

After Wide Sargasso Sea: Cliff, Condé, and Senior

Saito Midori

Niesen de Abruna asserts that Jean Rhys was “the literary mother to the next generation of women writers because she was the first Caribbean woman to create texts dealing with the complex mother-daughter matrix”.¹ Similarly, Caroline Rody notes that ‘Rhys is a major precursor to the mostly African Caribbean women’s literary boom that followed her greatest work’.² Although it is arguable whether we should consider Rhys as ‘a literary mother’ or ‘a major precursor’, Rhys’ texts certainly offer a particular perspective on the racialised history in the Caribbean and its response to the European canonical narrative. Rhys’ endeavour to write Bertha from the Caribbean’s point of view is linked to the revolt of Caliban, detailed more explicitly in Michelle Cliff’s ‘Caliban’s Daughter: The Tempest and the Teapot’.³ In connecting Caliban and Bertha, Cliff attests that ‘It took a Caribbean novelist, Jean Rhys, to describe Bertha from the inside,’⁴ and Rhys relocates and re-identifies her as a Caribbean woman by restoring Antoinette/Bertha’s name.⁵

More interestingly, Cliff connects three voiceless prisoners: King Kong, Venus Hottentot and Bertha, all of whom are again linked to Rhys.⁶ Cliff strongly identifies herself with Rhys as a colonial Caribbean woman in her essay as well as in her novel, *No Telephone to Heaven*, in which the protagonist, Clare Savage, reads *Jane Eyre* in London and identifies herself with Bertha, just as Rhys did. According to Thomas Cartelli, Clare’s identification with Bertha is clearly negotiated by Cliff’s own reading of Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a book that both ‘encourages and enables the West Indian reader to appropriate as central what is arguably marginal to the novel *Jane Eyre*’.⁷

Clare Savage in Cliff’s novels, *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven*, is a white Creole girl, but as Bertha incarnates Miranda who rebels against colonialism and turns herself into Caliban, Clare also associates with Caliban by refusing the privilege granted by her pale colour skin and education, and by joining the nationalist rebels in Jamaica and dying.⁸ By delineating the protagonists’ refusal to follow their path as a white Creole woman, Cliff also writes from ‘the impossible ground’ of both Caliban and Miranda and

Caliban's woman: inside and outside the tradition, hence moving beyond the confinement of the text of *The Tempest*.

Moreover, in this essay, Cliff also finds the Caribbean connection in another Gothic Romance, in Charlotte Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. Cliff points out that Liverpool was the centre of the slave trade where 'five-eighths of the English slave trade' was handled and imagines that Heathcliff's language, 'some gibberish that nobody could understand,' could be an African language.⁹ Further, after learning that Top Withens was the estate of a slave trader, Cliff imagines that the Brontë sisters would have known the fact, and Heathcliff could be 'the child of a slave captain and an African woman', and that Heathcliff is 'one of us'.¹⁰ As Cliff has argued, like *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights* is interpreted as a novel which depicts the relationship between the master and the slave, the oppressor and the oppressed. The Earnshaw family at *Wuthering Heights* is a representation of a patriarchal society, and Heathcliff, 'as dark as if he came from the devil' and a 'dirty, ragged, black-haired child',¹¹ is an intruder to their ordered and peaceful world.¹²

Cliff's insight into the racial construct of *Wuthering Heights* is further developed by Maryse Condé's rewriting of the text in her *La Migration des Cœurs*. An examination of Condé's rewriting of *Wuthering Heights* helps to establish a link between Rhys' rewriting and contemporary Caribbean women writer's rewritings.¹³ While Cliff is explicit in her admiration for Rhys, Condé remains ambivalent towards Rhys. In an interview, when asked what her writings share with those of Rhys, Condé answered, 'nothing, except – it's a kind of cliché – the oppression of women'.¹⁴

However, Condé's attempt in *Moi, Tituba* (1986) to reveal the historical injustice by narrating the life of a woman she feels related to can certainly be related to Rhys' effort in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. For Condé, the act of rewriting a Western novel signifies not only an end to intellectual colonization and a destruction and abandonment of the Western heritage but also an absorption of its power. She thus concludes that the act of rewriting such a novel represents an act of cannibalism which gives non-Western literature its strength.¹⁵ Following Suzanne Cécile who famously claimed '*la poesie martiniquaise sera cannibale ou ne sera pas*' (Martinican poetry shall be cannibal or nothing at all)¹⁶, Condé puts her literary cannibalism into practice in *Moi, Tituba* and in *La Migration des Cœurs*.

Rhys' attempt to rewrite *Jane Eyre* should be placed alongside the Caribbean writers'

endeavours to 'cannibalise' the literature that they were taught to accept. Condé deplores the fact that the Francophone Caribbean has not witnessed serious 'cannibalism' of Western literature compared to its Anglophone counterparts. Yet she claims that her *La Migration des Cœurs* can be considered as an example of such 'cannibalism'. Highlighting the way in which Condé rewrites the original text's transgression of racial and social boundaries acceptable in the Caribbean can help us to understand Rhys' similar attempt to interrogate the Caribbean cultural identity in *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Condé's text and Rhys' text are linked by the use of polyphony. Similar to *Wide Sargasso Sea* no omniscient character narrates the plot of *La Migration des Cœurs*, but the narrative is divided between several voices. In *Wuthering Heights* the story is mainly narrated by Nelly whereas twelve people narrate the story in *La Migration des Cœurs*, thus Condé represents diverse points of view. Moreover, and again like Rhys, Condé uses her own experiences in the Caribbean, and tracing her grandmother's trajectory, she chooses Guadeloupe, Marie-Gallant and Dominica as settings of her novel.¹⁷ As with Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* the plot of *Wuthering Heights* becomes a background to demonstrate racial tension and the history of the Caribbean. The beginning of the plot is identical to *Wuthering Heights*, yet in Condé's novel, colour difference is a crucial factor that separates Cathy from Heathcliff. Black orphan, Razyé, Condé's version of Heathcliff, is forbidden to marry Cathy because she is a mulatto. Cathy's relation to Razyé evokes Antoinette's relation to Sandi, and both novels explore women's objectification as a product of social exchange. Yet, unlike Rhys, Condé positively delineates the complex issue of race and the process of Creolization through Cathy and Justin-Marie's daughter, Cathy, who is black and resembles no one in her white family.

The second half of Condé's novel does not follow the plot of *Wuthering Heights*. Chris Bongie calls this narrative strategy 'errancy' and describes it as that which is 'clearly relevant to the diasporic, anti-essentialist turn' of recent literary and critical inclination, and 'which has seized upon metaphors like nomadism and migrancy by way of insisting upon the virtues of tracking routes rather than exploring roots'.¹⁸ Unlike the first third of the novel, which simply transplants the original plot into the Caribbean setting, the last two-thirds of the novel "wanders into 'new' territory that seems of little or no relevance" to the original text.¹⁹ In this respect Condé's rewriting ventures to a domain that Rhys' text could not reach, suggesting a new way of seeing beyond the confinement of the colonial text.

A conception of the new Caribbean perspective is most apparent in the open ending of the novel. While *Wuthering Heights* explores the possibility of love beyond social and racial difference, the text also provides a cautionary tale for the oppressed to conquer their oppressors and to rise above them. At the end of the novel, following the death of Heathcliff, everything returns to normal and order is re-established. Although *La Migration des Cœurs* perpetuates and glorifies the impossible love, unlike in the original text, the descendants of Razyé and Cathy survive and become unified in marriage, affirming that the racial and social transgression is a Caribbean reality.

Unlike the reunion of Cathy and Heathcliff that is only possible in death, Condé's version depicts the reunion of Cathy and Razyé (Heathcliff) on to the union of Cathy's daughter and Razyé's son. Condé uses Cathy, the daughter of Cathy and Justin-Marie, and Razyé II, the son of Razyé and Irmaline, as an incarnation of two different political stances in the Caribbean. Cathy represents the people who respect the colonial heritage, while Razyé II represents Négritude consciousness. Their union thus suggests the embodiment of two different political stands in the Caribbean and their daughter, Anthuria, the fruit of a cross-cultural interracial union can be interpreted as the future of the Caribbean. Condé ends her novel with Razyé II's comment on his daughter: 'He was absorbed by the thought of Anthuria. Such a lovely child could not be cursed'.²⁰ Similar to Rhys' attempt, Condé also absorbs the English novel and alters it within a novel that depicts and affirms the process of Creolization in the West Indies. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette's act of setting fire to Thornfield can be perceived as a white Creole's desire for identification and unification with black Creoles. Likewise, in Condé's novel, the birth of Anthuria signifies the unification and connection of different races and its potential future in the Caribbean that the reunion entails.

In her aforementioned comparative study of Condé's *La Migration des Cœurs* and Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Mardorossian claims that both texts foreground the 'inseparability of race, gender, and class', and unlike in *Jane Eyre*, the racial identification of Heathcliff and Cathy is not stable and that the 'racial logic at work in *Wuthering Heights* resonates with *La Migration des Cœurs*'.²¹ While Mardorossian argues that the indeterminacy of race and identity separates itself from the racial politics of *Jane Eyre*, I would argue that *Wuthering Heights* cautions against transgressing the racial and social divide. *Wuthering Heights* is not only a novel about the indeterminacy of identity but also incorporates the moral and colonial framework for the narrative as in the

text of *Jane Eyre*. In contrast to *Wuthering Heights*, Condé's rewriting does not demonstrate poetic justice, nor a Christian moral, but racial mobility and both racial and social transgressions are affirmed in its delineation of the complexity of Caribbean society. In Condé's version, Heathcliff's attempt at revenge also fails, yet the union between the descendents of Cathy and Heathcliff, formally condemned and depicted as monstrous in *Wuthering Heights*, is finally realized. Hence, Condé neither morally judges the meaning of revenge, nor condemns the transgression of racial and social boundaries.

As Rhys revises the taboo against racial and sexual transgression in the Victorian Gothic Romance by attempting to demonstrate the link between the white Creole woman and the black Creoles, Condé likewise breaks the taboo by affirming the union of the socially and racially different in the Caribbean. In so doing, both authors positively assert the process of Creolization by dismantling the racial binary in an act forbidden in the original English women writers. In this respect, Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* also cannibalises the Western discourse as much as Condé's *La Migration des Cœurs* does. Their attempts also support Wynter's notion of Caribbean women writers writing from the demonic ground, from the impossible ground that transgresses Western norms and the process of othering in the humanist project.

Rhys and Contemporary Black Anglophone Caribbean Women Writers

Rhys' text has rarely been discussed alongside those of black Caribbean writers who were her contemporaries and this separation of Rhys from such writers can be considered as a consequence of the process within the Caribbean literary canon by which vigorous promotion of black male writers meant that a white Creole writer such as Allfrey was excluded.²²

More recently contemporary Black Caribbean women writers have attempted to recuperate and reinstate their connection to Rhys' texts. As Thorunn Lonsdale and Elizabeth Burrows attest, black Caribbean women writers such as Elean Thomas, Olive Senior, Lorna Goodison and Jean Binta Breeze reinscribe Rhys and reconfigure her texts in their writings.²³

In *The Last Room*, Elean Thomas claims literary connection to Rhys.²⁴ In contrast to Lonsdale's statement that the novel is a reworking of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, I would argue that Thomas's novel moves beyond *Wide Sargasso Sea* in its deconstruction of the racial and cultural boundaries in the Caribbean. Like Michelle Cliff's protagonist, Clare

Savage, the protagonist of *The Last Room*, Putus, is the mixed race child of Mas D and Miss Belle, a direct descendant of the plantation owner. Her mother's second marriage destroys Putus' relation with her mother and her education is suspended due to her pregnancy. Putus gives birth to her daughter, Icyane, at the house of Grannie Lou, who is herself a descendant of the Caribs who had fought against the British along with Nanny. In describing the connection between the descendant of the slave owner and that of the Caribs, as Rhys attempted to demonstrate the racial complexity of the Caribbean, Thomas unveils the process of Creolization where easy distinctions between the oppressor and the oppressed are rendered impossible.

Evoking *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Putus's name is altered to Mrs. Marson after she leaves for England where she intends to resume her interrupted studies. As Antoinette descends into madness, Mrs. Marson becomes insane in England. Yet, unlike the failed mother-daughter relation in Rhys' work, Thomas confers a positive future for Caribbean women by allowing Mrs. Marson to reconcile with her abandoned daughter, Icyane. The final reconciliation between mother and daughter can be interpreted as an establishment of a relation between a black Creole daughter and the heritage of Rhys' writings.

In similar ways, several black Caribbean poets such as Jean Binta Breeze, Olive Senior and Lorna Goodison write about Jean Rhys. Jamaican poet, Lorna Goodison wrote two poems: 'Lullaby for Jean Rhys,' and 'A Jean Rhys Lady'. In her first poem on Rhys, 'A Jean Rhys Lady', Goodison gives Rhys a vampire-like image, with 'claws clutching, twisted mouth sucking' the luminal liquid.²⁵ Goodison's image of Rhys is close to that of Antoinette, or a madwoman in the attic. She describes Rhys' words as 'flames', hence linking Rhys' novel with Antoinette's act of setting fire to Thornfield Hall. In 'Lullaby for Jean Rhys', Goodison identifies herself with the night nurse who provides a 'dark potion' to Rhys. The relationship of the narrator as night nurse with Rhys does not challenge the representation of the black figures in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Yet Goodison subverts the relation of the two and endows the power of speech to the night nurse. Its final line not only suggests the poet's farewell to Rhys, but also her departure from the legacy of Rhys' writings.

Jamaican poet, Jean Binta Breeze has also written about Rhys. Her 'Red Rebel Song', written in Jamaican Creole, is a poem written from Antoinette's point of view.²⁶ The poem is a fierce criticism of the fissure between the black and white: 'lang time I wann free Iself from de white black question from de constant hairpulling'. This statement is

linked with Rhys' desire to bring Antoinette and Tia and Christophine together through Antoinette's death. The poem celebrates the identification of the narrator as the red rebel, evoking Antoinette and the final scene of the *Wide Sargasso Sea*: 'I is de red rebel, woman, accepting I madness, declaring I song, nah siddung eena attic, tek no fire bun'.²⁷ In this final line of the poem, Breeze reads the figure of Antoinette as a 'rebel' who accepted 'madness', with whom the poet seems to align herself.

Another Jamaican poet, Olive Senior, also powerfully explores the literary heritage of Jean Rhys in her "Meditation on Red." The poem narrates the poet's visit to Jean Rhys' grave in Devon.²⁸ The poem juxtaposes Rhys and the poet: 'voyager in the dark' and 'dark voyager like me'.²⁹ While racial contrast is underlined, the poet demonstrates her sympathy towards Rhys who had lost her way home. Unlike Rhys, who became the ghost that cannot cross the sea, the poet can find the way back home: 'Right now I'm as divided as you were by that sea. But I'll be able to find my way home again'.³⁰ Like Goodison's, Senior's poem is not only the testament of literary inheritance but also a statement of her departure from Rhys, from where Senior can write at which Rhys stops, a place of liminality and death.

Contemporary black Caribbean women's writings on Rhys contain signs of their attempts to relate themselves with Rhys despite their racial difference in an imagined community of poetic relationships – a place which Rhys sought throughout her life in her writings. As Antoinette has to die in identifying with Tia, the establishment of the connection with black Caribbean women writers might have been impossible for Rhys. Yet, so as to attest to the evidence of poetics of relation put into practice, that fruitful connection is finally made by later black Caribbean women writers, demonstrating the very potential and characteristics of Caribbean literature.

Notes

- 1 Laura Niesen de Abruña, 'Family Connections: Mother and Mother Country in the Fictions of Jean Rhys and Jamaica Kincaid.' In *Motherlands*, edited by Nasta Susheila (London: Women's 1991), 257-89, p. 257.
- 2 Caroline Rody, *The Daughter's Return: African-American and Caribbean Women's Fictions of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 137.
- 3 Michelle Cliff, 'The Tempest and the Teapot', *Frontiers: A Journal of women Studies*, vol.12, No.2. (1991), pp. 36-51.

- 4 Ibid., p. 42.
- 5 Ibid., p. 43.
- 6 Rhys' daughter, Maryvonne, used to call her King Kong, the protagonist of *Voyage in the Dark*, Anna, is called 'Hotennot'.
- 7 See Thomas Cartelli, 'After *The Tempest*: Shakespeare, Postcoloniality, and Michelle Cliff's New, New World Miranda,' *Contemporary Literature*, Vol.36, No. 1. (Spring, 1995) pp.82-102, refer to p. 90.
- 8 See also Thomas Cartelli's argument, Ibid., p. 91.
- 9 Michelle Cliff, 'The Tempest and the Teapot', p. 43. 'Us,' means the Caribbean people.
- 10 Ibid., p. 44.
- 11 Emily Brontë, (1987; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), p. 30.
- 12 Like Jane Eyre, Heathcliff, the oppressed, is described with Eastern allusions. At the same time, the use of Eastern allusion also ties the text to Rhys' novels in which many of her heroines are described as having slanting eyes. Nanny Nelly tries to soothe Heathcliff: 'You are fit for a prince in disguise. Who knows, but your father was Emperor of China, and your mother an Indian queen, each of them able to buy up, worth one week's income, Wuthering Heights and Thrush cross Grange together? And you were kidnapped by wicked sailors, and brought to England'. See *Wuthering Heights*, p. 78.
- 13 Many years has passed since I wrote this first draft in 2001. Since then, several criticisms have appeared foregrounding the connection between *Wide Sargassao Sea* and *La Migration des Cœurs*. See Mardorossian, *Reclaiming the Difference*, Chris Bongie, 'Exile on Main Stream: Valuing the Popularity of Postcolonial Literature', *Postmodern Culture* 14:1 (2003) pp 1- 36, or [<http://www.iath.virginia.edu/pmc/issue.903/14.1bongie.html>] (accessed 20August 2008), Marika Prezioso, 'Trajectories of Creolization: Maryse Condé's *La Migration des Cœurs* through Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*', [<http://www.cavehill.uwi.edu/bnccde/dominica/conference/rhys/prezioso.html>] (accessed 20 August 2008), Angela Brüning, *Caribbean Connections: Comparing Modern Anglophone and Francophone Caribbean Literature, 1950s – Present* (PhD Thesis, University of Stirling, 2006), [<http://hdl.handle.net/1893/84>] (accessed 20 August 2008). Also see Maria Cristina Fumagalli, 'Maryse Condé Creolizes the Canon in *La Migration des Cœurs*' in S. Barbour with G. Herndon, (eds.) *Maryse Condé: By Way of Introduction* (Trenton, NJ, Africa World Press, 2006), pp. 253-274.
- 14 Interview, Rody, p. 136.
- 15 See Maryse Condé, 'Des héros et des cannibales: Réécriture et transgression dans la littérature des Petites Antilles de langue français', *Portulan* (Ocobre, 2000), pp. 29-38.
- 16 Suzanne Césaire, 'Misere d'une poesie, John Antoine-Nau', *Tropiques* 3 (Octobre, 1941), 50-54, p. 50.
- 17 See Maryse Condé's autobiography, *Le cœur à rire et à pleurer: Contes vrais de mon enfance* (Paris: Robert Lafont, 1999).
- 18 Chris Bongie, Ibid., p. 152.
- 19 Ibid., p. 155.
- 20 *Windward Heights*, trans. Richard Philcox (London: Faber and Faber, 1998),p. 348.
- 21 Mardorossian, *Reclaiming the Difference*, p. 91.
- 22 See the Afterword of *The Orchid House*, by Elaine Campbell, (1981, Virago Press, 1990, p.

- 245): 'Heinemann had considered a reprint of the novel for its Caribbean Writers Series, but then received a marketing report from its Caribbean office advising against publishing.... Phyllis Allfrey and her early West Indian novel could be easily discounted without a foreword by her famous sister-Dominican.
- 23 Throunn Lonsdale, *Literary Allusion in the Fiction of Jean Rhys* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London, 2002), also Burrows, p. 70.
 - 24 Elean Thomas, *The Last Room*, (London: Virago Press, 1991).
 - 25 Lorna Goodison, 'I am Becoming my Mother', p. 37. *Tamarind Season*. (Kingston: Institute of Jamaica, 1980), p.20. In an interview, Goodison told about Jean Rhys in 1991 as follows: 'Obviously, you consider Jean Rhys important, or you feel strongly about her. But in the first poem ('A Jean Rhys Lady') the image of claws, flames, drunkenness, representing violent or destructive features are in sharp contrast to the second poem, a lullaby about sleep.' See Goodison, 'Heartease', in *Frontiers of Caribbean Literature in English*, ed. Frank Birbalsingh, Warwick University Caribbean Studies, (London: Macmillan, 1996). P. 155.
 - 26 Jean 'Binta' Breeze, 'Red Rebel Song', *Spring Cleaning*. (London: Virago Press, 1992), p. 53.
 - 27 Jean Binta Breeze, p. 6.
 - 28 Louis James, 'The Other Side of the Mirror: The short stories of Jean Rhys and Olive Senior', *Journal of Caribbean Literature* (Summer 2003), 13: 3. P. 193.
 - 29 Olive Senior, *Gardening in The Tropics* (London: Bloodaxe Books, 1994). See also Lonsdale and Louis James.
 - 30 *Ibid.*, p. 96.