

Replacement and Genealogy in *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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This is a polemical paper trying to formulate a poetics of replacement and genealogy based on Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Thornfield, in the book *Jane Eyre*, is one of the most famous haunted houses of British literature where, at the superficial level, the character of Jane Eyre replaces Antoinette as the female partner of the man of the house. Thornfield and the two women in it, representing different types of femininity, have haunted both novelists and theorists for decades, and have given us the typology of the 'mad woman in the attic'. The idea of replacement, in the context of 'writing back', can be seen as a larger question of the literary canon: just as one character can be a replacement for another, so can one literary work act as replacement for another. This idea allows us to conceptualize replacement as a function of genealogy: replacement can be a mode of reiteration, or even a compulsive repetition. When it comes to the story line, the central 'replacement' in *Jane Eyre* is Rochester trying to replace Antoinette as *partner*; the replacement in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is the replacement of Jane Eyre with Antoinette as the *protagonist*.

Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar formulating the category of 'mad woman in the attic' called Antoinette Jane's 'truest and darkest double'. How Jean Rhys has read *Jane Eyre* has made not only Antoinette Jane's double, but *Wide Sargasso Sea* the dark double of the novel *Jane Eyre*. Accordingly I hope this exercise will help us question the hierarchies in the canon: can *Wide Sargasso Sea* replace *Jane Eyre* as the hermeneutic key with which we read the hypertext of Antoinette, Rochester and Jane, who have already become larger than life, archetypes that have transcended their texts? Taken to the extreme, this could suggest, after the death of the author, the death of the text, where through literary engagement and fan-fiction the characters, once created, have their own multiple lives outside the original text. Once the grammar of replacement, the movements, scenes and lines that echo through these texts are laid out - with the hierarchy allotted to either text turned upside down- we will also have a better understanding of how narrative works.

The affinities between the characters of Jane Eyre and Antoinette Cosway are multi-faceted: a family with colonial connections, childhood spent in public institutions, and of course, lastly, falling in love with the same man as some kind of death drive. In order to tease out how the correspondences between the two characters work, I plan to do a close comparative reading of a few scenes, or movements. This should allow us to work out a poetics of instances, actions, oscillations, presences and absences that can be found in both novels. These 'movements', particularly towards and away from the loved one, can help us conceptualize the novels as replacements for one another. These movements include: 1) Jane Eyre's Red Room episode and Antoinette witnessing the burning of her childhood home, 2) Jane Eyre's paintings of the sea, which she admits she paints not having been on a sea voyage, in many ways reflecting the experiences of Antoinette who is haunting the upper stories of the building. I suggest some kind of transference between characters and between novels within the framework of replacement – even pointing towards a *collective narrative* in which the experiences of women are related. The paper thus favours an intersectional reading of

female narratives; an intersectionality that is informed by the idea of replacement and genealogy.

Jane Eyre, like much of Victorian literature, has been subjected to readings and re-readings in an effort to understand the trajectory that led to the postcolonial world we live in today. These attempts are a way of understanding and shaping the genealogy of discourses that variously positioned subjects confront today, and it proffers quite a lot of power to the able genealogist. As James Clifford points out (1998: 267):

Genealogy makes sense in the present by making sense selectively out of the past. Its conclusions and exclusions, its narrative continuities, its judgments of core and periphery are finally legitimated either by convention or by the authority granted to or arrogated by the genealogist.

It is the exclusion of the story of Antoinette in the genealogy and the canon of English Literature that, according to her letters and autobiography, that has led Jean Rhys to take on the mantle of the genealogist. Her work in general is about the relations between the core and the periphery- and it is indeed a different kind of narrative continuity that she aims at by her attempt to replace the mad Creole in the attic with the Antoinette she depicts, as a victim of series of displacements and dispossessions. Rhys says she read and reread *Jane Eyre*, trying to come to terms with the image of the Creole presented in Charlotte Brontë's novel. In her letters she famously speaks of 'paper tiger lunatic, the all wrong Creole scenes' (262) However, Rhys does not write off *Jane Eyre* as merely a story of exclusion, a female bildungsroman where certain female subjectivities are silenced, but insists on engaging with it. Her response is intersectional, recognizing the physical and emotional labour expected of differently situated women – and even second sons- and the travails that haunt them. Rereading *Jane Eyre* after *Wide Sargasso Sea* one realizes what a good and thorough reader of *Jane Eyre* Jean Rhys was. So now, rather than walk through *Wide Sargasso Sea* with *Jane Eyre* and use Charlotte Brontë's text as the hermeneutic key, in the spirit of replacement, I would like to walk you through a reading of *Jane Eyre* which highlights the uncanny similarities between the characters of Jane and Antoinette.

Both Jane and Antoinette are orphans and as children rely on the kindness of relatives and strangers. Jane being locked in the Red Room in Gateshead as a child is a foretaste of Antoinette's confinement in the attic. Jane's reveries in the Red Room where she is locked, just like Antoinette will be in another English house, and the very language Jane uses becomes haunted for readers returning to the text having read *Wide Sargasso Sea*. This episode already makes the English House (capital H), *unheimlich*, uncanny and prepares the reader for what is to come. It is not difficult to imagine a young Rhys reading this episode and forming her ideas about the unhomeliness of English homes. In the Red Room, Jane contemplates on her difference from her cousins, the Reed children,¹ saying she's 'heterogenous' (*JE*, 17),

¹ The Reed children themselves turn out to be doppelgangers of characters we know from Jane Austen, lending further depth to the genealogy we are trying to tease out here:

“Georgiana is handsome, I suppose, Bessie?”

“Very. She went up to London last winter with her mama, and there everybody admired her, and a young fellow fell in love with her: but his relations were against the match; and - what do you think?- he and Miss Georgiana made it up to run away: but they were found out and

the very meaning of Creole. Jane also calls herself ‘an interloper, not of her race’, trying to understand Mrs. Reed’s hatred of her. This contemplation provides accompaniment to instances where Rhys’s heroines in her other novels, spurned in England and France for not acting and speaking in a conventional manner, wonder why such matrons, female pillars of society, hate her so. The series of replaced actions and actors start within the space of *Jane Eyre*, before Jean Rhys’s intervention enters the literary scene. Here, Jane responds to her cousin John Reed telling her she must obey him because she has no money and no right to the books she’s reading, and then throwing the book she was reading at her:

‘Dear! Dear! What a fury to fly at Master John!’
‘Did ever anybody see such a picture of passion!’
The Mrs. Reed subjoined: ‘Take her away to the red-room, and lock her in there.’ Four hands were immediately laid upon me, and I was borne upstairs.
(13)

‘Fury’ and ‘passion’ in the child Jane corresponds to the ‘madness’ and ‘hysteria’ in Antoinette. The Red Room evokes fire in its colour and it also bears remembering that the room is an homage to the absent, deceased father of the house, containing his painting and/or effigy:

This room was chill, because it seldom had a fire; it was silent, because remote from the nursery and kitchens; solemn, because it was known to be seldom entered. The housemaid alone came here on Saturdays, to wipe from the mirrors and the furniture a week’s quiet dust; and Mrs Reed herself, at far intervals, visited it to review the contents of a secret drawer in the wardrobe, where were stored divers parchments, her jewel-casket, and a miniature of her deceased husband and in those last words lies the secret of the red-room- the spell which kept it so lonely in spite of its grandeur’. (16-17)

The sort of room, in fact, that would be perfect if the Reeds had a colonial secret to lock up. For Mrs Reed – Jane is convinced Mr Reed, her uncle, would have treated her differently- Jane becomes that unruly relation difficult to work into the holy English family and its fraught inheritance laws. Jane talks about ‘escape from insupportable oppression- as running away, or if that could not be effected, never eating or drinking more, and letting myself die.’ (17) Jane considers suicide as a way out of the locked room, and Bronte proffers the plan to Antoinette. Both the fire, and the laughter that fills the room will be provided later when the scene switches to the attic in Thornfield Hall. In a way, even the architecture will repeat, reiterate itself in Thornfield Hall, where Jane will meet both her love and her nemesis, making Thornfield Hall a replacement for Gateshead as the hostile English house where the

stopped. It was Miss Reed that found them out; I believe she was envious; and she and her sister lead a cat-and-dog life together; they are always quarrelling.’ When it comes to John Reed who gave Jane most trouble ‘And then his uncles wanted him to be a barrister, and study the law: but he’s such a dissipated young man, they will never make much of him, I think.’ (92) I quote this ‘follow up’ of the Reed children because it also gives us a sense of Bessie’s story-telling abilities which Jane makes much of.

heroine will have to assert her will and identity.² Almost to drive the point home, a fire is the first thing that Jane sees when she wakes after losing consciousness because of fear in the Red Room: ‘The next thing I remember is waking up with a feeling as if I had had a frightful nightmare, and seeing before me a terrible red glare, crossed with thick black bars.’ (21)

Bessie, the maid tries to calm down Jane, like a Grace Poole character trying to calm/contain Antoinette. However Bessie also seems to have certain characteristics of Christophine, the freed slave in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, who teaches Antoinette about Jamaica. Jane says Bessie had a ‘remarkable knack of narrative’ (31). Her conversations with Bessie contain a lot of fire imagery: ‘Come, Miss Jane, don’t cry’ said Bessie [...] She might as well have said to the fire, ‘Don’t burn!’ (24) Even as a child she is aware of her delinquency of space, which as a theme will crop up in Jean Rhys’s novels. In conversation with Mr Lloyd, the apothecary who has come to see if anything can be done about her ‘hysteria’, Jane says, when asked if Gateshead isn’t a beautiful place to live in: ‘It is not my house, sir; and Abbot says I have less right to be here than a servant’ (26). The cure for hysteria coupled with ingratitude is institutionalization- again themes that Rhys will pick up in her telling of Antoinette’s story- and Mr. Lloyd recommends that she be sent to the now infamous Lowood School. After her conversation with Mr. Lloyd, Jane overhears Bessie and another maid Abbot discuss her situation: ‘Abbot, I think, gave me credit for being a sort of infantine Guy Fawkes’ (28) likening her, of all rebels, to the patron saint of burning the House down.

What is important about Jane’s relationship with Bessie is she learns about the folk tales and the myths surrounding the English landscape, just like Antoinette learns about the folk figures and black magic of Jamaica from Christophine. It is important to mark that her time with Bessie is an education not only in England, but also in the art of narrative. It is also in the Red Room that the effects of Bessie’s story-telling come to its own, when she feels the presence of something: ‘I thought it like one of the tiny phantoms, half fairy, half imp, Bessie’s evening stories represented as coming out of lone, ferny dells in moors, and appearing before the eyes of belated travellers’ (16), foreshadowing the moment in which Jane will first encounter Rochester, how he will accuse *her* of being the imp who frightened his horse. ‘As this horse approached, and as I watched for it to appear through the dusk, I remembered certain of Bessie’s tales, wherein figured a North-of-England spirit called a ‘Gytrash,’ which, in the form of horse, mule, or large dog’ (113), she says. Just as Jane takes him for a ‘spirit’ in *Jane Eyre*, Rochester, in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is taken for a zombie. As he is walking in the woods he discovers the ruins of a house that used to belong to a white man who committed suicide. A girl sees him and takes him to be the ghost of the house. He then goes home and reads a colonial text entitled *The Glittering Coronet of Isles* to find out what the zombie signifies in the culture of the island:

‘A zombie is a dead person who seems to be alive or a living person who is dead. A zombie can also be the spirit of a place, usually malignant but sometimes to be propitiated with sacrifices or offerings of flowers and fruit

² The genealogy of the English house haunted by former owners, or indeed wives, threatening the identity of the newly arrived young English woman while they are being accused of being *usurpers* continues in Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca* (1938)

[...] The white people, sometimes credulous, pretend to dismiss the whole thing as nonsense. Cases of sudden or mysterious death are attributed to a poison known to the negroes which cannot be traced. It is further complicated by...' (WSS, 67)

The gytrash, as metaphor for Rochester's uncanniness, is replaced by the zombie in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and it is Bessie who provides Jane and the reader with the indigenous vocabulary to categorize him. It is also through Bessie's companionship that she passes her last night at Gateshead in peace 'That afternoon lapsed in peace and harmony; and in the evening Bessie told me some of her most enchanting stories, and sang me some of her sweetest songs' (*JE*, 42) This sense of comfort and enchantment at the same time is parallel to the scenes in *Wide Sargasso Sea* in which Christophine is trying to sooth Antoinette and trying to convince her to get out of her relationship with Rochester. In *Jane Eyre*, this 'knack for narrative' appears again, in Mary Ann Wilson, the student Jane befriends after the death of her close friend Helen 'she had a turn for narrative, I for analysis; she liked to inform, I to question.' (79) In both *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* women keep telling stories to one another, and build an archive of types and plots that enable them to read situations and act accordingly.

When we look at the text of *Jane Eyre* closer, although Jane may have been released from the Red Room, her imprisonment does not really end. She is sent to Lowood school, and then to Thornfield Hall where she spends most of her days immured, cloistered.³ In Lowood, they are allowed walks on Thursday afternoons: 'I discovered, too, that a great pleasure, an enjoyment which the horizon only bounded, lay all outside the high and spike-guarded walls of our garden: this pleasure consisted in prospect of noble-summits girdling a great hill-hollow [...] in a bright beck, full of dark stones and sparkling edges.' (77) It is when she flies away from Rochester, to the Yorkshire moors – where ironically Bronte herself was confined with a longing to see the rest of the world- that she is free for the first time and sees a bit of England.

I touched the heath: it was dry, and yet warm with the heat of the summer day [...] Nature seemed to me benign and good; I thought she loved me, outcast as I was; and I, who from man could only anticipate mistrust, rejection, insult, clung to her with filial fondness. [...] I was her child: my mother would lodge me without money and without price. (320)

Here Jane seems to have understood the underlying purpose of the ghost stories connected to the open spaces told by Bessie- that they are a reflection on the evil that men do, and not real manifestations of the landscape. Jane's discovery of the landscape is echoed in the section in *Wide Sargasso Sea* when Antoinette flees and 'sees England for the time'. Antoinette does not believe that the room she is

³ When wooing her Rochester says that he would not exchange Jane for 'the whole seraglio of the Grand Turk' and she responds by saying 'I'll be preparing myself to go out as a missionary to preach liberty to them that are enslaved- your harem inmates amongst the rest. I'll get admitted there and stir up mutiny' (267), possibly aware of the fact that her position in Thornfield with Adele, and all the female maids is not that different.

imprisoned in is England and believes she is in England only when she is taken outside to see the landscape that she recognizes from the books she has read:

(That afternoon we went to England. There was grass and olive-green water and tall trees looking into the water. This, I thought, is England. If I could be here I could be well again and the sound in my head would stop. Let me stay a little longer, I said, and she sat down under a tree and went to sleep. A little way off there was a cart and horse – a woman was driving it. It was she who sold me the knife, I gave her the locket round my neck for it.) (WSS, 119)

Both Antoinette and Jane find the outdoors more benign than Thornfield- it is man-made structures, physical and discursive, and not nature itself that makes England a hostile place for these women to live in. In a way, like Antoinette, Jane, as a young Victorian woman, knows little about England. She has not experienced the depictions of the 'warm hearth' popular in painting and literature- her experience of the English home has been very unhomey so far. But when she sees Mrs. Fairfax for the first time, she has a sense of recognition from other popular depictions that she has not had first hand knowledge of: 'Exactly like what I had fancied Mrs Fairfax [...] nothing was wanting to complete the ideal of domestic comfort.' (JE, 97) We, the readers, know at what expense this 'wanting nothing' is sustained in England.

The paintings that Jane Eyre has painted in Lowood, on the other, are as removed from this idea of domestic bliss as possible, and they constitute the topic of one of the first conversations Jane and Rochester have. When we look at them closely, particularly at the first picture, it's as if Jane had started to commune with Antoinette already when she was in school:

'The first represented clouds low and livid, rolling on the swollen sea [...] there was no land. [...] a cormorant [...] its beak hold[ing] a gold bracelet, set with gems. Sinking below the bird and mast, a drowned corpse glanced through the green water; a fair arm was the only limb clearly visible, whence the bracelet had been washed or torn' (127)

While she shows her paintings to Rochester she experiences artist's anxiety 'I was tormented by the contrast between my idea and my handiwork; in each case I had imagined something which I was quite powerless to realize' (128) sounding not unlike Mary Shelley's conception of her own work, *Frankenstein*. There are other references to Antoinette's sea voyage in Thornfield, in Adele, Rochester's ward. Adele is another sort of double for Antoinette, in her French extraction and manners, including her name. Adele's sea-voyage, from France is a diminutive version of Antoinette's Atlantic one. She, like Antoinette, seems to have been passed down several carers and at last ends up with Rochester as her guardian 'he was always kind to me, and gave me pretty dresses and toys; but you see he has not kept his word, for has brought me to England, and now he has gone back again himself, and I never see him' (104)

At first Rochester, for the most part, remains the distant male head of the Thornfield. However, in her fascination with him Jane can see the traces of Rochester's travels even in the décor: 'All these relics gave to the third story of Thornfield Hall the aspect of a home of the past- a shrine of memory [...] wrought English old hangings crusted

with thick work, portraying effigies of strange flowers, and stranger birds' (107). After a tour of the house Mrs Fairfax invites Jane to the roof and Jane tries to see as far as she can, mapping the territory. That the horizon is 'bounded by a propitious sky' reminds us of Jane's constrained situation rather than provide a moment of freedom. 'You have no ghost then?' asks Jane, reminding us that she is a good reader of Victorian Gothic and that the book *Jane Eyre* itself is a new kind of ghost story, of hauntings material rather than otherworldly. Thornfield Hall is a malfunctioning shrine to the Empire- it fails to contain the ghost it is meant to house/bury. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the designated ghost, Antoinette herself is aware of a presence that haunts Thornfield Hall, and refuses to identify with it, she refuses to be a spectre, and reasserts her materiality in the end:

All the people who had been staying in the house had gone, for the bedroom doors were shut, but it seemed to me that someone was following me, someone was chasing me, laughing. Sometimes I looked to the right or to the left but I never looked behind me for I did not want to see that ghost of a woman who they say haunts this place (WSS, 122)

In *Jane Eyre* Jane – she never makes an appearance in *Wide Sargasso Sea*- descends from the upper floors, hears Antoinette's laugh, and we are invited to see the doubling of the woman (angel) in the house and woman (mad) in the attic. Who is the ghost here, and who the heroine? Jane feels so restricted by her situation, in fact, that she takes to walking along the corridor of the third story, almost pulled to the company of Antoinette. Gilbert and Gubar (2000: 361) also make a reference to Jane's strolls in the attic, saying they mirror the movements of Antoinette in her confined space, without suggesting a narrative interaction between them. To me, as Jane is walking the corridor she seems to be grafting a narrative in which she opens 'my inward ear to a tale that was never ended- a tale my imagination created, and narrated continuously; quickened with all of incident, life, fire, feeling that I desired and had not in my actual existence' (*JE*, 111) almost suggesting that Antoinette could be the figment of Jane's imagination. These strolls in the vicinity of Antoinette also helps her formulate her own 'vindication of the rights of women': 'Women are supposed to be very calm generally; but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do.' (111) You can almost imagine her sitting down to exercising her faculties, and writing the rest of her own story, or indeed, the *Wide Sargasso Sea* itself. Although it contains the body of the man she loves, she is loath to re-enter the house after her walks outside: 'I did not like re-entering Thornfield. To pass its threshold was to return to stagnation; to cross the silent hall, to ascend the darksome staircase, to seek my own lonely little room' (117)

The confinement of Jane and the confinement of Antoinette become companion pieces particularly after Antoinette has knifed her brother in her cell and Rochester goes to fetch a doctor for him. He leaves Jane with the wounded man, in the ante-chamber of Antoinette's cell- almost like a Russian doll of confined women:

I experienced a strange feeling as the key grated in the lock, and the sound of his retreating steps ceased to be heard. Here then was I in the third story, fastened into one of its mystic cells; night around me; a pale and bloody spectacle under my eyes and hands; a murderess hardly separated from me by a single door. (211)

Rochester's two partners living in the same house, and a third, conventional prospective bride in the person of Blanche Ingram brings about the spectre, the taboo of polygamy, which comes up during the strange courtship between Jane and Rochester. To his references of 'oriental' luxury, which he wants to offer to her, Jane says:

I'll not stand you an inch in the stead of a seraglio [...] so don't consider me an equivalent for one. If you have a fancy for anything in that line, away with you sir, to the bazaars of Stamboul [...] and lay out in extensive slave purchases some of that spare cash you seem at a loss to spend satisfactorily here' (267)

But Rochester has already been away to such a land where slavery has just been abolished, and if we are to trust the way he reports his marriage to Antoinette, in both books, he himself has been the flesh that has been bought. Jane's fears of Rochester becoming an oriental despot is compounded for the reader when he says: 'Jane will you hear reason or I'll try violence' (300) The reader who has read *Wide Sargasso Sea* becomes equally alert to the ways in which Rochester names and renames things. He calls her:

'Soon to be Jane Rochester [...] in four weeks, Janet; not a day more [...]
You blushed, and now you are white, Jane; what is that for?'
'Because you gave me a new name- Jane Rochester; and it seems so strange.'
(257)

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, this is how Rhys imagines the first time Rochester calls Antoinette Bertha:

'Bertha,' I said
'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.'
Tears streamed from her eyes. (WSS, 94)

And in *Jane Eyre* when Rochester wants affection from Jane, who is very formal with him, he himself seems to be echoing both women trying to hold on to their names 'Jane, accept me quickly. Say, Edward - give me my name- Edward- I will marry you.' (JE, 253) Or is he telling Jane to ask to be given the name of Rochester here?

The grammar of replacement that we can observe through the two books manifests itself in these quotes as a grammar of naming, and Antoinette is closest to the mark when she names this naming 'obeah', an act of replacing people with their names. It is the emphasis that Rhys places on this naming that encourages us to go back to *Jane Eyre*, and read for the moments of replacement. The Antoinette-like responses that Jane gives to Rochester's attempts at possession leads us to further look for similarities between the two heroines who haunt each other's narratives. Jane will have us believe, from the start, that she is heterogenous, a creole, institutionalized due to the same refusal to be docile and grateful when society lends its magnanimous hand. Both are Bildungsromans with similar stations that finally intersect at the burning of the English House and the metaphors and foreshadowing in the novels suggest that either Jane or Antoinette could be up the job. While Jane replaces

Antoinette as Rochester's wife, Antoinette becomes the ersatz arsonist, acting out the visions of conflagration that seem to lurk beneath the narrative in *Jane Eyre*.

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