

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING ENGLISH:
ANXIETY OF ENGLISHNESS IN CHARLOTTE BRONTË'S *JANE EYRE*
AND JEAN RHYS'S *WIDE SARGASSO SEA*

By Sarah Whittemore

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Tara Wallace
Associate Professor of English

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Sarah Whittemore

Thesis Research Committee:

Tara Wallace, Associate Professor of English, Director

Antonio Lopez, Assistant Professor of English, Reader

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Abstract of Thesis

The Importance of Being English: Anxiety of Englishness in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*

The rise of the Second British Empire is denoted by the American Revolution, which served as a catalyst for the Britons' heightened awareness and concern over a national identity. Instead of viewing the secession of the American colonies as a poor reflection on Britain, the English began to refine the qualifications of Englishness, making them more exclusive and promulgating the idea that the colonists were never truly "English" at all. With the colonization of the Caribbean islands and other subsequent British satellites, identity within the British Empire became even more nebulous and reinforced the need for a distinction to be made between the multicultural imperial British subjects and the racially, culturally and religiously homogenous Britons who possessed the coveted "Englishness." This idea of English superiority found its voice in the narrative of the nineteenth-century English novel. This study will examine one of those novels, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, along with its postcolonial counterpart, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, to analyze the cultural hierarchies presented in both texts and to explore the contested nature and meaning of Englishness through the narrative of the colonizer (*Jane Eyre*) and the colonized body (*Wide Sargasso Sea*). While Brontë's text constructs a definition of Englishness by juxtaposing English characters against the colonial Other, Rhys's text attempts to illustrate the narrow confines of Englishness and fight against Brontë's cultural hierarchy while simultaneously colluding with the colonial project. By examining these two novels through the lens of nationhood, this study will discern how a

preoccupation with Englishness frames both texts, informs authorial choices and complicates past readings.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	iiiv
Abstract of Thesis	v
Introduction	2
Section One: A History of Anxiety.....	10
Section Two: Jane and Bertha: A Comparative Study	19
Section Three: An Integrated English Identity	38
Bibliography	50

Introduction

In April of 2008 an article appeared in *The Sunday Times* discussing British views on immigration. According to a *YouGov* survey conducted by Channel 4, anti-immigration sentiment is increasing in Britain with 83% of Britons believing there is an immigration “crisis” and 84% advocating a complete halt to immigration. The same *YouGov* survey revealed that of settled British migrants 58% agreed with the general population that immigration has become a national concern.¹ While the latter finding may be less statistically startling, it is more socially significant. It reveals a shift in identity as second and third-generation immigrants find themselves firmly embedded in British identity – identifying more with nationality than ethnicity – and fearing the intrusion of the alien.² This apparent tension between British identity and the threat of the alien comes just six years after The Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain called for a redefining of what it means to be “British.” This move resulted in a national backlash, leading Home Secretary Jack Straw to reject this proposed revision of Britishness and affirm the government’s commitment to preexisting views of British national identity.³ While this preoccupation with the definition and preservation of a national identity may seem like a relatively new phenomenon, such an emphasis on national identity can be traced as far back

¹ Rageh Omaar, “At least Britain is honest about immigration now,” *The Times Online*. 8 April 2008. 1 April 2008 < http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/tv_and_radio/article3688455.ece>.

² I use the term “alien” here to mean both politically alien as the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as being of “foreign nation and allegiance,” as well as culturally alien implying “Otherness.”

³ “No to rethink on British identity,” *BBC News Online* 11 Oct. 2006, 1 April 2008 < http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/966629.stm>.

as the sixteenth century in British history – coming to a head in the mid-nineteenth century with the advent of what historians have called the Second British Empire.⁴

The rise of the second empire is denoted by the American Revolution, which served as a catalyst for the Britons' heightened awareness and concern over a national identity. Instead of viewing the secession of the American colonies as a poor reflection on Britain, the English⁵ began to refine the qualifications of Englishness, making them more exclusive and promulgating the idea that the colonists were never truly "English" at all. With the colonization of the Caribbean islands and other subsequent British satellites, identity within the British Empire became even more nebulous and reinforced the need for a distinction to be made between the multicultural imperial British subjects and the racially, culturally and religiously homogenous Britons who possessed the coveted "Englishness." Creating this demarcation within the empire also allowed the British to disavow the darker parts of their national history. Suddenly acts like slavery became divorced from an English history that promoted liberation and, instead, associated with the creolized population of the Caribbean islands, who had forfeited their marks of Englishness through their colonial contamination.

This message concerning the superiority and desirability of Englishness found a narrative voice in the English novel. The reader can see, beginning in the early nineteenth century with Jane Austen and W.M. Thackeray, the impact of imperialism and the

⁴ David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 3. In Armitage's introduction he addresses the distinction between what historians refer to as the "First British Empire" and the "Second British Empire." The first is meant to refer to England's conquest of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, the British Isles and America while the second is marked by the independence of the United States and includes Great Britain, the Caribbean islands, Australia, the remaining parts of North America and India. This second empire is the one most commonly referred to when discussing the "British Empire" and will be what I refer to in the remainder of this paper.

⁵ In Armitage's *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* p. 10, he explains that due to the "hegemony of English history and historians" the term "England" came to be proxy for the "United Kingdom." Therefore I will be using the term "English" to refer to the population of people living in the United Kingdom who considered themselves to be part of the nation as opposed to part of the empire.

elevation of the English identity. In *Mansfield Park* slavery and imperial conquest become the price one has to pay to maintain one's claim to Englishness through class distinction and land ownership. Similarly, in *Vanity Fair* Joseph Sedley is reduced to the term "nabob" and his loss of Englishness can be seen in his excesses and his susceptibility to the creolized⁶ Becky Sharp. According to Edward Said, English novels proved "immensely important in the formation of imperial attitudes, references, and experiences."⁷ Said contends that nations themselves could be viewed as narratives and with the English novel dominating the literary scene of both Britain and its colonies throughout the nineteenth century, Englishness quickly became the dominant narrative of the entire British Empire. As Said notes, "never, in the novel, is that world beyond seen except as subordinate and dominated, the English presence viewed as regulative and normative."⁸ I will use Said's theory to examine how Englishness was able to reach its elevated status throughout the empire and how it shaped the way the English and colonials viewed themselves within this

⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989. In my essay I will distinguish between the terms "Creole" as a distinct ethnicity and "creole" as any hybrid identity whose national origin and ethnicity cannot be easily defined or labeled. Therefore Becky Sharp possesses a "creolized" identity due to her hybridity – having a French opera singer for a mother and an impoverished English painter for a father. When examining the term "Creole" as a distinct ethnic identity, the Oxford English Dictionary defines it as "A person born and naturalized in the country, but of European (usually Spanish or French) or of African Negro race: the name having no connotation of colour, and in its reference to origin being distinguished on the one hand from born in Europe (or Africa), and on the other hand from aboriginal." However, the OED also points out the unstable nature of the term "Creole" as its denotation shifts with geography from meaning a white European descendent naturalized in the West Indies, to a French descendent naturalized in Mauritius, to a non-white Spanish descendent naturalized in South America (sometimes used to refer to Mexicans), and finally in the U.S. to refer exclusively to descendents of early French settlers in Louisiana. Thus, in the same definition, the OED simultaneously stipulates that "Creole" is color-neutral and then proceeds to label "Creole" as now meaning of European descent – read white. The historical anxiety of needing to demarcate a separate national and cultural identity between homogenous Britain and its creolized satellites can be seen in the very definition of the term "Creole," or rather its inability to be clearly defined. As H. Adlai Murdoch points out: "This undefinability and strategic slippage of the Creole expose colonialism's false opposition of cultural traits and mine the unstable ground of social and cultural self-invention." See H. Adlai Murdoch, "Ghosts in the Mirror: Colonialism and Creole Indeterminacy in Brontë and Sand," *College Literature* 29.1 (Winter 2002) 3.

⁷ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993) xii.

⁸ Said 75.

imposed cultural hierarchy. As part of my examination of this hierarchy, I will focus not only on citizens of the English metropole and the formerly enslaved West Indian colonials, but also the “colonial elite,” or former British slave-owners, and how their connection with the colonies effectively creolized them – usurping their formerly homogenous British identity and negating their claims to Englishness.

Indeed, Englishness as an ideal in the nineteenth-century English novel proves so powerful that it allows the most unlikely of characters to become icons and heroines. Take for example the heroine of Charlotte’s Brontë’s celebrated work, *Jane Eyre*.⁹ Jane is introduced to the reader as being plain and poor. She laments her own lack of good looks when first arriving at Thornfield and comments on her alienation from handsome men: “I should have known instinctively that they neither have nor could have sympathy with anything in me” (*JE* 130). In the novel, it is Rochester’s lack of classic features and beauty that emboldens Jane to approach him and later fall in love with him. However, Rochester’s mad Creole wife in the attic creates a foil for Jane which allows her to occupy the role of English heroine. By juxtaposing the two women throughout the novel Brontë engages in what Said describes as a strengthening of one party by the comparative weakening of the other.¹⁰ Thus Brontë successfully creates a strong binary between Bertha’s Creole Otherness and Jane’s white Englishness. While Jane is depicted as healthy, chaste, modest, English and free, Bertha is shown to be mad, blatantly sexual, violent, Creole and needing restraint. In the famous unveiling scene in the attic, Rochester compares the two women side by side, saying, “Compare these clear eyes [Jane] with the red balls yonder [Bertha] –

⁹ Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. London: Penguin Books, 1996. All references are to this edition and are included in parentheses in the text and will be denoted by the abbreviation *JE*.

¹⁰ Said 192.

this face with that mask – this form with that bulk...” (*JE* 329). Brontë’s use of the Creole figure has occasioned more literary criticism than any other English text¹¹ and makes *Jane Eyre* both ideal and indispensable in my investigation of Englishness in the nineteenth-century novel.

Just as *Jane Eyre* sets up a narrative of special inclusion where Jane and Rochester are allowed to exist within the scope of Englishness, Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*¹² sets up a narrative of exclusion where characters attempt to achieve Englishness but continually fall short. Thus, *Wide Sargasso Sea* becomes the Creole answer to Brontë’s English text, producing a more comprehensive understanding of Englishness through the dual narrative voice of the colonizer and the colonized – the included and the excluded. Rhys attempts to resist the superiority of Englishness found in *Jane Eyre* by engaging in what Homi Bhabha describes as colonial mimicry.¹³ Her novel acts as the prequel for *Jane Eyre*, mimicking it in style and genre. She even makes Antoinette bear striking similarities to Jane in regard to her religious education, isolation in society, and loss of childhood friends. Yet while Rhys attempts to mimic but not mirror the English canonical novel in an effort to resist its narrow view of Englishness and subsequent coding of the “Other,” she simultaneously colludes with the very ideals she is trying to resist. By depicting Antoinette as constantly trying to distinguish herself from the blacks on the island and make herself appear more white, more European, more English, Rhys has made her character internalize the cultural hierarchy that values Englishness above all else. Antoinette’s interactions with various racial and ethnic

¹¹ Carolyn Vellenga, *Creole Crossings: Domestic Fiction and the Reform of Colonial Slavery* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006) 192.

¹² Rhys, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea*. London: Penguin Books, 1968. All references are to this edition and will be included in parentheses in the text and will be denoted by the abbreviation *WSS*.

¹³ Homi Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” *October* 28 (Spring 1984): 126.

groups of the island “both unsettle and reenact many of the commonsense structures of Englishness”¹⁴ and bring into question whether *Wide Sargasso Sea* can be considered postcolonial at all when the entire premise of the novel is a reaction to the English imperial narrative.¹⁵ Using both Bhabha and Gikandi, I plan to look at *Wide Sargasso Sea* to discern to what extent the novel illustrates the narrowness of Englishness, condemning its exclusion of hybrid bodies, and to what extent it “seeks, unconsciously perhaps, to complete the project of colonialism.”¹⁶

By exploring the role Englishness played in the creation and formulation of *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* a new reading emerges of the texts, which supplements and complicates the feminist readings of critics like Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and Elaine Showalter that have preceded it. We can begin to explore authorial choices, such as Brontë’s decision to have a Creole madwoman as Jane’s foil in *Jane Eyre*. While Gilbert and Gubar have famously argued in their feminist critique of *Jane Eyre* that Bertha represents Jane’s sexually open and liberated Other,¹⁷ a reading through the lens of Englishness could suggest that Brontë chose a Creole woman to highlight Jane’s Englishness and to reinforce the English superiority that was considered normal during the nineteenth century. Brontë’s decision to keep Bertha silent aside from her maniacal laughter also speaks more to Brontë’s take on empire and its inherent link to a culture of

¹⁴ Laura E Ciolkowski, “Navigating the Wide Sargasso Sea: Colonial History, English Fiction, and British Empire” *Twentieth Century Literature* 43.3 (Fall 1997): 340.

¹⁵ Simon Gikandi, *Maps of Englishness: Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996) 16. Gikandi points out in his work that “post-colonial” can be considered a misnomer as many post-colonial novels continue to deal with the colonial project instead of focusing on a domestic national identity which was solidified after decolonization.

¹⁶ Gikandi 16.

¹⁷ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale, 1979) 339.

silence than to a feminist reading of female subjugation.¹⁸ Spivak touches upon this culture of silence when she discusses the “subaltern” as being a position without identity and the inability of action. She states that the subaltern cannot represent itself through a narrative voice but is always being represented by others and pushed into the dominant preexisting meta-narrative – in this case, British imperialism.¹⁹ Thus, Jane and Rochester are both given a voice as they represent the meta-narrative of British imperial history, while Bertha is condemned to subalternity and silence. Similarly, instead of reading Jane’s decision to return to Rochester after he has lost his eyesight in the fire as a sign of female control and domination, we could read her decision as John Su has: having more to do with the extinguished colonial threat now that Bertha has died.²⁰ Although he bears the scars of the colonial experience, Rochester is finally rid of his colonial contagion (Bertha) and is now free to marry Jane – perpetuating the imperialist ideals of English superiority through an English wedding and the birth of an unquestionably English son. Antoinette’s madness in *Wide Sargasso Sea* also becomes complicated by this reading of Englishness, as it proposes the idea that Antoinette’s madness results from a colonial identity crisis and her frustration at not being able to fit within the narrow constructs of Englishness versus her sexual and social subordination by the male. In the same way, Rochester’s attempts to control Antoinette’s sexuality could be read as having less to do with simple misogyny and more to do with policing the boundaries of the English identity by preventing the conception of creole bastards that would falsely pass for English. Finally, madness itself can be viewed

¹⁸ Gikandi17.

¹⁹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Scattered Speculations on the *Subaltern* and the Popular,” *Postcolonial Studies* 8.4 (Nov. 2005): 477.

²⁰ John J Su, “‘Once I Would Have Gone Back... But Not Any Longer’: Nostalgia and Narrative Ethics in *Wide Sargasso Sea*,” *Critique* 44.2 (Winter 2003): 161.

differently through a social versus medical construct when one considers that expressing an open sexual appetite was so abhorrent a quality in Englishwomen that any evidence of such sexual excesses were immediately deemed “madness” by Englishmen.²¹ This encoding of physical disease with social values as it concerned the colonies is discussed by Alan Bewell, whose text I will be using to explore the extent to which Bertha and Jane’s respective sickness and health are rooted in social constructs rather than mere physical descriptions.²² Ultimately my purpose in writing this paper is twofold: to grasp the contested nature and meaning of Englishness through the narrative of the colonizer (*Jane Eyre*) and the colonized body (*Wide Sargasso Sea*) and to discern how this preoccupation with Englishness in the two novels frames the texts, informs authorial choices and complicates past readings.

²¹ Nicola Nixon, “*Wide Sargasso Sea* and Jean Rhys’ Interrogation of the ‘nature wholly alien’ in *Jane Eyre*,” *Essays in Literature* 21.2 (Fall 1994): 271.

²² Alan Bewell, “*Jane Eyre* and Victorian Medical Geography,” *ELH* 63.3 (1996): 733-808.

Section One: A History of Anxiety

During the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century an important shift occurred in the social construct of the British identity. This change was ushered in with the loss of Britain's most important colonial acquisition to date: America. Prior to the loss of the American colonies in the late eighteenth century, disputes over identity and cultural hierarchy had been mainly domestic, only involving the populations within Great Britain. However, with the loss of America and increasing anxiety as to Britain's imperial power within the European community, it became necessary for Britain to come together as a nationally and culturally homogenous metropole in order to control its remaining colonies. Thus, as David Armitage points out, the term "British" became colonized by the term "English," which came to stand for Great Britain (the mother country) and its inhabitants as a whole.¹ Englishness as a social construct then changed from something of domestic significance to something of imperial importance as it became "...a means of establishing and protecting the cultural borders of the metropole against the (inevitable and mutual) process of cultural hybridization that occurs in the contact zones of empire."²

When the American colonies were first settled by the British in the seventeenth century they were viewed by Britons as economic satellites there for the purpose of generating wealth for the mother country. Indeed, many government officials even viewed the settlers

¹ Armitage 10. Armitage describes here how the "hegemony of English history and historians" created a situation whereby "England stood proxy for the United Kingdom, and...maintained a willed forgetfulness about the rest of Britain, Ireland and the Empire."

² Erica L. Johnson, *Home, Maison, Casa: the Politics of Location in Works by Jean Rhys, Marguerite Duras, and Erminia Dell'Oro* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003) 15.

in the colonies as “...children, placed in their lands by a generous father, who had subsequently made every provision for their welfare.”³ However, despite this sense of familial and cultural ties, Britons were very aware of the burgeoning gap between themselves and the Americans who were a “...mysterious and paradoxical people, physically distant but culturally close, engagingly similar yet irritatingly different.”⁴ This anxiety of difference manifested itself in British depictions of the Thirteen Colonies symbolized by the image of the Native American princess, most often seen in cartoons in British newspapers, who was at once untouched (representing this unchartered new world) and menacing. Linda Colley suggests that this depiction of the Americans indicates that the British “...were not unaware that imperial dominion might in the future shift from their own small island to the massive continent inhabited by their American colonists.”⁵ These fears were not unfounded, as resistance to metropolitan authority increased when acts in Parliament such as the Stamp Act of 1765 were passed without American representation. When the colonists started to openly rebel, Britain soon realized it had made a tactical error in its treatment of the colonies by not establishing royal authority as Spain had with its colonies. Instances of such rebellion, like the Boston Tea Party of 1773, solidified many Britons’ beliefs that the Americans would never yield to the imperial authority of the Crown and that war was necessary to enforce royal dominion.⁶ After the American Declaration of Independence in July 1776, Britons’ former views of the colonists as their English brethren were shattered and the British began to perceive that their supposedly

³ Lawrence James, *Rise and Fall of the British Empire* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996) 99.

⁴ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005) 134.

⁵ Colley 135.

⁶ Colley 136-137.

shared cultural identity and heritage with the American colonists were not shared at all.⁷ This modified view of the colonists as a people separate from the British was strengthened by the colonists' alliance with France, England's primary political enemy, an alliance which the British took as a sign that any affinity or connection between the colonists in America and the Englishmen in Britain had been severed. With the loss of the American War and thus the American colonies, Britain began to reexamine its cultural and national identity. Believing in a shared Englishness and national loyalty had only given the British a false sense of security about their American colonies and had made Britain more susceptible to colonial revolt. What was now needed was a narrower definition of Englishness; such exclusivity would ensure its position at the top of the cultural hierarchy within the empire, prevent a shared sense of identity between domestic English subjects and British colonial subjects and make Britain more diligent in its command and surveillance of its colonies. Linda Colley summarizes this shift in domestic cultural politics when she says:

In the half century after the American war, there would emerge in Great Britain a far more consciously and officially constructed patriotism which stressed attachment to the monarchy, the importance of empire, the value of military and naval achievement, and the desirability of strong, stable government by virtuous, able and *authentically* British elite.⁸

Response to the American Revolution was particularly felt by English officials in the West Indies who denounced the actions of the "deluded North Americans," saying that

⁷ Colley 141.

⁸ Colley 145. Italicized words are my emphasis.

while rebellion could be tolerated, outright revolt could not.⁹ The creole colonizers' vehement objections to revolution and dissension reflect a history of anxiety within the British Caribbean islands beginning in the 1730s with the Maroon rebellions in Jamaica. The population referred to as "Maroon" was composed primarily of runaway slaves and their descendants who engaged in guerilla warfare with the white colonists and plantation owners in Jamaica. While a treaty was eventually reached between the Maroon leader, Cudjoe, and the governor of Jamaica, exchanging loyalty to the Crown for land, such peace was only temporary and evaporated with the dawning of the French Revolution.¹⁰ These Maroon rebellions were soon followed by other rebellions such as the slave revolts in Tobago between 1770 and 1776 and Tacky's Rebellion in 1760 in Jamaica involving the Ashanti Negroes of the Akan linguistic group. Tacky's rebellion especially posed a threat to British control as it involved over a year of planning during which not one slave betrayed the secret and the rebellion resulted in the capture of several plantations and the slaying of white plantation owners.¹¹ Such anxiety over rebellion was exacerbated by the success of the French and American Revolutions during the late eighteenth century.¹² By the 1770s and 1780s, slaves outnumbered white colonists by eleven to one in Jamaica and twenty-two to one in Grenada. With demographics stacked in their favor, slave rebellions continued with Fedon's Rebellion in 1795, during which Grenada came temporarily entirely under the

⁹ Douglas J. Hamilton, *Scotland, the Caribbean and the Atlantic World, 1750-1820* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005) 160. Hamilton distinguishes between "rebellion" and "revolt" in the text by implying that "rebellion" refers to isolated incidents of subversion that were successfully quelled by imperial (British) authority, while "revolt" refers to incidents of subversion that resulted in a complete loss of imperial power and control as seen in Haiti and America.

¹⁰ Hamilton 37.

¹¹ Antonio Benitez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective, Second Edition*, trans. James E. Maraniss (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996) 160.

¹² Hamilton 32.

slaves' control until British troops reestablished order in July 1796.¹³ The British attempted to maintain order through the enforcement of a cultural hierarchy in which the white English were universally understood to be privileged and superior while blacks and natives of the islands were always subservient and needing governance. However, such a hierarchy placed Britain in the difficult position of simultaneously attempting to make its imperial subjects feel that they belonged within the empire and instill a sense of loyalty, while also reinforcing the superiority of Englishness and the Crown's inherent right to rule over them.¹⁴

British anxiety over how to control their colonial populations was heightened by the activities in the French colony of Saint Domingue. In December 1791, Governor Mathews of Grenada informed the British government that over 68,640 slaves had rebelled in Saint Domingue and 1,126 estates had been destroyed. This initial report of rebellion marked the beginning of the Haitian Revolution which lasted from 1791-1804 and involved an army of over half a million slaves, a majority of whom had been imported from Africa.¹⁵ Such a massive revolt in the Caribbean and the establishment of a sovereign black nation irrevocably changed the way Europe viewed the West Indian colonies and their enslaved inhabitants.¹⁶ The British saw Haiti as the ultimate affront to imperial order and control: "...we need only to look at Haiti to see what the West Indies will become without the moral authority and governance represented by Englishness."¹⁷ As Silvio Torres-Saillant

¹³ Hamilton 38.

¹⁴ Hamilton 36. While a social hierarchy was imposed that clearly identified whites as superior, it is worth noting that distinctions and gradations within each racial group existed based on birth, wealth, religion, etc. This will be explored more in my discussion of race relations to Englishness in Section Two.

¹⁵ Benitez-Rojo 161.

¹⁶ Hamilton 163.

¹⁷ Gikandi 114.

points out in *An Intellectual History of the Caribbean*, “To a large extent, the tenacious rise of a nation built by insurgent slaves contradicted and debunked the very logic upon which the international hegemony of the Christian West was predicated.”¹⁸ The British feared that this symbol of black independence and self-governance would lead to revolution within their own colonies, specifically those of Grenada and Jamaica which had shown previous signs of rebellion. As the English continued to settle in the colonies, English cultural norms began to take root in the West Indies and black slaves began to emulate the British characteristics of white colonials. This can be seen in several of the characters in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, who continually attempt or even succeed in passing for white: Tia’s clothes are just as nice as Antoinette’s and she believes herself to be socially superior, black former slaves denigrate white former slave owners by calling them “white niggers,” Daniel Cosway hangs portraits in his house as Englishmen do, and the nameless black boy who helps Baptiste embraces British education in order to learn English and travel back to the metropole. As the black colonial community continued to emulate the white English community, Englishness became even more important as a means of distinction between two groups that were becoming increasingly similar. Such similarity was dangerous, as it exposed the difference between the slaves and their owners as something socially constructed rather than racially based. By narrowing the construct of Englishness, the British were able to widen the gap between the slaves and their owners.¹⁹

Just as Englishness was used to widen the gap between slave and master in the West Indies, Englishness was also used to widen the gap between white colonist and domestic

¹⁸ Silvio Torres-Saillant, *Intellectual History of the Caribbean* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 127.

¹⁹ Carl Plasa, *Textual Politics from Slavery to Postcolonialism: Race and Identification* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000) 14. Plasa touches upon Homi Bhabha’s idea of colonial mimicry here that I will further discuss in Chapter Two.

Englishmen. Britain's unique status as an empire controlled by a tiny island proved imperative in achieving both these goals. While its geographic distance necessitated the development and promulgation of an appropriate British ideology in alliance with military, political and economic methods in order to govern its satellites,²⁰ Britain's distance also allowed it to simultaneously control the colonies through racial subjugation and disavow any knowledge or involvement in said actions. From this practice two separate and distinct national histories arose in Britain: domestic history and imperial history. As David Armitage points out:

‘British’ history is assumed to mean ‘domestic’ history; Imperial history implies extraterritorial history. The attributed character of the second Empire – as an empire built on military conquest, racial subjugation, economic exploitation and territorial expansion – rendered it incompatible with the metropolitan norms of liberty, equality and the rule of law, and demanded that the Empire be exoticized and further differentiated from domestic history.²¹

Having these two divergent histories allowed Britain to simultaneously oppose slavery as morally depraved in Great Britain and yet practice slavery in its colonies to gain wealth. Evidence of the existence yet suppression of this parallel history can be seen in *Jane Eyre*, in which both Mr. Rochester and Jane Eyre receive their fortunes through their affiliation with the West Indies (Rochester's wife Bertha and Jane's uncle), yet the source of this West Indian wealth, namely the slave trade, is never openly acknowledged.²² The result of

²⁰ Said 64.

²¹ Armitage 3.

²² Plasa 72.

this moral incongruence between Britons' complicity with slavery and yet their absolution from it due to their supposed firm moral stance against it can be seen in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In the novel, the unidentified male character whom the reader assumes to be Mr. Rochester, continually notices and inquires after evidence of slavery in Jamaica, yet never acknowledges any blame as an Englishman for what has gone on there. He associates the names of past slave owners and places like Massacre solely with the West Indies and its morally depraved inhabitants like Antoinette (*WSS* 36).

While emancipation was declared in Britain in 1833 with the Slavery Abolition Act, full emancipation did not take effect in the colonies until 1838. Given these dates and many scholars' beliefs that *Jane Eyre* is meant to take place during the 1820s or 1830s in pre-emancipation England,²³ one can read the ending of *Jane Eyre* in the context of the ideological versus economic struggle in Britain between doing what was considered morally correct by the metropole and doing what was economically advantageous for the empire. When examining scenes such as the one in which Bertha sets Thornfield on fire, some critics have begun to move toward a more political reading of the text and away from past feminist readings. An example of this can be seen in Susan Meyer, who contends that instead of Bertha's rebellion at the end of the novel symbolizing women breaking free of gender oppression, Bertha is meant to reenact the slave rebellions so feared by the British

²³ Susan Meyer, *Imperialism at Home: Race and Victorian Women's Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996) 70. Meyer most notably makes the case for *Jane Eyre* being based in the 1820s. She argues that when Jane says she has been married ten years at the end of the novel, the date is 1846 when Brontë finished the novel. Therefore Jane and Rochester would have been married in 1836. Rochester then is quoted as saying he had Bertha locked away for ten years before he met Jane making Bertha's incarceration begin in 1825. Rochester also explains that he and Bertha lived together for four years before he imprisoned her at Thornfield, meaning their marriage would date to 1821 at the latest. Therefore because full emancipation was not achieved until 1838, Meyer claims it is safe to say that the main action in *Jane Eyre* occurs while slavery is still prevalent in the West Indies. See also Veronica Marie Gregg, *Jean Rhys's Historical Imagination: Reading and Writing the Creole* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995) 83 and Hilary Jenkins, Foreword, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (London: Penguin Books, 1968) viii.

in the Jamaican colonies during the late eighteenth century.²⁴ Such violence and aggression in *Bertha* places her firmly in the group of the inferior West Indian Creole, and consequently elevates Jane to the role of the orderly Englishwoman who mirrors Britain's sense of imperial control. Thus, from the history of rebellion and aggression perpetrated by the colonial subjects of the British Empire to Britain's anxiety over outright revolution as seen in America and Haiti, a need for a narrower definition of Englishness became essential to control satellite colonies from afar and to secure a permanent position of moral and cultural superiority for the British. The ways in which this new ideology of Englishness was defined and its superiority impressed upon all subjects within the British Empire will be further explored in the following two sections.

²⁴ Meyer 70.

Section Two: Jane and Bertha: A Comparative Study of Englishness and Otherness

In order to promulgate an idea of a cultural hierarchy that Britain could both dominate and control, an idea made necessary by the imperial setbacks discussed in the previous section, the British used their most potent weapon: the novel. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said points out that the nineteenth-century British novel and British imperialism "...fortified each other to such a degree that it is impossible...to read one without in some way dealing with the other."²⁵ It is as a result of this mutually symbiotic relationship that the construction and protection of English identity becomes a major theme of many nineteenth-century British novels.

As Britain began colonizing the West Indies, India, and Australia, the English narrative spread and became the dominant cultural narrative throughout the British Empire. While battles of imperialism were fought over land, it was through narratives that people determined who had a right to own the land and who had a right to rule over it.²⁶ Narratives of Englishness sought to assert the metropole's superiority and construct a hierarchy with Englishness at the top and its dominance understood throughout the empire.²⁷ This cultural hierarchy can be seen in canonical nineteenth-century British novels such as *Mansfield Park* and *Vanity Fair*, where the colonial world is never "...seen except as subordinate and dominated, the English presence viewed as regulative and normative."²⁸ This strategy of

²⁵ Said 71.

²⁶ Said xiii.

²⁷ Said 75. Said writes that "...we must continue to remember that novels participate in, are part of, contribute to an extremely slow, infinitesimal politics that clarifies, reinforces, perhaps even occasionally advances perceptions and attitudes about England and the world."

²⁸ Said 75.

comparison between the English normative and the colonial “Other” can also be seen in British authors’ choices of characters and the juxtaposition of colonial difference with “...positive ideas of [British] home, of a nation and its language, of proper order, good behavior, moral values.”²⁹ Charlotte Brontë employs this strategy in her choice of Bertha, the novel’s anti-heroine, as a West Indian Creole woman. As Gikandi discusses in *Maps of Englishness*, English novels can assert their characters’ legitimacy as English by holding them up to the colonial Other for comparison, highlighting their difference and alterity, and thereby asserting their Englishness.³⁰ In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë sets up a dichotomy whereby Jane’s Englishness is enhanced by Bertha’s Otherness.³¹

In Brontë’s comparison of Bertha and Jane, she focuses on five main areas of difference: appearance, health, liberty, violence and sexuality. As I have already argued (p.5), Rochester’s comparison of the two women distinguishes the bestial Creole from the human Englishwoman. Jane herself depicts Bertha as an animal when she describes her attack on Rochester, saying, “...the lunatic sprang and grappled his throat viciously, and laid her teeth into his cheek” (*JE* 328). By portraying Bertha as sub-human, Brontë effectively diminishes the reader’s pity for her as an imprisoned woman, instead making them view her as a beast with no entitlement to English ideals of liberty.³² Once Bertha is effectively dehumanized, she is cast into the role of impediment instead of victim: she is all that stands between Rochester and Jane’s culturally sanctioned union.³³ Therefore, because

²⁹ Said 81.

³⁰ Gikandi 89.

³¹ Said 192. Said writes that in British novels the strength of one character (presumably the English protagonist) is dependent upon the weakness of the other character (in this case the colonial antagonist).

³² Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism.” *“Race,” Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) 268.

³³ Su 162.

Bertha is neither entirely English nor entirely human, Jane can continue to love Rochester (a married man) and withhold sympathy for Bertha, without appearing un-Christian and consequently un-English.

Implicit in Brontë's description of Bertha is the taint of colonial disease and aberration.³⁴ As Alan Bewell discusses in his work, *Jane Eyre and Victorian Medical Geography*, Brontë refuses "...to separate questions of spiritual or national well-being from questions of health and morbidity."³⁵ Imperial medical geography set out to elevate England as a metropole by showing that disease came from other places on the globe, particularly the West and East Indies.³⁶ Medical geography thus played a large role in determining which places were "healthy" and which places needed to be "improved," encoding physical disease as moral disease.³⁷ Moral and ideological values, such as liberty, purity, and normality were expressed through a country's climate and medical pathologies.³⁸ Therefore, English moral superiority over another culture or race could be seen through their physical repulsion (immune response) to that location. Similarly, the moral depravity of diseased colonial spaces was evidenced in their ability to contaminate healthy English bodies. The toll that colonial disease has on English bodies can be seen in Richard Mason, whom Jane recognizes immediately as being "not altogether English" and describes as sallow-faced and vulnerable to chills (*JE* 215-216). Joseph Sedley, another character exposed to colonial contamination in *Vanity Fair*, manifest similar symptoms, having a "yellow" face and expressing a fear of the English cold weather when first introduced to

³⁴ H. Adlai Murdoch, "Ghosts in the Mirror: Colonialism and Creole Indeterminacy in Brontë and Sand," *College Literature* 29.1 (Winter 2002) 10.

³⁵ Bewell 774.

³⁶ Bewell 775.

³⁷ Bewell 780.

³⁸ Bewell 790.

Becky Sharp.³⁹ Similarly, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette's Aunt Cora leaves the island because of her poor health and returns to England for a year. However, Cora's exposure to the West Indies has contaminated her, so that she fears that another English winter will kill her (*WSS* 31-33). Cora's sojourn in the West Indies has compromised her physical and moral high-ground, so that she belongs in dangerous Jamaica rather than healthy England.

Bertha's mania too can be seen as an indication of her moral inferiority manifested through her physical deterioration and discoloration. This interpretation seems especially salient when one compares descriptions of Bertha's failing health with Jane's thriving existence at Thornfield. Jane describes Bertha to Rochester, saying, "It was a discoloured face – it was a savage face. I wish I could forget the roll of the red eyes and the fearful blackened inflation of the lineaments!" (*JE* 317). As previously stated by H. Adlai Murdoch, Bertha's discoloration in her "blackened" and inflated lineaments implies colonial sickness and contamination. However, while Bertha's physical appearance deteriorates as the novel progresses, Jane's health improves. Upon first arriving at Thornfield, Jane often goes on walks in the English countryside and is described as having an unblemished visage (*JE* 114). As her relationship with Rochester transforms from that of master/servant to mutual friendship and respect, Jane reflects: "...the blanks of existence were filled up, my bodily health improved, I gathered flesh and strength" (*JE* 166).

Jane herself knows that her English health will be compromised in a colonial world. When Rochester reveals his colonial diseased wife to Jane after their wedding ceremony is interrupted, Jane flees Thornfield and is taken in by the Rivers family. There she meets St.

³⁹ W.M. Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 24-25.

John Rivers, later discovered to be one of her cousins, and earns his respect as a suitable Christian woman and potential missionary wife. When St. John proposes to Jane, asking her to follow him to India to spread Christianity within the British colony, she is immediately terrified. Jane's fear of leaving England for India reinforces her Englishness, as she asserts that, "...if I go to India, I go to a premature death" (*JE* 450). Both Jane and St. John's sisters agree that Jane's delicate English constitution "...would not live three months there" as she would surely fall victim to colonial disease and eventual death (*JE* 462). By making it impossible for Jane to leave the metropole for the British colonies, Brontë confirms Jane's purely English constitution and moral superiority over diseased Bertha.

In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë constructs a connection between physical debility and moral weakness and expands the connection to the political arena, highlighting the way Bertha and Jane respond to oppression. As Edmund Burke states in his writings on the French Revolution, the English citizen's inherent right to freedom stems from history:

You will observe, that, from Magna Charta to the Declaration of Right, it has been the uniform policy of our Constitution to claim and assert our liberties as an *entailed inheritance* derived to us from our forefathers, and to be transmitted to our posterity – as an estate specifically belonging to the people of this kingdom...⁴⁰

Therefore, while Jane can assert her independence and throw off her oppressors, such as the Reed family, Antoinette cannot because her hybrid identity as a Creole excludes her from this history of inherited rights. In both texts, the reader encounters moments of liberty

⁴⁰ Edmund Burke, *Selected Writings and Speeches*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 1963) 528.

for Jane and moments of imprisonment for Bertha/Antoinette.⁴¹ Jane voices her desire for liberty while at Lowood, saying, “I desired liberty; for liberty I gasped; for liberty I uttered a prayer; it seemed scattered on the wind then faintly blowing” (*JE* 99). By acting rationally, Jane is able to place an ad in the local newspaper, acquire a new position as a governess at Thornfield, and ultimately achieve her desired freedom from Lowood. Once at Thornfield, Jane encounters Mr. Rochester who later serves as the most significant indicator of difference between Jane and Bertha/Antoinette. While Bertha/Antoinette can be successfully imprisoned by Rochester in a room on the third floor of Thornfield, Rochester cannot force Jane to stay once she discovers his disastrous marriage. In the final chapter of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette recalls offering all she has to Rochester in exchange for her freedom and being denied (*WSS* 115). However, Jane never needs to ask Rochester to release her, and instead is described as a “resolute, wild, free thing” who leaves without his knowledge (*JE* 357). In both texts patterns of English freedom arise as Rochester and Jane are both able to break away from unhappy situations in their lives. Rochester is able to escape his miserable marriage to Antoinette by locking her in a “cardboard world” (*WSS* 115) where he 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...” (*WSS* 113). He is able to live the life of a bachelor, roaming Europe and taking mistresses, while disowning both his wife and their marriage. Jane is similarly able to escape from her awkward and unhappy situation at Thornfield after her illegitimate marriage to Rochester is halted, by sneaking away in the early morning unbeknownst to the house (*JE* 360).

⁴¹ In this essay I will use the name “Bertha” when referring to the character in *Jane Eyre* and “Antoinette” when referring to the character in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Here I use both names because examples of imprisonment are evidenced in both texts.

However, in neither text is Bertha/Antoinette given an opportunity to liberate herself from her imperial oppressor (Rochester) except through her final act of suicide in *Jane Eyre*. Even when Antoinette is still at her estate, Granbois, she cannot follow Christophine's advice and escape to Martinique or England because she has forfeited her fortune to her husband (*WSS* 69). Unlike Rochester, for whom England is a haven, Antoinette experiences England as a prison rather than a refuge.⁴²

Not only does Antoinette lose her freedom in England, but she also loses her voice. As Gikandi points out, "...empire equals domination and a culture of silence; nation equals freedom and the culture of liberation."⁴³ This can be seen in both the colonial subjects in *Jane Eyre* – Bertha and Richard Mason. Brontë enacts Gikandi's dichotomy, providing an English national narrative which is expressed only through the voices of English characters such as Jane and Rochester. Bertha is denied a voice and, as Spivak explains in her discussion of the subaltern, can be represented only through the description of others who fall within the English meta-narrative, never herself.⁴⁴ Brontë's effective silencing of the subaltern identity is coupled with Rochester's silencing of the colonial body. Once again Gikandi's dichotomy is enacted as Rochester's national English identity allows him to dominate Mason and silence him, warning, "Richard – it will be at the peril of your life if you speak to her: open your lips – agitate yourself – and I'll not answer for the consequences," (*JE* 236). Bertha and Mason's forced colonial silence is necessary to suppress the threat of a subaltern discourse, which could challenge the authority of

⁴² Nixon 275.

⁴³ Gikandi 17.

⁴⁴ Spivak, *Scattered Speculations*, 477.

Rochester's narrative of victimized Englishman and, consequently, the sanctity of Jane and Rochester's English union.⁴⁵

Brontë's text justifies restraining Bertha by pointing out her own lack of restraint, in regard to both violence and sexuality, and her excesses once again enhance Jane's Englishness. During the nineteenth century, one mark of Englishness was control over passions and aversion to physical violence.⁴⁶ Of all the forms of physical violence, the use of the knife was considered the most primitive and uncivilized by the English courts system.⁴⁷ As Martin Wiener points out: "...in public culture, foreign knife-wielders – Latins most commonly – were seen to fall short of the standards of civilization exemplified by the English."⁴⁸ In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha not only exhibits repeated violence against Mr. Rochester and Richard Mason, but she employs a knife as her weapon – proving her lack of civilization (*JE* 239). Bertha's violent revolts also allude to the slave revolts in the West Indies that the English were so terrified of during the nineteenth-century. Her narrative functions as a slave narrative within the text as she is taken from her native home by the white European colonizer, travels on her own Middle Passage from Jamaica to England, and is enslaved in Thornfield by her colonial oppressor. Bertha's position as colonial Other is once again reinforced when she enacts a slave rebellion similar to the burning of Coulibri by former slaves in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, setting fire to Thornfield while the colonial master

⁴⁵ Nixon 272.

⁴⁶ Martin J. Wiener, "Homicide and 'Englishness': Criminal Justice and National Identity in Victorian England" *National Identities* 6.3 (2004): 204.

⁴⁷ Wiener 207.

⁴⁸ Wiener 207.

sleeps inside.⁴⁹ By making Bertha's narrative mirror a slave-narrative, Brontë places her firmly in the role of feared Other – completely alien from Rochester and Jane.⁵⁰

Bertha/Antoinette's excessive sexuality also makes her a perfect foil to demonstrate Jane's Englishness. By making Bertha a West Indian Creole, Brontë invokes prevalent stereotypes of nineteenth-century Britain, which characterized colonial women as "intemperate and unchaste" – terms Rochester uses to describe Bertha in *Jane Eyre* (345). In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rochester describes Antoinette as being provocatively sexual: "Sometimes a sidelong look or a sly knowing glance disturbed me, but it was never for long," (*WSS* 54). She is suspected of having an extra-marital affair with her cousin, Sandi, a doubled transgression which wrests from Rochester the anguished cry, "Do you think that I don't know? She thirsts for *anyone* – not for me..." (*WSS* 107). Rhys's Antoinette is in direct opposition to Brontë's Jane, who refuses to be Rochester's mistress, regardless of the broken state of his marriage and despite her passionate love for him (*JE* 337). Even during their engagement, Jane shows extreme sexual restraint – not allowing Rochester to touch her, pamper her, or even compliment her (*JE* 307). The self-discipline which Jane possesses and Antoinette lacks was one of the quintessential qualities of Englishness during the Victorian era.⁵¹ While Rochester criticizes Antoinette for being so emotionally transparent in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and not concealing her feelings as he has learned to do (*WSS* 63), Jane is adept at hiding her emotions. She is even able to discipline herself into not showing her attraction to Mr. Rochester: "I had reason to congratulate myself on the

⁴⁹ Seodial F.H Deena, *Canonization, Colonization, Decolonization: A Comparative Study of Political and Critical Works by Minority Writers* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2001) 99.

⁵⁰ Vellenga 127.

⁵¹ Michael Curtin, *Propriety and Position: A Study of Victorian Manners* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1987) 128.

course of wholesome discipline to which I had thus forced my feelings to submit,” (*JE* 184). Jane’s self-restraint allows her to protect her untainted body, while Antoinette’s reportedly promiscuous behavior pollutes her colonial body – signifying Jane’s English moral superiority to Antoinette’s moral and physical degradation. Thus, Jane’s self-control and Bertha’s lack of restraint in regard to sexuality demonstrate Jane’s Englishness and Bertha’s Otherness.

Jean Rhys’s postcolonial answer to *Jane Eyre* opposes Brontë’s construction of Bertha as Other to English superiority, but her own project is complicated by ideological contradictions.⁵² These contradictions within Rhys’s work are a product of her own confusion as to the nature of Englishness. Written in 1966 after her repatriation, *Wide Sargasso Sea* in many ways serves as Rhys’s own colonial narrative: demonstrating the narrow confines of Englishness which allowed Rhys to be a British imperial subject but never an English domestic citizen. Rhys describes how the confines of Englishness manifest themselves among the domestic English population in her journal:

I soon discovered the peculiarly smug attitude which made them quite sure that I was in some way inferior...If I said I was *English* they at once contradicted me – or implied a contradiction – No a colonial – you’re not English – inferior being. My mother says colonials aren’t ladies and gentlemen, etc., etc.

If on the other hand I’d say exasperated, “All right then I’m not English as a matter of fact I’m not a bit. I’d much rather be French or Spanish. They’d get even

⁵² Glyne Griffith, “Madness and Counterdiscourse: A Dialogic Encounter Between *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre*,” *The Woman, the Writer & Caribbean Society*, ed. Helen Pyne-Timothy (Los Angeles: Center for Afro- American Studies Publications, 1998) 222. In Griffith’s essay he observes that because Rhys’s novel is supposed to serve as the prequel to *Jane Eyre* and affects the novel’s reading, *Wide Sargasso Sea* can be seen as counter-colonizing the novel in the name of the colonial “Other.”

more amazed at that. I was [a] traitor. You're British they'd say...Neither one thing nor the other. Heads you win tails I lose – And I never liked their voices any better than they liked mine.⁵³

Rhys's inability to claim a solid national identity is reflected both in her depiction of Antoinette as a hybrid character and the implicit contradictions found within her discussion of Englishness. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys both fights against tropes of Englishness using what Homi Bhabha terms "colonial mimicry"⁵⁴ and colludes with the colonial project by using black characters as "props to the Creole identity" just as Brontë uses the Creole as a prop to the English identity.⁵⁵ Throughout the novel, Rhys reflects the social hierarchy the British imposed upon the West Indies by displaying her protagonist Antoinette's constant, albeit failed, attempts to achieve Englishness. From the onset of the novel Antoinette lacks a sense of belonging, due to "...a destructive racism that separates her socially from the Caribbean black population and epistemologically from the European white population."⁵⁶ When Mr. Mason "so sure of himself, so without a doubt English" (*WSS* 17) marries Annette, Antoinette's mother, he attempts to Anglicize the family. Although Antoinette enjoys behaving like an English girl, eating traditional English food like beef and mutton, she acknowledges that it is only a façade, as she truly craves Christophine's spicy West Indian cooking (*WSS* 16). Antoinette's aberration from English tastes signifies her physical and cultural difference from the domestic English body as the Creole food she chooses to ingest comes to symbolize her Creole Otherness. Mr. Mason for his part cannot understand

⁵³ Ciolkowski 350.

⁵⁴ Bhabha 126.

⁵⁵ Veronica Marie Gregg, *Jean Rhys's Historical Imagination: Reading and Writing the Creole* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995) 37.

⁵⁶ Griffith 222.

Antoinette and her mother's alterity, attempting to claim them for the English elite⁵⁷ while both are self-admittedly "so without a doubt not English," (*WSS* 16). The impossibility of complete English assimilation is self-evident to the Cosway women, who realize that "...to celebrate the dominant codes of Englishness, doesn't have the same status or authority as those persons who, because of their race and genealogy, are construed as English to the backbone."⁵⁸

Part of Antoinette's inability to claim Englishness lies in her family's lack of wealth. For the black inhabitants of Jamaica, whiteness is associated with the wealthy planter class. Thus, because Antoinette cannot properly perform her whiteness, she cannot claim Englishness.⁵⁹ Tia, the black Jamaican girl whom Antoinette tries to befriend, points out the incongruity in Antoinette's social status when she says, "Real white people, they got gold money. Old time white people nothing but white nigger now, and black nigger better than white nigger," (*WSS* 8). When Tia refers to "old time white people" she is referring to former slave owners whose familiarity with and involvement in the slave-trade have creolized them and "...morally and biologically estranged [them] from their English brethren."⁶⁰ Antoinette's physical appearance also plays a role in her difficulty claiming Englishness because her skin color is ambiguous. While some literary critics assume Antoinette is a white Creole because of Rochester's comments about her ability to pass as English at times (*WSS* 40), Brontë's text describes her as having darkened skin and appearing almost purple to Jane (*JE* 317). Bertha/Antoinette's racial ambiguity contributes

⁵⁷ Johnson 94.

⁵⁸ Gikandi 126.

⁵⁹ Vivian Nun Halloran, "Race, Creole, and National Identities in Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Phillips's *Cambridge*," *Small Axe* 21 (October 2006): 91.

⁶⁰ Vellenga 130.

to her exclusion from an English identity as her description of having darkened skin associates her with “blackness,” the antithesis of English whiteness. For Britain, “blackness” was associated with the colonial slaves and their violent uprisings in the West Indies against the white English imperial power. This connection is only strengthened at the end of *Wide Sargasso Sea* when Rhys foretells what I have previously described as Bertha/Antoinette’s slave revolt when she sets Thornfield on fire (*WSS* 123). Thus, Bertha/Antoinette’s racial ambiguity results in English colonial anxiety, as she is linked with colonial slave violence against the colonizer, making her emphatically un-English.⁶¹

However, just as Rhys shows that Antoinette cannot be truly English, she also problematizes the premise of Brontë’s novel: that Antoinette’s Otherness is the reflection of Jane’s Englishness. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys questions, through her use of colonial mimicry, the diametric opposition of the two female characters seen in *Jane Eyre*. Homi Bhabha states that the act of colonial mimicry consists of

...[a] desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as *a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must produce its slippage, its excess, its difference.⁶²

Thus, colonial mimicry reveals the ambivalence of racial markers and the arbitrariness of cultural hierarchy. In the scene in *Wide Sargasso Sea* where the black ex-slaves set fire to Coulibri, Rhys reenacts the famous scene of Bertha setting fire to Thornfield in *Jane Eyre*. By mimicking this scene of colonial violence, Rhys makes Antoinette a victim of the

⁶¹ Gikandi 51.

⁶² Bhabha 126.

colonial Other – associating her with the English (Rochester and Jane) who are also victims of the colonial Other in *Jane Eyre*. Such a comparison destabilizes the supposedly inherent difference between Antoinette’s Creoleness and Rochester and Jane’s shared Englishness. More examples of this rupture in the dominant discourse of Englishness can be seen when Rochester notices how Antoinette “might have been any pretty English girl,” and Granbois “looked like an imitation of an English summer house,” (*WSS* 40). Both of Rochester’s observations illustrate the dangers of colonial mimicry when it borders on resemblance with Englishness and undermines its authenticity.⁶³ Such subversive ideology was a threat to the British, as it revealed Englishness as an empty fiction and called into question “the very integrity of the English culture and identity.”⁶⁴ Rhys emphasizes the fallacy of the English hierarchy by undermining Rochester’s claims to moral and cultural superiority. She depicts him sharing qualities with Daniel Cosway, Antoinette’s biracial alleged half-brother, who, like Rochester, resents his father (*WSS* 79). She even goes so far as to have Rochester betray his Englishness by endangering the homogeneity of the British race through sleeping with the black servant Amélie and actively partaking in miscegenation (*WSS* 94).

While Rhys successfully problematizes Englishness’s autocracy in casting Antoinette as the colonial Other and English subordinate, she also – consciously or unconsciously – colludes with the very ideology she attempts to oppose by having Antoinette view the

⁶³ Bhabha 127. Bhabha explains that colonial mimicry is based upon ambivalence: an uncertainty of difference between the colonizer and colonial body. Therefore, by constructing a colonial Other and emphasizing “its slippage, its excess, its difference,” from previous depictions of the colonial Other by colonial (English) authors, post-colonial authors can undermine notions of colonial difference that preceded them. Such a process subverts imperial dichotomies of Englishness and Otherness, questioning the authenticity of difference between colonizer and colonized body and the validity of Englishness as a superior construct.

⁶⁴ Ciolkowski 349.

Blacks⁶⁵ as racially inferior.⁶⁶ Rhys depicts Antoinette as being embarrassed by her black relations (half-siblings) and espousing Mr. Mason's English view of Blacks as lazy when she comments on their complicity in Coulibri's dilapidated state (*WSS* 5). Antoinette also displays an English fear of miscegenation when she sees a black servant kiss her mother.⁶⁷ She proceeds to generalize her disgust at the black servant by lashing out at Christophine and calling her a "damned black devil from Hell," (*WSS* 86). By associating Christophine with the black man, Antoinette demonstrates that "the racial dyad of white and black is always there in the back of her mind, always structuring and warping conceptions and relations, even her relationship with Christophine."⁶⁸ In the scene where Antoinette is chased by the biracial boy on her way to school, she describes her horror at the child's hybrid features: "...he had white skin, a dull ugly white covered with freckles, his mouth was a negro's mouth... Worst, most horrible of all, his hair was crinkled, a negro's hair, but bright red and his eyebrows and eyelashes were red," (*WSS* 26). Antoinette's apparent fear of the biracial boy stems from his enactment of colonial mimicry as he engages in the act of passing – "almost the same but not white".⁶⁹ Her revulsion at the physical evidence of miscegenation mirrors Rochester's English disgust when he reflects that Antoinette and Amélie resemble each other and could be related, whereby Antoinette would be the colonial subject attempting to pass and infiltrate the borders of whiteness (*WSS* 80).

⁶⁵ In my paper I will use the term "Blacks" as Jean Rhys and other West Indian writers have to indicate a people of predominantly or complete African ancestry.

⁶⁶ Gikandi 16.

⁶⁷ Ciolkowski 352.

⁶⁸ Patrick Colm Hogan, *Colonialism and Cultural Identity: Crises of Tradition in the Anglophone Literatures of India, Africa, and the Caribbean* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000) 94.

⁶⁹ Bhabha 130. Once again Bhabha points out how the foundations of Englishness are undermined by colonial mimicry in which passing for white – read English – is almost possible, producing the phrase "almost the same but not white."

Antoinette's attempts to break out of her displaced role of the "Other" and establish herself within one cultural group are continually thwarted. When Antoinette attempts to assimilate with the black population in Jamaica, befriending Tia and speaking patois, her complete assimilation is prevented by both Tia and Rochester. When Coulibri is burned down and Antoinette runs to join her friend Tia, she throws a rock at Antoinette's face and signals Antoinette's rejection by the black community (*WSS* 23). Rochester of course will not let Antoinette find a place among the Blacks – as she is now the wife of an Englishman – and voices his disapproval with her speaking patois with Christophine along with hugging and kissing the black servants openly.⁷⁰ Thus, Antoinette's own English prejudices, along with Tia's rejection and Rochester's chastisement, exclude her from identifying with the black community, while her birth and familiarity with the former slaves preclude her assimilation with the English community.

While in *Jane Eyre* Rochester asserts that it was Bertha's sexual "...excesses [that] had prematurely developed the germs of insanity," (*JE* 345) Rhys's portrayal of Antoinette argues that her madness is the result of trying to fit within the narrow confines of Englishness. As Seodial Deena points out, Antoinette is a victim of colonization, "one of the purest forms of cultural destruction and mass human denigration."⁷¹ Even the British colonizers suffer from a loss of cultural identity as they are creolized and rejected by their English relations. Antoinette alludes to this when she and Mr. Mason discuss how Cora's husband's family refused to help the Cosways because of their involvement with slavery (*WSS* 13). Antoinette's attempts to identify herself as English are frustrated by the nature of

⁷⁰ Deena 107.

⁷¹ Deena 85.

her position as a Creole, on the boundary of Englishness and Otherness – being simultaneously radically different and yet inherently similar to Rochester.⁷² Erica Johnson discusses this dichotomy of inclusion and exclusion within the canon of Englishness when she says: “Rhys is careful to show how the history of colonialism operates in such a way that Creole characters never achieve the same sense of national or even geographical identity that the English characters possess.”⁷³ Antoinette exists in an imperial system which simultaneously forces her to submit to the British nation-state’s domestic legal and cultural practices yet refuses to view her as anything more than a distant imperial subject – never domestically English.⁷⁴ She is rejected by the Jamaican black community, and while her label as “Other” is problematized, she is still denied her Englishness. Antoinette addresses her own lack of identity when she reflects:

It was a song about a white cockroach. That’s me. That’s what they call all of us who were here before their own people in Africa sold them to the slave traders. And I’ve heard English women call us white niggers. So between you [*sic*] I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all. (*WSS* 63)

Taking a holistic/combined view of both Brontë and Rhys’s texts, the synthesized character of Bertha and Antoinette evades any type of classification: she is neither Brontë’s mad criminal nor Rhys’s dutiful, victimized English wife.⁷⁵ Her identity is unknown both to the reader and herself, while its malleability is demonstrated by Rochester’s ability to

⁷² Gikandi 2.

⁷³ Johnson 87.

⁷⁴ Ciolkowski 350.

⁷⁵ Johnson 107.

mold it from free-spirited Antoinette to lost and confused Bertha. Antoinette realizes how Rochester is manipulating her identity and self-concept when she says, “Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name,” (*WSS* 95). Rochester’s other nickname for Antoinette, “Marionette,” signifies the loss of identity as Antoinette soon becomes Rochester’s possession to be locked away in the attic devoid of free-will. Patrick Hogan comments on the aptness of “Marionette” as a nickname for Antoinette saying it reflects her change in identity to “...a mere manipulated thing, a puppet, a piece of wood, without reflection or autonomous action, without social connectedness (beyond mere manipulation), without identity.”⁷⁶ Antoinette’s inability to forge a true identity for herself, coupled with the loss of her primitive self-concept leads to her later madness at Thornfield.⁷⁷ Not only does Antoinette lose all concepts of time and place – neither remembering how long she has been in the “cardboard house” nor believing that she is in England – but she loses touch with herself (*WSS* 116-117). In one of the final scenes of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette escapes from her attic prison in Thornfield and experiences a traumatic event: “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 streaming hair. She was surrounded by a gilt frame but I knew her,” (*WSS* 122). What Antoinette has just witnessed is her own transformation into Rochester’s mad Creole wife, Bertha, as she views her reflection in a hall mirror. She has effectively passed through a reverse Lacanian mirror-phase, in which she is now cognizant that her mirror image is distorted and broken, replacing her previously

⁷⁶ Hogan 93.

⁷⁷ Hogan 85.

holistic self-concept.⁷⁸ It is this disassociation between Antoinette's formerly holistic⁷⁹ self-concept in Jamaica and her currently fractured identity in England that causes Antoinette to assume the role of Rochester and Brontë's mad Creole woman, Bertha. Rhys's haunting image of Antoinette's face being reflected as Brontë's mad Creole woman in the "gilt frame" foreshadows⁸⁰ Antoinette's life as voiceless Bertha in Brontë's text – trapped by Rochester in her "gilt"⁸¹ cage on the third floor of Thornfield.

⁷⁸ Hogan 84. Hogan discusses the role of Lacan's mirror-phase in Rhys's novel, explaining that the mirror-phase involved the child's adoption of its mirror image (which was holistic) as its perceptual self-image (which was formerly fractured). I use Lacan's mirror-phase to demonstrate how witnessing a mirror image more fractured than our previous self-concept can have the opposite effect on us: making us feel more psychologically fractured instead of holistic.

⁷⁹ I use the term "holistic" here to refer to Antoinette's former mental and behavioral self-concept and knowledge of her appearance as opposed to racial/ethnic self-concept. While Antoinette's race and ethnicity are continually problematized throughout *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette is aware of her physical appearance while in Jamaica through her use of mirrors. When Antoinette looks at her reflection in the hall mirror at Thornfield she sees the house's bloated, sickly, promiscuous, insane ghost and passes through a reverse mirror stage that results in mental fracturing as she cannot reconcile this figure with the knowledge of her previous mental and behavioral self-concept and physical appearance.

⁸⁰ I say "foreshadow" here solely in regards to the setting of the novels as Rhys's novel acts as the prequel to Brontë's although it was written more than a century later.

⁸¹ "Gilt" here takes on two meanings as it both signifies Rochester's "guilt" at his involvement in the colonial project and the small room he places Bertha in with Grace Poole which becomes her golden cage.

Section Three: An Integrated English Identity

As demonstrated in Chapter Two, one of the most effective ways for British authors to demonstrate Englishness in the nineteenth-century British novel was through the comparison of the colonial Other with its English superior. While Brontë achieves this with Bertha and Jane in *Jane Eyre*, Rhys demonstrates English self-importance and superiority by having Rochester constantly compare the West Indies and its inhabitants to England. She illustrates that for Rochester, England is clearly the norm or standard against which everything else should be measured. Starting from his arrival in Jamaica, Rochester begins comparing West Indian and English practices: the time dinner is served, the way the houses look, the way Antoinette interacts with the servants (*WSS* 55). Perhaps one of the most telling dichotomies Rochester puts into place is that of “...one ancestral home against another,” with Thornfield (representing England) asserting its dominance over Granbois (representing the colonial) at the conclusion of *Wide Sargasso Sea*.⁸²

Rochester’s innate Englishness is evidenced through his susceptibility to colonial disease. Jane’s fears of colonial contamination that she expresses in regards to travelling to India in *Jane Eyre* are realized in Rochester’s character in *Wide Sargasso Sea* when he contracts a fever immediately upon his arrival in Jamaica. His healthy English body cannot withstand the colonial contagion represented by the West Indies and he feels “wretched” from the affliction for two weeks (*WSS* 44). Just as Antoinette’s Otherness and bodily contamination can be seen by her desire and ability to ingest Creole food, Rochester’s

⁸² Johnson 97. Thornfield, and thus England, is able to assert its dominance over Granbois, or the colonial, by serving as the resting place for Rochester and Bertha/Antoinette at the end of the novel and for the duration of Brontë’s text. Not only is

Englishness can be seen through his inability to ingest substances that are coded as belonging to the colonial Other. In the scene where Antoinette puts one of Christophine's potions, made of West Indian ingredients, in Rochester's wine he becomes physically sick to the point of thinking himself poisoned (*WSS* 88). His unsullied English body has been invaded by the colonial contagion and his moral and cultural superiority are confirmed in his body's visceral reaction to such contamination. Rochester's Englishness can also be seen in his utopian view of England as a safe haven from his failed marriage. In *Jane Eyre*, Rochester recalls being on the verge of suicide when he is rescued by thoughts of England: "Go," said Hope, "and live again in Europe...take the maniac with you to England; confine her with due attendance and precaution at Thornfield: then travel yourself to what clime you will, and form what new tie you like," (JE 347). Rochester is able to achieve freedom from his wife and failed marriage because of his Englishness, which as Edmund Burke states, entitles him to share in the British's history of inherent liberty. However, Englishness can liberate Rochester only by imprisoning Antoinette in his English house where she can be kept separate from the domestic English body and the threat her colonial contamination poses can be quarantined. At the end of *Jane Eyre*, when Bertha breaks free of her prison and burns Thornfield, Rochester's English body is once again afflicted. He is maimed, losing his eyesight and a limb during the fire, and decides to remain at Ferndean⁸³ in clean, safe England to convalesce (JE 477). As Meyer points out, "Rochester's

Granbois abandoned by Rochester and (albeit forcibly) Antoinette, but there is also the threat of its complete disappearance as Rochester indicates his plans to sell it at the end of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. See Rhys 113.

⁸³ It is interesting to note here that Brontë actually describes Ferndean as being unhealthy with "damp walls" in the forest (JE 338). Rochester's choice to stay at Ferndean after his mutilation indicates his colonial contamination due to his involvement in the colonial project (marrying a West Indian Creole). His pure English body has been tainted and can now withstand an unhealthier, more dangerous environment similar to Cora's ability to live in dangerous Jamaica in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Rochester staying in England and within the English domestic sphere can then be read as an attempt to cleanse his colonial contamination and return to having a pure, untainted English body.

mutilation keeps him at home, and thus within the space of the values the novel codes as English.”⁸⁴ Thus, Rochester becomes physically and symbolically tied to domestic England: aligning himself with the Englishness of the metropole and distancing himself from the Otherness of the colonies.

As a fixture of Englishness in both *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rochester refuses to accept anything that deviates from his English norms and ideals, justifying his emotional suppression: “It was necessary, I was told, and that view I have always accepted. If these mountains challenge me, or Baptiste’s face, or Antoinette’s eyes, they are mistaken, melodramatic, unreal,” (*WSS* 63). Throughout *Wide Sargasso Sea*, “...Rochester sets out the proper relationship between English Self and ethnic Other by establishing and defending the moral and physical differences that are enlisted as the signifiers of English national identity.”⁸⁵ He is horrified by the physical signs of miscegenation that he encounters during his meeting with Daniel Cosway: “A tall fine Englishman like you, you don’t want to touch a little tallow rat like me eh?” (*WSS* 79). Rochester attempts to combat this threat to English hegemony within his own marriage when he decides to remove Antoinette from Granbois and her cousin, Sandi. While Daniel Cosway insinuates an affair between Antoinette and her bi-racial cousin in Part Two of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, it isn’t until Part Three that Antoinette confirms the relationship: “We had often kissed before but not like that. That was the life and death kiss and you only know a long time afterwards what it is, the life and death kiss,” (*WSS* 123). By taking Antoinette to England Rochester is able to “...police the biological boundaries of Englishness... [and] restricts all [Antoinette’s]

⁸⁴ Meyer 84.

⁸⁵ Ciolkowski 343.

sexual activity to the domain of the patriarchal family.”⁸⁶ Therefore, Rochester prevents the possible birth and infiltration of Antoinette and Sandi’s bi-racial bastard into the patriarchal home and codes of Englishness.

However, Rochester’s efforts to erase the colonial threat posed by Antoinette’s extra-marital affair are not the only markers of his Englishness. While both Rochester and Jane seem to claim Englishness as a birthright, being born within the domestic English sphere, such a declaration built solely on geography elides other contributors necessary to possessing Englishness. Of these extraneous contributors, the two repeatedly represented as being the most important in both texts are wealth and social rank. In *Jane Eyre*, Rochester is presented as having “a gentleman’s tastes and habits,” (*JE* 120) along with “wealth and good blood,” (*JE* 181). He is the master of Thornfield and a member of the landed gentry class of English society. While Antoinette is also presented as possessing a dowry in *Wide Sargasso Sea* provided by her rich English step-father, her money is able to purchase only an English husband, not Englishness itself. Antoinette comprehends the English obsession with wealth when she comments that “Gold is the idol they worship,” (*WSS* 122). This English preoccupation with wealth as a means to sustain a family’s social position is the reason for Rochester’s disastrous marriage to Bertha/Antoinette in both texts. As the second son, he is forced by his “avaricious, grasping” father and brother to marry a Creole heiress for money. Rochester recalls his father’s concerns with money, saying to Jane, “...he [Rochester’s father] could not bear the idea of dividing his estate and leaving me a fair portion: all, he resolved, should go to my brother, Rowland. Yet as little could he endure that a son of his should be a poor man. I must be provided for by a wealthy

⁸⁶ Ciolkowski 343.

marriage” (*JE* 343). Rochester explains that both his brother and father were aware of Bertha’s family history of insanity “...but they thought only of the thirty thousand pounds, and joined in the plot against me” (*JE* 344). Thus, wealth proves so important to Rochester’s family that his father and brother are willing to sell him into a miserable marriage if it means being able to use Bertha’s fortune to protect their social position in England.

Like Rochester’s family, Jane also exhibits an English understanding of the importance of wealth at a young age when she is given the choice between living with impoverished kind relations or staying with the cruel but wealthy Reeds. Jane reflects, “...no, I was not heroic enough to purchase liberty at the price of caste,” (*JE* 32). Indeed, wealth and social rank become areas of contention for Rochester and Jane later in the novel when the two become engaged. In the famous proposal scene in the gardens of Thornfield, Rochester cries out to Jane, ““You – poor and obscure, and small and plain as you are – I entreat to accept me as a husband”” (*JE* 286). While Brontë’s characters claim that love is more important than money or class, Brontë’s decision to withhold Rochester and Jane’s marriage until Jane has gained her uncle’s inheritance and effectively purchased her entrée into Rochester’s caste reveals such claims to be merely rhetoric. During their engagement, Rochester’s wealth and Jane’s lack thereof is a constant source of tension; Jane not only makes repeated mention of their disparate “stations” (*JE* 296), but laments their financial inequality saying: ““It would, indeed, be a relief,’ I thought, ‘if I had ever so small an independency; I never can bear being dressed like a doll by Mr. Rochester...if I had but a prospect of one day bringing Mr. Rochester an accession of fortune, I could better endure to be kept by now”” (*JE* 301). Jane occupies a tenuous social position for, while being a

governess was certainly noble work that entitled one to the title of “a lady,” a woman could not be considered upper-class unless she possessed a fortune.⁸⁷ Having leisure time was another important marker of social class and rank for the Victorian woman.⁸⁸ By the end of the novel, Jane is able to achieve both through her uncle’s inheritance: she is financially independent (possessing a fortune of £5,000) and is able to quit her post as a teacher at St. John River’s school in order to have the leisure time required of an upper-class lady (*JE* 433). However, the source of Jane’s wealth – her uncle’s involvement in the slave-trade in Madeira – is conveniently forgotten by both Jane and Rochester. When Jane informs Rochester of her new status as an independently wealthy woman at the end of the novel, he immediately disregards any mention of her money’s origins and, instead, focuses on her new social station (*JE* 483). While Rochester claims to love Jane because she fulfills his needs as “the antipodes of the Creole” (*JE* 349), she is actually entrenched in the West Indies and the colonial project. Jane’s very ability to claim Englishness through her new social class hinges on her inheritance derived from the colonial project in the West Indies (*JE* 426). Not only is Jane’s fortune from the West Indies, but her marriage to Rochester is interrupted by this association with the West Indies. It is Jane’s colonial uncle who sends a solicitor to stop Jane’s false marriage after he discovers Rochester’s first marriage from Richard Mason, another colonial inhabitant (*JE* 329). Therefore, while Jane’s colonial connections allow her to acquire the final markers of Englishness (wealth and accession into the upper-class) making her Rochester’s social and intellectual equal when the couple

⁸⁷ Martha Vicinus, *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972) 10.

⁸⁸ Curtin 217

is reunited at Ferndean, she, like Rochester, is tainted by her “dirty” colonial money and involvement in the colonial project.

Religion and education also serve as important markers of Englishness in the two novels, with Antoinette representing colonial polytheism and Jane representing English Protestantism. Both women attend Christian schools during their adolescence. However, while Antoinette attends Mount Calvary Convent in Jamaica, Jane attends Lowood in England. Antoinette’s Catholic education marks her as alien since Britain, above all, defined itself by its rejection of Catholicism.⁸⁹ As Linda Colley points out: “They [the British] defined themselves as Protestants struggling for survival against the world’s foremost Catholic power [the French].”⁹⁰ Through her affiliation with Catholicism, Antoinette becomes associated with cruel and miserly characters like Eliza from *Jane Eyre*, whose choice to enter the convent has more to do with a lack of residential options than religious vocation (*JE* 272). However, while Antoinette’s connection with Catholicism taints her, it is her familiarity with obeah that truly marks her as the colonial Other. The practice of obeah was feared and outlawed by the English, who connected it historically with the Caribbean black inhabitants who used it as a source of power during the slave rebellions in Jamaica and Haiti.⁹¹ It is this historical aversion to obeah which causes Rochester to contact the English authorities when he discovers Christophine and Antoinette using it on him to try and make him love Antoinette again (*WSS* 88). Because Antoinette

⁸⁹ Armitage 8.

⁹⁰ Colley 5. Linda Colley explains the progression of Catholicism becoming the antithesis of Britishness when she reflects on England’s 130-year long rivalry with France.

⁹¹ C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Overture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989) 86. In his work James discusses the role obeah (voodoo) played in the San Domingo Revolution saying, “Voodoo was the medium of the conspiracy. In spite of all prohibitions, the slaves travelled miles to sing and dance and practice the rites and talk...to hear the political news and make their plans.”

practices Catholicism and obeah simultaneously, she is cast into the role of colonial Other with the polytheistic black Jamaican community.

Conversely, Jane's seamless Englishness is evidenced through her exclusive Protestantism as opposed to Antoinette's polytheism.⁹² She is introduced as a true English Protestant, attending Lowood, a Protestant school, as a child. Jane asserts her Christian values through her refusal to become Rochester's mistress and the charity she shows the Rivers by sharing her inheritance with them (*JE* 432). While Jane rejects the type of Christian martyrdom Helen Burns subscribes to, saying, "I must dislike those who, whatever I do to please them, persist in disliking me; I must resist those who punish me unjustly," (*JE* 68) she performs this very act of Christian martyrdom with St. John Rivers later in the novel. She describes her unhappiness at being subjected to learning Hindostanee and fulfilling all of St. John's lofty expectations, saying:

I found him...an exacting master: he expected me to do a great deal; and when I fulfilled his expectations, he, in his own way, fully testified his approbation. By degrees, he acquired a certain influence over me that took away my liberty of mind: his praise and notice were more restraining than his indifference. I could no longer talk or laugh freely when he was by; because a tiresomely importunate instinct reminded me that vivacity (at least in me) was distasteful to him. I was so fully aware that only serious moods and occupations were acceptable, that in his presence every effort to sustain or follow any other became vain: I fell under a freezing spell. When he said 'go' I went; 'come', I came; 'do this', I did it. (*JE* 443)

⁹² Plasa 25.

Yet Jane is willing to submit to St. John and travel with him to India as his missionary wife, despite her fears of colonial disease and her scorn for his “counterfeit sentiments” (*JE* 454) as well as his person, “...were I but convinced it is God’s will,” (*JE* 466). Jane’s martyrdom is evidenced in this desperate act of self-sacrifice in the name of God and Christianity. However, Jane’s sacrificial act is interrupted by the sound of Rochester calling out for her; a sound which Jane later discovers resulted from Rochester praying to God when he called out her name. Jane’s ability to hear his prayers and grant them becomes a testament to her ardent Faith and spirituality. This pattern of God rewarding Protestants can also be seen in *Wide Sargasso Sea* when Antoinette observes that it isn’t until Mr. Mason, the Englishman, calls out to God to stop the Blacks from yelling during the fire at Coulibri that “...mysterious God heard Mr. Mason and answered him at once,” (*WSS* 22). Thus, both texts represent a value system whereby Protestantism (coded for Englishness) is rewarded by God, while polytheism (coded for colonial Other) is punished by English law.⁹³

Intelligence and appropriate education are also characteristics inherently linked to Englishness within the two novels. Jane proves herself to be a competent governess while Antoinette seems to lack any solid knowledge: “She was undecided, uncertain about facts – any fact” (*WSS* 52). In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë extols the virtues of the British education system saying, “...for after all, the British peasantry are the best taught, best mannered, most self-respecting of any in Europe...” (*JE* 434). It is for this reason that Rochester wishes his

⁹³ Both Antoinette and Christophine are punished for their use of obeah in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Christophine is imprisoned by English authorities and Rochester prevents her from helping Antoinette by threatening future incarceration by the “white inspector of police” who assures Rochester that Christophine “won’t get off lightly this time” (*WSS* 92). Antoinette is similarly punished for being polytheistic through plot events as her marriage to Rochester makes her and her fortune subject to him by English law. She loses her financial independence, her freedom, her home and eventually her identity in the course of *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

ward, Adèle, to have an English governess: “‘I e’en took the poor thing out of the slime and mud of Paris, and transplanted it here, to grow up clean in the wholesome soil of the English country garden,’” (*JE* 164). Rochester’s metaphor alludes to Bewell’s discussion of medical geography once again as England is coded as clean and pure while anywhere outside the domestic English sphere is depicted as dirty and contaminated. Therefore, Adèle is to be colonized by English teachings and morals in order to eradicate any traces of moral contamination from her French mother, Céline. The superiority of the English can be seen through Rochester’s contemptuous description of all his mistresses “...each conforming to... a national stereotype. The Frenchwoman Céline proves shallow and false, the Italian Giacinta ‘unprincipled and violent,’ and the German Clara ‘honest and quiet; but heavy, mindless, unimpressible.’”⁹⁴ Jane’s ability to rid Adèle of the vestiges of her “French defects” (*JE* 500) highlights her “...crucial role in the cultural battlefield of a creolizing nation.”⁹⁵ Thus, Jane’s claims to Englishness are bolstered by her evident power to teach and convey Englishness to others.

In the final chapter of *Jane Eyre*, Jane’s narrative voice resounds with her newfound marital serenity.⁹⁶ She and Rochester are finally able to be together as Jane’s social rank and intellect are found to be congruent with Rochester’s. She has finally achieved independent wealth to complement her preexisting marks of Englishness: birth, education, modesty, and intellect. Jane exemplifies the British restraint Rochester possesses in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and repeatedly asserts their intellectual compatibility saying, “I have something in my brain and heart, in my blood and nerves, that assimilates me mentally to

⁹⁴ Vellenga 123.

⁹⁵ Vellenga 141.

⁹⁶ Nixon 276.

him” (*JE* 199). While Rochester describes Bertha as having a “nature wholly alien to mine,” (*JE* 434) he claims Jane as his appropriate bride “...because my equal is here, and my likeness,” (*JE* 285). It is their shared Englishness “...that paves the way for a ‘happily-ever-after’ conclusion premised not on feminine fancy, but on notions of a natural law of cultural and spiritual compatibility and ‘congruous union.’”⁹⁷ However, this ending can come about only after the removal of the colonial contagion (Bertha) from Rochester and Jane’s relationship. Although Rochester’s blindness and amputated hand can be seen as the scars he must bear as a consequence of his involvement in the colonial project, Bertha’s death also signals the beginning of Rochester’s repentance and absolution from colonial sin. Not only does he pledge “...to lead a purer life than I have done hitherto,” (*JE* 497) but he atones for the threat his Creole marriage posed to the hegemony of the Empire by having a purely English son with Jane, thereby defending and perpetuating the imperial patriarchal order.⁹⁸ By following St. John’s advice and spending her life regenerating the English race (*JE* 435), Jane also absolves any guilt she might possess over her complicity with the colonial project and the source of her inheritance. She has turned her back on the colonial project and imperial world, focusing instead on defending the homogeneity of the domestic English household. It is this emphasis on English domesticity that gives the myth of Englishness its power: claiming it as something solely for the nation-state – never imperial – and unattainable for the colonial Other. Both Jane and Rochester are rewarded for their homogenous union and for policing the borders of Englishness with the return of Rochester’s eyesight so that he may bear witness to the continuation of the English

⁹⁷ Nixon 270.

⁹⁸ Griffith 221.

patrilineal order which his former marriage nearly jeopardized (*JE* 501). Through this symbolic act of healing, Brontë conveys the power of Englishness to erase traces of colonial contamination.

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