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Nature, the Obeah, and Mythic Memory: Fragmenting Linear Time in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

The very title of Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* evokes nature. Even before we open the covers of the book, the title gives us a glimpse of the sea's expansiveness at the central region of the Atlantic between the Caribbean and England, its legendary terrors for sailing ships, and its namesake plant — what Rachel Carson calls a “self-perpetuating community” of free-floating sargassum weeds with “no roots or holdfasts for attachment” (118). Like the sargassum weeds, the protagonist Antoinette Cosway floats at the interstices of modalities of attachment, drifting between different temporalities: the mythic time of nature and the obeah and the linear time of patriarchal, imperial history. Just as the Caribbean natural landscape defies Rochester's attempt at rational control, so does Antoinette grow to incinerate the patriarchal claims over her body as well as colonial ontology's attempt to categorize her. By embracing the flame of obeah and the mythic memory of “the tree of life in flames,” Antoinette finds the means to revolt against the teleological propulsion towards her seemingly inevitable end at the hands of empire and patriarchy (112).

Wide Sargasso Sea is born at the intersection of various histories — literary, colonial, patriarchal — that assume a certain conception of time, what Julia Kristeva describes to be the time of history as “project, teleology, linear and unfolding; [...] as departure, progression, and

arrival” (17). This linear time of history, which progresses towards Bertha Mason’s end in *Jane Eyre* and follows the arc from colonial periphery to the heart of empire, sets Antoinette on a novelistic journey towards whiteness and Western rationality. Nowhere is it more obvious than in Antoinette’s recurring dreams, wherein the narrative enunciates the trajectory that she appears doomed to fulfill. The dreams start in the forest where Antoinette “[follows]” a man who hates her but is keeping her “white” dress from getting “soiled” (36). She ends up in “an enclosed garden surrounded by a stone wall and the trees are different trees” because she no longer knows them — the enclosed garden suggests entrapment in the domesticity of England, under the letter of the law (36). The final destination seems to be a foregone conclusion that Antoinette anticipates (“It will be when I go up these steps,” she thinks) and yet does not want to escape from for she makes “no effort to save [herself]” (36). The man — a shadowy, faceless Rochester — leads and controls her direction, and Antoinette can only submit so as to keep her whiteness from being contaminated. In an attempt to defer the inevitable, she holds on to a tree which “sways and jerks as if it is trying to throw [her] off” (36). For Antoinette, in Hell, unfamiliar trees in an enclosure offer no refuge.

Yet, even from this propulsive dream with a pre-destined outcome emerges alternative temporalities that fragment the linear time of history. Like a palimpsest, *Wide Sargasso Sea* embroiders multiple temporalities. On one hand, as Sandra Drake notes, the novel is deliberately derivative, “a novelistic colony” (194); on the other hand, it displaces *Jane Eyre* by becoming its prequel, its origin story, thereby overlaying its narrative over Brontë’s. By reading Antoinette as an avatar of *nature*, the overwhelming thrust of empire and patriarchy and their dominion over other temporalities splinter. Interweaving the teleological narrative with the mythic time of the

Coulibri garden and the intuitive force of the obeah, *Wide Sargasso Sea* cuts diagonally across linear time.

In the opening pages, the novel is cloaked in “mythic” time. Young Antoinette inhabits a limbo between the past and the unfolding future, suspended between colonial tenses. In the aftermath of the 1833 Emancipation Act, she watches the Coulibri Estate “[go] wild” like the garden (11). While she draws explicit parallels between the Coulibri garden and the Biblical garden of Eden, her garden is where beauty and decay intermingle with the “smell of dead flowers mixed with the fresh living smell” (11). Uncannily, the plants have a life of their own — the orchids are “snaky looking” or “like an octopus with long thin brown tentacles” (11). Antoinette, too, grows wild. Although the Coulibri Estate has fallen out of linear time, enmeshed in a seemingly static state of wild overgrowth instead of progress, Antoinette feels “safe” amidst nature (16). Despite her first nightmare of the unnamed man, she thinks of “the tree of life in the garden,” “the wall green with moss,” “the barrier of the cliff and the high mountains,” and “the barrier of the sea” that keeps her protected from strangers (16). Yet, with the arrival of the new Luttrells, the eternity symbolized by nature is displaced by the whirlwind of activity that reintroduces linear time, with its masculine, obsessional, civilizational values — her mother’s determination to restrain Antoinette’s wildness and reclaim their whiteness culminates in her remarriage to Mr Mason (Kristeva 18). By the end of Part One, the loss of the Coulibri Estate, which goes up in flames, robs Antoinette of her sense of safety. As she loses contact with nature, her dream grows more vivid (as analyzed in the previous paragraph) and the further along she progresses in linear time towards her foretold ending. The Coulibri garden, with its chaos instead of order, wildness instead of progress, and as a feminine space devoid of a patriarchal figure,

becomes a sacred place in Antoinette's mythic memory — one that she represses, surfacing repeatedly as *loss* in her dreams, and one that she only draws upon in her final struggle.

The shift to Rochester's perspective in Part Two further illuminates nature's disruptive temporality. On one level, his uncanny encounters with the Caribbean natural landscape show the diagonal challenge nature poses to the colonizer/Western man's assumptions of logic, agency, and rationality. On another level, through his eyes, Antoinette and the island become mirror images of one another. In short, Antoinette embodies the Caribbean nature — she is the zombi,¹ “the spirit of a place” (64). Rochester's obsession to tame and destroy her forms an evocative metaphor for the imperial errand into wilderness — one that seeks to possess, domesticate, and use without care. While he seeks to impose his framework of Western rationality onto the island, the landscape threatens and overwhelms his senses. He thinks of the island as “too much” — “too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near” (41). Again and again, the landscape refuses to be a passive template for his agency or to be owned, instead, intruding and destabilizing his notions of rationality. The “hostile” forest and “menacing” mountains seed in him the disconcerting impression of the obeah (41, 62). His inability to unlock nature's hidden “secret” while Antoinette seems privy to it frustrates him (52). As he conveys to her, he feels that the island is his “enemy and on [her] side,” unable to grasp as Antoinette does that nature is “not for you and not for me” and that the island “has nothing to do with either of [them]” (78). Rochester's logic of possession and control, fear of Antoinette's liminality and desire for clear binaries, and anxiety at the island's incongruity with his rationality are at odds with her understanding that nature does not belong to man and neither does the Caribbean belong to Europe by virtue of

¹ See Drake, 199-206, for an alternative reading on Rochester's reduction of Antoinette to a condition of zombi by making her a marionette.

colonialism. In contrast, Rochester carelessly and intentionally destroys parts of nature. Upon their arrival, he steps onto and crushes the wreath of frangipani. Later on, he breaks a spray of orchid that once reminded him of Antoinette and “trampled it into the mud” (59). Finding her “dark, alien eyes” (39) as disconcerting as the island’s “alien, disturbing, secret loveliness” (52), he begins to rename Antoinette as Bertha, claiming her — with her, the island’s secret — as his in a litany of possession: “I’ll take her in my arms, my lunatic. She’s mad but *mine, mine* [...] If she smiles or weeps or both. *For me*” (99). By the end of Part Two, he appears to have fulfilled Antoinette’s premonitory dream, imprisoning her — symbolizing also the frustration and unsettling shame at the loss of English power in the Caribbean — in his attic back in the metropole, locking up that wildness and discordance as linear time neatly advances.

In Part Three, with Antoinette seemingly having arrived at the final destination in linear time, nature thwarts the teleology of empire, patriarchy, and *Jane Eyre* in the third and final occurrence of her dream. Like Kristeva’s hysteric, who recognizes her self in the temporal modalities anterior to the time of history, Antoinette suffers from reminiscences of the mythic time of the Caribbean, which surface in her cyclical dreams (“Women’s Time” 17). To Antoinette, “time” (that is, linear time) no longer has any “meaning,” whereas her red dress — materiality of mythic time — which she can hold and touch does (109). Upon setting her eyes on the dress, which has the color of fire, sunset, and flamboyant flowers as well as “the smell of vetivert and frangipani, of cinnamon and dust and lime trees when they are flowering,” she remembers the tree of life, telling her guard and nurse: “If you are buried under a flamboyant tree [...] your soul is lifted up when it flowers” (109). Her agency is triggered by the dress, returning as in the form of memory, dictated by the past: “It was beautiful and it reminded me of something I must do. I will *remember* I thought. I will *remember* quite soon now” (111;

emphases added). Her dream reminds her to transform her “cardboard” world into the tree of life, or as Drake puts it, “Antoinette converts Thornfield Hall itself into a flamboyant (flaming) tree; her own soul rises up as it ‘blooms’” (203). In her dream, Antoinette sees the sky — “it was red and *all my life was in it*” — and the “tree of life in flames” (112; emphasis added). The sky becomes her mirror, reflecting her past in a reel of sounds, objects, and images of nature. As she readies herself to jump and fly, her last visage is of Tia by the pool of Coulibri, the sacred place of her mythic memory. While Wilson Harris argues that this scene taps on the creation myth of the foodbearing tree from Arawak and Macusi legends and the dream of wings to fly home across the sea for African slaves in the West Indies and Americas (one thinks of Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*), which may well be true, I would like to read the flame as Antoinette’s intuitive return to the force of the obeah (189). In her dream, as Antoinette sees flames shoot up, she tellingly cries to Christophine for help and she is helped: “There was a wall of fire protecting me but it was too hot, it scorched me and I went away from it” (112). The fire — like the divine flame that sets afire the tree of life — signifies Christophine’s obeah powers. Yet, while in her first request towards Christophine for assistance, Antoinette sought to regain Rochester’s affections and to distance herself from the obeah by paying for the love potion; now, upon waking up from her final dream, Antoinette embraces the obeah by becoming the protector of the flame: “I *shielded* [the flame] with my hand and it burned up again to light me along the dark passage” (112; emphasis added). In full circle, the incendiary act seeks to transform the Thornfield Hall, the symbol of patriarchy at the heart of empire and the evolutionary end of her literary journey where she coalesces with Bertha Mason, into Antoinette’s sacred place — the burning Coulibri in mythic time. Yet, the novel is suspended temporally right before the act’s consummation. Rhys’ choice to eschew Bertha Mason’s ending, leaving it beyond the novel’s

final sentences, resists the teleological pull of the pre-scripted conclusion. There are always two deaths, as Antoinette elucidates. The novel's focus is not on "the one people know about" (Bertha Mason's death) but on the "real" death of Antoinette Cosway and her subsequent rekindling (77). The novel's end opens up into the mythic time of nature and the obeah, as Antoinette lights a flame through the dark passage of patriarchy and empire.

Wide Sargasso Sea ends on this note that linear time is, perhaps, an illusion. In a letter to Evelyn Scott, Rhys writes that "the past exists — side by side with the present, not behind it; that what was — is" (Carr 114). The mythic time of Antoinette's dreams supersedes and cannibalizes the present and the future perfect. The past — Coulibri burning, Caribbean wilderness, her lost flamboyance (flame) — repeatedly thrusts itself upon the teleology undergirding the novel, creating alternative temporalities. Nature, which facilitates the fragmenting of linear time, becomes a space of mythic time, as represented by the tree of life gone wild and the island's secret loveliness that signifies the obeah. In this way, perhaps, *Wide Sargasso Sea* suggests that the reader looks at nature as an orientation of human life instead of a passive background against which history unfolds — a subtle strain of ecological criticism that rather presciently asks that we rethink our notion of temporality in the face of not only patriarchy and empire but also climate change.

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