too wide a gulf and have contributed too little culturally, as a group, to give credence to the notion that they can, given the present structure, meaningfully identify or be identified with the spiritual world on this side of the Sargasso Sea."⁹

⁶ Emery, *Jean Rhys at World's End*, 10.

⁷ Rhys, *Smile Please*, 16.

⁸ Edward Brathwaite, *Contradictory Omens: Cultural Diversity and Integration in the Caribbean* (Mona: Savacou Publications, 1985), 38.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

Obviously, Rhys falls outside Brathwaite's definition, which leaves her further marginalized and casts doubt on her identity as a West Indian. In the following pages, I will explore several aspects of Rhys' text that involve her identity as a Caribbean of English descent, including colonization, zombification, and the relationship of *Wide Sargasso Sea* to *Jane Eyre*. I will argue that the conclusion of *Wide Sargasso Sea* enables Antoinette to establish a connection to the Caribbean that was previously denied. Critics such as Mary Lou Emery have cautioned readers against viewing *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a return to a native land,¹⁰ but Rhys' novel attains a type of return for Antoinette, and it is *through the text* that this return is achieved. Though the problem of displacement is not entirely resolved, Antoinette is able to recognize the heterogeneity of her identity and embrace her Caribbeanness.

Antoinette's Double as an Object of Desire

Though Antoinette identifies more with island culture than European culture, she is not fully accepted by the former, as Christophine eventually explains to her new husband: "she is not béké like you, but she is béké, and not like us, either" (155). One particularly interesting relationship, that between Antoinette and Tia, a native black girl, demonstrates that the former has an ambivalent relationship with the Caribbean world. The girls are playmates, but they have an altercation at the river in which Tia calls her "white cockroach" and steals her clothes. Because of this theft Antoinette is forced to wear Tia's clothes, which the latter left behind. In donning these clothes, Antoinette metaphorically becomes Tia. However, when she returns home and puts on another dress, it rips, a way of expressing that her old identity no longer fits. Nothing fits Antoinette: her original dress has been stolen, and her new dress rips. This "new" dress,

¹⁰ Emery, *Jean Rhys at "World's End,"* 14.

Tia's dress, is symbolic of Antoinette's desire to be like Tia. Antoinette cannot find an identity to suit her, and this lack of belonging applies to her inability to assimilate to the Caribbean. In her book *Jean Rhys at "World's End,"* Mary Lou Emery comments on this doubling:

When Antoinette emerges from the pool, she discovers that Tia has exchanged her dress for Antoinette's. In the black child's dress, Antoinette arrives home to meet a visitor from England, Mr. Mason, who eventually marries her mother and takes over their neglected estate. She has become Tia's double, by a forced exchange, and in that costume meets the man who will forcefully exchange her in marriage to another white Englishman.¹¹

Antoinette not only becomes Tia's double in this scenario but also when the estate is set on fire, for she simultaneously identifies with Tia and realizes that she is not like her:

Then, not so far off, I saw Tia and her mother and I ran to her, for she was all that was left of my life as it had been. We had eaten the same food, slept side by side, bathed in the same river. As I ran, I thought, I will live with Tia and I will be like her. Not to leave Coulibri. Not to go. Not. When I was close I saw the jagged stone in her hand but I did not see her throw it. I did not feel it either, only something wet, running down my face. I looked at her and I saw her face crumple up as she began to cry. We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking glass. (45)

This idea of the looking glass, of a mirror, appears often in the novel, which I will discuss in more detail below. Of greater importance is the fact that Antoinette, the viewer, peers into the mirror and sees an object of desire. Antoinette desires to be accepted by the island people and is reluctant to say goodbye to her life in Coulibri, even though the people's hostility toward her is evident. The island is all that she knows, and she is desperate to identify with it through Tia, for Antoinette feels that they have shared the same experiences. She wants to be a part of *something*, so she clings to the hope of Tia and being "like her." This desire manifests itself most strikingly when Antoinette looks directly at Tia as if she were looking into a mirror. Of course, her

¹¹ Emery, *Jean Rhys at "World's End,"* 39.

illusions are shattered when Tia throws the stone in her face, breaking the mirror image and jolting Antoinette to the realization that she does not belong and that she is not like Tia. The reality is that the racial boundaries are set: Antoinette is white, Tia is black; Antoinette represents the colonizer, Tia the colonized. Margaret Paul Joseph writes about doubling and mirror images found in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and focuses on this particular scene:

Mirrors are used with other, more specific, intentions as well. Antoinette has a playmate, a black girl called Tia, whom she envies because Tia belongs as Antoinette never does. It seems as if fires are always lit for her, as if sharp stones never hurt her bare feet, for she never saw her cry. While Antoinette longs to be black in order to identify with her, Tia is conditioned by the master-slave relationship that links them both; so the feeling of sisterhood is one-sided.¹²

The image of a dress, like the one Tia steals from Antoinette, frequently appears as a symbolic image in the novel and usually signifies Antoinette's relationship and identification with England and the Caribbean. These further references to dresses emphasize the color white or red, an important detail which indicates that white represents England while red represents the Caribbean. The color that Antoinette wears shows where her devotion lies, and the reader will see a transition in part two and three from white (England) to red (Caribbean) to symbolize her triumph over the oppression that England epitomizes.

Beginning with the white dresses, Antoinette wears one white dress in her second dream that foreshadows her unhappy marriage to Rochester. I explored Antoinette's dream at length in chapter one, but in this section I wish to focus on the dress image. In the dream Antoinette first tries to hold up her dress, but then she allows it to trail the earth: "...so I walk with difficulty, following a man who is with me and holding up the

¹² Margaret Paul Joseph, *Caliban in exile : the outsider in Caribbean fiction* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 39.

skirt of my dress. It is white and beautiful and I do not want to get it soiled...He smiles slyly. 'Not here, not yet' he says, and I follow him, weeping. Now I do not try to hold up my dress, it trails in the dirt, my beautiful dress" (59). This image of the soiled dress is repeated in part two, for it is used to describe Christophine, whose dress trails the floor.¹³ However, the repeated image of the dress, rather than serving to compare the two women, actually highlights their differences, once again distancing Antoinette from a Caribbean identity. It is Rochester who takes notice of the dress: "Her coffee is delicious but her language is horrible and she might hold her dress up. It must get very dirty, yards of it trailing on the floor." Antoinette replies: "You don't understand at all. They don't care about a dress getting dirty because it shows it isn't the only dress they have" (85). In Antoinette's dream she is following the man who will reject her and take everything from her, and she tries hard not to dirty the white (read: English) dress. When she does allow it to fall to the ground it is in terms of surrender and complete subordination to Rochester. Christophine, in contrast, is unmarried, independent and self-assured. She is not concerned when her dress gets soiled, for as she later says to Antoinette, "I keep my money. I don't give it to no worthless man" (110).

The dress images continue in part two when Rochester sees Antoinette's white dress lying on the floor which leaves him "breathless and savage with desire" (93). Antoinette longs to please him (England) and wants to have a double of the dress: "I was thinking, I'll have another made just like it," she promised happily. "Will you be pleased?" (94). As I have already noted, Antoinette is part of a double culture: English descent with Caribbean tradition. However, she wishes to have a double of the white

¹³ I have already noted several repetitions in the text, such as Antoinette and her mother, who both have frowns that appear to be cut "like a knife." That repetition connects the two women in their madness and despair.

dress, which demonstrates her desire to be loyal to her husband and thus to England. The desire to have two white dresses leaves no space for her Caribbean background. Of course, Antoinette cannot achieve this goal of full Englishness, as is clear when Rochester later sees her wearing the dress and feels annoyance instead of desire: “She was wearing the white dress I had admired, but it had slipped untidily over one shoulder and seemed too big for her” (127). Like Tia’s dress, the white dress (England) does not suit Antoinette; the identity does not fit and it is clear to Rochester that though she is of English descent she is different. As discussed in chapter one, which treats the mother country, England will betray Antoinette and in so doing, provide another example of the symbolism of the color white which is the color of the ship that takes her away (186).

In part three, narrated by Antoinette in Thornfield Hall, she notices a girl coming out of her bedroom, wearing a white dress (182). If we are to assume that this girl is Jane, then it is fitting that she wears white, for she is the English girl who in the Victorian novel is set up in opposition to Bertha (Antoinette).¹⁴ In Thornfield Hall, however, the dress that Antoinette reserves for her later action is not white, but red, which will be a significant diversion from the white images.

With the color white symbolizing England, it is of course not a far leap to attribute white in terms of race. Antoinette is not without racist feelings, for she calls Tia a “cheating nigger” (24), Christophine a “black devil from Hell” (134) and an “ignorant, obstinate negro woman” (112). Critic Patrick Hogan remarks that the description of the man in Antoinette’s dream has a face “black with hatred” while her dress is “white and

¹⁴ Critics are divided on whether or not the girl in the white dress is actually Jane; I leave open the possibility that she is Jane, for in *Jane Eyre* Jane stays in Thornfield Hall and fears the ghost (Bertha) that haunts the place.

beautiful.”¹⁵ Although Antoinette has ambivalent feelings about blacks, specifically a mix of envy and dislike, it is clear from the first sentence of the novel that she is also excluded by whites: “They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did. But we were not in their ranks” (17). Antoinette is neither white enough for the Europeans nor black enough for the “natives,” which is problematic for her own sense of identity. Antoinette’s struggle with race could be an autobiographical component to the text, for in Rhys’ autobiography *Smile Please*, she prayed to be black: “Was this the reason why I prayed so ardently to be black, and would run to the looking-glass in the morning to see if the miracle had happened? And though it never had, I tried again. Dear God, let me be black.”¹⁶ Once again the image of the mirror appears in Jean Rhys’ text, and is the place where she hopes to see her object of desire.

While the color white symbolizes England, red is the color of the Caribbean. Before appearing as the color of Antoinette’s dress in the final chapter of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the color red emerges in other parts of the novel, most often as fire, this fire is symbolic of the text. As the reader is well aware, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is the untold story of *Jane Eyre*’s madwoman in the attic and though it is a novel that could stand alone, the influence of Brontë’s work is undeniable.¹⁷ This relationship between the two novels is analogous to the history of colonization in the Caribbean; European influence is present despite the colonized subject’s ambivalence towards this influence. Rhys uses Englishness to her advantage, however, and creates a text that questions Western

¹⁵ Patrick Hogan, *Colonialism and Cultural Identity: crises of tradition in the anglophone literatures of India, Africa, and the Caribbean* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 59.

¹⁶ Rhys, *Smile Please*, 42

¹⁷ Some critics debate this point. For example, in his article “Heroines and Victims: Jean Rhys and *Jane Eyre*,” *Massachusetts Review: A Quarterly of Literature, the Arts and Public Affairs* 17 (1976) : 540 – 52, Dennis Porter believes that *Wide Sargasso Sea* is not autonomous while Sandra Drake maintains that it is.

authority by portraying English control (in the form of English men and husbands) as harmful and malignant. She also succeeds in creating a madwoman as a sympathetic figure who emerges as triumphant and liberated from English rule. I will explain this through my interpretation of the fire images, which appear first in part one of the novel, when the people burn the house in Coulibri. The fire at Coulibri occurs shortly after Mr. Mason marries Annette, thus restoring wealth and prosperity to the Cosway household. This event is an all too familiar scene to the black inhabitants of the island. At this point, Antoinette is a little girl who struggles with loneliness and fear; she is aware that the family is hated by the other islanders and that she is also unloved by her mother, whom she feels sees her as a “white nigger” (26). While Annette is still tied to the generation of slavery, Antoinette must achieve a new identity for the white Creole, one that is harmonious with post emancipation Jamaica. This is murky territory for Antoinette, as she unsuccessfully attempts to form relationships with people like Tia and tries to please her disapproving mother and her new English stepfather. Mr. Mason establishes his authority as an Englishman and evokes racist feelings in Antoinette by making her feel shy about admitting that Sandi Cosway is her cousin because he is black (50). Caught between shame and affinity with the black Caribbean, Antoinette cannot achieve any sense of identity, which leaves her vulnerable to making mistakes such as marrying Rochester. In the meantime, she lives in the convent, where her pain is momentarily eased by the gentle nuns. Here is where the first mention of red occurs since the fire at Coulibri, in relation to Antoinette’s cross-stitch: “Underneath, I will write my name in fire red, Antoinette Mason, née Cosway, Mount Calvary Convent, Spanish Town, Jamaica, 1839” (53).

This act is very significant because here, Antoinette is creating a text through her sewing. The act of sewing or weaving has always been an important element in literature, particularly in regard to women. One famous example is the myth of Philomela, who suffers a brutal rape at the hands of her sister's husband, but is unable to speak about the crime because he also cuts out her tongue. Though she can no longer speak, she is able to reveal her story through weaving:

She had a loom to work with, and with purple
On a white background, wove her story in,
Her story in and out, and when it was finished,
Gave it to one old woman, with signs and gestures
To take it to the queen, so it was taken,
Unrolled and understood.¹⁸

Cloth was one of the earliest forms of paper, and in literary works it often functions as a symbol for a page or a text. Philomela's woven cloth tells her story, and in Antoinette's cross-stitch, her fabric is also a text which reveals parts of her story that are fundamental elements to one's identity: her name and her place of birth. Though her identity is not fully realized, the fiery color of Antoinette's stitching foreshadows her determination and resolve. The textual implication is clear: the Creole's story will be written, and as the reader realizes at the end of the novel, it is written in flame.

Red is again used to describe the earth, which connects this color to the Caribbean. Antoinette takes note of this and points it out to her new husband, who is not impressed by her observation:

Next time she spoke she said, 'The earth is red here, do you notice?
'It's red in parts of England, too.'
'Oh England, England,' she called back mockingly, and the sound went on like a
warning I did not choose to hear. (71)

¹⁸ Rolfe Humphries, trans., *Ovid's Metamorphoses* (Indiana University Press, 1955), 146.

The depth of color, according to Antoinette, is expressly reserved for the island. This exchange takes place in part two, narrated mostly by Rochester, and it is in this section that Antoinette often wears white, which I described above. Though her love for the island and its tropical environment is apparent, it is also in this chapter that she begins to see England as a solution to her problems with Rochester. I explored this at length in chapter one, but the point I would like to make now is that in part two Antoinette pledges allegiance to England, not realizing that it is England, in the form of her English husband, that is forcing her into the stereotypical role of the mad, drunken Creole found in *Jane Eyre*. In part two, she asks Rochester, “Is it true that England is like a dream? Because one of my friends who married an Englishman wrote and told me so. She said this place London is like a cold dark dream sometimes. I want to wake up” (80).

This question, of course, references the nightmare that Antoinette had of England when she was staying in the convent (60) but also is pertinent to her emotional state in part two. As her relationship with Rochester worsens, Antoinette enters a sleep-like state. She numbs herself by overindulging in rum, and eventually follows Rochester mechanically and indifferently to England. Rochester notices her eyes as “blank, lovely eyes” (170) and that her voice had “no warmth, no sweetness. The doll had a doll’s voice, a breathless but curiously indifferent voice.” Antoinette thus fulfills the dream prophesy from part one: “I follow him, sick with fear but I make no effort to save myself; if anyone were to try to save me, I would refuse” (60). In part two, Antoinette is in her cold dark dream from which she will eventually wake, and it is important to note that the person who tries to save her, and whom she refuses, is Sandi Cosway, Antoinette’s cousin, her friend, and possibly (or so Rhys hints) her lover. However, as previously

noted, this is the same Sandi Cosway that Antoinette denounces as a relative under the influence of Mr. Mason. As Sandra Drake mentions in her article, “All That Foolishness/That All Foolishness: Race and Caribbean Culture as Thematics of Liberation in Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea*,” “If she [Antoinette] had married Sandi Cosway, she would not have lost either of her names, for she and he carry the same family name.”¹⁹ Instead, Antoinette has two English names, Bertha Mason, and her rejection of Sandi is another example of how she attempts to assimilate to English customs and deny her Creole past.

Zombification: Rochester as Author in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Antoinette’s lifelessness is the result of zombification, a state which the novel defines as a dead person who seems to be alive or a living person who is dead (107). Critic Simone Alexander defines zombification as “a state wherein one is brutally stripped of knowledge of his or her original world and left as an empty shell or flesh, capable only of receiving orders from someone else and unquestioningly carrying them out.”²⁰ Indeed, Antoinette enters a master-slave relationship with Rochester, for she becomes the colonized subject and he the colonizer. Like her mother, Antoinette becomes a zombie and there are several moments in the novel that describe her as such. For example, two children jeer at Antoinette on her walk to the convent, and in doing so they eerily foreshadow Antoinette’s fate, which will be similar to that of her mother:

Look the crazy girl, you crazy like your mother. Your aunt frightened to have you in the house. She send you for the nuns to lock up. Your mother walk about with no shoes and stockings on her feet, she sans culottes. She try to kill her husband and she try to kill you too that day you go to see her. She have eyes like zombie and you have eyes like zombie too. (49-50)

¹⁹ Drake, “Race and Caribbean Culture as Thematics of Liberation,” 104.

²⁰ Simone Alexander, *Mother Imagery in the Novels of Afro-Caribbean Women* (Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 2001), 58.

In the convent, even Antoinette describes her mother as a zombie, saying both that “she must pray for her as though she were dead, though she is living...” (57) and “This is my mother, wherever her soul is wandering, for it has left her body” (57). These characteristics all satisfy the definition of the zombie given in the novel, that of the “living dead.”

As Rochester becomes more distant from Antoinette, she meddles in obeah in order to bring him back to her, yet this disastrously fails and she, like her mother, begins to enter the zombie state. The potion does not work because, as Christophine points out, she is “béké” and not of the island people. Mary Lou Emery connects this failure to the fact that Antoinette lacks identity: “These reasons [that the obeah fails] belong to the larger one of Antoinette’s lack of place in this society. Neither beke nor black, her reliance on obeah for individual, personal matters cannot succeed, for as an individual she hardly exists.”²¹ In her despair, Christophine also notes that Antoinette’s eyes are empty: “your face like dead woman and your eyes red like souciant” (155). Antoinette succumbs as slave to Rochester, who clearly defines himself as master and Antoinette as slave when he begins to call her Bertha, which the reader recognizes as the madwoman’s name in *Jane Eyre*. The re-naming is significant in two ways. First, name and identity are intimately linked. Second, this episode represents a reversal characterized by Rochester’s use of obeah. Antoinette’s whiteness prevents Christophine’s potion from working; instead Rochester uses his own form of witchcraft when he renames her. She rightly accuses him of this: “Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name. I know, that’s obeah too” (147). The subject

²¹ Emery, *Jean Rhys at “World’s End,”* 44.

of names is also a point of interest in regard to Rochester. Though Rochester renames Antoinette, he remains nameless in the novel. The reader only identifies him as Rochester through the recognition of the character in *Jane Eyre*. If the reader had no knowledge of Brontë's text, then his name would be unknown. The fact that Rhys does not name him paradoxically enforces his role as master, and Antoinette as slave, for Rochester is one who *names* and not one who *is* named. The fact that Antoinette is enslaved will be of importance in the conclusion of the novel, for her experience as slave, and her later rebellion, will enable her to identify with the black Caribbean, an identification which was impossible before. At this point she will wake from the zombie state, but I will discuss this momentarily. First I will further develop my analysis of Rochester's authorial position in the novel and the effect it has on Antoinette.

Toward the end of part two, Rochester's plans become more sinister and he begins textually to take on the role of Western literature which typecasts the Caribbean Other. For example, when Rochester first plans to hide Antoinette from view, he intends to stay in Jamaica (162) only to reconsider when he thinks about how much the people gossip (163). Upon reflection, he begins to sketch, and this sketch inspires him to return to England: "I drank some more rum and, drinking, I drew a house surrounded by trees. A large house. I divided the third floor into rooms and in one room I drew a standing woman – a child's scribble, a dot for a head, a larger one for a body, a triangle for a skirt, slanting lines for arms and feet. But it was an English house" (163). The drawing symbolizes the text; the person drawing has authorial control to place the house in England, to put the woman in the attic of the house. Rochester is essentially drawing the blueprint for his plan to imprison his wife, to put her in England where no one will talk to

her and where her voice will not be heard. Furthermore, Rochester assumes the role of the English narrator who speaks for the Caribbean Other. This idea is developed in the following pages: Rochester says, “Words rushed through my head (deeds too). Words. Pity is one of them. It gives me no rest” (164). These words are not unlike those found on the pages of *Jane Eyre*; they ferociously describe Antoinette as Bertha, the madwoman who cannot be controlled and Rochester as the one who deserves sympathy: “ ‘Pity. Is there none for me? Tied to a lunatic for life – a drunken lying lunatic – gone her mother’s way’ ” (164). Rochester becomes the imperialist author whose words spill wildly as he continues to describe Antoinette’s character, his thoughts interrupted only by points from his previous conversation with Christophine, points that explain why Antoinette is in such a delicate emotional state. Yet when Christophine’s reasoning enters his mind, Rochester counters this reasoning with what will be *his* version of events. Again, this version is familiar to readers of *Jane Eyre*. For clarification, note that Christophine’s words are in quotations:

‘She love you so much, so much. She thirsty for you. Love her a little like she say. It’s all that you can love – a little.

Sneer to the last, Devil. Do you think that I don’t know? She thirsts for *anyone* – not for me.

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 and give herself as no sane woman would – or could. Or *could*. Then lie so still, still as this cloudy day. A lunatic who knows no time. But never does.

Till she’s drunk so deep, played her games so often that the lowest shrug and jeer at her. And I’m to know it – I? No, I’ve a trick worth two of that.

‘She love you so much, so much. Try her once more.’

I tell you she loves no one, anyone. I could not touch her. Excepting as the hurricane will touch that tree – and break it. You say I did? No. That was love’s fierce play. Now I’ll do it.

She’ll not laugh in the sun again. She’ll not dress up and smile at herself in that damnable looking-glass. So pleased, so satisfied.

Vain, silly creature. Made for loving? Yes, but she’ll have no lover, for I don’t want her and she’ll see no other. (165)

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the reader sees that Antoinette's "madness" is evoked in multiple ways: her unreciprocated love for Rochester, her inability to make him understand the reasons behind her mother's condition, and the feelings of dislocation that have permeated her life. In the above passage, Rochester simplifies this explanation by reducing Antoinette's character to that of a woman whose sexual desire and laughter are uncontrollable and therefore indicate that she is insane. This is the version of events told in *Jane Eyre*. In chapter one, I explored the ways in which Rochester is repelled by Antoinette's desire and why this is another element of her character that Rochester sees as non-English. A woman who feels such desire does not fit the mold of the English ideal found in the Victorian novel and therefore the only place for her in Western literature is that of the Other, and in this case, the Other is a mad Creole. While Christophine implores Rochester to show Antoinette a bit of compassion, his response is to insist that "she loves no one" and thus, writes a new story to explain Antoinette's state, one that the reader views as the recognizable story that had once been regarded as truth. As Jean Rhys said of *Jane Eyre*'s Bertha, "Of course Charlotte Brontë makes her own world, and of course she convinces you, and that makes the poor Creole lunatic all the more dreadful. I remember being quite shocked, and when I re-read it rather annoyed. That's only one side – the English side" sort of thing."²² In part two of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the reader sees the manifestation of Rochester's plans and his portrayal of Antoinette as a lunatic as "the English side." Although at one point even Rochester realizes that his version of the story is slanted, he is still unwavering:

²² Nancy Harrison, *Jean Rhys and the Novel as Women's Text* (Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 127 – 128.

So I can never understand why, suddenly, bewilderingly, I was certain that everything I had imagined was false. False. Only the magic and the dream are true – all the rest is a lie. Let it go. Here is the secret. Here.

(but it is lost, that secret, and those who know it cannot tell it.)

Not lost. I had found it in a hidden place and I'd keep it, hold it fast. As I'd hold her. (168)

If the dream is Antoinette's dream of entrapment, and if it is true, then is the "secret" that Rochester mentions Antoinette's real story that he wants safeguarded? If so, he intends to keep it, and if this were a Western novel, then that would be the end of it, for in *Jane Eyre* Bertha's story is a very slim portion of the novel. Fortunately, Rhys' novel has Caribbean influence, and Rochester underestimates Antoinette who in part three wakes from her English dream to tell her secret. She rekindles her Caribbean identity to finally "write her name in red."

"I Will Write My Name in Red": Antoinette's Caribbean Identity

Red, the color that represents the Caribbean in this novel, is the color of the dress that Antoinette has with her in the attic at Thornfield Hall. In England Antoinette miserably writes, "I am dying because it is so cold and dark," (183) another repetition in the text of England as a "cold dark dream." In part three, Antoinette once again narrates, and when she sees her dress hanging in the press, her senses start to awaken. The description of the dress contains elements of the Caribbean:

As I turned the key I saw it hanging, the colour of fire and sunset. The colour of flamboyant flowers. 'If you are buried under a flamboyant tree,' I said, 'your soul is lifted up when it flowers. Everyone wants that.'

She shook her head but she did not move or touch me.

The scent that came from the dress was very faint at first, then it grew stronger. The smell of vetivert and frangipani, of cinnamon and dust and lime trees when they are flowering. The smell of the sun and the smell of the rain. (185)

The flamboyant tree recalls the orange tree that Rochester found when he was lost in the forest, and the flowers scattered around were those thought to be sacrifices to the zombie. When Antoinette smells the dress, she slowly begins to come back to life, for the scent of the Caribbean plants the seed of “something I must do” (187) which is to put Thornfield Hall to flame. In her article Sandra Drake describes how this scene depicts Antoinette as a zombie that is reawakened and takes its revenge:

Frangipani, vetivert, cinnamon and lemon are all Caribbean salts which awake the zombie from its slumber. The red dress which Antoinette fears “they” have taken from her – the act which she calls “the last and worst thing,” to change its smell – steal the freeing salts which confirm her identity – she sees transmute itself, to flame; and she identifies it, in the comment quoted, with the flamboyant tree. Antoinette converts Thornfield Hall itself into a flamboyant (flaming) tree; her own soul rises up as it “blooms.”²³

Earlier in the novel Antoinette mentions that there are two deaths, the real one and the one people know about. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette’s real death comes under the oppression of Rochester, symbol of English rule. She is colonized into a slave figure and thus enters a death-like sleep, a zombie state, just as her mother did. Upon closer inspection, the death is also the one imposed by Western literature through voicing the Other’s history instead of allowing the Other to tell her own history, as Sandra Drake also concludes:

Antoinette’s “real” death is not the demented suicide in the flames of Thornfield Hall. That projected death is really the one “everyone knows about” – through reading *Jane Eyre*, the European colonizer’s writing of history, and of Antoinette’s history. Her “real” death is her subjugation by Rochester – by the colonizer – the long slow process of her reduction to the zombie state chronicled in the novel.²⁴

Though the suicide is the death that everyone is familiar with in *Jane Eyre*, in *Wide Sargasso Sea* it is Antoinette’s coming back to life. She holds the flame colored dress

²³ Drake, “Race and Caribbean Culture as Thematics of Liberation,” 108.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 109.

(which contrasts the white dress images previously seen in the work) against herself and asks Grace Poole, “Does it make me look intemperate and unchaste?” (186). These words are taken directly from Rochester in *Jane Eyre*: “Bertha Mason, -- the true daughter of an infamous mother, -- dragged me through all the hideous and degrading agonies which must attend a man bound to a wife at once intemperate and unchaste.”²⁵ This time, Antoinette is not reduced to becoming the infamous madwoman, because when she sees the flame colored dress on the floor it inspires her to act, which she does first in the form of a dream. As in *Jane Eyre*, Antoinette steals Grace Poole’s keys in order to roam the house, but she is frightened, not wishing to encounter “the ghost of a woman who they say haunts this place” (187). Antoinette does not realize that the ghost, of course, is herself. Her description as a ghost is another textual repetition in the novel. Shortly before their departure to England, Rochester remarks, “She was only a ghost. A ghost in the grey daylight. Nothing left but hopelessness” (186). A ghost is what she is reduced to in *Jane Eyre*, one which Antoinette does not recognize, which makes her at once self and Other. But Antoinette will soon go beyond *Jane Eyre*’s legend, as I will explain. The fire begins when she lights several candles in order to fill the *white* room with the color *red*:

It was a large room with a red carpet and red curtains. Everything else was white. I sat down on a couch and it seemed sad and cold and empty to me, like a church without an altar. I wished to see it clearly so I lit all the candles, and there were many...I looked round for the altar for with so many candles and so much red, the room reminded me of a church. Then I heard a clock ticking and it was made of gold. *Gold is the idol they worship* (188).

White for England, red for the Caribbean, as Sandra Drake’s article affirms. When Antoinette sees the gold clock, her thoughts echo Christophine’s about the English and

²⁵ Emily Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (New York : Chelsea House Publishers, 1996), 302.

that their main concern is money. She thus separates herself from English belief and aligns herself with Christophine's. As the room fills with red it becomes her Aunt Cora's room, reinforcing the idea that red and flame transport Antoinette back to her island. She knocks down the candles and the fire spreads: "I laughed when I saw the lovely colour spreading so fast, but I did not stay to watch it. I went into the hall again with the tall candle in my hand. It was then that I saw her – the ghost. The woman with the streaming hair. She was surrounded by a gilt frame but I knew her" (188-89). Antoinette comes face to face with her own reflection which she recognizes as "the ghost." She is surrounded by a gilt frame, which symbolizes many things. Gilder is a gold covering, which reminds the reader that gold is what the English revere, that "gold is the idol they worship." Secondly, Antoinette is an image that is framed, which conjures the idea of a picture, such as that of the Miller's daughter, the English picture that Antoinette once so admired and which is revisited later in the context of fire. Finally, Antoinette as Bertha is framed within the context of the mad Creole in *Jane Eyre*; she was previously limited to and trapped inside Brontë's pages. In essence, she is surrounded by Englishness. However, she peers into the glass and thinks, "but I knew her." This time Antoinette is more; she is not "only a ghost" as Rochester previously stated. Her first glimmer of self-recognition is in stark contrast to several other moments in the novel that include mirrors. She sees Tia as an object in a mirror during the fire at Coulibri, yet is painfully aware that she is unlike her. She is unable to see herself at the convent because mirrors are forbidden. There are also no mirrors in the attic at Thornfield Hall, so Antoinette tries to remember:

There 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. Long ago when I was a child and very lonely I tried

to kiss her. But the glass between us – hard, cold and misted over with my breath. Now they have taken everything away. What am I doing in this place and who am I? (180)

The idea of mirrors is significant in the text as mirrors are linked to identity and Antoinette's uncertainty about her own identity is shown through her interaction with mirrors. This is not a new concept, for the Lacanian view of "The Mirror Stage" indicates that the first perception one has of himself is a self-image through the recognition of the self in a mirror. This is part of what Patrick Hogan discusses in detail as "reflective identity" which he describes as "everything I think of myself, perceptually or conceptually – my visual self-image, my characterization of my feelings, thoughts, and acts."²⁶ The mirror provides the visual image, where one not only sees oneself but also what others see, which brings up another Lacanian moment, for self-perception is determined not only by visual image but also by what others think of you; hence part of one's identity could be formed through the gaze of "The Other."²⁷ It is easy to understand why Antoinette is conflicted if her identity involves the perception that others have of her; she is deemed a "white cockroach" by the black inhabitants of the island, a "white nigger" by whites, including her mother, and "alien" by English European standards. However, the mirror provides some sense of self, which is perhaps why Antoinette's mother looked to the mirror with hope: "I got used to the solitary life, but my mother still planned and hoped – perhaps she had to hope every time she passed a looking glass" (18). The image in the glass is a symbol of hope, hope that is absent in situations where Antoinette is stripped of her identity, as in Rochester's malicious plan: "She'll not laugh in the sun again. She'll not dress up and smile and at herself in that

²⁶ Hogan, *Colonialism and Cultural Identity*, 83.

²⁷ Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits* (Paris : Editions du Seuil, 1966-1971).

damnable looking glass” (168). Rochester’s plot mentions taking away the mirror, a tool which provides some sense of identity. As explained in the above passage, Antoinette never could fully identify with herself or with England, and her struggle as a white Creole in post emancipation Jamaica prevented a natural connection to the Caribbean. As a child, she saw her image yet did not know herself. But in the fire scene at Thornfield Hall, Antoinette does recognize herself in the gilt frame. The all important red dress will be another detail in the novel that shows Antoinette’s actions contradicting Rochester’s words – she will “dress up” and see herself in the glass. She not only sees herself but says she *knows* herself. Antoinette begins to distinguish her real self from the Other that was constructed from English literature, a construct that took her life away. She begins to connect to her Caribbean identity, which is remarkably shown through the Caribbean images seen in the flames:

Then I turned around and I saw the sky. It was red and all my life was in it. I saw the grandfather clock and Aunt Cora’s patchwork, all colours, I saw the orchids and the stephanotis and the jasmine and the tree of life in flames. I saw the chandelier and the red carpet downstairs and the bamboos and the tree ferns, the gold ferns and the silver and the soft green velvet of the moss and the picture of the Miller’s Daughter. I heard the parrot call as he did when he saw a stranger, *Qui est là? Qui est là?* And the man who hated me was calling too, Bertha! Bertha! 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...And I heard a man’s voice, Bertha! Bertha! ... And the sky so red. Someone screamed and I thought, *Why did I scream?* I called “Tia!” and jumped and woke. (189)

There are several things happening in this passage. It is, of course, a repetition of the fire at Coulibri, only this time Antoinette is the colonized figure who takes revenge on her English oppressor. Antoinette has been enslaved, and therefore can more easily identify to the people of the island because this history is now shared. Mary Lou Emery explores this notion as Antoinette ignores Rochester’s calls and instead leaps:

She rejects “the man’s voice” and his name for her and chooses instead her black friend, rekindling their childhood ties through the wall of fire. She can make this choice, not because she has consolidated her character, but because she has lost and multiplied it, become enslaved, and thus joined the history of the blacks of the islands, learning from them traditional means of resistance.²⁸

This connection is perhaps why Antoinette calls out to Tia and why she jumps to her childhood friend. Though Brathwaite asserts that “Tia was not and never could have been her friend,”²⁹ I argue that in Rhys’ fiction, with Antoinette’s experience as slave to Rochester, she can through a new historical understanding achieve a bond with the black Caribbean. As she says to herself earlier in the novel, in viewing the landscape, “This is my place and this is where I belong and this is where I wish to stay” (108). The return is achieved through the text, and I agree with Mary Lou Emery when she states that Rhys’ novel is not obligated to mirror historical “reality” but that it is a rewriting of canonical fiction: “He [Brathwaite] does not consider, however, the novel as a creative response to that history and to its eclipse in nineteenth century English fiction, a response written in another historical period of West Indian and colonial histories.”³⁰

To return to the fire, the images within the fire are significant, for all of the images of the Caribbean landscape that are so important to Antoinette reappear, thus reuniting her with the comforting elements of her past. The English elements, such as the carpet and chandelier, merge with the Caribbean but seem to be swallowed up by them as the focus is on island symbols and not on English ones. Additionally, throughout the novel, the color red, flame and fire are associated with the Caribbean and red fire is the consuming factor in the passage.

²⁸ Emery, *Jean Rhys at “World’s End,”* 59.

²⁹ Brathwaite, *Contradictory Omens*, 36.

³⁰ Emery, *Jean Rhys at “World’s End,”* 47

The Parrot as Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

The parrot image in the fire is a particularly significant symbol, one that the reader recognizes from the beginning of the novel as the family pet whose wings are clipped by Mr. Mason, representing Annette's and subsequently Antoinette's loss of freedom. This is proved by the fact that Mr. Mason, though he loves Annette, does not take her fears seriously, thus costing Annette her sanity and her property in Coulibri. When the house is set on fire, it is the parrot that she wants to save from the blaze, which Mr. Mason will not allow. Therefore, the reader is treated to the ghastly image of a parrot aflame, attempting to, but of course, unable to fly, falling from the roof screeching "Qui est là!" (43). This scene recalls the fire scene in *Jane Eyre*, where Bertha, on the blazing roof, jumps to her death. In his article, "A Tale of Two Parrots: Walcott, Rhys, and the Uses of Colonial Mimicry," Graham Huggan explains how the parrot functions as a metaphor for mimicry, which he argues "is a strategy by which the Caribbean writers of different backgrounds seek to interrogate the European literary and cultural traditions which not only give shape to their own work, but also continue to exert considerable influence over the hybrid societies of the Caribbean region."³¹ *Wide Sargasso Sea* mimics, but does not copy, *Jane Eyre*, and mimicry is used to imitate certain aspects of the canonical text yet makes modifications in this text to challenge it.³²

In part three, the parrot image is repeated, only it is Antoinette on fire, her hair aflame "like wings" which were metaphorically clipped by Rochester. However,

³¹ Graham Huggan, "A Tale of Two Parrots: Walcott, Rhys, and the Uses of Colonial Mimicry," *Contemporary Literature* 35, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 643.

³² It is important to note Homi Bhabha's influence on Huggan's article. Bhabha's essay "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," is among the first that treats the concept of mimicry in postcolonial literature.

Antoinette does not go down in flames, as the parrot (Bertha) did, she rises up, consistent with her wish “if you are buried under a flamboyant tree...your soul is lifted up when it flowers.” One page earlier, shortly after seeing her image in the mirror, Antoinette is described as running from the flames, but she is actually flying: “As I ran or perhaps floated or flew I called help me Christophine help me...” (189). Antoinette flies, like the parrot, calling out to the Caribbean influence Christophine, then jumps to meet her object of desire, the girl that she longs to be, Tia. While England burns behind her, Antoinette jumps to embrace the Caribbean.

Antoinette’s Betrayal

There is a religious element to this scene as well, which, combined with the other religious images in the novel, strengthens the idea that Antoinette’s “death” in the flames reunites her with the Caribbean. In her Caribbean world, Antoinette’s caretakers have religious names – Christophine refers to Christ and Baptiste is a reference to John the Baptist. It is John the Baptist who in the book of Matthew mentions a baptism of fire, and traditionally, baptism signifies death and then rebirth.³³ As previously discussed, Antoinette dismisses this Caribbean world in favor of Englishness, and her betrayal is evident when she pressures Christophine to give her the “love potion,” then rewarding the favor with money, the English idol, which Christophine rejects: “ ‘You don’t have to give me money. I do this foolishness because you beg me – not for money’ ” (117). This scene recalls two biblical episodes that detail a betrayal of Jesus: Peter, who denies him three times and is reminded of his sin by the cock’s crow; and Judas, who accepts money in exchange for his complicity in a plot to kill Christ.³⁴ After coercing Christophine to

³³ See Matthew 3:11

³⁴ See Matthew 26:69 and 26:47.

give her the obeah potion, Antoinette compares herself to the biblical figure: “Nearby a cock crew and I thought, ‘That is for betrayal, but who is the traitor?’ She did not want to do this. I forced her with my ugly money. And what does anyone know about traitors, or why Judas did what he did?” (118). Antoinette, as noted earlier, has already denied parts of her Caribbean past, such as her cousin Sandi. Now, Antoinette betrays *Christophine*³⁵ and follows Rochester to England, where she remains in her zombie state (the living dead) until the fire. Shortly before starting the fire she sits in the red room that reminds her of a church, but the gold clock reminds her of money, a false idol (188). Antoinette is then prompted to start the fire, and in the midst of these flames she calls to *Christophine*. This fire can be seen to symbolize Antoinette’s baptism with fire, her death gives way to rebirth, and this rebirth is one that reunites her with *Christophine* and the Caribbean.

The fire scene without all of the above implications mimics the fire scene in *Jane Eyre*, yet the end result is quite different. As Huggan says in his article, “Mimicry, creolization – both provide means by which Caribbean writers such as Walcott and Rhys ‘answer back’ to the dominant metropolitan systems within which their own work is implicated.”³⁶ The difference between *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* is that in Rhys’ work Antoinette wakes up in the midst of her fiery death, a significant diversion from the ending as told by Brontë. Since the fire came in the form of a dream, it does not signify the end of Antoinette as the fire in *Jane Eyre* signified the end of Bertha. Instead, Antoinette wakes, the final awakening of the zombie, but her intention is to carry out the actions in her dream: “Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I must do. There must have been a draught for the flame flickered and I thought it was out. But I

³⁵ Emphasis mine.

³⁶ Huggan, “A Tale of Two Parrots,” 657.

shielded it with my hand and it burned up again to light me along the dark passage” (190). For perhaps the first time, Antoinette speaks with determination and clarity. Before, her questions were “what am I doing here?” and “who am I?” much like the parrot’s question, “Qui est là?” Now that she has come to terms with these questions, she has recognized her image and knows what it is, she has embraced her cultural difference in her Caribbean identity. Though it is a subtle detail, Rhys’ implementation of a draft that almost extinguishes her flame is important, because it once again represents the attempt of imperialism to stifle the voice of the Other. Antoinette’s flame, though, representing the red fire of the Caribbean, burns steadily under her protection and enables her to achieve “what I must do” which is to symbolically burn the canonical text to create room for the Creole one and defeat the plan to keep her story a secret. This nefarious plan is a result of the imperialism which is symbolized by Rochester’s intentions: “Very soon she’ll join the others who know the secret and will not tell it. Or cannot. Or try and fail because they do not know enough...I too can wait – for the day when she is only a memory to be avoided, locked away, and like all memories a legend. Or a lie...” (172). The intention is to silence the Other, which brings me to Spivak’s analysis of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which claims that Antoinette remains within the confines of her attic prison.

Does the Subaltern Remain Silent? Spivak’s Critique of *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Gayatri Spivak one of the most well-known critics in the field of postcolonial theory, and her essay “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” has a pessimistic view of *Wide Sargasso Sea*’s ending. Below is a particularly interesting passage from the essay:

We can read this as having been brought into the England of Brontë's novel: "This cardboard house" – a book between cardboard covers – "where I walk at night is not England" (WSS, p. 148). In this fictive England, she must play out her role, 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. I must read this as an allegory of the general epistemic violence of imperialism, the construction of a self-immolating colonial subject for the glorification of the social mission of the colonizer. At least Rhys sees to it that the woman from the colonies is not sacrificed as an insane animal for her sister's consolidation.³⁷

Spivak contends that Rhys' work, rather than giving a voice to the Other, actually reinforces the notion of the supremacy of Western tradition. Her critique is not surprising, for Spivak's many essays, most notably her "Can the Subaltern Speak," conclude that the colonized subject is "irretrievably heterogeneous" and that attempts to liberate the Other or condemn imperialism ultimately serve to fortify the tradition of Otherness in the colonized subject.³⁸ Consider what she writes about works like *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which attempt to tell the Other's story: "No perspective *critical* of imperialism can turn the Other into a self, because the project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been the absolutely Other into a domesticated Other that consolidates the imperialist self."³⁹ Spivak indicates that a work which condemns imperialism does not miraculously *unOther* an Other. It is through the historical violence of colonization, a historical past that is unalterable, that the Other obtained its heterogeneity, for an Other can only be so when there is a self put up against it; it can only exist in the realm that names it Other. Stuart Hall also makes the point that for identity to exist, there must exist entities that are *unlike* the identical subject:

³⁷ Gayatri Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (Autumn 1985) 251.

³⁸ Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*.

³⁹ Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," 253.

Moreover, they [identities] emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity – an ‘identity’ in its traditional meaning (that is, an all-inclusive sameness, seamless, without internal differentiation).

Above all, and directly contrary to the form in which they are constantly invoked, identities are constructed through, not outside, difference. This entails the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its *constitutive outside* that the ‘positive’ meaning of any term – and that its ‘identity’ – can be constructed.⁴⁰

Therefore, if one agrees that the self needs an Other to strengthen the self’s sense of identity, then one can understand how through Rhys’ critique of *Jane Eyre*, she immediately puts Antoinette in the position of Other, thus reaffirming the English self. Spivak suggests that the work strengthens the imperialist cause in that it replicates the discourse that it is trying to refute, but that the end result is the same – the mad Creole’s suicide through fire that reinstates the triumph of British fiction. There is also the implication that little hope remains for the colonized subject to escape otherness. This is shown through her description of Antoinette trapped within the confines of the cardboard book and having to “play out her role,” the only difference being that at least the Creole is portrayed with more dignity in Rhys’ work.

Spivak’s argument is certainly compelling, her concept of the cardboard house as book covers is insightful, and her concept of otherness is true in that once the other is labeled Other, the process may be impossible to reverse. In terms of Rhys’ supposed servitude to imperialism, one can agree that from the moment Rhys picks up the pen, she enters into the Western literary tradition. I have already mentioned that the European influence in the West Indies is unquestionable, and the reader is well aware that Brontë’s

⁴⁰ Stuart Hall, *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London: SAGE Publications, 1996), 5.

Jane Eyre was the inspiration behind the work. However, for Spivak to suggest that the only redeeming difference between the *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre* is that in the former Antoinette/Bertha is less monstrous, is a restrictive view which does not lend enough credit to the possibility of a Caribbean identity. There are several ways in which the Creole can be seen as the prevailing character in the story who surmounts the gruesome end given to her counterpart in *Jane Eyre*.

The first difference is that in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rochester, the Englishman, also becomes the “Other.” Certainly Antoinette feels otherness both in terms of the island and England, but in the beginning of part two she is in control. As I described in chapter one, it is she who must warn Rochester about the fire ants, the cooling weather, the local customs. Rochester feels alien and unsure of himself in the island’s wilderness and he must depend on his wife and the black inhabitants to direct him. He is painfully aware they do not respect him as an authority figure, and this inability to assert control incites a rage which fuels his hatred of Antoinette. By placing him against the Caribbean backdrop, Rhys creates an interesting reversal by making Rochester the fictive Other in a Caribbean work. Though Rochester attempts to seize control by bringing Antoinette back to British soil, I would argue that Antoinette’s act of setting Thornfield Hall aflame does not reinforce the imperialist self but rather vindicates the oppressed Other. Antoinette does not merely “play out her role” by setting fire to the estate and killing herself. Though she is within the confines of the cardboard house, which Spivak interprets as the cardboard covers of a book (*Jane Eyre*), this book is *burned*, a striking image if the reader accepts Spivak’s interpretation. The result is that *Jane Eyre* burns to

the ground to make room for the new Creole character emerging from the flames, one that contains a literary Caribbeanness, whose “soul is lifted up when it flowers” (185).

Though perhaps a small detail, it is important to note that *Wide Sargasso Sea* does not really end with a suicide. Antoinette’s fiery death is in the form of a dream; she is very much alive at the end of the novel but intends to make a reality of her dream, which I explained earlier in this chapter is a symbolic rewriting of the text in order to give a voice to the Other. One could theorize that Rhys did this purposefully to avoid giving Antoinette the same literal end that Bertha had, and this changes the “role” that Spivak describes of Antoinette killing herself so that Jane can remain the heroine. In fact, though we are in England in part three of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jane is absent with the exception of one possible glimpse of a girl in a white dress (182).⁴¹ The fact that Rhys excludes Jane from her work makes way for a new heroine, one with more diversity.

All this being said, Spivak’s arguments could still have merit based on the fact that Rhys’ critique of *Jane Eyre* and her attempt to give a voice to the Other are well-intentioned, but do not succeed. Part of Spivak’s opinion of postcolonial critique is that the theorists that try to liberate the Other only intensify its position as subordinate. But even if Rhys fails in her efforts to make the Other a self (if that were ever her intention), she succeeds in that she influences the way readers will interpret *Jane Eyre*. Once Rhys introduced Antoinette to literature, she cannot be taken out. After reading *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette’s story will come to mind when the reader revisits Bertha of Thornfield Hall in the pages of *Jane Eyre*.

⁴¹ Again, I will point out that critics are divided on whether or not the girl in the white dress is actually Jane; I leave open the possibility that she is Jane, for in *Jane Eyre* Jane stays in Thornfield Hall and fears the ghost (Bertha) that haunts the place.

Jean Rhys says of her heroine, “When I read *Jane Eyre* as a child, I thought, why should she think Creole women are lunatics and all that? What a shame to make Rochester’s first wife, Bertha, the awful madwoman, and I immediately thought I’d write the story as it might really have been. She seemed such a poor ghost. I thought I’d try to write her a life.”⁴² Rhys does not allow the madwoman to stay in the attic of the Victorian novel, as she had for so many years, leaving the reader horrified at her monstrosity and thus sympathetic to Rochester and his independent Jane, who is seen as the antithesis of her insanity. Instead, she storms into view through 20th century Caribbean fiction, seen as Jane’s unhappy double, to make us question our interpretation of the classic text and bring to light the anguish of forced silence, dislocation, and cultural difference.

Creolizing the Canonical Text: Condé’s Caribbeanness in *La migration des cœurs*

Condé as Author

In regard to the French literary canon, many theorists view Maryse Condé as a postmodernist. While modernism focuses on a fragmented view of history and sees art as the separator between the heroic individual and bourgeois society, postmodernism focuses on collectivity and diversity, and often integrates popular culture into literature. In postmodern fiction, there is also a tendency to remove the seriousness from a situation, rendering it parodic. John McGowan makes this distinction between postmodernism and modernism: “Unlike the heroic modernist, who created works out of pure imagination, the postmodern artist works with cultural givens, trying to manipulate them in various

⁴² Harrison, *Jean Rhys and the Novel as Women’s Text*, 127-128.

ways (parody, pastiche, collage, juxtaposition) for various ends. The ultimate aim is to appropriate these materials in such a way as to avoid being utterly dominated by them.”

43

In the Caribbean writer's case, the dominant material is Western history and literature. Condé's work is often tinged with irony, and she does not focus on one particular character but rather juxtaposes multiple (and diverse) characters in a cultural framework such as the Caribbean to illustrate the difficulties the characters may encounter in a culture which is not Western but is dominated by Western ideals. These elements align themselves with the above characteristics of postmodern literature. Furthermore, the emphasis Condé places on the culture rather than the individual distances her from modernists such as André Gide, who concentrate on the individual; and the ironic nature of much of her work separates her from realists such as Flaubert. Critic James Arnold explains why realism does not fit into a literature that is seen as Other: “The hypothesis of a liberating postmodernism leads us to tactics used to subvert the master plot of colonial narrative, in which Europeans are the agents and Africans and their Creole descendents are mere instruments in the working out of History. It is in this sense that poetics of realist fiction are especially dangerous for the West Indian writer.”

44

In the Antilles, the European tradition and island culture are inextricably linked. This idea may often be disconcerting for Caribbean writers who, understandably, associate Europe with colonization and oppression. For example, Glissant laments the fact that the history

⁴³ Michael Groden and Martin Kreiswirth, *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 324.

⁴⁴ James Arnold, “The Novelist as Critic,” *World Literature Today: A Literary Quarterly of the University of Oklahoma (WLT)*, 67, no.4 (Autumn 1993): 714

of Martinique is really a manifestation of French history, centered on references to slavery and colonial culture:

S'obstiner à découper l'histoire de la Martinique sur le modèle de l'histoire de France (siècles, guerres, règnes, crises, etc.), c'est aligner si manifestement la première sur la seconde qu'en réalité on en vient à camoufler par là le fait principal de cette histoire martiniquaise : sa surdétermination. Le rapport trop évident aux périodes de l'histoire de France est une ruse de la pensée assimilée, relayée par les « historiens » martiniquais : il dispense d'avoir à fouiller plus avant.

To persist in categorizing Martinican history according to the French historical model (centuries, wars, reigns, crises, etc.) is to align the first so closely to the second that in fact by this means you ultimately camouflage the main feature of such a history of Martinique : its overdetermination The overemphasis on links with periods of French history is a trap created by an assimilationist way of thinking, spread through Martinican historians who do not bother to dig any deeper.⁴⁵

Despite the aversion critics have to this fact, the European model has taken hold in the culture by instilling French and English education in the Antilles and teaching European history, language and religion to the people. The unfortunate result is that the islands experienced, to use a famous Glissantian term, a Caribbean “non-history” (non-histoire). In other words, because the Caribbean was dominated by Western culture, which used the need to “civilize” and “educate” as a justification for colonization, the history of the Caribbean remained untold. It becomes, then, the responsibility of the Caribbean writer to give a history to the Antilles. Revealing the history of a non-Western Other is also connected to postmodernism, as John McGowan point out:

Within such a view, what is distinctive about postmodernism is not something new but our attention to and interest in features of the past that until recently were most often ignored. Postmodernism, then, is just part of the very complex rereading of history taking place in the current climate of a critical questioning of the Western tradition.⁴⁶

Many Caribbean writers, such as Aimé Césaire and Edouard Glissant, have given their islands a history by distancing themselves from the West and attempting to

⁴⁵ Glissant's *Le discours antillais*, 155, and Glissant's *Caribbean Discourse*, 88.

⁴⁶ Groden and Kreiswirth, *The Johns Hopkins Guide*, 328.

decolonize their lands through writing. By coining such terms such as Antillanité,⁴⁷ which involves living the Caribbean experience, including its Creole language; and Négritude,⁴⁸ the search and affirmation of one's African identity (as well as the identity of peoples from other non-homogeneous cultures), Caribbean writers give their native lands a past and a literary voice that they were originally denied.

Despite these efforts to create distance from the West and establish Antillean autonomy, shedding European influence is not an easy task. Caribbean literature emerges from a historical nightmare, that of colonialism, and therefore it can be difficult to remove Europe from the (con)text. One method writers have used to fight back is to consume the influence; they re-write the canonical texts and, in so doing, reverse the colonial power. This serves both to question the validity of the classic texts as well as to give a voice to the forgotten Other such as Caliban in Césaire's version of *The Tempest* or Antoinette/Bertha in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Critic Theo D'haen details how the Other is virtually ignored in the European text:

In the single instance in Shakespeare's play that Caliban himself tries to tell his own story, he is immediately silenced and his 'his story' is overwritten by Prospero...And in *Jane Eyre* the story of Bertha Mason is told by Rochester, and only takes up a few pages in what is a long novel. In other words, in all of these works Europe's Others are always and uniquely represented as such in the words through the eyes of characters that explicitly represent themselves as incarnations of Europe's self.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ "Glissant's concept of Antillanité is deeply rooted in the vécu antillais – the reality of the Caribbean lived experience. The fact that the Caribbean community has embraced the word Antillanité and that it has become a part of the current lexicon is an indicator of its importance in the Caribbean community." Debra Anderson, "Decolonizing the Text: Glissantian Readings in Caribbean and African-American Literatures," PhD diss., Louisiana State University, 1995, 32.

⁴⁸ "...the form of the new lexeme marvelously embodies what we have been calling the tension between assimilationist and counter- assimilationist world view." Davis, Gregson, *Aime Césaire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 12.

⁴⁹ D'haen, Theo, "Caribbean Migrations: Maryse Condé on the Track of Emily Brontë," in *Histoire jeu science dans l'aire de la littérature*, ed. Sjef Houppermans, Paul J. Smith, Madeleine van Strien-Chardonneau (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Rodopi; 2000), 203.

Maryse Condé uses this method of re-writing in *La migration des cœurs*, which is modeled after Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. However, her approach is different than that of, for instance, Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, for Condé shows little discord with the classic text, and instead embraces the work. This is illustrated through the novel's dedication: "A Emily Brontë qui, je l'espère, agréera cette lecture de son chef-d'oeuvre. Honneur et respect!" (To Emily Brontë, who, I hope, will approve of this interpretation of her masterpiece. Honor and respect!). *La migration des cœurs* is a way for Condé to insert her text into a literary tradition, thus attributing her work to a canonical text, a text that is written by a British woman writer.

Condé is an interesting writer to study for many reasons. She has made several places her home, from her native Guadeloupe to the colonizing country of France, continuing on to the idealized continent of Africa and to the New World of the United States. She has spent time in many other Caribbean islands such as Jamaica and Martinique. In her prose, Condé does not hesitate to take her characters on similar journeys, and this element of her work separates her from other Caribbean writers, though making it no less of a Caribbean work. Condé is also a unique Caribbean writer in that she is reluctant to align herself with any particular literary theory or movement. She is unwilling to join a particular school of thought but instead wrestles alone with the complexities of living in a postcolonial society. In an interview with Marie-Agnès Sourieau, she describes how the various literary terminology can have a stifling effect on the writer:

Dès 1972 j'ai fait paraître un article, peut-être le premier article sérieux que j'ai écrit, qui s'intitulait « Pourquoi la Négritude ? ». Pour ce qui est de la « Créolité » c'est la même chose : je ne veux pas qu'on me définisse et qu'on m'impose un canon littéraire. Je pense que je suis un être complexe de par ma situation colonisée, de par

une série d'influences qui font ce que je suis, et qu'il faut donc me laisser absolument libre d'exprimer les facettes de ma personnalité.

In 1972 I published an article, maybe the first serious article that I wrote, which was titled "Pourquoi la Négritude?" For those who are of "Créolité" it's the same thing: I do not want to be defined or imposed upon by a literary canon. I think that I am a complex being because of my situation as a colonized subject, by a series of influences that make up who I am, and I must be absolutely free to express all facets of my personality. (*translation mine*)⁵⁰

Condé also rejects the idea of one belonging to a native land, which is not surprising given her nomadic tendencies, as well as the fact that she situates her characters in various locations whether it be Cuba, Africa, the United States or Guadeloupe. Again, this technique is representative of the theme of miscegenation found in her novels, as Françoise Lionnet points out: "Métissage is a model of intertextuality and hybridization in which the warp and woof of the social fabric, the racial elements of a given group, and the traditions of literary history are interwoven, or juxtaposed, and mirror each other."⁵¹ Yet this viewpoint is controversial, for, as Condé puts it, "Even the most superficial study of literature from the West Indies demonstrates that every writer keeps to his or her island. Personally, I don't share this viewpoint, believing instead in a West Indian identity, regardless of colonial language and political status."⁵²

Perhaps for this reason Condé has been labeled a "recalcitrant" daughter,⁵³ receiving criticism for representing Africa in a less than positive light (such as in her first novel, *Heremakonon*) or for depicting cynicism in her culture (*La vie scélérate*). Because Condé writes her novels in French, and until recently has interjected little or no Creole (and when she does, usually provides a glossary for non-Creole readers, i.e. French

⁵⁰ Marie-Agnès Sourieau, "Entretien avec Maryse Condé: De l'identité culturelle." *French Review: Journal of the American Association of Teachers of French* 72, no. 6 (1999) : 1092

⁵¹ Lionnet, "Narrating the Americas," 74.

⁵² Maryse Condé, "The Role of the Writer." *World Literature Today* 67, no. 4 (Autumn 1993): 699

⁵³ Johnathan Ngate, "Maryse Condé and Africa: The Making of a Recalcitrant Daughter?" *A Current Bibliography on African Affairs* 19, no. 1 (1986-1987) : 5 – 20.

readers), she can be viewed as one who perpetuates the “colonial” language and therefore the European tradition. In ways, Condé *does* connect to the European literary tradition, yet in others she detaches herself from it, which enables her to convey a Caribbean literariness which is *primarily* Francophone literariness but which does not exclude other Caribbean cultures. In the novel *La migration des cœurs*, Condé fuses these cultures together.

Métissage in *La migration des cœurs*

Condé’s novel is at first faithful to Brontë’s text, the largest difference being that the location has changed. The majority of the action is in Guadeloupe, where Wuthering Heights is replaced with L’Engoulvent, and Thrushcross Grange with the Belles-Feuilles estate. The plot is very similar to the English text, in which Heathcliff and Cathy Earnshaw’s strong bond is broken as Cathy betrays Heathcliff to marry Edgar Linton. Cathy views the marriage as an opportunity to move up in social structure and sees Heathcliff, whose ambiguous origins are not that of a white European, as belonging to the lower class. Heathcliff, bent on revenge, leaves for years but returns as a wealthy, handsome gentleman. His clever scheming reverses the class system: the Linton family becomes poverty stricken and the descendants of both families (Hareton Earnshaw and Cathy’s daughter, Cathy Linton) are forced to work for him. Heathcliff’s extreme cruelty astounds readers, yet it is tempered by the encompassing love he still has for Cathy. Despite the reversal, in which the Other is the dominating force, order is eventually restored through lineage. The descendants of the Earnshaw and Linton family, Cathy and Hareton, fall in love and marry. Their marriage is symbolic of Heathcliff and Cathy’s love, for they carry on in their lives what Cathy and Heathcliff were unable to accomplish

in their own. At the same time, Cathy and Heathcliff's ghosts meet on the moors, and they are able to continue their love beyond death.

It is important to note that Hareton and Cathy's marriage is more than the continuation of a cosmic love. It also gives back what Heathcliff had taken away and allows for pure, English society to be reinstated. Theo D'haen speaks of this return to "normalcy" in the Linton/Earnshaw household:

With Heathcliff's self-announced, but otherwise inexplicable, death, and Cathy and Hareton's marriage, everything reverts to normal. The ancient families of Earnshaw and Linton resume control of their houses, their fortunes, their lands. With the earlier death of Heathcliff's son, and now his own death, all further threat of "foreign" blood sullyng England's purity has vanished. In both social and racial terms, then, order and purity has been restored. The colonial Other threatening to invade Europe's heartland has been successfully eliminated.⁵⁴

Condé's work describes similar events at first, but ends in a dramatically different way, a subject that will be addressed later in this chapter. First, it is necessary to explicate the changes Condé employs to incorporate Antillean elements into the re-writing of Brontë's work. Among the most important is the emphasis placed on *métissage* : Cathy Gagneur is mulatto; her ancestry includes black and white descendants. When she wrestles with the idea of marrying Aymeric (Edgar) as opposed to Razyé (Heathcliff) she encounters difficulties of determining cultural identity. She describes herself as two Cathys grappling for control: the "white Cathy" of, presumably, European descent, and the "black Cathy" of Africa. She views them as opposing forces, the "white" Cathy as positive and the "black Cathy" as utterly negative:

Une Cathy qui débarque directement d'Afrique avec tous ses vices. Une autre Cathy qui est le portrait de son aieule blanche, pure, pieuse, aimant l'ordre et la mesure. Mais cette deuxième Cathy-là n'a pas souvent la parole... (48)

⁵⁴ D'haen, "Caribbean Migrations," 208.

One Cathy who's come straight from Africa, vices and all. The other Cathy who is the very image of her white ancestor, pure, dutiful, fond of order and moderation. But this second Cathy is seldom heard, and the first always gets the upper hand... (41)

Cathy is not only torn between conflicting ideas of class and color (through color is left ambiguous in Brontë's text; it is only said that Heathcliff is dark), she is also torn between two cultures, both of which are a part of her. This conflict is connected to Caribbean literature; it does not present an obstacle to the European writer who is part of a dominant culture and writes of the Other in terms of the European perspective. Cathy simultaneously has both perspectives and neither: she is not fully African, not fully European, and what does it mean to be fully Antillean? This is the question that all Antillean writers are examining.

In her article "Réécriture de la folie dans *La Migration des cœurs*," Françoise DuRivage speaks of how Cathy's decision to marry Aymeric implicitly aligns her with colonialism:

Pourtant elle choisit d'épouser Aymeric dans un effort désespéré de détruire en elle-même la Cathy venue d'Afrique, car elle la voit avec des yeux blancs, « avec tous ses vices » Chez le métis, le mélange des races ne peut être harmonieux car, sur ses goûts les plus profonds, sur ses désirs secrets, il porte sans cesse le jugement moral de la société coloniale.

She chooses however to marry Aymeric in a desperate effort to destroy within herself the Cathy from Africa, because she sees her through white eyes, "with vices and all." Among those of mixed blood, the mixing of races cannot be harmonious because, deep within their hearts, their secret desires, they carry the unceasing moral judgment of colonial society (*translation mine*).⁵⁵

The reason Cathy begins to view Razyé with "des yeux blancs" emerges from her stay with the Linsseuil family. She goes to the family as a wild girl who "déchirait le français, remuait son *bonda* et dansait si bien le *gwo-ka* le soir" (massacred the French language,

⁵⁵ Françoise DuRivage, "Réécriture de la folie dans *La migration des cœurs* de Maryse Condé," *RLA: Romance Languages Annual* 10, no. 1 (1998): 23.

wiggled her *bonda* and danced the *gwo-ka* every evening) but returns as a girl who “s’abritait d’une ombrelle et recherchait l’ombrage” (shaded herself under a parasol and hid from the sun) (35). She mimics the refined lady who emulates European standards; her hair is pulled back and she is confined in her dressy attire. This prevents her from doing the things she once enjoyed, such as horseback riding or running in the fields with Rayzé. Cathy internalizes society’s values when she commits to the European system, becoming like the women in Victorian novels. The mention of language is also noteworthy, for Cathy returns speaking European French; the colonial language. The emphasis on language and the juxtaposition of Creole and French further demonstrates the extent to which this novel is representative of Caribbean literature, which, of course, makes language a primary subject matter.

Another element which demonstrates Condé’s independence from Brontë’s text and the tradition of the Victorian novel is the introduction of sexual desire in *La migration des cœurs*. Condé makes it no secret that Cathy and Razyé have a sexual relationship; they are childhood friends and lovers. Cathy defends her sexuality by affirming that though it may be viewed as vice, “moi, je sais que c’était innocence” (99) (I know it was innocence) (95). Razyé is seen as a sexual creature, which contributes to his being “immoral,” in the eyes of other characters, and his sexuality casts a spell on Aymeric’s sister Irmine, who is also taken by desire. Razyé uses this to his advantage and sees his opportunity to get a foothold in the Linsseuil family, turning the tables by becoming “colonizer” instead of “colonized.” He treats Irmine like a slave and successfully takes over the Linsseuil’s land, yet unlike Antoinette and her feelings for Rochester, Irmine’s desire for Razyé does not wane.

In contrast to Razyé, Aymeric is seen as someone lacking masculinity. He is weak and easily shaken; emotional conflict renders him ill. It must be said that this does not make him an unsympathetic character; it perhaps heightens the pity the reader will have for him. Condé makes it clear that Aymeric is unable to satisfy Cathy sexually, which contributes to the unhappiness in her marriage, as the housekeeper observes:

Mais je savais que son cœur et son corps mentaient et qu'il ne lui donnait pas ce qu'il lui fallait. Le matin, quand j'entrais dans sa chambre, je la trouvais déjà réveillée, appuyée droite contre ses oreillers, morose et insatisfaite." (75)

But I knew that her heart and her body lied and that he didn't give her what she needed. In the morning when I entered her bedroom I would find her already awake, propped up against her pillows, brooding and dissatisfied. (69) ⁵⁶

Aymeric mimics the model of the English Victorian novel, in which sexuality is virtually absent. Condé incorporates sexual desire in the Afro Caribbean characters in *La migration des cœurs*, but she also makes sexuality a subject in her other works, such as in *Moi, Tituba, sorcière*. Though the introduction of sexuality into the plot of *Wuthering Heights* could be said to further "Caribbeanize" Condé's work, Condé says that sexuality is rare even in Caribbean literature, especially when the authors are male:

Male novelists portray women only as mothers or grandmothers. They are only in the maternal function. In the French Caribbean classic *La Rue Cases-Nègres* by Martinican novelist Joseph Zobel, Man Tine sacrifices her entire life to her grandson José and symbolically dies when he reaches adulthood. As a female I cannot accept being restricted to motherhood, however important it is. ⁵⁷

The fact that Condé does not wish for women to be linked continuously to motherhood is perhaps the reason she leaves so many orphans in *La migration des cœurs*. Of course, several women characters die in *Wuthering Heights*, leaving small children, but Condé adds many additional characters, mainly narrators, who speak about their mothers dying

⁵⁶ The speaker in the passage is Lucinda Lucius, a housekeeper for the Linsseuil family.

⁵⁷ Condé, "The Role of the Writer," 699.

before they had a chance to meet them. One of the major modifications of *Wuthering Heights* is the death of Cathy's daughter, Little Cathy, who dies during childbirth.

Though Condé includes sexuality in Cathy and Heathcliff's relationship, she keeps their romantic (and obsessive) love intact. As in Brontë's novel, this love has destructive consequences. Cathy is twice driven to madness (true to Brontë's text) because of her consuming love for Heathcliff: once when he leaves upon learning about her upcoming marriage to Aymeric, and again when she learns that Heathcliff and Irmine are lovers. The first time she is cured through Mama Victoire (the white doctors can do nothing for her), but the second time she cannot be saved. She dies shortly after giving birth to Little Cathy, who is Razyé's child, another significant alteration in the text. Of course, Razyé is perhaps the most affected by love; he is inconsolable after Cathy's death and longs to contact her spirit. Condé keeps close to Brontë's text and, consequently, European tradition by applying to her work the depth of love Cathy and Heathcliff feel for each other. This is different from African culture, as Condé describes in an interview with Françoise Pfaff:

...l'amour tel que nous le concevons aujourd'hui est une invention européenne et qu'il n'existe pas en Afrique car l'amour individuel n'a pas de place dans une société qui donne plus de place à la collectivité qu'à l'individu.

Love as we conceive of it today is a European invention that does not exist in Africa because individual love has no place in a society that values the many over the individual (*translation mine*).⁵⁸

There is a key difference, however, between the two works on the topic of love: in Brontë's novel the couple is reunited in death, and in Condé's work they remain separate.

⁵⁸ Françoise Pfaff, *Conversations with Maryse Condé* (Lincoln : University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 114.

The separation is seen as eternal, rendering the characters all the more tragic, at least from the European point of view.

The Meaning of Death in *Wuthering Heights* and *La migration des cœurs*

The notion of death in *Wuthering Heights* is modified in *La migration des cœurs* to the African tradition, and is an element that distinguishes the novel as a Caribbean work. Brontë's text conveys a fascination with death, but it is very different from the Caribbean conception presented in Condé's novel. In Brontë's text, death is often associated with the morbid or gothic. For example, the most chilling moment in the novel occurs near the beginning, when Cathy's ghost tenaciously grips Lockwood's arm and implores him to let her in. There is also the example of Heathcliff, who, mad with grief, digs up Cathy's tomb so he can see her corpse. Theo D'haen observes that Heathcliff is compared to a devil, a vampire, and a ghoul.⁵⁹ These events and descriptions are absent from Condé's text.

Condé says of death: "Dans la majorité des sociétés africaines, la mort n'est pas un terme, mais un passage...Les funérailles sont des gestes de vivants qui facilitent la métamorphose du disparu en ancêtre qui, dès lors, invisible, ne quittera plus les humains et participera à leur vie. Aux Antilles, il reste de larges pans d'une telle croyance."⁶⁰ (In the majority of African societies, death is not an end, but a passage...Funerals are customs of the living that facilitate the metamorphosis of the dead into an ancestor who, although invisible, will never leave the living and will participate in his life. In the Antilles, there remains a large number who hold to this belief") (*translation mine*). The

⁵⁹ D'haen, "Caribbean Migrations," 207.

⁶⁰ Maryse Condé, *La parole des femmes : essai sur des romancières des Antilles de langue française* (Paris : L'Harmattan, 1979) : 67.

idea of the dead coexisting with the living is illustrated on many occasions in *La migration des cœurs*. Cathy has a death monologue in which she observes her own wake and laments her separation from Razyé, Razyé's sons see his ghost several times, and during Razyé's lifetime he is persistently trying to communicate with the other world through magic men, such as Melchior. He is never successful; Cathy continually eludes him. This is a diversion from the canonical text, for in Brontë's story the redeeming quality in Cathy and Heathcliff's relationship is that they are able to have in death what they were deprived of in life. Class struggles prevented Cathy and Heathcliff from marrying, yet a resolution is achieved through their descendants. Little Cathy and Hareton's marriage symbolizes the relationship Cathy and Heathcliff could never have in life, and Cathy and Heathcliff also meet in death. There are several sightings of their ghosts on the moors.

In Condé's novel, Cathy and Razyé desire a relationship in death, just as Cathy and Heathcliff do in Brontë's text, but the result is quite different. At first, *La migration des cœurs* seems to conform to the plot of *Wuthering Heights*. The characters place hope in the afterlife, a hope that corresponds to freedom from oppression. For instance, Cathy dreams of an afterlife "...où nous pourrions exprimer tous les sentiments, toutes les envies que nous avons dû étouffer pendant notre existence. Un au-delà où nous serions enfin libres d'être nous-mêmes" (81) (...where we can express all the emotions and desires we have had to stifle in our lifetime. An afterlife where we would be free at last to be ourselves") (84). Condé, however, leaves the desire for a post-mortem freedom unfulfilled. While she introduces into the novel African customs relating to death, Condé also attributes death with finality and implies that it brings about no drastic changes from

life. This hopelessness is underlined in many of the characters' thoughts. For instance, Irmine toys with the idea that death could also recompense one with riches after all the sorrows one is forced to endure while on earth, but eventually concludes that "Perdants nous avons été dans la vie, du temps de l'existence, perdants nous restons dans notre éternité" (274) (Losers we are when alive, losers we remain in eternity) (281). Similarly, Razyé's son sees him sitting atop his tombstone, waiting in vain for Cathy:

A présent, je suis là et je ne sais pas même plus si j'attends. Je vois un chemin qui file devant moi. Je dois le suivre et, pourtant, je sais qu'il ne conduit nulle part et qu'au bout du compte je me retrouverai au même point. Là d'où je suis parti. Je suis fatigué. Je voudrais en finir.

Qu'est-ce je vais faire de tout ce temps? (278)

Now I'm here and I don't even know any longer why I'm waiting. I can see a path stretching out in front of me. I have to follow it, but I know it leads nowhere and in the end I shall be back where I started. I am tired. I wish it were over

What am I going to do with all this time on my hands? (286).

Razyé's anguish mirrors Cathy's, who, in her own death monologue, also resigns herself to the fact that death is no solution: "La vie est derrière. L'éternité devant. L'éternité. Un temps sans limites à passer. Sans limites" (99). (Life is past. Eternity ahead. Eternity. Infinite time on my hands. Infinite) (95). Even Cathy's daughter, Little Cathy, has dreams of an afterlife where she will meet her mother, but she soon sees the futility in this hope: "Puis, brusquement, elle réalisait sa naïveté. Il n'y a pas d'autre odeur que celle de la charogne" (301). (Then suddenly, she realized how naive she was. There would be nothing to smell but the smell of a corpse.) (309). In all of these situations, each character first looks to death as a resolution, but then comes to the grim conclusion that it is meaningless.

Because of death, Little Cathy and Razyé II are unable, unlike Hareton and Little Cathy in *Wuthering Heights*, to continue Cathy and Razyé's legacy. In addition to this fact is perhaps one of the most striking differences from *Wuthering Heights*, that in Condé's novel there is no spiritual reconciliation between Razyé and Cathy. Despite his many attempts, Razyé fails to see Cathy's ghost during his lifetime, and there is no reunion in death. Instead of meeting on the moors, as in Brontë's novel, the last chapter depicts the two spirits being separated:

Certains affirmaient avoir distingué dans une surprenante lumière de plein jour des silhouettes qui erraient les unes à côté des autres, se croisaient, se cherchaient apparemment sans se voir. Triste et effrayant spectacle!" (334)

Some people claimed to have seen silhouettes in a strange light as bright as day wandering side by side, passing each other, blindly searching for one another. A sad and frightening sight! (345)

Though the novel puts death in the perspective of the African culture, the fact that neither Razyé nor Cathy are able to meet in death also reflects how Cathy forcefully denied that part of her culture when she attempted to fit in to a richer, whiter world. In death Condé does not allow Cathy to reconnect to this culture, for though her physical body changes to reflect her true heritage,⁶¹ her spirit never haunts Razyé. Brontë does not allow Cathy and Heathcliff to continue their romance in life, but in death. Condé's view indicates that if it were impossible in life for a romance to continue due to class and race restrictions, then it will not be possible in death. Lionnet suggests that Condé puts death ahead of race as a line that cannot be crossed, thus making the racial boundaries more possible: "The romantic and gothic elements present in Brontë's version have been replaced by

⁶¹ In Chapter 11, *La veille et le dit de Cathy*, Cathy's African blood is made evident: "On aurait dit que le sang nègre, qu'elle ne pouvait plus le contenir, prenait sa revanche. Victorieux, il l'envahissait." (89) It was as if her black blood could not be contained and was taking its revenge. Victorious, it was flooding through her. (84)

Condé's at once more cynical and more hopeful view that the only inescapable border or boundary is not the one between the races, but the one that separates life and death."⁶² The function of death in Condé's novel is one of the many textual digressions from *Wuthering Heights* that contributes to the Caribbeanness of *La migration des cœurs*.

Textual Digressions

Two of the most dramatic plot diversions from *Wuthering Heights* that Condé develops are the following: the fate of Little Cathy, which influences how the novel ends, and the narrative structure of the text, which puts it in a more Antillean context. Beginning with the narrative structure, in *Wuthering Heights* a frame story is created around Lockwood, a first person narrator who stays at the Heights and is intrigued by Heathcliff's strange demeanor. Within this frame he meets Nelly, the family's housekeeper, who proceeds to recount the entire tale of Cathy and Heathcliff. In striking contrast to this structure, Condé's story is mainly told through a third person omniscient narrator. In addition, there are chapters told from multiple perspectives in the first person. These other narrators are usually housekeepers, fishermen, and other members of the working class, and they are also culturally diverse. Africans, Dominicans, and Indians offer their perception of events. The fact that Condé gives authorial power to these people is significant, for it allows the Other's voice to be heard, a voice often emanates from the illiterate and uneducated, but a voice nonetheless that represents the Caribbean culture and goes unrecognized in canonical texts.

Language is also a key factor in the narration. There is a smattering of Creole throughout the text, especially in those chapters narrated in the first person, and this gives

⁶² Lionnet, "Narrating the Americas," 74.

the impression that Creole is the natural language of the people. When Little Cathy teaches in Marie-Galante, she is seen as Other and criticized for teaching “proper” French to the school children:

Est-ce qu'elle n'interdisait pas aux enfants de parler le créole? Le créole, c'est la langue de notre *maman*, ronchonnaient les gens. Qui l'empêche de sortir de la gorge d'un enfant le rend muet pour la vie. (235)

Didn't she forbid the children to speak Creole? Creole was our mother tongue, they grumbled. Anyone who prevented its natural expression silenced a child for life. (238)

In Condé's novel, the Creole language is seen as normal, the French more so as the Other language. This is important for a Caribbean consciousness, which Glissant claims is threatened by use of a language that is not the maternal language:

La langue maternelle orale est contrainte ou écrasée par la langue officielle, même et surtout quand celle-ci tend à devenir langue naturelle.

The maternal oral language is repressed or crushed by the official language, even and especially when the latter tends to become the natural language.⁶³

The idea of the official language becoming the “natural” language is exemplified by Little Cathy, who struggles to use Creole because she is accustomed to speaking French. This gives the people of Marie-Galante pause, for in viewing Little Cathy's appearance one *expects* to hear Creole. Little Cathy's ancestry from Razyé (though unknown to her) would also make this a natural connection, but because she is raised among the elite, Little Cathy speaks the official language of French and this makes her an outsider in the town. In *Wuthering Heights*, it is just the reverse: proper English is set up as superior and in opposition to Hareton and Joseph's coarse dialect. As Theo D'haen says of Brontë's

⁶³ Glissant, *Le discours antillais*, 194, and Glissant's *Caribbean Discourse*, 103.

work, “The norm, it is clear, is standard English as spoken by the literate classes of nineteenth-century Britain.”⁶⁴

By allowing a multiplicity of narrators and, as a result, multiple perspectives, Condé not only establishes her novel as a literary voice for the French Caribbean, but she also presents the idea of collectivity in the *entire* Caribbean. She integrates narrators from other islands, such as Cuba and Dominica, all locations in which the characters have some involvement, and this exemplifies Condé’s attitude that it is a collective experience that creates a Caribbean identity: “I feel as much at home in Jamaica as in Martinique or Guadeloupe. People from the Caribbean share a common history and are united by a common experience.”⁶⁵ Critic Beverly Noakes also makes reference to Condé’s view of collectivity in the Caribbean: “Her closest approach to a definition [of Antillean culture] in recent years has been to conclude that despite the diversity of the region, there does exist a Caribbean unity, the affirmation of a personality which is neither African, nor American, nor European, and which is based on a common history and a fairly similar social revolution.”⁶⁶ This multiplicity of voices in Condé’s work and her ability to write from the point of view of several protagonists, most of whom are from various parts of the West Indies, distinguishes her prose as distinctly Caribbean. In her dismissal of theories that promote a spiritual return to Africa, Condé insists that the Caribbean has its own distinct identity, and that this identity must be embraced simultaneously with a Caribbean unity:

Nous avons été amenés à croire que l’Afrique était la source. C’est la source mais nous avons cru que nous trouverions une patrie alors que ce n’est pas une patrie...Diversité au sein de l’unité, telle est la définition de nos objectifs communs

⁶⁴ D’haen, “Caribbean Migrations,” 210.

⁶⁵ Condé, “The Role of the Writer,” 699.

⁶⁶ Noakes, “Money, Race and Cultural Identity,” 127.

en vue d'une autonomie nationale et d'une coopération au sein des Caraïbes prises dans leur ensemble.

We were led to believe that Africa was the source; it is the source, but we believed that we would find a home there, when it was not home...Diversity within unity is the definition of our shared objectives for national autonomy and cooperation within the larger Caribbean.⁶⁷

The emphasis placed on collectivity also parallels Glissant's insistence on creating a distinct Caribbean community, rather than assimilating to Europe.

The second major digression from *Wuthering Heights* is the outcome of Cathy's daughter. In Brontë's novel Little Cathy is forced to marry Heathcliff's son, Linton. Linton is dying of tuberculosis and the forced marriage will allow Heathcliff to take over the Linton estate after his death (being a woman, everything Cathy owns will go to her husband, then to her husband's father, as she has no children). When Linton dies this plan is executed, but as previously mentioned, the family line and its land are restored after Heathcliff's death and Cathy and Hareton's engagement. In Condé's text, Little Cathy represents hope not for her ruined family's restoration but for the forgotten Other. She is born with dark skin, while her brothers and sisters are extremely light, and this brings back the African bloodline in the family. Though she does not know that she is probably Razyé's child, she does not feel that she belongs to the Linsseuil family. She decides to leave her white European existence and teach in the poverty stricken island of Marie-Galante, where she meets Razyé II.

In terms of family, Condé's character Justin-Marie (Justin's son) corresponds to Brontë's Hareton character (Hindley's son), while Razyé II (Razyé's son) corresponds to Linton (Heathcliff's son). Yet the behavior of these characters is reversed: Rayzé II is

⁶⁷ Clark, "Je me suis réconciliée avec mon île," 117.

much more like Hareton. He is strong and healthy, yet uneducated and treated horribly by Razyé, while Justin-Marie, like Linton, is stricken with tuberculosis and dies. Little Cathy does not fall in love with Justin-Marie. In fact, she never comes in contact with him. Instead she marries Razyé II in Marie-Galante, where Razyé II has fled to escape his father. It is Little Cathy who begins to tutor Razyé II, just as Little Cathy tutors Hareton in Brontë's work. However, the couple must abandon their plans and flee to Roseau, capital of Dominica, to escape Razyé. Cathy is pregnant during this turmoil; therefore Condé not only muddies the bloodlines through a child fathered by Razyé (Heathcliff) and not Gagneur (Hindley) blood, but also through the incestuous relationship that produces the child. As the reader is well aware, Little Cathy and Razyé II are probably both children of Razyé; they are half brother and sister. It seems as if the Caribbean "colonized" just might triumph over the European "colonizer" as the Other's blood invades both the Linsseuil and the Gagneur families. However, Cathy dies during childbirth and Razyé II returns home with the baby to his mother in La Pointe, where he is stunned to learn that Razyé is dead and that his old house is transformed. After Razyé's death, Irmine was able to use his riches to turn the dilapidated house into one resembling those of the European bourgeoisie.

Brontë's novel temporarily reverses the imperialistic powers and then restores them. Theo D'haen comments on how the turn of events in Condé's novel also undermines a reversal for the Other, due to the fact that Irmine's (and Razyé's) children seem destined to carry on the European tradition:

...the younger children of Razyé has with Irmine will...be educated in France: the boys "dans un collège de jésuites à Bordeaux," Cassandre "au pensionnat des soeurs à Versailles" (300). Cassandre, not coincidentally, is the lighter-skinned of Razyé and Irmine's children, and apparently destined for success: "Elle avait joué du piano devant le gouverneur et avait baisé la main de monseigneur l'évêque." Premier né

[Razyé II] and [Little] Cathy de Linsseuil, as well as their daughter Anthuria, are very dark. It seems, then, as if in Razyé's children everything he strove for is undone.⁶⁸

In Brontë's novel, Isabella, who corresponds to Irmine's character in *La migration des cœurs*, dies. But in Condé's novel Irmine survives everyone and her children will be taught to emulate the European model, a model to which Irmine was accustomed before she married Razyé. In contrast, Razyé II becomes wild and savage, like his father when the Gagneur family found him:

Sa barbe frisait en zéros autour de sa bouche. Il s'habillait avec des fripes sans couleur, enfilées n'importe comment, à la va-vite. Ceux qui avaient connu Razyé du temps qu'il était Razyé hochaient la tête en soupirant." (336)

His beard grew prickly-haired around his mouth. He dressed sloppily in drab, worn-out clothes. Those who had known Razyé when he was Razyé shook their heads, sighing. (348)

These actions appear to support D'haen's theory, but D'haen does not elaborate on the fact that these are children of Caribbean culture, despite their assimilation with the European model. Therefore, their experiences will possibly penetrate the European system. Instead of Europe transforming the Caribbean, Condé could be indicating that it is the Caribbean that will cause change in Europe.

It is difficult to draw any conclusions about *La migration des cœurs*. As is often the case, Condé raises more questions than she answers. It could be an ironic account of *Wuthering Heights*, commenting on how the colonizer always wins out, despite the effort to reverse the situation. It also leaves open the possibility for the Other to succeed through Anthuria, Little Cathy and Razyé's child, who may or may not be "maudite," or cursed. Leah Hewitt comments on the elusive quality of Condé's work:

All idealism in Condé's work is tinged with ironic, self-conscious overtones that belie the writers's own bouts with colonial politics, as well as with race and gender issues.

⁶⁸ D'haen, "Caribbean Migrations," 211.

None of her characters is ever constructed unequivocally: idols reveal their weaknesses; the meek show their strength. And while racial, sexual and political oppressions are always denounced, Condé is more often concerned with tracing their complications and intersections than with clarity of their definitions.⁶⁹

In her writing, Condé does not simplify things in terms of black vs. white, African vs. European, Creole vs. French; she instead absorbs all these cultures and their intricacies into her text, giving a sense of plurality to her work. She narrates the pain of the European educated white Creoles, such as Irmine, as fluently as that of the oppressed black woman who works for them, like Mabo Julie. The unanswered questions in Condé's novel could easily be seen as representative of Condé's ambivalence towards defining Caribbean culture or labeling herself as a specific type of writer. In *La migration des cœurs*, the Caribbean aspects of the work *are* apparent: the complexity of métissage, the emphasis on (Creole) language, the placement of death in the African tradition, and the illustration of the problems of colonized society. Yet Condé does not entirely shed elements of the European tradition in that she articulates the same depth of love endured by Catherine and Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, and she is careful not to demonize European culture; demonstrating instead the problematic nature of its power and influence. Of course, there is the unclear ending of the novel in which European tradition appears to prevail, but there are various potential outcomes made possible through the descendants of both African and European blood. On the whole, Condé is difficult to categorize; she does not limit herself to the French Caribbean but expands her vision to the entire Caribbean, and its relationships to Europe, Africa, and the United States. Condé shies away from the idea of any one Caribbean identity and focuses instead on the collective experience in a region of diversity.

⁶⁹ Leah Hewitt, "Inventing Antillean Narrative: Maryse Condé and Literary Tradition," *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature* 17, no. 1 (Winter 1993): 87.

Chapter III: Textual Techniques in *The House on the Lagoon and Paper Fish*

The focus of this chapter pertains to how writing is used to highlight the experience of marginalized figures in Rosario Ferré's *The House on the Lagoon* and Tina De Rosa's *Paper Fish*. In reading of Ferré's novel, I examine race as a prevalent theme, and, specifically, the characters of different races in Isabel's manuscript whose lives are affected by the complex discrimination found in Puerto Rican culture. Petra, the mysterious African woman briefly mentioned in chapter one is a bigger topic of discussion in this chapter. Her influence on the other characters in the house is an important element in Isabel's manuscript and in Ferré's novel. In this chapter, I draw similarities between Petra and *Wide Sargasso Sea*'s Christophine, arguing that they are more than tangential figures to their narratives. In addition to race, gender is another important theme in the novel which is developed through Isabel's relationship to her husband. She allows herself to be marginalized as a submissive wife to her domineering husband, but this role changes when she begins to write. In creating a manuscript that divulges the family secrets of the house, Isabel is able to de-center the patriarchal position of men in the novel and create equilibrium for women. This is another example of the empowering force of the text for this and other characters.

In *Paper Fish*, like in Rhys' novel, the focus is also on the power of the text and how writing enables the Italian American woman to break the silence that has permeated her culture. In this novel memory is used as a way to sustain the Italian American experience. More importantly, *Paper Fish* is an example of how recording the memory ensures immortality to the Italian American tradition, a tradition whose customs did not always include writing. In her novel De Rosa describes a girl whose family suffers in

silence, who sees herself as Other for the first time, and who through the text is able to achieve an identity with her culture and with herself. In so doing, De Rosa makes an important contribution to Italian American literature, a literature that is severely underrepresented in academic studies.

Race and Blood in *The House on the Lagoon*

Isabel, the main character and narrator of the novel, describes Puerto Rico, like other places in the Caribbean, as an island obsessed with race and class distinction. In the opening chapters of *The House on the Lagoon*, Isabel explains that a clean family line was “worth its weight in gold” (22) and that marriages were inscribed in Bloodline books and kept in churches so that the entire family ancestry could be traced back for several generations. At the same time, the opening chapters also focus on the United States’ intervention in Puerto Rico and the propaganda surrounding the Puerto Ricans’ new American citizenship. It is interesting to look at Western influence on Puerto Rico from different points of view. In one way, the American influence contributes to a decrease in racial intolerance:

When the Americans arrived on the island, the Bloodline Books were abandoned. Priests became poor and many of their records perished in random fires or hurricanes, when the wind blew away many a leaky parish roof. But the Books disappeared also because the practice was considered unworthy of American citizens...As the new habits of democracy gradually took over, unsoiled lineages were becoming almost impossible to find. (23)

Puerto Ricans, however, realize that Americans are not as liberated as they seem. This realization occurs when they visit the United States, and see that it promotes racial segregation and oppression. In this America, blacks are forced to use separate restrooms or travel in separate trains, and the islanders also endure some of the same discrimination, for their olive complexions raise suspicion in the minds of mainland Americans. These

prejudices surprise the Puerto Ricans, who note the difference between island and mainland culture:

It would have never happened in their country, they thought, where everyone could eat or make water in the same place. The concept of equality under law, which the new democratic regime supposedly had brought to the island and which they had so earnestly embraced because they wanted to be good American citizens, was interpreted very differently on the mainland (25).

In spite of the hypocrisy America has shown with respect to racial tolerance, Ferré describes a Puerto Rico that has experienced an increase in racial mixing. What is the real reason behind this trend? A possible answer could be the island itself. As Césaire and so many other Caribbean writers and critics have observed, the land is a powerful force. In conjunction with American leadership, it was wind and fire that destroyed the churches and hence the Bloodline books that were contained within them. Similarly, Rebecca remarks that the warm climate and the attractiveness of the mixed-blood women contributed to the loosening of Bloodline restrictions: "...before long the sons of the well-to-do began to eye the bare arms and shoulders of the beautiful mulatto girls...The beauty of the quadroons, which until then was a hidden treasure, was suddenly discovered by the young men of "good families" and there was a veritable epidemic of racially mixed liaisons on the island" (23). Of course, each country has its own form of intolerance, as Isabel duly notes. Though they are amazed at the treatment blacks receive on the mainland United States, many Puerto Ricans are also rooted in tradition and want the bloodline to remain intact. This is part of the struggle that Isabel faces with Quintín as her story progresses. As observed previously in this dissertation, these marginalized authors are creating a discourse that both provides them with a distinct identity and challenges the dominant tradition. As a woman, Isabel's writes her novel to include the predicament of marginalized women, most notably black and mulatto women. Instead of

remaining in the margins, or being summed up by the voices of male authors, Isabel puts them in the forefront, and therefore deepens the reader's knowledge of their plight.

Marginalized Figures Brought into Focus

One of the more remarkable women that Isabel describes is Ermelinda, a mulatto who grows up in a poor neighborhood and survives as a seamstress until the day she sees one of her products in an American magazine:

One of them struck her fancy: it showed a beautiful girl with blond curly hair, getting ready for bed. She was wearing the very same silk negligee she and her little sisters had finished only three weeks before, for which Mr. Turnbull had paid her mother exactly fifty cents. It was selling for fifty dollars at a store called Saks Fifth Avenue in New York. (219)

The blonde American model in New York marks a striking contrast to the Afro Caribbean women, like Ermelinda, detailed in Isabel's manuscript. Ermelinda is also beautiful, but not in the way typically described in magazines:

She was sixteen and very good-looking – tall and willowy, with fine features. Her eyes were the color of molasses and her skin was a light cinnamon. Her only drawback was the mat of corkscrew curls that grew on top of her head, so wild and thick and spirited that there was no way to comb them into a civilized hairdo. For this reason, ever since she was fifteen, Ermelinda wore a red turban tied around her head. (219)

This passage immediately follows the description of the blond American woman, and it highlights issues that are common in African American and Caribbean literature – the idea that beauty is having skin that is light, hair that is straight, and that the ability to “pass” as white is an asset. In her article, “Nanas negras: The Silenced Women in Rosario Ferré and Olga Nolla,” Mary Ann Gosser Esquilin sees the above description as problematic.¹ Certainly, the use of the word “drawback” could indicate this but Isabel is also describing the reality of the struggles of black and mulatto women in this

¹ Mary Ann Gosser Esquilin, “Nanas Negras: The Silenced Women in Rosario Ferré and Olga Nolla,” *Centro Journal* 14, no. 2 (Fall 2002) : 57.

environment. In order to succeed, they are placed in the difficult position of deciding whether or not to “pass” as white in a society that does not offer the same possibilities to mulattos or blacks.

Despite these struggles, Ermelinda becomes an accomplished seamstress whose garments are sought after in Ponce. She gives birth to three beautiful daughters. Though she has obtained this success, her lover and the father of her children, influential white lawyer Don Bolívar Márquez, refuses to marry her or give their children his last name. The reason, obviously, is Ermelinda’s race, and this problem has a trickle down effect for the entire family, leading to the scandal with the Mendizabal family.

Ignacio, Quintín’s brother, falls in love with Ermelinda’s daughter, Esmeralda, and Ermelinda is happy at the prospect of her daughter marrying into the Mendizabal clan. Of course, Ignacio is worried about his family’s reaction to his new love, and his reason for concern is not unfounded. During a party at the Mendizabal household, when Rebecca and Buenaventura meet Ermelinda for the first time, Rebecca decides to expose Ermelinda by knocking off the turban that hides her curls:

Dona Ermelinda’s face turned gray. Several people began to laugh, pointing to the thick matt of hair that rose from her head, and some began to make unkind comments. But Dona Ermelinda didn’t bat an eyelash. She stared right back at them, stood up proudly from the Spanish Conquistador Chair, and shook her head vigorously, to make her wild curls stand out even more. Then she walked over to Esmeralda, took her by the hand, and they walked out of the house together, heads held high. (231)

Ermelinda’s reaction to this humiliation is to demonstrate a newfound pride by displaying her curls, but her pride is so great that despite his insistence, she refuses to let Ignacio see her daughter. Ignacio never recovers, never marries, and ends up committing suicide. As Esquilin points out, this sad outcome also keeps the Mendizabal’s precious bloodline intact, and Isabel’s recounting of these events demonstrates at what cost. The loss of a

son is echoed in the second generation as well, for when Manuel wants to marry Coral, Ermelinda's granddaughter, Quintín's opposition incites Manuel's rage which forever separates father and son.

It is important to recognize that Isabel is the one who records these events, thus shedding light on what would have otherwise remained secret in the Mendizabal family. As author, she focuses primarily on Quintín's history, including many elements that would certainly be disregarded if Quintín controlled the text. As a white male, Quintín is horrified by certain family secrets that are revealed: for example, that his father frequently had affairs with black women in the mangroves and had many illegitimate mulatto children. Quintín's infidelity is also a subject of the novel, and the details are even more disturbing to the reader when Quintín takes Carmelina, Petra's granddaughter, by force, and she becomes pregnant with their son. Though Isabel forgives Quintín and adopts the illegitimate child as her own, they do not reveal to the public the true nature of Quintín's relationship with Willie, i.e., that Willie is his biological son. Because of Quintín's racist tendencies and Puerto Rico's class restrictions, Quintín would not openly acknowledge this fact, but Isabel reveals this secret in her novel, thus making racial issues a central focus in her manuscript. Also important, since Quintín and Isabel legally adopt Willie, they have effectively "depurified" the bloodlines in the Mendizabal family and merged with the Avilés (read: Petra's) family. Despite Quintín's opposition and the secrecy surrounding the adoption, it is still a step towards eliminating the racial barrier. Again, the secret is told in Isabel's manuscript, which further pushes through this barrier.

Though Quintín has an affair, like his father before him, with a mulatto woman, and adopts the son, his racism is not quelled. His hypocrisy is exposed through his violent opposition to his son's desire to marry Coral:

And, taking his pocketknife, he made a small incision on the tip of his finger, so that a spurt of blood appeared on it. "You see this blood, Manuel?" Quintín said. It doesn't have a drop of Arab, Jewish, or black blood in it. Thousands of people have died for it to stay that way. We fought the Moors, and in 1492 we expelled them from Spain, together with the Jews. When our ancestors came to this island, special books were set up to keep track of white marriages. They were called Bloodline Books and were jealously guarded by the church. Esmeralda's marriage to Ernesto Ustariz doesn't appear in any of them, because she's part black. *That's* why Isabel shouldn't have taken you to Esmeralda's house when you were a child. And *that's* why you can't marry Coral. (346)

This quotation demonstrates how strong Quintín's feelings are on the bloodlines subject; a sentiment that was not overt through most of the novel. It is Isabel who narrates and chooses to include these events to expose the racism that is pervasive in Puerto Rican society, and she does so not only through her husband, but also by including many strong and sympathetic black or mulatto Puerto Rican women in her manuscript. These women are resilient and successful, yet they are still at a disadvantage in society because of their race. Isabel's authorship divulges these hardships and her exposure of the hypocrisy in Puerto Rican society through writing is a step towards eliminating it. Ermelinda, Esmeralda, and Coral are not the only women of color that Isabel includes in her manuscript. One of the most important figures in the novel is Petra, a presence that represents authority and power in the house on the lagoon.

Petra's Underworld: Rational Speech in *The House on the Lagoon*

In the foreword to *The House on the Lagoon*, Rosario Ferré presents the reader with a quotation from Homer's *Odyssey*: "Any shade to whom you give access to the blood will hold rational speech with you, while those whom you reject will leave you and

retire.”² This section of Homer’s poem depicts Odysseus’ voyage to the Underworld. Here, he meets with the dead souls who describe the circumstances of their deaths and implore him to tell them news of the living. Isabel undergoes a figurative voyage by writing her manuscript, the purpose of which is to record the memories of family history and violence in order to avoid similar mistakes in the future. In order to do this, Isabel must revisit the past, and in a way, communicate with ghosts, and record their words in her text. As detailed above, Isabel does not limit her dialogue to the elite males of the family but includes the voices of feminist women as well as women of color. One of these women is Petra, the family servant, who serves as protector of the family and who lends an African perspective to the work, a perspective which is an important part of Puerto Rico’s history but is often left undeveloped in Latin American literature.

Petra and her family inhabit the basement of the house, and this area is surrounded with an aura of secrecy and sacredness. A medicine woman and descendant of tribal chieftans, Petra’s basement can be seen as an underworld, for members of the black community come to her with offerings to her favorite saint, Elegguá, seeking counsel from her. As is common in African culture, ancestors are very important to Petra, and she uses her conch shell to speak to the dead.

Though Petra is a servant, and in many ways embodies the stereotypical characteristics of black servants in literature, she has a powerful effect on the Mendizabal family. Her space in the house is indicative of this effect, for while inhabiting the cellar is a literal manifestation of African servants being among the lower classes in Puerto Rican society, at second glance the basement can be viewed as the space that is the

² Robert Fitzgerald, trans., *The Odyssey of Homer*. (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux Inc., 1998), Book XI,

foundation of the house on the lagoon. Petra's name, meaning rock, is an attestation to this fact, and her cellar is just beneath the golden terrace that was unable to be destroyed because of the strength it provided to the house (69). In revisiting José Luis González's essay, "Puerto Rico: The Four Storyed Country," one can look at Petra's physical location in the house, and the fact that she is of African descent, as González's first story of the four to which the title refers. González claims that the descendants of African slaves made up the first true Puerto Ricans, people who considered the island their home and branded it with the Afro Antillean culture that today is still a central part of Puerto Rican life. The extra layers constituting the second, third and fourth stories were foreigners who were not invested in Puerto Rico as a nation.³ Petra's realm in the cellar of the house serves as a stable foundation that remains solid even when chaos ensues from the workings of the Mendizabal family who inhabit the upper stories of the house.

The other members of the household are aware of Petra's quiet power, and they respect or fear her. The most powerful male in the novel, Buenaventura, leader of the household, descends into Petra's realm when he needs advice or healing. In her article, "Petra's Kingdom: The Cellar of the House on the Lagoon," RoseAnna Mueller elaborates on the extent to which the white members of the household depend on Petra: "The masters of the house descend to seek youth, cures, and in Isabel's case, to get at the truth: the cause of one family member's suicide and the bankruptcy of the family business."⁴ Petra is also the force behind the perpetuation of the family, for Buenaventura and Rebecca remain childless until Petra invites her to drink her African

³ José Luis González,, *Puerto Rico : the four-storeyed country and other essays* (Maplewood, N.J :Waterfront Press, 1990). A more detailed reading of this essay, and how it relates to Ferré's novel, will be provided in chapter four.

⁴ RoseAnna Mueller, "Petra's Kingdom: The Cellar of The House on the Lagoon," *Centro Journal* 14, no. 2 (Fall 2002) : 201.

potions, which give Rebecca several pregnancies. Petra can be seen as a matriarchal figure, an unusual position in a culture that favors the patriarch. This position in the family strengthens when one of her heirs, Willie, whose lineage contains Mendizabal blood, is adopted by Quintín and Isabel.

In Quintín's texts in the margins of Isabel's manuscript, he describes a fear of Petra that verges on paranoia. He refers to her several times as a "spider" that lives in the cellar and believes that she is a source of his problems with Isabel: "Petra had the ability to creep into people's hearts, and after she was entrenched in them, there was no way to get her out...Quintín began to suspect that Petra was responsible for the web of lies Isabel was weaving around him. She wanted to show him that his family was a disaster, so he would lose his self-respect" (249). Quintín later becomes even more distressed by Isabel's growing manuscript, concluding that Petra and Isabel must be working together in order to destroy him (274). In Isabel's manuscript, she depicts Petra as the one who raised and mothered Quintín while Rebecca neglected him, a claim that Quintín dismisses. The distrust that Quintín has of Petra is comparable to Rochester's attitude toward Christophine, and the two women share common strengths. While Petra is supportive of the men in the family, she *is* defiant when it comes to her great grandson Willie. When Quintín disinherits Willie, Petra threatens him with the wrath of her African saint: "Go ahead and disinherit Willie then," Petra said defiantly. "But I swear to you by Elegguá – he who is more than God – that one day you'll be sorry!" (372). Petra's faithfulness to Elegguá is often mentioned in Isabel's manuscript, and the presence of African spiritualism is again an example of Ferré's insistence on an African perspective in the work. Elegguá becomes an important protector in the story, and the

attributes of the god can be compared to the Homeric verse quoted in the beginning of this section.

Elegguá is one of the Orshia gods, which are deities worshipped by West African peoples. Petra's ancestors are from Angola, a former colony located on the Western coast of Africa. In his article "Trickster at the Crossroads," Erik Davis describes the qualities of these deities and how they embody human characteristics: "The orshia are regularly "fed" with animal blood, food, and gifts, and during rituals the gods frequently possess the bodies of the faithful. Their behavior draws from a full range of human experience, including sexuality, mockery and intoxication."⁵ Davis goes on to describe that human gifts, such as blood sacrifice, provide sustenance to the gods and that these gifts show that gods need humans to exist. These attributes are similar to the gods found in Greek and Roman mythology, for they exhibit conduct that is innately human, often conduct that is negative in nature, such as pride, jealousy, and infidelity. The Greek and Roman gods are also dependent on humans, whose action is a source of amusement to them. An example of this is the Trojan War, which according to myth originated from a quarrel over which goddess was the most beautiful. The subsequent violence of the war continued to serve as distraction for the gods, who took sides and often intervened on behalf of the humans they supported.

Though Elegguá is mentioned often in Isabel's manuscript, there is no detailed description of the god. Though there are various forms of Elegguá in different African cultures and mythology, (Eshu, Elegbara, and Legba are some of the other names of Elegguá) the common thread among the variations is the idea of crossroads and

⁵ Erik Davis, "Trickster at the Crossroads: West Africa's God of Messages, Sex, and Deceit," *Gnosis* (Spring 1991) : 2.

communication. Often compared to the Greek god Hermes, Elegguá is the god who relays information between the gods and mortals. In his article, Davis details a legend in which Eshu's (Elegguá) mother gives her seven children power over different areas of the earth, assigning each a different language. Eshu however, remains with her and gives her information about her children. Eshu therefore knows all the languages, and acts as intermediary because the children, now speaking different languages, cannot directly communicate with their mother. In the same vein, humans must acknowledge Eshu before any other god, and must go through Eshu in order to contact other gods. It is interesting that Ferré chooses to include a god whose legend includes such linguistic abilities, since the subject of language and its connection to identity is such a prevalent theme in her novel. In his book *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates reflects on the tenacity of the myth of Eshu, which is widespread in African and Caribbean cultures, and how it obviously survived the Middle Passage through the strength of oral tradition:

Nevertheless, this topos functions as a sign of the disrupted wholeness of an African system of meaning and believe that black slaves recreated from memory, preserved by oral narration, improvised upon in ritual – especially in the rituals of the repeated oral narrative – and willed to their own subsequent generations, as hermetically sealed and encoded charts of cultural descent.⁶

As I have noted, particularly in chapter one, the oral tradition is seen as significant in *The House on the Lagoon*, once again through Petra's family. It is through the oral tradition that the family learns about the history of their ancestors. Gates also explains that Eshu's relationship between the humans the gods, one that requires the use of different languages, is representative of interpretation. Gates extends this reading to connect the meaning of Eshu to the literary critic who interprets a text, claiming that "as Hermes' role as messenger and interpreter for the gods lent his name readily to *hermeneutics*, our word

⁶ Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 5.

for the study of methodological principles of interpretation of a text, so too is it appropriate for the literary critic to name the methodological principles of the interpretation of black texts *Esu-tufunaalo*, literally “one who unravels the knots of Esu.”⁷

In addition to being the god of crossroads and communication, Elegguá is also known as a trickster god and sometimes intentionally blurs the lines of communication in order to trick humans or to teach them a lesson. One such story involves a lesson in perspective:

Eshu was walking down the road one day, wearing a hat that was red on one side and blue on the other. Sometime after he departed, the villagers who had seen him began arguing about whether the stranger's hat was blue or red. The villagers on one side of the road had only been capable of seeing the blue side, and the villagers on the other side had only been capable of seeing the red half. They nearly fought over the argument, until Eshu came back and cleared the mystery, teaching the villagers about how one's perspective can alter a person's perception of reality, and that one can be easily fooled.⁸

There are many variations to this tale, but the underlying theme is the same: that perception can vary from one group to another. The texts studied in this dissertation point to the fact that in literature, the perspective is often that of the dominant Western tradition. However, as the story of Eshu reveals, there is often another side, a side that my studied authors are attempting to convey to readers, and Ferré does so by including an African point of view. Although in her novel these stories of Elegguá are not evoked, it is interesting that Ferré has chosen to include a god that represents communication, and unlikely coincidental that the quotation from book XI of the *Odyssey* treats communication.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁸ Davis, “Trickster at the Crossroads,” 7.

In book XI, Odysseus must offer a blood sacrifice in order to speak with the dead. These dead souls are not gods, however, it is not unlike a blood sacrifice and therefore, similar to the sustenance offered in order to communicate with African gods. Odysseus' journey to the underworld is a privilege unavailable to most mortals, and he is able to see a different perspective, one that illuminates the depth of sorrow felt by the souls. Achilles, for example, having chosen heroism over long life, laments his fate and thus Odysseus is able to see that being revered in the mortal world is of little comfort to the dead.⁹ Odysseus also shares qualities of Elegguá, for like the god, he is known for his cleverness and is often depicted as a cunning trickster. He is also known as a gifted orator, possessing the ability to smooth over arguments or talk his way out of difficulties, which corresponds to Elegguá's capacity for communication. Odysseus' trip to the Underworld is something of a crossroads; it is a journey he must undergo in order to return home safely. In order to get home he must receive communication from Theresias.

Though the integration of Homer's *Odyssey* with the African god Elegguá is seemingly arbitrary, I believe that it was intentional on Ferré's part. In addition to the passage quoted at the beginning of the novel, Ferré references Greek mythology in other ways: Part 8 of the novel is entitled "When the Shades Draw Near" and within this section is a chapter entitled "Petra's Voyage to the Underworld." The word "shade" is a reference to the dead soul, a term used primarily for the dead in Greek and Roman myth. In this section Isabel gives her manuscript to Petra to put in Elegguá's care in hopes that the offering to the god will in turn earn protection for her sons. Isabel also reflects on her past and thinks about the people, the shades, that she has lost:

⁹ Fitzgerald, *Homer's Odyssey*, book XI, p. 201: Achilles says: "Let me hear no smooth talk of death from you, Odysseus, light of councils. Better, I say, to break sod as a farm hand for some poor country man, on iron rations, than lord it over all the exhausted dead."

“Looking at the Atlantic was comforting. The living and the dead were held fast by its embrace: Abby, Mother, Father, and Manuel on one side; Willie and I on the other. It made me think of what Petra had said when she died; she had insisted that water was love, that it made communication possible, and she was right (380).” The important element of water, along with the title of the chapter, evokes mythological themes. In Homer’s *Odyssey*, Odysseus and his crew are aboard a ship lost at sea, and he must pass through the Underworld to complete his voyage home. The Underworld is surrounded by water and includes a series of five rivers, and souls must be ferried across one of these rivers, the Acheron.¹⁰ The chapter *Petra’s Voyage to the Underworld* describes Petra’s wake, during which she is submerged in water and is then carried across the river on a boat, a scene bears a resemblance to the ritual of the dead crossing the Acheron in Greek and Roman mythology. In the text, there are a procession of boats, filled with mourners, which link two places: “The caravan of boats that followed was so long it reached all the way from Almares to Morass Lagoon, cutting across mangrove swamp. For one brief moment the procession linked our elegant suburb to the slum of Las Minas” (384). Water facilitates a connection between two worlds that are so diverse and often at odds. The European elegance of the house on the lagoon, proud of its Spanish ancestry, is now tied to poverty stricken Las Minas, an area inhabited by Afro Puerto Ricans. As I have noted, African and European traditions have already merged in the Mendizabal family, for Petra’s blood relative, Willie, is also of Quintín’s blood. This merging of blood was also

¹⁰ Mark R. Besonen, George (Rip) Rapp, and Zhichun Jing, “The Lower Acheron River Valley: Ancient Accounts and the Changing Landscape.” *Hesperia Supplements*, 32 (2003): 199.

done in water, for Quintín took Carmelina while they were swimming in the mangroves.

Willie knows that he has Aviles blood in his veins, as he so confesses to Isabel:

Because we live on an island there is no mass of mountains, no solid dike of matter to keep us from flowing out to others. Communication is possible, Mother. Through water, we can reach out and love our neighbors, try to understand them...Water permitted the Avilés family to travel from Morass to Alamares Lagoon in the first place," he said. "After all, I was conceived in the swamp, isn't that right, Mother? And it was in the mangroves that Carmelina Avilés fell into Father's arms." (260)

Blood, water and communication are all tied together in the novel, and Willie understands how water played a part in his conception. His notion of island culture is also interesting, for because there are no physical boundaries blocking the land from the sea, there is a propensity for more people to come and go, as well as the propensity for cultural and racial mixing. This observation about water recalls Glissant's notion of a Caribbean consciousness that connects the various islands of the Caribbean Sea and is facilitated by the sea itself. In particular, Willie is struck by the potential for better communication among peoples. It is perhaps because of this attitude that Petra wills the statue of Elegguá, god of communication, to her great-grandson. More importantly, among Elegguá's sacred toys lays Isabel's manuscript. The manuscript is Isabel's form of communication, a novel that among other things, expresses how important Petra and Elegguá were to the house on the lagoon. In fact, the demise of the house occurs a few short chapters following Petra's death, indicating that the structure was vulnerable without her presence. Though Petra has passed on, Willie's existence will perpetuate a new family saga, one that includes a mixing of the elite and the oppressed. The same is true for Esmeralda and Coral, who, like Irmine's children in *La migration des cœurs*, will change the landscape of the class system and perhaps shape it into a system that is far less segregated. Although in Ferre's novel Petra is a strong figure, she is a rare example of

women who, like Antoinette, can break out of their metaphorical and literal cellars and attics to emerge from cloistered sections of the text.

Petra and Christophine: Stereotypes or Real Figures?

In the novels *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *The House on the Lagoon*, Christophine and Petra share many characteristics. They both are medicine women, faithful servants in a household, and they possess a shrewdness that seems to elude other characters in the novels. Despite their intelligence, many critics claim that both Christophine and Petra are saddled with the same tiresome stereotypes found in many works of colonial literature. In this section, I explore the views of two critics: Gayatri Spivak, who is critical of Rhys' depiction of Christophine, and Mary Ann Gosser Esquilin, who evaluates Ferré's portrayal of Petra. In examining these critics' claims, I argue why Christophine and Petra are more than merely tangential to the narratives.

In her essay, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," Spivak claims that Jean Rhys' novel reduces Christophine to a marginal figure:

We can, however, look at the scene of Christophine's inscription in the text. Immediately after the exchange between her and the Man, well before the conclusion, she is simply driven out of the story, with neither narrative nor characterological explanation of justice: " 'Read and write I don't know. Other things I know.' " She walked away without looking back." (133)¹¹

Spivak also concludes that because Christophine is from Martinique (and not Jamaica, where the novel takes place) she embodies the stereotype of the good servant rather than the black native, and is therefore not a "self" in the novel. I disagree with many of Spivak's complaints, for many reasons. Though Christophine is from Martinique rather than from Jamaica, there remains a sense of Caribbean identity and unity, an argument

¹¹ Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," 246.

that Maryse Condé supports. Christophine is native to the black Caribbean and her ancestry provides sufficient means for her to identify with island culture.

While Spivak's above passage suggests that there is a basis to look upon Christophine as "tangential," it is important to recall that Christophine is the most independent woman in the novel. She is not tied to or dominated by a male figure, a sharp contrast to the white females, like Antoinette and her mother. Though Christophine was once a slave (a wedding present to Antoinette's mother), she is now, as she states, a "free woman" (160). Again, the irony in the text is that the women who are *not* free are Antoinette and Annette, the white females. In the beginning of the novel, they are not free to leave their home, for they are so hated by the other island inhabitants that they fear leaving. Additionally, as described in chapters one and two of this dissertation, when they marry, they enter into a master/slave relationship with their husbands. Therefore, Annette is trapped within her own mind as she suffers from madness, and Antoinette is not "free" from Rochester until her revolt at the novel's close.

Another example that makes Christophine a compelling figure among these women is that she is one of few in the novel who defy Rochester. As previously noted, Rochester is uncomfortable around Christophine and the other servants because he feels alien to island culture. Christophine's identification with island culture intensifies these feelings of alienation. The fact that Rochester feels his authority is subverted plays into his desire to take Antoinette away with him to England. His contemplation of this plan leads to one of the longest dialogues in the novel, occupying twelve pages, and it is between him and Christophine. Her speech to him is candid and convincing; she rightly accuses Rochester of marrying Antoinette for money, of being jealous of her, of her

mother being driven to madness and of Rochester repeating this same history with Antoinette (161). The idea of speech arises and is interesting in terms of Christophine's statement "Read and write I don't know. Other things I know" (133). Though Christophine cannot read or write, she possesses rich linguistic ability, speaking English, French, and patois (21). This and "other things" suggest that Christophine possesses knowledge that is in no way inferior to what is important in Western tradition. As Glissant affirms, writing must be cultivated with speech:

Car la seule manière selon moi de garder fonction à l'écriture (s'il y a lieu de le faire), c'est à dire de la dégager d'une pratique ésotérique ou d'une banalisation informatique, serait de l'irriguer aux sources de l'oral. Si l'écriture ne se préserve désormais des tentations transcendantes, par exemple en s'inspirant de pratiques orales et en les théorisant s'il le faut, je pense qu'elle disparaîtra comme nécessité culturelle des sociétés à venir. Comme le Même ne sera éteint dans les vivacités surprenantes du Divers, l'écriture se renferma dans l'univers clos et sacré du signe littéraire.

For the only way, to my mind, of maintaining a place for writing (if this can be done) – that is, to remove it from being an esoteric practice or a banal reserve of information – would be to nourish it with the oral. If writing does not henceforth resist the temptation to transcendence, by, for instance, learning from oral practice and fashioning a theory from the latter if necessary, I think it will disappear as a cultural imperative from future societies. As Sameness will be exhausted by the surprising dynamism of Diversity, so writing will be confined to the closed and sacred world of literary activity.¹²

Christophine represents an oral component in the work that diversifies and nourishes Rhys' text, and her presence contributes to its authenticity as a Caribbean novel. When Christophine's presence is no longer in the text, Antoinette is in England trapped in her cardboard house which Spivak interprets to be the pages of *Jane Eyre*. It is interesting to apply Glissant's above quotation to Brontë's novel. It becomes clear that Antoinette is imprisoned in the British text and therefore, in what Glissant refers to as "the closed and sacred world of literary activity." In this case, that "world" is synonymous with the

¹² Glissant, *Le discours antillais*, 193, and Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 101.

Western tradition. As the reader is aware, Antoinette sets this world aflame, and in so doing, she calls out to Christophine for help (189). Therefore, Antoinette is leaving the closed world in order to create a new text outside the canon and she calls to Christophine, the oral component, for help in achieving this purpose.

When Christophine turns away “without looking back” it is, as Spivak states, her last physical appearance in the novel, but it is not the last time the reader hears from Christophine. Not only does Antoinette call out to her near the novel’s conclusion, but Christophine’s argument with Rochester rings so true that it echoes in his mind when he attempts to make plans to entrap Antoinette, as I discussed in chapter two. Rochester obviously knows that Christophine has rightly guessed his motives; therefore he has trouble dismissing her voice from his thoughts, and this voice reinforces Christophine’s oral authority in the work. Although Christophine makes no more appearances in physical form, she is not so tangential that she is ignored throughout the remainder of the novel. Furthermore, as critic Benita Parry explains, it is fitting that Christophine exits the novel at this moment because she denies that England exists: “She blinked and answered quickly, ‘I don’t say I don’t *believe*, I say I don’t *know*, I know what I see with my eyes and I never see it’ ” (112). Christophine does not *know* England, and, as noted in chapter one, she, unlike Antoinette, is confident in her identity and therefore does not need to depend on England’s existence to support this identity. Christophine leaves the narrative just before part three which takes place in England. Benita Parry also disagrees with Spivak’s view that Christophine is a peripheral character, stressing that Christophine’s exit makes sense:

In Spivak’s reconstruction, Christophine’s departure from the story after this declaration [“Read and write I don’t know. Other things I know” (133).] and well before the novel’s end, is without narrative and characterological explanation or

justice. But if she is read as the possessor and practitioner of an alternative knowledge, then her exit at this point appears both logical and entirely in character.¹³

It is true that Rhys' novel concentrates on the predicament of the white Creole, which is a source of contention to many critics, who point out that the violence aimed at Afro Caribbeans resulted from this group. However, it is probable that Rhys develops characters such as Christophine, who were othered through colonialism and are now a more powerful presence in the novel, as a way to subvert the violent past. In his article, "The Place of *Wide Sargasso Sea*," Peter Hulme refers to Christophine as a character who triumphs over history: "At the same time, foregrounding African-Caribbean protagonists (especially Christophine) in the way Charlotte Brontë would never do, and allowing them to speak and act as they do, Rhys *implies* that they are the historical victors without ever *articulating* that victory."¹⁴ Christophine's impatience with Antoinette's passivity and her refusal to leave her husband further emphasizes the former's position as independent and sets her up in opposition to Antoinette who is weak in comparison.

In regard to Rosario Ferré's novel, critic Mary Ann Gosser Esquilin's point of view is similar to that of Spivak's. While she concedes that Afro Puerto Rican women are given *more* of a voice in the novel, Esquilin claims that these women are still marginalized characters who predominantly inhabit basements and kitchens, and that the text is problematic because it represents modern Puerto Rican society, a society that is still othering these women despite advancements for their race. As Spivak does with Christophine, Esquilin focuses on Petra as one of these marginalized figures, claiming

¹³ Benita Parry, "Two Native Voices in *Wide Sargasso Sea*," in *Wide Sargasso Sea: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Judith Raskin (New York: Norton and Company, 1999), 249.

¹⁴ Peter Hulme, "The Place of *Wide Sargasso Sea*," *Wasafiri: Journal of Caribbean, African, Asian and Associated Literatures and Film* 20 (Autumn 1994): 9.

that “most of the time she remains silent, in the background of the house and the plot of the manuscript.”¹⁵

Esquilin makes some valid claims, most notably that the text is representative of today’s Puerto Rican society. However, there is nothing that is “problematic” about this fact. Ferré illustrates the problem of Puerto Rican society’s discrimination against these women, and it is precisely that she exposes the true nature of this society that makes her text a sympathetic one to marginalized figures. While Petra and her relatives are not the *main* characters (the elite) in the work, they demonstrate an integrity and mental fortitude lacking in the latter. Ironically, the main characters endure setbacks and suffering because of their own self-destructive racial discrimination. Quintín loses his son and his brother, because he will not allow them to marry into “black” blood, and this ultimately results in the loss of his own life. Furthermore, as author, Isabel reduces *Quintín*, and not Petra, to a tangential character, literally forces him into the margins of the text, and then eventually writes him out of it.

The text does not limit itself to exposing the marginalization of Afro Puerto Rican characters, but widens the scope to include the disadvantaged position of all Puerto Ricans. By including a strong political component to the novel, Ferré explores the idea of living under the colonial influence of the United States, and details the conflict that divides Puerto Ricans between those who desire Statehood and those in favor of Commonwealth status. Therefore most Puerto Ricans in the novel have identity issues, and are given the status of “Other” with respect to the U.S. As detailed in chapter two, one is labeled Other in the face of sameness, which is determined by the most powerful

¹⁵ Esquilin, “Nanas Negras,” 57.

entity. In Puerto Rico's case the latter is represented by the United States. In this way, *The House on the Lagoon* is similar to *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Jean Rhys focuses less on the disadvantages of the black native and more on the precarious situation of the white Creole. In so doing, the blacks that inhabit the island are depicted as more "self" than they are as "Other." In *The House on the Lagoon*, elite Puerto Ricans like Isabel are conflicted by identity issues that stem from the colonial status of Puerto Rico, while characters such as Petra do not seem affected and are and appear comfortable with their identity. Here, a reversal is at work whereby the crisis of identity is experienced by those characters traditionally presented as dominant while the weak suffer no such internal conflict. A similar reversal is at work in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, as outlined above.

Petra's position in the house is also a point of interest for Esquilin, who believes that although she is a strong figure, Petra's living in the cellar nonetheless minimizes her space in the novel. On the contrary, Petra's space in the novel is more important than Esquilin claims. It is Petra who is known to be the keeper of the secrets held at the house on the lagoon, which makes her an authoritative figure in the work. Isabel remarks on this authority when she visits Petra to learn the truth behind Ignacio's suicide. She finds Petra in her usual space in the cellar, and the visit resembles a sacred journey to the Underworld:

I wanted to talk to Petra; I was certain she'd be able to tell me the real story...I went down to the cellar and found Petra there, sitting in her old wicker chair. She was as massive and as enigmatic as ever, with her beaded necklaces wound around her neck. She was peeling a manioc root, and it was difficult to distinguish her dark, knarled hands from the tuber's knobby surface. I pulled up a stool next to her and she set the manioc root down with the knife on a table. For the first few minutes I didn't say anything but just sat there in silence. Finally I sighed and put my head on her lap. (290)

Though Petra is the supposedly marginalized character in the novel, it is Isabel who, suppliant and humble, comes to her in search of truth. This scene may recall *Wide Sargasso Sea's* Antoinette, who, at dawn, rides to Christophine's house to seek out a remedy for her problem with Rochester. In both situations the Afro Caribbean woman is a commanding and authoritative figure; she possesses knowledge about things that *béké* cannot begin to understand. Petra says as much to Isabel: “ ‘There are secrets in the Mendizabal family you know nothing about, my child, ’ she said softly, shaking her head. ‘But I’m not the one to tell you about them’ ” (292). To view Petra’s space in the cellar as limiting is to minimize the symbolic nature of the *basement* as the foundation of the house. In this case, it represents so much more since the house is the basis for the novel, therefore Petra’s position in it takes on a double significance.

Finally, Esquilin finds it problematic that Petra’s voice emerges from a white author. This is certainly understandable; indeed, this dissertation treats the problem of the imperialistic tradition speaking for the marginalized Other. However, Puerto Ricans such as Rosario Ferré, as well as her characters like Isabel, would not necessarily be considered “white” by U.S. standards, by which any tint to the skin is a darkening, and not a lightening, of the race. Ferré illustrates this view at the beginning of her novel, when she describes the difficulty Puerto Ricans experienced in the U.S. and the discrimination they faced because of their color (25). In his article “Puerto Rico: The Pleasures and Traumas of Race,” Alan West-Durán also describes the differences in determining skin color between the United States and Puerto Rico:

Although whiteness is still upheld as the norm, its definition is more inclusive than in the U.S. Typically in the Caribbean if you are not black you are white, whereas in North America it is the reverse...None of this implies an absence of racism or prejudice, but with roughly half the population being white and another 40 percent considered to be of mixed blood (which, of course, includes degrees of white blood),

it is not difficult to see how “negotiating degrees of whiteness” could become a complex ensemble of social, racial, and cultural maneuverings. Thus, in Puerto Rico miscegenation was ultimately seen as a whitening of the black and brown population, and not the opposite.¹⁶

If one considers this view, then one can clearly understand Spivak’s and Hall’s claim that an Other cannot be named as such without a self held against it and that identity is formed on the basis of exclusion. Therefore, identity is not fixed:

Throughout their careers, identities can function as points of identification and attachment only *because* of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render ‘outside’ abjected...The unity the internal homogeneity, which the term identity treats as foundational is not a natural, but a constructed form of closure, every identity naming as its necessary, even if silenced and unspoken other, that which it ‘lacks.’¹⁷

In the case of Puerto Rico, blacks and mulattos are othered when held up against the “selves” of white elite Puerto Ricans of European descent, who consider themselves “white.” However, the elite, too, are “Other” when held up against the imperialistic self of the U.S. Therefore, any marginalization be it a result of race or nationality is worthy of treatment in a text. Ultimately, Ferré and Rhys have experienced marginalization to the extent that they can write about the subject matter in their novels without somehow being inauthentic. Another possibility would be to exclude characters such as Petra from the narrative, but this defies reality and the nature of a racially diverse Caribbean. What then, is the alternative for the Creole or Puerto Rican writer? In my view, she has created powerful and compelling Afro Caribbean characters who are forced to cope with adversity but whose wisdom and strength supersede that of their supposed “superiors.” In so doing, those who were once the elite are now the marginalized, following the pattern, for example, of Isabel’s husband Quintín.

¹⁶ Alan West-Durán, “Puerto Rico: The pleasures and traumas of race,” *Centro Journal* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 54.

¹⁷ Hall, *Questions of Cultural Identity*, 5.

Quintín's Marginalization

Quintín is an interesting character study, for he becomes increasingly more evil. The forward of the novel depicts an act of extreme violence on his part, when he nearly beats a boy to death. However, as the novel continues, the reader becomes aware of Quintín's positive and negative attributes, and may nearly forget the incident with the boy. It is toward the end of the novel that his cruelty is exposed, and it is the text that enlightens the reader and demonstrates Quintín's obsession with authority and power.

Beginning with the manuscript, Quintín scribbles his own version of events in the margins in an attempt to undermine the truth of Isabel's story. Some of his corrections are quite convincing, most notably the story of the ballet, when Quintín reveals that Isabel, in a fit of jealousy, is the mysterious person who lifts the curtain at the theater (193). His attempt to alter Isabel's text could also be viewed in a political light. Quintín adamantly supports statehood, and as I have already noted, women in the novel tend to be supporters of independence, because they associate Puerto Rico's independence from the U.S. to independence from their husbands in their marriages. Quintín's desire for control over Isabel parallels his wish for Puerto Rico to hand control over to the U.S. Supporters of independence have called Puerto Rico's relationship to the U.S. a colonial one, and they see themselves as trapped under America's influence. If one accepts this view, then Isabel, like Antoinette, may be viewed as a colonial subject who must revolt against her oppressor.

Writing the text is Isabel's way of resisting the control that Quintín has over her, and Quintín's altering of her text is his way of attempting to regain that control. This use of the text is reminiscent of Rochester's drawing, a topic discussed in chapter two, and

the text he creates in order to assert his authority and his control over Antoinette's future. Similarly, Quintín repeatedly contemplates burning the manuscript, and continually remarks on the rebellious and feminist nature of Isabel's text, which he so violently opposes. Quintín despises Petra, the wise and independent medicine woman (who shares many common characteristics with Christophine, also an enemy of Rochester). Later in Isabel's novel, we learn some horrific things about Quintín, many of which recall Rochester. For instance, Quintín essentially disowns his son for wanting to marry a woman whose bloodline is not pure and whose ancestry has "black" blood. Similarly, Rochester comes to suspect that Antoinette also has the same blood in her, and he is repelled by the idea. Despite Quintín's racist feelings, this does not prevent him from raping Carmelina, Petra's granddaughter, an event that is not unlike Rochester's affair with a black servant girl to spite Antoinette. Amazingly, Quintín justifies the act of violence against Carmelina, and what is perhaps even more surprising, Isabel forgives him. Isabel's complicity is baffling in this novel. She complies with Quintín's wish to be sterilized, she does not put up a fight when Quintín essentially disowns their son, Manuel, and she signs his revised will which cuts both sons out of his inheritance. She even acknowledges that Quintín is partly responsible for his brother's suicide. In this way, she is also linked to Antoinette, for Antoinette meekly follows Rochester to England rather than stay on the island. As previously mentioned, Isabel did not foresee a future as a housewife, yet this is what she becomes. As Isabel settles into this role, her writing suffers. She mentions that she goes years without picking up a pen, and Coral, her son's radical girlfriend, exposes Isabel's life as lie, calling her a "sellout and a sham" (353). The reader sees that there is some truth to the statement, for Isabel goes through her life

with a determination to be an independent woman expressing her desires for Puerto Rico to be an independent nation, yet in reality she becomes submissive and toward the end of her marriage lives in fear of her husband.

When Isabel begins secretly writing her novel, however, she asserts her own authority simply by telling her side of the story, recounting family legacies that divulge the personal struggles of each character. For instance, without Isabel providing details of Rebecca's former passions, the reader could easily see her as another submissive wife. Isabel also reveals how intense radicalism can have extreme consequences, as in the case of Quintín's grandfather, who was so passionate about statehood that he was pressured to kill Independista rebels. With insight into this deeper meaning, the reader sees beyond the American history and propaganda that Buenaventura witnesses at the beginning of the novel. The novel lays bare the identity struggle of an island that has been shuffled from one country to another, and whose official language, culture, and political status are therefore continually questioned. Isabel is one character of many in this dissertation that uses the text to fill in the gaps of the "non-histoire" formerly provided by Western tradition. As author, Isabel reinforces the validity of Puerto Rico as an autonomous island. Perhaps more importantly, as author, her text allows her to take her independence back from Quintín.

On several occasions Quintín contemplates burning Isabel's manuscript, and this repeated thought brings forth the element of fire, which will envelope the house on the lagoon at the end of the novel. Isabel's manuscript escapes the flames, protected by Elegguà the African god, but the fact that the house is set ablaze creates another parallel to *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Antoinette sets fire to the English house, which represents the

destruction of the canonical text and creates a path for post-colonial literature, one that tells the Other's story. When Antoinette gazes at the fire, she sees events from her past unfold before her :

Then I turned around and I saw the sky. It was red and all my life was in it. I saw the grandfather clock and Aunt Cora's patchwork, all colours, I saw the orchids and the stephanotis and the jasmine and the tree of life in flames. I saw the chandelier and the red carpet downstairs and the bamboos and the tree ferns, the gold ferns and the silver and the soft green velvet of the moss and the picture of the Miller's Daughter. I heard the parrot call as he did when he saw a stranger, *Qui est là? Qui est là?* And the man who hated me was calling too, Bertha! Bertha! (189)

Isabel does not set fire to the house on the lagoon herself, but when she stares at the blaze, her experience is similar to Antoinette's, for she sees her life flash before her:

Then I saw my life unreel before me like a film: Quintín rising from our rattan sofa at Aurora Street, taking off his belt and whipping the sixteen year old boy for singing me a love song; Ignacio shooting himself and Petra standing all alone by his grave; Margarita coming out of the operating room, pale as an alabaster statue, Carmelina and Quintín making love among the mangroves; Quintín unleashing his dogs so they would attack his own sons and making me sign a will to disinherit them; Perla in her coffin, her dark hair flowing around her like a shroud. And I told myself nothing, nothing in the world could justify such violence. (407)

Most of the events seen in the fire are caused by Quintín's desire for power and by his inability to control his temper. A paragraph later, Isabel, in her own act of violence, murders Quintín in self-defense.

As author, Isabel has accomplished two important tasks. First, she has reversed the traditional gender roles of her culture by reducing Quintín's voice to the margins of her manuscript. Though, as previously noted, Isabel has sometimes been a weak figure in the novel, emulating the subservient housewife, it is important to remember that the entire work is under her pen. When Quintín voices his dissatisfaction with her story, he does so in the margins of her pages, and he admits that his writing style does not possess the artistic flair of hers. Isabel has usurped Quintín's authority, which brings to light the

second important task she has accomplished: she completely writes him out of the story. By doing so, she reverses the dominating influence, as have all the authors of study in this dissertation. While characters like Petra, Esmeralda, and Coral remain in the story, the dominant white male is forced out. Quintín's precarious position in the margins, a place where Puerto Rican women and Afro Caribbean characters have traditionally remained, now causes him to be *marginalized*. With Quintín's murder, the reversal is complete, a reversal of power similar to Antoinette's final act in *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Silence and Otherness in Tina De Rosa's *Paper Fish*

"For years I have wanted to hear the voice(s) of the Italian American woman. Who is she? I have wondered. What is her view of life? Does she still exist?"

-- Alice Walker, *The Dream Book*

Omertà is the code of silence pervasive in Italian culture which governs what should and should not be spoken about in public. As Tina De Rosa says, "You never tell anybody outside the family anything that's going on inside the family."¹⁸ In writing *Paper Fish* De Rosa shatters the silence, breaking *omertà* but keeping her culture alive through the text and giving a voice to Italian American women. This novel is one of self-discovery and memory; it underlines elements fundamental to Italian culture but also illustrates the vitality of the Italian American girl/woman who wishes to step beyond the limits her culture has set for her. Critic Mary Jo Bona describes how the American culture and Italian culture clash in their definition of identity: "The primary cultural difference between southern Italian and American self-concept stems from the Italian's unrelenting belief in the family as the giver of identity to the exclusion of individual

¹⁸ Meyer, "Breaking the Silence," 62.

autonomy.”¹⁹ Often the family unit is run by the Italian male, leaving women narrowly defined to the role of motherhood. This lack of independence extends to the absence of a literary tradition for Italian women writers, as Helen Barolini points out:

Italian women did not come from a tradition that considered it valuable to them to narrate their lives as documents of instruction for future generations; they were not given to introspection and the writing of thoughts in diaries; they came from a male-dominant world where their ancillary role was rigidly, immutably restricted to home and family; they came as helpmates to their men, as mothers to their children, as bearers and tenders of the old culture.²⁰

Italian American women writers are truly a rarity in American literature, and it is equally difficult to find criticism on novels that are published by these women. Despite the praise Italian American critics have given to De Rosa’s writing in *Paper Fish*, the work was out of print for many years, and though it has been revived by the Feminist Press, it is not widely taught in American classrooms. Louise DeSalvo comments on how the lack of Italian American women writers affected her writing style, how she did not dare write about her Italian traditions, not considering it a worthy subject for prose:

The truth is, I didn’t realize that more silence surrounded the experience of Italian-American women than – say – that of African-American women, Latina women, Native-American women, or Chinese-American women, whose work had begun to find its audience, to command critical attention, to be taught...I for example, didn’t have the courage to recognize that my experience was valuable, and to invent both the form for containing this experience and the language appropriate for it without the force of tradition behind me.²¹

The silence of which DeSalvo speaks involves the anxiety felt by Italian Americans about their ethnicity, and the temptation to suppress customs based on that ethnicity in order to better assimilate into the American mainstream tradition. In so doing, the Italian American walks the line of imperceptibility and self-hatred, much like African

¹⁹ Bona, “Broken Images, Broken Lives,” 87

²⁰ Barolini, *Chiaroscuro*, 149.

²¹ Louise DeSalvo, “Paper Fish by Tina De Rosa: An Appreciation,” *Voices in Italian Americana*, no. 2 (Fall 1996): 250.

Americans who have used “passing” in order to avoid discrimination. In her book *Writing With an Accent: Contemporary Italian American Women Authors*, Edvige Giunta contemplates the dilemma faced by Italian American women who go unheard in the literary community, and remain silent in the face of mainstream tradition. Giunta believes that in so doing, Italian Americans sacrifice a much needed cultural identity, and even when the ethnicity is embraced, this ethnic tradition is not acknowledged. “On the one hand, the self-silencing that acculturation entails resonates in language, seemingly purging it of ethnic ties, at least on the surface; on the other hand, for those who maintain the signs of ethnic identity in their language, lack of recognition generates a perception of cultural invisibility.”²² Whether the Italian American chooses to assimilate or not, the response is the same: silence. In De Rosa’s novel, silence is a palpable force that is connected to suffering, as she presents the reader with characters that are the antithesis of the stereotypical chattering Italian family. Instead, the reader sees a family wrought with conflict, and the finger of blame is pointed at America.

Paper Fish is a novel that relies heavily on memory. It contains surreal images and a non-linear story line. At the center of the novel is Carmolina, a vivacious third generation Italian girl growing up in Chicago who attempts to cope with the suffering in her life, which stems from her distant parents and her mute, handicapped sister. As I mention in the introduction, some elements of the novel are taken directly from De Rosa’s life, and she has said that many of the novel’s events parallel those of her childhood. In the book, Carmolina connects with her Italian culture through her grandmother Doria, who tells her what life was like in the Mezzogiorno (a term for

²² Edvige Giunta, *Writing With an Accent*, Contemporary Italian American Women Authors, (Palgrave, 2003), 73.

Southern Italy). In his book *Italian Signs, American Streets*, Fred Gardaphé claims that the grandmother figure is a common one in third generation Italian writers, and that this figure establishes a link to the Italian American's ethnic past: "Just as the godfather represented the attempt to gain the power necessary to negotiate success in America, the immigrant figure – in this case the grandparent – serves as the mythic *figura* who is the source of the ethnic stories created by the third generation."²³

Grandma Doria's stories are rooted in the oral tradition, and she passes on these stories, her memories, to Carmolina. In this way, the past will be embedded in Carmolina's memory and she will be able to pass on the legacy of the family's history. Carmolina early on adopts the storytelling role by recounting stories to her sister Doriana (29). The idea of text and memory is important because memory is assured immortality if it is recorded to text, which differs from the way memories were preserved in Doria's time:

She watches Carmolina singing in her small broken Italian; she is growing up with the music tooled inside her brain. The sound of Carmolina's growing is filled with music in her head, of the laughter and quick tears of her large family around her. The sound of Doria's time was quiet, was patient, the sound of her growing up was slow and deliberate. The time of Doria's was marked by usual, small events, but her people had their own way of remembering. They sat in the dusk of Italy and made their lives slowly, measuring out the days like milk or salt. They kept picture books of their lives, and in them they pasted likenesses of themselves. The pictures were bound in corners of black paper. The people in the pictures had skin the color of onion; they were dressed in shades of brown...Their skins were not truly the color of onion, their clothes were not really shades of brown (19).

In the Mezzogiorno, memory is kept alive through storytelling and photographs. The oral tradition is what is used to educate future generations about the past. According to Fred Gardaphé, the peasant population of Italy had little use for books to record the family past, therefore the literary and the oral did not overlap. This changed through

²³ Gardaphé, *Italian Signs, American Streets*, 120.

immigration, where Gardaphé says “Italian oral culture collided with the literary traditions of Anglo-Saxon culture.”²⁴ The merging of the two entities is often cultivated through the first generation immigrant and third generation Italian American, as is the case with Doria and Carmolina.

In the quoted passage, Doria muses over the photographs of Italians found in old picture books; however, the photos are incapable of keeping a tradition alive. The images do not give a complete account of who the subjects are; they are one-dimensional and, as Doria observes, the colors are an inaccurate depiction of what the people looked like. This passage is marked by silence, for Doria’s quiet memories are starkly contrasted with Carmolina’s vivacity and noise. Carmolina is described with music, laughter and tears whereas Doria speaks of growing up in a time that is quiet, patient, and slow. This notion of silence engulfs the novel, and it is shown most clearly through Carmolina’s sister, little Doriana. The rest of the family also suffers in silence, which is shown through the lack of dialogue in the novel; they pinpoint Doriana’s suffering as the source of their pain. In her interview with Lisa Meyer, De Rosa comments on the subject of silence:

There’s very little dialogue in the book. They don’t even talk to each other. In the book, everybody explains suffering through Doriana. For example, if Doriana were well, then maybe we wouldn’t be a happy, chattering Italian-American family. But nobody understands it. And that is the definition of suffering. When you are suffering, there are no words...All of them are speechless and Doriana is carrying the brunt of their speechlessness.²⁵

Doriana’s silence pains Carmolina, for she is unable to understand why her older sister cannot communicate. In one powerful memory, Carmolina vents her anger on a doll, an obvious symbol for Doriana, who is described as an extraordinarily beautiful, but silent

²⁴ Gardaphé, *Italian Signs, American Streets*, 25.

²⁵ Meyer, “Breaking the Silence,” 233.

child who sleeps much of the time and is essentially lifeless. Her face is often described as an infant's face or as having the look of porcelain, which also recalls a doll. Carmolina destroys the doll, yet her mother does not get angry and instead gently gathers the broken toy in her arms (97). By destroying the doll, Carmolina attempts to break the silence that pervades not only in Doriana but also the rest of her family. She will eventually break this silence with her text.

Doriana takes her grandmother's name but not her legacy, because her inability to speak and comprehend prevents her from sustaining the Italian memory, and this places the burden on Carmolina to bring her family's past to life. The Italian music is, as her grandmother says, "tooled in her brain," something that cannot be forgotten and thus will always make up part of her identity. Grandma Doria's stories are another influence on Carmolina, and one that particularly interests her involves her grandmother's girlhood fascination with gypsies. Doria tells Carmolina that she dreamed of running away to the circus to meet them. Though this childhood dream was not fulfilled, Doria embarked on another kind of journey by immigrating to the United States. However, she does not feel at home in America, and even blames the city for Doriana's illness:

In Italy, it would be different. In Italy little Doriana would run in green fields under the healthy sun, would play in the white sunlight...Doriana would run free, she would touch the bark of the olive trees and receive her health...It was the city that did this to her...It was the empty gray light like a spider sucking the blood of the wonderful child, the child bled out her brains, her smiles, her own words into the empty gray light of the city and there was nothing to feed her. The buildings of the city were bones crushing against little Doriana, giving her pain. (64)

The description of the city is similar to Condé's description of Paris as an arid prison of street and stone, in contrast to the rejuvenating tropical setting of Guadeloupe. For Doria, the Italian landscape functions in a similar way. The destructive nature of the city is

directly applied to Doriana, but it can also be applied to all Italian immigrants in America who experience difficulty. If the city is harsh enough to handicap a child, then it has the capacity to ruin other lives. In contrast, the mother country of Italy is a picture of health and security. The immigrants' suffering in the work is often represented as broken pieces or shards of glass. This brokenness is always signified by the streets in America, whereas Italy is what is whole and good: "All along the street, rich dirt runs beside the curbstones. This dirt reminds some of the men, when they drink too much wine, of Italy, and then they go down on their knees in the dirt and dig their hands into it. They find no olives, only chips of glass" (40). In the afterword of the novel, Edvige Giunta defines the imagery of the city as breaking a life to pieces, and De Rosa's novel as an attempt to reassemble those pieces:

Through the use of body imagery, De Rosa represents the urban monster as driven by a deliberate and ineluctable force, greedily devouring the fragile Doriana, reducing the family to "little pieces." If the city crushes the immigrants like a giant, De Rosa defies its destructive power and puts back together the little pieces through the redemptive force of vision and language.²⁶

De Rosa does create something out of this destruction, for though Sarah and Marco's lives appear broken, Carmolina's life will repair some of the damage by exposing the reason behind their suffering and allowing them a voice. The image of "little pieces" that Giunta speaks of is an interesting observation when one considers the format of De Rosa's novel. Non-linear and fragmented, the novel jumps from one period of time to the next, from one encounter to another; it offers glimpses into the lives of the characters and slivers of the Italian American experience. It never presents any life as whole, because the reality of the Italian immigrant's life is one wrought with struggle and difficulty. De Rosa accomplishes the act of putting pieces together to form a work that comments on

²⁶ Giunta, "A Song from the Ghetto," 135.

the immigrant experience, but by making the format so fragmented, she emphasizes the displacement felt by each of the characters.

Carmolina's grandmother undergoes much suffering as a result of her emigration from Italy, and Carmolina emulates this painful experience through a miniature immigration of her own. Influenced by Grandma Doria's story of gypsies, Carmolina runs away for fear that she, like her handicapped sister, may be sent away. When she sneaks onto a train, Carmolina watches her neighborhood go by, filled with images of Italian immigrants from her everyday life:

Outside the window was old Gustavo and his blind horse. Outside the window was Tony the barber and his bald head shining in the sunlight, and the dizzy barber pole going red white and snakey in its glass tube. There was Anna, Pasquale's Indian wife, with her long hair and black gums. Anna's daughter zipped by on roller skates, her black pigtails flying behind her in the wind...Outside their kitchen windows, the brown faces of all the mothers bobbed like burned apples to the surface, letting the sun shine on them and make them browner while they called out to each other across clotheslines and flowerboxes. (74)

The above quotation recalls the passages in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *The House on the Lagoon* where so many images of home are strung together in one agonizing paragraph. The observers are moved by what they are witnessing, and it is often a turning point in the work. For instance, in *Wide Sargasso Sea* it is this scene that prompts Antoinette to "do what I must do" (190) which is to truly set fire to Thornfield Hall, and in *The House on the Lagoon* it is this scene where Isabel decides to finally take action against her husband, Quintín. For Carmolina, the action that ensues is leaving her neighborhood of Little Italy and going to another neighborhood that is foreign to her. She also views this new neighborhood from outside the train window, and this view contrasts with what she observed earlier: "This part of the city was brand new; it had never been in Carmolina's eyes before. Augie the grocer was not around the corner. No one that she knew was

behind any of the windows. It was like being locked up in a stranger's house, in one room, and you weren't allowed to leave the room" (76). The difference that Carmolina feels between her familiar neighborhood of Little Italy and the foreign neighborhood can also be compared to *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Antoinette's voyage to England is not a return home but a trip to a strange, foreign place that is hostile toward her. In the above passage Carmolina compares the strangeness of the neighborhood to being locked up in one room of a house, which is Antoinette's exact experience. The only England Antoinette sees is the attic of Thornfield Hall.

The strangeness that Carmolina encounters also makes her a double of her sister Doriana, whose illness is described by Grandma Doria as dislocation. Doria believes that America is portrayed as being responsible for Doriana's illness. In a later passage, Doria describes Doriana's illness as being lost:

Doriana she go into the forest to look at the birds. The birds they sing in the trees, they sing, they turn into leaves. Doriana she have a key to the forest. It a secret. Only Doriana know where she keep the key. One day Doriana go into the forest. She forget the key. She get lost in the forest. She get scared...She try to come home. From the forest. She no find her way. (100)

Carmolina is also lost in a new strange world, similar to the one her sister inhabits in her mind. Carmolina refrains from going home even when she encounters hostility as a result of her ethnicity. A man in a diner throws her out because of her ethnicity, claiming, "Ain't no dago kids live here...Ain't no dagos here anywhere" (77). During this journey Carmolina sees herself as "Other" for the first time, but she cannot bring herself to call her parents for help. When finally she approaches a policeman and is brought back to Little Italy, Carmolina believes that her family is a group of strangers trying to play a trick on her: "They weren't really her family at all. Her family went away and left all these strangers who just looked like them in their place, but these were

pretenders” (106). After being displaced, it is not the family that has changed of course, but Carmolina. She is not completely Italian, like her grandmother, and her experience outside her Italian neighborhood proves that she is not completely American either. She and her sister represent cultural displacement, a condition that the grandmother embodies as an Italian immigrant living in America. This feeling of displacement causes her to view her family differently. Her father attempts to reaffirm where Carmolina “belongs” by forcefully telling her that “this is your bed,” “this is your bedroom,” and “You are never going to leave us again” (107). Carmolina counters his vehemence with her own determination, “When I grow up, she said, I’m going to go away forever” (107). Carmolina’s journey underlines a conflict felt by many Italian Americans who are tempted to leave their origins behind and assimilate to American culture, such as the case of the second generation which I expanded upon in chapter one. Edvige Giunta claims that this problem is also true for Italian American writers, and that this conflict is present in their writing: “Italian American women writers have variously and creatively articulated, in oblique ways, the visceral attachment to an idea of home linked to ethnic origins and the urge to leave that home behind. Often they end up plunging into a space in-between, in a virtual condition of homelessness.”²⁷ One can argue that De Rosa is one of the writers who has felt this conflict. In her essay “An Italian American Woman Speaks Out,” she affirms her identity as an Italian American writer, but she later contradicts this view in an interview with Lisa Meyer. During this talk, De Rosa claims that she does *not* want to be identified as Italian American:

But I think the larger context is American Literature. Not feminism, nor Italian-American female writing. I’m a writer. I happen to be a woman. I happen to be writing about the Italian-American experience. I am uncomfortable with being

²⁷ Giunta, *Writing With an Accent*, 76.

defined by my sex and ethnicity. A hundred years from now, *Paper Fish* will be read as part of the canon of American literature because it is beautiful. Not because it is written by a woman. Not because I am Italian-American.²⁸

It is noteworthy that De Rosa feels that her book should belong to the “larger context” of American literature and thus not be singled out as Italian American. In a newly defined literary world where the Caribbean establishes itself as separate from France or England, where the larger American canon has not fully recognized the work of Italian Americans, it seems unusual for De Rosa to dissuade readers from viewing her work in light of her identity as an Italian American woman. De Rosa appears to be occupying the “in-between” space of which Edvige Giunta speaks, feeling an Antoinette-like anxiety of living life through two cultures and wanting only one; therefore her act is to silence herself on the subject of her *italianità*. In his study of ethnicity, William Boelhower explains that being “ethnic” is not easily defined, and that many scholars who have attempted to define the term admit to not being satisfied with their definition.²⁹ As explained in the introduction, while people of “ethnic” origin may have a collective unity in what characterizes them as “ethnic,” they are Other in the eyes of the entity that labels them as such. They are different from the standard, and in the case of Italian Americans, the standard is the entity that is considered “American.” However, as Boelhower explains, this terminology becomes difficult because “being American and being ethnic American are part of a single cultural framework.”³⁰ This inclusiveness is possibly why Boelhower warns readers against dividing American literature into categories of “mainstream” literature and “ethnic” literature. He suggests that rather than draw more

²⁸ Meyer, “Breaking the Silence,” 228.

²⁹ Boelhower, *Through a Glass Darkly*, 32.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

attention to a work on the basis of its ethnicity, compartmentalizing the literary work will instead increase its quality of otherness:

They [ethnic advocates] might argue, of course, that by separating ethnic literature from the mainstream canon, it will finally get its due attention. Yes and no. No, because for the dominant critical matrix ethnic literature in such a framework will remain poor, minor, ephemeral, local, aesthetically inferior, and thus easily dismissible.³¹

Boelhower answered both “yes and no” to the wisdom of separating ethnic literature from the mainstream. He makes a valid point; however, the truth remains that much literature that is considered “ethnic” has not been accepted as part of the “mainstream.” In her forward to *The Dream Book*, which is a collection of writings of Italian American women, Helen Barolini writes about how the lack of Italian American writing in the American literary canon is an act of exclusion. *The Dream Book* is a way to raise awareness in American literature of the existence of such talented women writers, not necessarily to be separate but “rather as an act of inclusion and completion, restoring to the body of the national literature the names of women authors who had been overlooked even as men were being documented as the only examples of Italian American writing. For when the record is not recognized, it is in effect denied.”³² As Barolini explains, these authors have not deliberately separated themselves but were never “included.” In addition, ethnic Americans are finally embracing this term, and their writing reflects the anxiety felt in the face of “mainstream” culture, as well as an acceptance of themselves within that culture. The experience of *not* being the standard has given rise to innovative work. Should it still be considered American? Yes, but is there really a need to erase the ethnic component from American literature?

³¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

³² Barolini, *Chiaroscuro*, 138.

Perhaps De Rosa's view is similar to Boelhower's, accordingly De Rosa does not want her ethnicity or gender to be considered, but Barolini's statement about inclusion and exclusion is equally compelling. While De Rosa wants her book to be considered in the American canon, for it to be considered without regard to her Italian American culture would, I believe, also be an exclusionary act. Not to recognize, or, as Barolini puts it, deny facets in her writing that are distinctly Italian American, De Rosa emphasizes the silence that overwhelms the tradition. Fortunately, and possibly despite her intentions, *Paper Fish* has taken on a life of its own, becoming a voice for Italian American women. This sentiment also appears to be present in Carmolina, who, despite her childhood threat, will not shed her *italianità* and go away forever but will instead become self-reliant while staying close to her culture. At her "wedding" her grandmother tells her, "Now it your turn. You keep the fire inside you." Her grandmother is dying, and in the epilogue the Italian neighborhood is destroyed, but Carmolina will keep her culture alive through memory, as her grandmother has done.

The importance of memory is not only a subject in *Paper Fish*, but it is important to Caribbean writers as well. For example, in *Searching for Safe Spaces*, Myriam Chancy explains how memory has helped her through a life of exile: "It has been through memory – my own and that of family members – that I have been able to keep a vital link to Haiti."³³ Carmolina's grandmother is also living a life of exile; a life away from her native Italy. She, like Chancy's family, imparts her recollections of Italy to Carmolina, whose efforts are revealed through a concrete form of memory which is the text.

³³ Chancy, *Searching for Safe Spaces*, xiv.

A Look in the Mirror: Memory as Text in *Paper Fish*

To fully appreciate the merging of creative imagination and recognition of culture in *Paper Fish*, the reader must understand that many events in De Rosa's novel are based on memory. The work is stylistically unlike any other in Italian American literature, as it experiments with several literary devices such as flashbacks, flash-forwards, and stream of consciousness. Events are never in chronological order, a characteristic of memory. The novel instead demonstrates Carmolina's struggle through the multitude of perspectives with which she views the world. The mirror is a symbol used in the work to link memory and perspective, and Carmolina's use of the mirror enables her to have authorial control while at the same time reflect upon the images put before her.

As previously stated, Carmolina, unlike her other family members, is not a silent figure but rather a loud and expressive one, and she uses the mirror in conjunction with the text to express herself, but her use of the latter is uncommon. For example, she experiments with writing after reading about a famous figure in Italian history: Leonardo da Vinci. Carmolina learns that he often wrote backwards, so she begins to imitate his technique by writing a message on a bag that no one in her family can understand, until she tells them to read the message in the mirror: "This bread brought to you courtesy of Carmolina BellaCasa" (29). The parents cannot read Carmolina's message at face value; they must look at it in a different way. However, rather than be amused by her wit, the family is perturbed by the trick, just as they are fearful when Carmolina tells stories to her handicapped sister. At times they feel that Carmolina may "catch" Dorian's disease, but more often they are ill at ease with Carmolina's intelligence rather than her sister's lack of it: "Too bright. The littlest one too bright. She had stolen the brains of her sister"

(29). Carmolina's precocious talent for written and spoken language sets her apart as strange. This image is repeated when Marco is looking for his daughter after she has run away. He imagines that he sees her through his rearview mirror, but he cannot understand her: "In the spray was the small form of his daughter, laughing, dripping in her dress, waving at him from behind her dark eyes. She was talking backwards to him in the mirror, he could not understand the words, she was talking backwards and laughing because he could not understand" (30). Carmolina is both literally and symbolically lost to Marco, a second generation Italian who cannot comprehend the importance of words and the self. For Carmolina, however, these words aid in defining the self, as critic Mary Jo Bona explains: "Carmolina's interest in the capacity of words to empower the self stems from her reading the words of a Northern Italian artist, words that are provocative in this example because of the emphasis on the ability of words to protect, even transform the self." ³⁴ Bona mentions that words, in addition to helping define Carmolina, also protect her. This protection is also offered through the image of the mirror, which Carmolina uses as an observational tool. In viewing her family through reflective objects, she realizes that she has a certain control over herself and the object that she observes. For example, she uses a gold earring to view the reflected images of her mother and grandmother: "Through the golden hoop she watched Mama sitting next to Grandma. She squinted where the sunlight sliced sharp off the golden edge. Inside the earring, Mama and Grandma were small. They were talking, but she could not hear them. She could turn the earring any way she wanted; she could make them bigger or smaller" (59).

³⁴ Bona, "Broken Images, Broken Lives," 97.

In another section of the novel, Carmolina views her sister and mother through a drinking glass. The memory is somewhat painful, for Doriana is having a fit and her mother is crying. Yet, by looking through the glass, Carmolina is able to separate herself from the action and become an observer, not a player, in the scene: “Carmolina watched through the bottom of the milk glass. Doriana looked far away and small; the bottom of the glass was white” (72). Carmolina has authority when she looks through the glass, for she is able to minimize her pain by separating herself from the action and controlling the size of the images that she observes. Carmolina is looking at her life like a writer would by thoughtfully examining her experiences and deciding what to focus upon. This is, of course what De Rosa is doing: taking autobiographical events from her life and recreating these images in prose. In an interview with Lisa Meyer, De Rosa speaks about this combination. When Meyer mentions that the book is a collection of memories, De Rosa responds, “Memories and imagination. Just as my poem that I used as an epigraph says, ‘Our imagination and memory face each other in a mirror. Who’s to solve the mystery?’”³⁵

The most memorable mirror images occur during Carmolina’s marriage to self. The significance of the marriage scene was explored in chapter one of this dissertation, but the reflection of generations in that scene merits a second look. Doria represents the first generation Italians who have come to America, but she passes her Italian past on to Carmolina through stories of her childhood. Though after her runaway experience Carmolina expresses a longing to break from her culture, this scene demonstrates that she is eventually able to achieve a balance between her heritage as *italiana* and her identity as a person. She is able to preserve her memories by committing them to writing, which in

³⁵ Meyer, “Breaking the Silence,” 233.

turn permits her to step out of the Italian woman's traditional role. One of the many autobiographical moments of the novel is the epilogue, which depicts the destruction of the Italian neighborhood. Although the neighborhood is materially destroyed, there is hope that memory will ensure its survival, just as memory ensures the survival of Carmolina's dying grandmother. The last words of the novel are "It's only a trick, Grandma...Don't let it fool you" (121). In other words, death is an illusion, superseded by memory and the text. De Rosa is doing what Grandma Doria prepares Carmolina to do: she mixes Italian past with American present and creates a work that speaks to both cultures. In an interview with Fred Gardaphé, De Rosa said, "Our grandparents and parents were bound to survival; we, on the other hand, have become freer to use our own talents and to rescue the talents of those who came before us."³⁶ This sentiment is echoed in many third generation writers of Italian descent. Among the most poignant is an essay from Louise DeSalvo, whose family experienced such mistreatment as a result of its ethnicity that they passed down no cultural history to the third generation daughter. Through family records, DeSalvo uncovers information of her past and imagines life as it would have been through the eyes of her immigrant grandmother, whose careful signature is etched in DeSalvo's memory:

And I wonder, now, what it was/is like to live a life where you almost never had an occasion to sign your name; wonder what it meant/means not to be able to use the art of writing to tell people about yourself and who you were and where you came from; wonder what it meant/means not to be able to participate in the creation of your identity, for you did/do not have the language to do so.³⁷

Something as simple as a signature was a rare event for the grandmother, and DeSalvo points out that her grandmother's signature on her naturalization papers gave silent

³⁶ Fred Gardaphé, "An Interview with Tina de Rosa," *Fra Noi* 24 (May 1985) : 23.

³⁷ DeSalvo, "Color: White/Complexion: Dark," 25.

consent of what others presumed about her. Most notably, the arbitrary and unnecessary observation of complexion, which naturalization officials labeled “dark.” With that signature DeSalvo’s grandmother renounced her Italian citizenship in order to become “American.” The painstaking act of putting her name to paper, the name being central to identity, to affirm a newly assigned identity, is a memory that is effectively “rescued” through DeSalvo’s essay.

M.L. Hansen sees the third generation as retrievers of a past that the second generation has ignored. According to his theory, the second generation did not only reject the language and custom of its parents, but it also suppressed artistic elements of its culture. Hansen claims that though most of the people who immigrated to America were uneducated, they still had an appreciation of art that lingered from the European culture in which they lived. In America, there was no such appreciation, and therefore in order to conform, the second generation created a gulf between itself and artistic endeavors: “The second generation was entirely aware of the contempt in which [any other artistic] activities were held and they hastened to prove that they knew nothing about casts, symphonies or canvas.”³⁸ If we accept Hansen’s claim, then it is no wonder that Italian Americans suffered from a lack of literary tradition. However, the third generation writer provides hope for reviving and recording history. As a writer, it is clear that De Rosa feels a responsibility to give a life and a voice to images of the past, and in so doing, creates a work that exemplifies the Italian American identity. This is an identity that does not have to be created at the expense of the self. In other words, through writing about her experience, it is possible for the Italian American woman to assert her independence while bringing herself closer to her culture.

³⁸ Hansen, “The Third Generation in America,” 494.

Chapter IV: Literature and History in *The House on the Lagoon*

In this chapter I examine the relationship between literature and history and how this applies to identity. I first explore José Luis González's "The Four Storyed Country," an essay that metaphorically arranges Puerto Rican history in a structure of four levels and claims that Puerto Rican identity is a myth that was created by those who sought power. I then apply this essay to the house in Ferré's novel, which serves as much more than a mere setting or background to her story. The house is as much a character in the novel as Isabel and Quintín, and its continual destruction and reconstruction can be compared with the constant changing of Puerto Rican identity. I focus a section of the chapter on Milan Pavel, the fictional architect who designs the house on the lagoon. Using imitation as a point of departure for what will ultimately be a unique creation is an idea I explore in relation to Jean Rhys and Maryse Condé. Like Pavel, Rhys and Condé are mimicking an original design but implementing changes to make it their own. Finally, I consider Isabel and Quintín, whose intense feud over her manuscript is representative of the debate over literature and history. Although different critics may consider one superior over the other, or both useless, I hold that their relation to one another is important and that literature can be used to shed light on a neglected history.

José Luis González's Four Stories and Puerto Rican Identity

In his essay "The Four Storyed Country," José Luis González examines the effect of American intervention in Puerto Rican culture by exploring the beginnings of that culture and arguing against the notion that Puerto Rico had a strong identity before the American invasion. He goes on to say that the Puerto Rican culture, as in many colonies, is made up of two groups: the oppressed and the oppressors, and that only the culture of

the oppressors is universally accepted as local custom, a point continually made throughout this dissertation about colonial society. Formerly, the majority of published literature focuses on the colonizer's point of view. Any story of the oppressed or Other is expressed in the colonizer's words.

González's essay describes Puerto Rican history, explaining that Spanish settlers did not consider themselves Puerto Rican as they held fast to their European traditions. He concludes that the first *real* Puerto Ricans were black, the descendants of African slaves brought to the island. According to González, these descendants were the first to think of the island as their homeland: "What I *am* claiming is that it was the blacks, the people bound most closely to the territory which they inhabited (they were after all slaves), who had the greatest difficulty in imagining any other place to live."¹ González adds that many react with chagrin to this information, apparently reluctant to agree with his view. González's statement seems at least partly correct, because he neglects to mention the marriages between Spanish settlers and Taino Indians. González writes about the Taino Indians but says that their mass deaths induced by colonial violence as well as the disease the settlers brought to the island all but wiped them out. While this is true, many Spanish also married Taino women, for when gold seekers arrived in great numbers, they brought no women with them.² In fact, according to Irving Rouse's book on the Taino Indians, as many as forty percent of Spanish men had married Taino women by 1514, and this early racial mixing is still perceptible in Puerto Rico today.³ According to these sources, it seems that the first Puerto Ricans included at least two

¹ González, "The Four Storyed Country," 10.

² Kal Wagenheim, *The Puerto Ricans: a documentary history* (New York: Praeger, 1973), 41.

³ Irving Rouse, *The Tainos: Rise and Decline of the People Who Greeted Columbus* (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1992), 67

groups: those of African descent, and those that were a mix of Spanish and Taino. Several of these sources also argue that the Spanish, unlike other European countries, did not have a problem with marrying into another ethnic group.⁴ This is not to say that they did not exploit both the Taino Indians and the African slaves, but perhaps the more nuanced forms of racial discrimination came later, and González claims as much. He clearly makes a distinction between Puerto Rico and other Caribbean nations, explaining that Puerto Rican culture would be predominantly Afro Antillean in nature if it were not for the subsequent “stories” built upon the original foundation.

The next, or second story of the country includes the influx of foreigners coming to the island from several parts of Europe in the early 19th century. González calls this event a “second colonization,” for these foreigners took lands from the Creoles, those who were born on the island and were by then the ruling class. The foreigners of course felt no national pride for Puerto Rico as they identified with their country of origin, and their cruelty toward the Creole class was a divisive force on the island. Therefore, according to González, when the American invasion occurred in 1898, Puerto Rico was already a divided country with no national identity and so the independence cause was based on a desire to go backward, not forward, and return to an era that was marked by colonial violence.

It is a compelling argument; nonetheless, what is missing in González’s essay is some account for the three hundred years and all the generations that lived between the arrival of the Spaniards on the island and the arrival of the foreigners. During this time, many were born on the island who considered Puerto Rico, and not Spain, their home. As previously mentioned, theorists such as Gayatri Spivak and Stuart Hall have explained

⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

that identity is formed on the basis of exclusion, i.e. that there must be an entity that is culturally different in order for there to be an entity of sameness. In the desire for autonomy from Spain, Puerto Rican Creoles of this generation may well have been unified in an effort to be separate from Spain.

In his article “Puerto Rico: The Pleasures and Traumas of Race,” Alan Duran argues that the movement for independence was combined with the call for abolition of slavery.⁵ However, during this period there are still many racial divides – the white Creoles view the mulattos with disdain, and the black Puerto Ricans are the most hated.⁶ This racial split is not uncommon in other Caribbean cultures, but González singles out Puerto Rico because this particular island has the illusion of a happy, racially mixed family:

What sets Puerto Rico’s case apart is that for more than half a century we have been peddled the myth of social, racial, and cultural homogeneity which it is now high time that we begin to dismantle, not so as to “divide” the country – a prospect that some people contemplate with terror – but rather so as to gain a true perspective on the country’s real and objective diversity.⁷

This call to dismantle the facade of a cohesive Puerto Rican society is what Rosario Ferré is participating in with her novel. In her writing she dispels the myth of a harmonious Puerto Rico by revealing the fissures within the facade and creating a work that includes the marginalized.

While Americanization and capitalism are the third and fourth stories perched upon the unstable second story, González insists that this Americanization is not synonymous with de-Puerto Ricanization, and that those who claim that American influence threatens the independence of Puerto Ricans are wrong because they speak of

⁵ West-Durán, “Puerto Rico : The pleasures and traumas of race,” 50.

⁶ Wagenheim, *The Puerto Ricans: A Documentary History*, 112.

⁷ González, *The Four Storyed Country*, 23.

an identity never felt by Puerto Ricans. This claim resonates strongly if identity is formed as a result of exclusion from another group. For Puerto Rico, however, no unity persisted since there were many who welcomed U.S. intervention and possibly statehood, thus causing the political and national divide on the island that still exists today.

While in some ways the essay seems to champion American intervention, asserting that Americans gave more freedom to the oppressed masses, González does maintain that no colonial status can ever be truly good for the colonized and that Puerto Ricans must not look back to the Spanish era as the “good old days” but instead look forward to a Caribbean collectivity. This idea of collectivity, of striving towards a “Caribbeanness” is reminiscent of convictions held by Maryse Condé, who feels neither isolation from nor a return to Europe or Africa to be the answer but instead one must look to a collective Caribbean consciousness. This consciousness is steeped in Afro Antillean tradition, and in order to uncover this identity it is necessary to strip away the layers and search for the foundation, a foundation González claims makes up the first story of Puerto Rico’s history. Through Caribbean literature one can direct the focus to these traditions, and thus delve deeper toward the foundation. Rosario Ferré’s novel *The House on the Lagoon* is an attempt at exposing the “real” Puerto Rican society, a society that is not presented as a heterogeneous “happy family” but one that is conflict-ridden and filled with violence. In the house dwells a family that clings to Spanish European ideals and an insistence on purity of blood, but beneath the house, at the foundation, are the African servants who prove to be the wisdom and strength behind the family’s veneer. The novel is divided into several sections, and in these sections three different houses on the lagoon are built up and then torn down. The layers of the house are like the

layers of Puerto Rican history. In Ferré's novel, her main character Isabel reveals another Puerto Rico, the one previously hidden from view. She, like the other authors of this dissertation, tells another side of the story, and it is the elite who are forced into the margins.

Binary Opposition in *The House on the Lagoon*

It would be easy to create binary oppositions from elements of *The House on the Lagoon*: men versus women, statehood versus independence, English versus Spanish, history versus literature. There is even the temptation to link some of these elements together on one side and list them as opposing the remaining elements on the other side. In the novel, many women support political independence, which may represent their desire for marital independence. Because Isabel is writing the novel and Quintín critiques it on the basis of historical accuracy, men could appear under the umbrella of history and statehood while women under literature and independence. As for the languages, the independistas want Spanish to remain the official language, whereas if Puerto Rico were to become a U.S. state, English would be the official language. Therefore, Spanish could be placed alongside women, literature, and independence and English alongside men, history and statehood.

While these oppositions do exist, they do not neatly line up on either side, for Ferré creates components in her characters that cause these oppositions to overlap. For example, as noted in the chapter on motherhood, many women do not want to have children in order to be more independent, such as Rebecca and Isabel's grandmother. But there are women like Isabel who want a large family, and Carmita deeply regrets her abortion and also would like more children. Many of the men in novel want many

children, such as Buenaventura. He is happy that Rebecca eventually has several children, partly because it keeps his wife subservient to him. His son, Quintín, however, is satisfied with one child and insists that Isabel be sterilized to prevent further pregnancies. In both cases the men are dominant over their wives, even if their objective is different.

Though this novel is about Isabel's independence from Quintín, an independence which represents women's resistance to a patriarchal society, not all of the situations in the text develop this theme. For example, Isabel's mother Carmita is not subservient to her husband. If anything, it is the reverse, for her husband is unable to control Carmita's gambling, he is incompetent when he attempts to take over his wife's family business, and he commits suicide. These facets of his life can be seen as emasculating. Similarly, Isabel's son, Manuel, has no interest in politics, but because his love for Coral is so strong, he adopts her views and becomes a radical for the independence movement. It is under her influence that he abandons his family and is even violent against them. Therefore, there are two contradictions to the opposition: first, Manuel, a man, supports the independence movement and blindly follows Coral's lead. Second, while he is set up in contrast to his father, who supports statehood, they are linked together in violence. And although Manuel's views, albeit through Coral, become radically different from his father's, the underlying violence is the same.

As for literature and history, the reader has greater access to Isabel's story (literature) than to Quintín's (history) scribbling in the margins of the novel. But some of his corrections are convincing, causing the reader to ponder the truth of Isabel's stories.

In spite of the fact that Isabel supports independence, she does write the novel in English, therefore she cannot easily be placed on the side of those who support Spanish.

A simple dynamic is repeated in the novel: oppositions are set up then broken down. This is also what happens to the house on the lagoon. It is built up, broken down, and rebuilt several times in the novel. It is important to recognize that the house is not merely destroyed, but reconstructed. This action can be attributed to deconstruction theory and its critique of oppositions. Philosophers like Derrida claim that oppositions can be harmful because they set up dualities in which one is rendered superior to the other. For example, self and other or identity and difference can be seen as oppositions, in which self and identity are depicted as more valuable. These dualities should therefore be deconstructed, analyzed, and undone. As Derrida states, "Deconstruction is not an enclosure in nothingness, but an openness to the other."⁸ By setting up and then undoing several binary oppositions, Ferré's novel can be seen as an act of deconstruction which makes way for the "Other."

An Artist in the Faking: Pavel's Character

An interesting character in the novel is the architect, Milan Pavel, whose work is admired by all the inhabitants of San Juan. The reader learns that Pavel's designs are not original and that his works are actually copies of those of his former master, famed architect Frank Lloyd Wright. This fact is unknown to the people of San Juan, whose wealthy citizens commission Pavel to build their homes. Among these clients is Buenaventura, who commissions him to build the house on the lagoon. The only reason Pavel agrees to the work for him is that he forms a connection with Buenaventura's

⁸ Vincent Leitch, "Jacques Derrida," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 1824.

artistic wife Rebecca. He begins plans for the house on the lagoon, which becomes the main setting of the novel. As is his custom, he selects one of Wright's beautiful designs for the house, but in his fervor Pavel begins to add several other designs that are uniquely his own:

As he worked on the plans he grew inspired and added many new elements which would make the house more in keeping with life in the tropics. (43)

It was the first time in his life he designed something truly original. He created the house on the lagoon as one would create a poem or a statue, breathing life into its every stone. (49)

Every other time he drew plans for a structure, Pavel simply replicated what his master had designed. It is only through Rebecca's artistic influence that Pavel breaks this cycle and creates something unique out his master's designs. This action could be viewed as another example of what all the authors treated in this dissertation are doing: they look beyond the "masters," of the dominant tradition and create a unique text out of what has come before. As the above quotation explains, Pavel's changes are made in order to adapt the house to the tropics. In contrast, Frank Lloyd Wright designed buildings in Chicago, a city that has an entirely different climate from the Caribbean. In similar fashion, the authors in this dissertation have created works that are in keeping with their tradition, and, for example, include the backdrop and culture of the Caribbean.

The house is an important setting for the novel, one that evokes artistic creation and expression. Even when the house is demolished later in the novel, to make room for the new one, one important part of the structure remained: "The only section of Pavel's house Buenaventura didn't order destroyed was the terrace. The contractor said it might weaken the foundations of the new house, so the terrace was left standing and was made part of the Spanish Revival mansion (69)." The terrace was the main source of artistic

creation in the house. Pavel created it specifically for Rebecca, who used the space for performing her dances and art. The fact that this space remained and was the central source of strength of the house is significant. While the novel informs us that later in San Juan, Pavel's buildings were destroyed, a section of the house on the lagoon, which is his only original creation, has withstood the test of time. This idea of duration can again be extended to parallel the strength of the "Other's" literature as work that is newly created from Western tradition. Yet, the work is original, has a strong foundation, and is now being recognized in literary circles. Pavel is usurping Wright's authority and claiming it for his own when he surpasses his former master's designs. This idea can also be extended to Caribbean literature, whose works usurp the authority of Western tradition in their appropriation of that literature. Because colonial violence is such a part of Caribbean history, the usurping of authority can be viewed as a master/slave relationship. The appropriation of the dominant literature, and the changing of elements to incorporate it into Caribbean culture, is a revolt against the "master" tradition.

The interpretation of Pavel's architecture can be applied to Isabel, who records stories from the house on the lagoon to create her own novel. Many of the events in the novel involve her husband's family, to whom Isabel has been very obedient. She writes that she fears her husband, whose violent temper becomes more discernable throughout the novel. Quintín has the role of "master," and like Pavel with Wright, Isabel usurps Quintín's authority by appropriating stories from *his* family and describing them with her own details and point of view.

When her husband Quintín discovers the manuscript, he criticizes Isabel, claiming that she has distorted the facts of their family history. Yet, despite his

uneasiness, he becomes captivated with her manuscript, and thinks, “He was discovering something important about Isabel and was examining his family’s history in a way he’d never done.” The effect that Isabel’s manuscript has on Quintín is similar to the effect that ethnic literature has on the literary tradition. When works surfaced from non-traditional authors, they provoked readers and urged them to observe heterogeneous cultures in a different light, one that was not limited to the dominant viewpoint. Of course, Isabel does not merely copy the family events in bland historical fashion (a style that irks Quintín, who is an amateur historian), she adds her own artistic flair to make her manuscript a work of art. This is, in fact, what Pavel does – he begins with a copy, but his enthusiasm with the design leads to an original creation.

In addition, Isabel’s novel offers historical significance to her island culture. Caribbean writers such as Glissant have complained that the Caribbean has suffered from a non-histoire, since its stories were told and altered by the dominant West. Puerto Rico has endured the same fate, as Isabel reveals. The insertion of American culture on the island caused many changes, such as English being recognized as the national language and American history being the subject of study in Puerto Rican schools. The fact that U.S. history was the only historical education available had an effect on islanders such as Aristides, Quintín’s grandfather. This education convinced him to admire the U.S. and to be an advocate of statehood. The fact that the education system did not offer Puerto Ricans an opportunity to study their own history demonstrates that the U.S. wished to assert itself as a hegemonic force. Isabel’s manuscript offers a glimpse into true Puerto Rican culture while also revealing the dominant country’s desire to govern and draw people away from their own history. This is not unlike the colonial schools in the West

Indies and Africa, who wanted their new pupils to speak the colonial language and essentially become European, yet also wanted power over the colonized land. Just as writers Condé and Rhys have done, the character of Isabel is writing back, fueled by a need to record her own history.

As Quintín notes, Isabel writes in English, which is something he criticizes. Isabel's use of English seems to contradict her independent views. The reader has to remember also that this work is a novel within a novel, and it is noteworthy that Rosario Ferré wrote this novel in English as well. If one supports Puerto Rican independence, and keeping the official language Spanish, then it seems justifiable to criticize the author for choosing the colonial language. Yet, as pointed out with all of the authors in this dissertation, to reach the goal of destabilizing the colonial power, one must appropriate it. By writing in English, Isabel appropriates the colonial language, and uses it to write about her own culture, history and life experiences. In using English, she also reaches a wider audience and perhaps facilitates a dialogue with her Western readership that may lead to greater understanding. This same point applies to many Caribbean authors, such as Condé, who have been criticized for using French and providing Creole translations in the text, rather than using the native Creole tongue. If Condé wishes to educate and persuade readers of the validity of Caribbean culture and colonial violence, she writes in French so that the former colonizers may clearly understand the plight of the colonized subject.

Isabel and Quintín's Feud in *The House on the Lagoon*

One of the most interesting topics of Ferré's work is the textual aspect that highlights the debate between literature and history. This argument is also linked to the role of gender in the text, whereby Isabel (female) represents literature and Quintín (male) history, and the two forces are opposed to each other. As stated in an earlier section, these oppositions are not mutually exclusive, but it is interesting to explore Quintín and Isabel's relationship as representative of literature and history.

One of the reasons for Quintín's frustration with Isabel's novel is his vehement belief that her account of events is historically inaccurate. For Quintín, history is equivalent to absolute truth while literature is fictive. Isabel argues, however, that history is also fictive, and this point in particular lends a theoretical approach to the novel. The problem with accepting history as absolute truth, according to critics in cultural studies, is that the best known history is that of the dominant tradition. In González's "The Four Storyed Country," he opens his discussion by stating that in many societies there are at least two cultures that co-exist, that of oppressor and oppressed, and that it is the history of the oppressor that is passed off as "general culture".⁹ Antonio Gramsci is another theorist who explores the role of culture in society, and he echoes this view.¹⁰ In his *Letters from Prison*, he writes about how cultural dominance can be driven by economical factors. Though Gramsci's ideas are fused with Marxist beliefs, his notion of hegemony, a position that he believes is formed through a group's economic and cultural interests, can be applied to today's cultural studies in that the values of the hegemonic

⁹ González, "The Four Storyed Country," 3.

¹⁰ Gramsci, Antonio, *Letters from Prison* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 245.

group are passed off as a general consensus. Gramsci's idea that history is used as propaganda and as a way to create an appearance of a unified nation aligns well with González's claim that Puerto Rico's national identity did not exist until Americanization affected the island. The people of Other races and cultures, who belong to González's "oppressed" group, are not included in this national history since their history does not belong to the dominant, hegemonic tradition. Glissant also attributes the generality of culture that the population accepts to the work of the oppressor, namely the West. Glissant maintains that the desire for Caribbean cultures to assimilate to European norms, a desire that the West instilled in the Caribbean, is dangerous because it denies a history that is separate from the West. Though Glissant speaks mainly of French Caribbean islands, like Martinique and Guadeloupe, the same idea can be applied to Puerto Rico, where loyalties range from the desire to be independent, to remain a commonwealth or to become a U.S. state. Glissant claims that it is the role of the writer to reclaim the history that once belonged to the Caribbean, this is what Isabel attempts to do when she reveals the secrets of the house on the lagoon.

Isabel's husband Quintín becomes increasingly angry with her because he sees her novel as totally disregarding history, which he believes can only be based in truth:

She was manipulating history for fiction's sake, and what was worse, she was putting words into his mouth as if the false information had come from him ... all writers interpreted reality in their own way – and that was why Quintín preferred history to literature; literature wasn't ethical enough for him. There were limits to interpretation, even if the borders of reality were diffuse and malleable. There was always a nucleus of truth. (71 – 72)

Quintín is bothered by the fact that Isabel's manuscript errs in historical facts such as dates and location and that she also distorts the "historical" truth of his family's past. He does not feel that imagination is powerful enough nor is it necessary to describe his

family's history. Yet Isabel's position is that history, like literature, does *not* necessarily equal truth. Often, as in the case of the many stories told in *The House on the Lagoon*, history consists of facts which are handed down and changed depending on what the person chooses to elaborate upon or leave out. In this novel, this idea is applied to Puerto Rico's crisis with identity, partly because its history *is* left out: "The history of the United States was taught thoroughly at their school, yet Puerto Rican history was never mentioned. In the nuns' view, the island had no history. In this they were not exceptional; it was forbidden to teach Puerto Rican history at the time, either at private or public schools" (91). History, like literature, can be used selectively to sway one towards one idea or away from another. By ignoring Puerto Rican history and focusing solely upon U.S. history, many could be swayed towards statehood. Isabel emphatically denies that history, as Quintín claims, is "more important than literature" (312) by stating: "History doesn't deal with the truth any more than literature does. From the moment a historian selects one theme over another in order to write about it, he is manipulating the facts. The historian, like the novelist, observes the world through his own tinted glass, and describes it as if it were the truth" (312). Isabel's statement indicates that history can actually be more inaccurate than literature, since history presents itself as factual whereas the novelist makes no such claim.

Though Isabel and Quintín are at odds, literature and history are connected, as most fiction has some historical value and many novels are based on historical periods or events. Isabel chooses to include Puerto Rican politics, Quintín's family secrets, and the disadvantaged position of Afro Puerto Rican women in her manuscript. As previously stated, many of these elements would not be included if Quintín were author. If we

accept that Quintín represents history, then we can view his desire to ignore certain unsavory events in his family's past as the imperialistic self's desire to ignore the marginalized Other. Since this Other is represented through literature, one can examine the influence of literature in an effort to understand why Quintín is so envious of this influence. Because Isabel possesses a gift for writing, the reader can be influenced by her words and have sympathy for her character. Therefore, a reader may be more inclined to believe her version of events (literature) than Quintín's (history). As in the case of *Paper Fish's* Carmolina and her memories of the past, the truthfulness of Isabel's account is less important than the impact her text has on the reader. Quintín slowly begins to realize the power of literature and consequently the power that Isabel now commands, for he realizes that through her writing she is severing herself from him while creating something that will outlast him and his accomplishments. This possibility alarms him and Isabel (literature) achieves an immortality that Quintín (history) will never possess. Critic Julie Barak comments on Quintín's fear and his reaction to this fear:

Quintín is suffering because he knows that Isabel's book will gain her a kind of immortality that his business will not create for him. He secretly believes that literature outlasts history. He wants her to admit him as a co-author of the novel so that they can be remembered together. He wants her to admit that literature needs history to survive. When he realizes she won't do this, he begins to collect art – paintings and sculptures. These tangible pieces of the past that he sees himself rescuing from oblivion, saving for/from history, restore his confidence in himself. His desire to turn his home into a museum is an attempt to metamorphose into history.¹¹

Isabel's literature will not acknowledge that she needs history to survive, and Quintín's attempt to preserve history in a museum-like way does not succeed, for the house and all its artifacts burn to the ground. In contemplating the relationship between literature and

¹¹ Julie Barak, "Navigating the Swamp: Fact and Fiction in Rosario Ferré's *The House on the Lagoon*," *Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association (JMMLA)* 31, no.2 (Winter 1998): 36

history, I am reminded of Irving Howe's essay "History and the Novel." Howe claims that as time moves forward, history loses its power. History, he implies, is eventually forgotten:

I come to a disconcerting conclusion. History may be the rock on which the novel rests, but time crumbles that rock into grains of sand. The circumstances forming the matrix of fiction soon turn out to be inaccessible, distant, and perhaps no longer arresting: come to seem alloyed by values we can no longer credit; or decline into mere reflexes of social bias.¹²

While this passage would seem to indicate that literature is therefore superior, Howe states that literature is also vulnerable. The passage of time that wears away the historical significance also affects the novel, for it will not have the same impact on readers of future generations. Howe laments that works such as *Bread and Wine* are "not likely to stir younger readers as it once stirred readers of my generation" or that *The Sun Also Rises* deeply affected him, but that his students now have a response to the novel that is "dismaying."¹³

Though the impact of a novel certainly *changes*, I cannot agree with Howe that literature sinks into the sand that was once history. Instead, a literary text is read with a new perspective on history. For instance, *Jane Eyre* can now be read with a more informed history of colonialism and a clearer idea of what Bertha's life may have been *before* her journey to England. Critics such as Said insist that we must no longer ignore the imperial history that is present in literature.¹⁴ Characters will still remain sympathetic and words will create an impression on future readers – the ebb and flow of time does not destroy, but merely transforms, the landscape of fiction. Writers such as Glissant and

¹² Irving Howe, "History and the Novel." in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company), 1544.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1545.

¹⁴ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 6.

Condé, who focus on historical events that were once ignored, are examples of those who create changes that bring clarity and greater understanding to literature.

The house on the lagoon is burned to the ground, an event that can be compared to the rock/sand metaphor that Howe speaks of. It is important to keep in mind, however, that through the course of the novel the house was *deconstructed* and *reconstructed*. When Quintín threatens to burn the manuscript, he also threatens to kill Isabel, but she says, “I’ll kill you first,” (375) and she is able to fulfill this promise. As author, she determines what will happen, therefore Quintín dies at the close of her novel. Also as author, Isabel is able to obtain freedom from male dominance and she explains this clearly to her husband: “ ‘My novel is about personal freedom, Quintín, not about political freedom,’ I said calmly. ‘It is about my independence from you. I have the right to write what I think, and that’s what you haven’t been able to accept from the start’” (386).

The manuscript survives, but Quintín does not, and the house on the lagoon falls victim to the flames. Is this to say that literature trumps history and that history is dead? Or that literature can survive without history? On the contrary, the burning of the house, and all the history it contained, does not represent the death of history, but instead signifies a chance for a new future. Just as in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette burns down the “cardboard” house, which is a symbolic representation of the pages of Brontë’s fiction, in order to create a new literary work that includes the history of the Caribbean, Isabel destroys Quintín and his house on the lagoon. The destruction of the house results in the destruction of the ruling patriarch that dominates the female subject along with the

imperialistic elite that inhabit it. What is to rise up from the ash? Perhaps a new literary and historical tradition that will provide more insight into Caribbean culture.

Endings and Beginnings

The idea of an emerging and diverse literary tradition is present in all of the works studied in this dissertation, and therefore it seems appropriate to focus the concluding pages on the endings of the novels. Many of the endings are open endings that leave the reader to interpret what the future has in store for the protagonists. For example, in Condé's *La migration des cœurs*, one is left to wonder about later generations. In chapter two, I suggested that Irmine's children could possibly diversify a European system, and that Anthuria, the child of Razyé II and Little Cathy, may continue a tradition that her grandmother had rejected. In *The House on the Lagoon* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the fires end one chapter of the protagonists' lives but allows room for another, and this is most clearly shown when Antoinette wakes with determination and purpose. In *Paper Fish*, the novel also closes with destruction as Carmolina's neighborhood of Little Italy is demolished. In the novels, there is special attention given to geographical space and landscape, and the destructions and reconstructions that occur in those spaces clear the way for new and different texts.

In this dissertation, I have explored several examples of how landscape is connected to the Caribbean identity for writers Condé, Ferré, and Rhys. In Condé's memoir, her mother normally distances herself from a Caribbean identity yet on the rare occasion that she embraces it, during her pregnancy, it is through the evocation of landscape images. In *La migration des cœurs*, Razyé's namesake is the heath covered cliffs in Guadeloupe, and he is linked to the land. Condé uses the land almost as a

character in the novel through the portrayal of Razyé. In this light, Cathy's rejection of him and her previous lifestyle in favor of the European ideal can be viewed as an example of her alienation from the land. The addition of Caribbean images to a text that is known for its English elements, including topography, is an example of how Condé appropriates the text and facilitates her Caribbean discourse. In *The House on the Lagoon*, the landscape of Puerto Rico is important in that the water surrounding the island is said to connect all peoples. This sentiment is echoed in Glissant's essays, in which he describes a Caribbean connected by a common sea. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, there is great emphasis placed on environment, which in chapter two I applied to Antoinette's relationship with England.

Tina De Rosa, though an Italian American writer, also uses landscape in a symbolic way in *Paper Fish*. She distinguishes the beauty of natural land from the harshness of the American city through Grandma Doria's vivid descriptions of Italy. In the epilogue, the neighborhood is destroyed by unknown American officials, whom the Italian American inhabitants refer to only as "the city." The city personified is what crushes these immigrants, causing illness, suffering, and finally, their disappearance: "Berrywood street had disappeared as though it were a picture of someone wiped away. The city said the Italian ghetto should go, and before the people could drop their forks next to their plates and say, pardon me?, the streets were cleared" (120). With nothing lying beneath the brick, then what do we have to remind us of the immigrant experience? The answer lies in a growing number of Italian American writers, among them Tina De Rosa, whose keen eye captures the story behind the rubble and records it to text.

Through destruction comes creation, and all of these authors destroy something in order to create a space for their culture in the literary tradition. Because of Jean Rhys, the madwoman's story has not burned along with Thornfield Hall, as it did in the pages of *Jane Eyre*. Likewise, Rosario Ferré makes sure that Isabel's manuscript is rescued from the flames. Those same flames consume the structure but not the stories of the lives within that house, lives that make up all four stories of Puerto Rican culture. Because of Tina de Rosa, the immigrant experience does not disappear along with the neighborhood that held it, and Maryse Condé hints at a unique promise in future generations of Caribbean children. This idea of a promised generation is comparable to M.L. Hansen's theory that it is through the curiosity of third generation immigrants that history is restored. There is an effort in the dominant tradition to *contain* what is viewed as Other, to offer tolerance only if that Other accepts the description it is given. For instance, the Italian American must accept the image of the mafioso, or more relevantly, his wife; the Creole must accept the portrayal of the mad drunken animal, the Puerto Rican must commit to serving her husband, and the Afro Caribbean woman must consent to her role as housekeeper and mother. The stereotypes present within these images are what many traditional cultures are comfortable with, and any divergence from these assigned places in society are not tolerated.

What these women have in common as authors is why I chose them for this dissertation: they refuse to be contained. The source of their power is the text, which is the tool they use to free themselves from the confines imposed by the dominant literary tradition. Each author understands displacement through her own life experience and integrates this into her prose. I have discussed many contexts from which this feeling of

displacement emerges, such as the relationship to the mother and the connection, or lack thereof, with the mother country. A destructive marriage within a patriarchal society also contributes to an ill-defined identity. Being marginalized within their families as well as within the surrounding culture further adds to the protagonists' feeling of otherness. Through the text, this otherness is embraced, and the deafening silence that pervades this marginalized literature is breaking. The unusual stylistic techniques employed by the authors and their "rewriting" of the text set these works apart, for they simultaneously borrow from Western European models *and* create a distinct literary work that stands on its own and forms an identity that is in no way inferior to the "sameness" that defines it as Other. The subaltern is speaking, and her experimentation with the text gives a voice to the white Creole who had no chance to defend herself in Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, it offers strength to the Puerto Rican woman living in a charged patriarchal and political society, it helps the Italian American girl find a balance between the past and the future, and enables the Caribbean woman to get in touch with her African ancestry. The attics, basements, and houses that are supposed to symbolize "home," instead keep the "Other" hidden from view. The women in these texts force their way out of these confining spaces to reveal their value to the literary tradition.

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