

RECLAIMING THROUGH RETELLING: THEORIZING
CARIBBEAN CULTURAL IDENTITY THROUGH TWENTIETH-
CENTURY CARIBBEAN RETELLINGS OF WESTERN LITERARY
CLASSICS

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Throughout the 20th century, many of the territories colonized by once expansive European empires began to resist their colonial powers. Military resistance, peaceful diplomacy, non-violent civil disobedience, cultural movements, political revolutions, and more decolonial action pervaded this period that has since become known as the beginning of postcolonialism. One tool that theorists, politicians, and activists used during this period to realize their visions of postcolonial futures was literature. The focus of this thesis is to examine just one literary strategy used by postcolonial authors—that of retelling the Western literary canon from the perspective of the colonized—to assess its impact on and value to a specific postcolonial region, the Caribbean. To do so, I examine three 20th-century Caribbean texts which depart from and reimagine a work or works from the Western literary canon. I argue that Aimé Césaire’s *A Tempest*, Derek Walcott’s *Omeros*, and Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* each depart from a work or works from the Western literary canon to simultaneously resist colonialism, imagine decolonial futures for the region, and theorize Caribbean cultural identity. By placing these three texts in conversation with the works of 20th-century Caribbean cultural theorists and postcolonial theorists like Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha, and others, I seek to show the unique and multifaceted value of retelling Western literary classics in the Caribbean.

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Introduction

During the 20th century, many of the territories historically colonized by European empires began to contest their colonial powers in large and organized ways. The era saw military resistance, peaceful diplomacy, non-violent civil disobedience, cultural movements, political revolutions and more decolonial action sprout up across the entirety of the colonized world. Some resistance movements were successful in gaining independence, others were not. Regardless of a given territory's success in achieving independence, 20th-century decolonization brought to the forefront new questions of national and cultural identity for these formerly colonized places. The Caribbean in particular faced a unique question due to the vast majority of its population being non-indigenous to the region after the destruction and replacement of much of the indigenous Taíno, Ciguayos, Macorix, and Guanahatabey peoples with European settlers, enslaved Africans, and later East Asian immigrants. The question of what it means to be Caribbean is one that pervades this time period in everything from the speeches of Caribbean politicians to the essays of Caribbean academics and the novels of Caribbean writers. If Martinican theorist Aimé Césaire was correct in saying that “colonization = thingification,” then the postcolonial Caribbean was a region trying to find its human identity after colonialism had stripped its humanity from it. The question “What does it mean to be Caribbean?” then becomes a question of becoming human again. The answers to this question are as numerous and varied as the people of the region, but one strategy employed by many of the most influential thinkers and writers during the 20th century is that of retelling Western literature from their own perspectives. The range of discursive strategies employed in these retellings and the identities represented in them are the focus of this thesis.

The goal of this paper is to closely examine three 20th-century Caribbean retellings of Western literary classics to illustrate the variety of ways the strategy of retelling has been utilized to represent Caribbean cultural identity. It must be stated immediately that while there are similarities between the strategies and ideas of these three authors and their retellings, in no way are they using the strategy in the same way to accomplish the same goals, nor do they come close to representing the true depth and variety of perspectives of the region. The modern Caribbean consists of a few dozen recognized territories which range from independent nations to territories dependent on and subject to a sovereign state and territories whose ownership is disputed. The population of the Caribbean traces its lineage to nearly every corner of the globe. As a result, the region is home to hundreds of ethnic groups, cultures, spiritual belief systems, and languages. While some have historically painted the Caribbean as a singular entity, the diversity of the region makes it not only incorrect but harmfully essentializing to suggest that a single, all-encompassing Caribbean cultural identity exists. This is precisely why this research seeks to emphasize the differences between the three retellings it examines as much as, if not more than, their similarities. When the phrase “Caribbean cultural identity” is used throughout this paper, it should be understood to mean the specific identity or identities with which the author him or herself is engaging. Some are generalized for the entire region; some are specific to a unique community in a given territory. This paper’s primary objective is to provide just a taste of the range of perspectives on Caribbean cultural identities that exist and the role that retelling Western literature has played in producing and presenting some of these perspectives.

The three retellings this paper examines are Aimé Césaire’s retelling of William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, titled *A Tempest*; Derek Walcott’s retelling of Homer’s *Illiad* and *Odyssey* and Virgil’s *Aeneid*, titled *Omeros*; and Jean Rhys’ retelling of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane*

Eyre, titled *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Each of these texts retells or departs from a work or works of the Western literary canon and offers a unique perspective on Caribbean cultural identity, but they differ from one another in nearly every other area. From their form, their author's geographic region, the period when they were written, to the degree to which they adhere to their departure text, these three retellings differ from one another greatly. Aimé Césaire writes his retelling from Martinique in the 1960s and follows Shakespeare's original quite closely. Jean Rhys writes as a White Creole from Dominica in the 1960s whose con-text acts as a spiritual prequel to Brontë's original. Derek Walcott writes from St. Lucia in the early 1990s and carries through thematic and narrative elements of his departure texts while otherwise writing a tangentially related story. However, it is precisely their differences that highlight the variability and adaptability of retellings in this region. Each of the authors uses a variation of the strategy of retelling to accomplish different goals and present different perspectives on their personal understanding of what Caribbean cultural identity looks like. Additionally, their respective approaches to the topics of historical oppression, Caribbean indigeneity, decolonization, postcolonial futures, and more add to the diversity of perspectives the Caribbean contains within its waters. By examining these three authors' use of the strategy of retelling and placing them in conversation with the fields of Caribbean studies, cultural studies, postcolonial studies, and Black diaspora studies, this research seeks to illustrate the beautiful diversity of perspectives Caribbean writers possess on the cultural identities of the region they call home.

Literature Review

Pre-Text vs. Con-Text

To delve into the complexities of these three retellings, a few key terms must be defined. The three texts I will be examining in this essay all closely relate to what John Thieme refers to as “con-texts,” which he defines as works that “take a classic English text as a departure point, supposedly for contesting the authority of the canon of English literature” (Thieme 1). Although it varies greatly how harshly a given con-text contests the text it departs from—also referred to as a “pre-text”—all con-texts “induce a reconsideration of the supposedly hegemonic status of their canonical departure points, opening up fissures in their supposedly solid foundations” (2). In other words, to Thieme, con-texts write back to the text and the literary canon they depart from in order to critically engage with them for various reasons. For this paper, the terms con-text and pre-text will be used to refer to the retelling and the original text that the retelling departs from respectively.

However, while Thieme’s definition offers a strong foundation for the works this paper examines, it is not perfect. Although most of the texts this paper focuses on do write back to pieces of the English literary canon, it is somewhat limiting to include only the English literary canon when the canons of other Western nations could easily be contested in similar ways for similar reasons. In addition, while the texts explored in this essay absolutely challenge the hegemonic status of Western cultures and their literary canons, to say that this is their only or primary objective is shortsighted. The goals of authors writing con-texts are certainly more expansive and complicated than mere contestation. In fact, a central argument of this paper is that these authors are retelling pieces of Western literature to theorize their own personal and cultural relationships to the cultures those canons represent. Thus, for the sake of this paper, the

terms pre-texts and con-texts will be used as they are the closest to describing the kinds of works at the center of this research, but they should be understood more broadly than the definitions Thieme provides.

Another work that is foundational to this research is Bill Ashcroft's book *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature*. In this text, Ashcroft suggests that the kind of "writing back" to Western literary canons in which con-texts engage is an inherently political action as "the canonical nature and unquestioned status of the works of the English literary tradition and the values they incorporated remained potent in the cultural formation and the ideological institutions of education and literature" (Ashcroft 4). Ashcroft suggests that the literature of a given culture espouses and affirms the beliefs of that culture. In the case of European empires, whose dominance as world powers throughout the modern age enabled them to enforce their cultures on the rest of the world, their literature acted to cement their cultures as the standard to which all others are compared. For example, in colonial contexts, the first English literature about colonized peoples was written by the English colonizers themselves, whose writings helped create binaries that "privilege[d] the centre, emphasizing the 'home' over the 'native', the 'metropolitan' over the 'provincial' or 'colonial' and so forth" (5). Because the literary canons of Europe held such significant positions of authority, those canon's depictions of those with whom they now interacted were accepted due to "their claim of objectivity," which worked to "hide the imperial discourse within which they are created" (5). Thus, through writing back to the canons they draw from, con-texts address and call into question this "nexus of power involving literature, language, and a dominant [European] culture" (4). Essentially, they use the literary canon's claims to authority to subvert and criticize the canon itself as well as engage in other culturally productive work.

One claim that both Thieme and Ashcroft make in their respective pieces is that while con-texts do significant work to challenge the authority of the literary traditions they draw from, they are incapable of bringing about what Thieme, quoting theorist Helen Tiffin, refers to as “genuine revolution.” Thieme, Ashcroft, and Tiffin suggest that while con-texts can challenge the dominance of European literary canons, these texts are “deliberately provisional; they do not overturn or invert the dominant in order to become the dominant in their turn, but to question the foundations of the ontologies and epistemological systems which would see such binary structures as inescapable” (Tiffin 32). This means that while con-texts can challenge, criticize, and expose problematic aspects of the dominant canons and cultures they draw from, because they are inherently connected to those canons and cultures—by ways of using them as places of departure—they are incapable of completely uprooting and replacing them. However, this does not mean this body of literature is not worth engaging in. Even if con-texts are incapable of bringing about “genuine revolution,” they certainly create space to challenge and criticize the cultural claims to authority and superiority integral to the canons and cultures of colonial empires. In addition, because this research’s expanded definition of con-texts allows for the possibility that the primary focus of the con-text is not to contest the canon it departs from, it becomes less significant that they cannot completely overturn the authority of that canon. The work con-texts do outside of mere contestation is important in that it allows for these authors to conduct culturally productive work from their specific postcolonial positionalities. Illustrating the power these con-texts possess to both contest the canons they draw from *and* produce other culturally productive work is a central goal of this research.

Caribbean Cultural Studies

To understand the counter-discursive and culturally formative work the three Caribbean con-texts discussed in this paper do, it is necessary to put them in conversation with the overlapping fields of cultural studies, anticolonial and postcolonial studies, and Caribbean/Black diaspora studies. These fields of study each explore how culture(s) have formed and continue to form in the Caribbean while considering the role colonialism has played in those formations. For the sake of brevity, within this paper, the term “Caribbean cultural studies” shall be used to refer to these various fields. Although there are certainly differences between the various fields of study included within this research, each of these fields works offers valuable insight into the Caribbean that contextualizes the work to which these three con-texts contribute. The Caribbean is a particularly complicated region due to its overlapping historical connections to its Indigenous populations, its colonial European empires, its African-descended populations, and its Asian immigrant communities. Not to mention the fact that the Caribbean itself is not a singular entity, but rather a region that contains numerous separate and distinct cultural groups whose differences should not be erased or essentialized. Due to this, it is necessary to place the con-texts explored in this paper in conversation with the various fields of study focused on the formation of culture(s) in the Caribbean. These fields of study simultaneously interact with, criticize, build upon, and contradict each other in ways that undeniably influenced the writing of these con-texts, which makes them vital to discuss.

The first major cultural movement in the Caribbean that is relevant to this essay is known as the Négritude Movement which came about in the French colonial Caribbean in the early 20th century. This literary and political movement centered on the cultural unification of the Black diaspora, critical engagement with Western values and claims to authority, and the philosophical

combating of European colonial empires. Its founders—Senegalese poet and politician Leopold Senghor, Martinican author and politician Aimé Césaire, and French-Guinean poet and politician Léon Damas—focused heavily on bringing together a trans-national coalition of African-descended peoples to resist colonial degradation of Black identity and cultures, resist Western colonial claims to authority, and recenter African cultural traditions and belief systems that had been lost and destroyed due to the colonization of Africa and the abduction and enslavement of African peoples during the colonial period. In *Discourse on Colonialism*, Aimé Césaire suggests that Europe has reduced Black peoples to sub-human statuses through the process of “thingification.” And, to overcome Europe’s “thingification” of Black peoples all over the world, Césaire suggests that it is necessary for the Black diaspora to unify against the colonial machine.

The unification for which Césaire’s Négritude argued centered on resistance against colonialism and the “morally indefensible” European empires that participated in the system of domination without remorse. Europe, according to Césaire, is trapped in the past in that it continues to cling to the colonial understandings of race and power that it created. By departing from European cultures and systems, and instead recentering African cultural practices as a foundation on which to build new cultures, Césaire suggests that the Black diaspora will create a unified culture that is defined by “the productive powers of modern time, warm with all the fraternity of the olden days” (Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* 52). This call for a culture that is simultaneously influenced by modern production and pre-colonial traditions creates a new age of possibility for African-descended peoples which Césaire calls the hour of the “modern barbarian” (76). Intentionally using the racially charged term “barbarian,” Césaire evokes the European conception of pre-colonial Africa paired with the resources and advancements of the modern world to illustrate the Négritude Movement’s vision for a unified pan-African culture: a

culture that uses traditions and cultural systems of the pre-colonial African continent in the modern day.

While the Négritude movement was somewhat successful in uniting the Black diaspora against its European colonial oppressors and acted as a foundation that other Caribbean cultural movements would draw from and build upon, the movement did not exist without criticism. Specifically, Martinican psychologist and philosopher Frantz Fanon, an early supporter of the Négritude Movement, argued that while resistance to European colonialism was vitally important, the unification of the Black Diaspora under a singular cultural umbrella was a flawed and potentially harmful way of bringing that about. In his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon suggests that the attempt by the Négritude Movement to create a unified culture helped to cement the colonial representation of Africa and African-descended peoples as a single, homogenous entity. By not allowing for differences between various groups of African-descended peoples in the cultural umbrella of Négritude, Fanon warns that “the unconditional affirmation of African culture has succeeded the unconditional affirmation of European culture” (211-212). To Fanon, a central tenet of historical European colonialism has been the reduction of colonized peoples into a singular group whose homogeneity made them more exploitable and subjectable. By focusing on a singular African culture, the Négritude Movement fails to account for the significantly different struggles specific groups face in different contexts. As an example, Fanon points out that after attempting to unify under a singular cultural umbrella, “little by little, the American Negroes realized that the essential problems confronting them were not the same as those that confronted the African Negroes” (215). According to Fanon, the Négritude Movement unintentionally created a circumstance in which all people with ties to the African

continent were lumped into a single category that was so broad, it was incapable of providing for the different needs and addressing the different problems each individual group had.

Another criticism Fanon levies at the Négritude Movement is that it does not account for how people who fall under the cultural umbrella of Négritude contribute—whether intentionally or not—to the perpetuation of colonial systems of domination. Fanon suggests that because White European empires had entrenched racially stigmatizing binaries across the colonial world for centuries, the Black intellectuals at the head of the Négritude Movement—who were predominately educated in French schools—relied on European epistemologies to reject European empires, a strategy Fanon suggests is incapable of reaching the goals of anti-colonization. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon points to the reliance on the French language by Black intellectuals like Aimé Césaire as an example of the impossibility of using European thinking to resist colonialism and racism, due to its ties to European empires. Fanon writes that “To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture,” which means that a Black man from the Caribbean attempting to master the French language is wedding himself to the French culture which claims to be superior to him. (38). Fanon does not dismiss the historical reasons for Black intellectuals’ reliance on the French language as “the key that can open doors which were still barred from him fifty years ago,” (38), but if the goal for the Caribbean is to completely divorce itself from White European empire—something Fanon argues for—it cannot do so while relying on the language that is directly implicated in that empire.

Fanon suggests that while the Négritude Movement’s goal of rejecting European empire through the unification of the Black diaspora is a good one, the tools it employed were imperfect. Unification is necessary, but not along cultural lines centered on a return to a false mythic past of African culture. Rather, a creolized cultural identity centered on a foundation explicitly distinct

from European empire is Fanon's vision for the Caribbean. In the conclusion to *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon writes that while it is tempting to emulate a European model due to centuries of European empires instilling the belief of White supremacy in the minds of those it colonized, "we have therefore seen [...] to what mortifying setbacks such an imitation has led us" (312). The European systems Négritude unintentionally emulated were defined by their crimes against humanity including enslavement, racism, colonialism, imperialism, genocide, cultural erasure, and more. To Fanon, if the Caribbean does not wish to follow in the footsteps of its colonial oppressors, a complete separation from Europe is necessary. To accomplish this separation, the Caribbean must unify through a communal rejection of colonialism.

Stuart Hall's works build on the foundation laid by the theorists that came before him, while also considering their shortcomings. In his essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Hall echoes Fanon's criticism of the Négritude Movement's attempt to include all members of the Black diaspora under a single cultural umbrella by arguing that while Europe attempted to homogenize African peoples during the period of enslavement, "the slaves were also from different countries, tribal communities, villages, languages, and gods" (Hall 227). Since the time of enslavement, these vastly different groups have further differentiated themselves in the new geographical contexts where they found themselves; uniting them under a singular cultural flag does not account for these differences. However, breaking from Fanon, Hall suggests that accounting for differences does not completely dismiss the connections a shared history can build between different peoples. Hall argues that "[there] is a profound difference of culture and history. And that difference *matters*. It positions Martiniquians and Jamaicans as *both* the same *and* different" (227). Ignoring the historical divisions within the Black diaspora not only erases

key cultural differences, but also prevents placing one community in conversation with another, something Hall believes is necessary to understand Caribbean cultural formation.

In addition to his nuanced accounting for the similarities and differences of African-descended peoples, Hall critically engages with Fanon's focus on a complete separation from Europe, which he deems unrealistic and problematic. Much of Fanon's theories centers on a binary between Black Africans and White Europeans, but Hall does not believe these groups are so strictly constituted. Rather, to Hall, the racial, cultural, and historical systems that operate in the Caribbean do so as a "sliding scale," not as a binary division. A simple but significant example to which Hall points to illustrate this concept is the fact that "Martinique both *is* and *is not* French." (228) This means that the island and its peoples are always in conversation with France to such a degree that it becomes impossible to separate one from the other. When discussing various forms of media that are produced in the French Caribbean, including music and fashion, Hall suggests that the media these cultures produce cannot be understood as "a simple binary opposition – 'past/present,' 'them/us'" but instead must be understood as "differential points on a sliding scale" (228). This sliding scale is constituted by the fact that the Caribbean is an extremely diverse region that, if thought of in terms of European vs. African, would be grossly oversimplified. Because the Caribbean consists of people of vastly different historical backgrounds, it definitionally has become a space "where creolizations and assimilations, and syncretisms were negotiated" (234). This makes the prospect of divorcing the Caribbean from European influence one that cannot realistically be accomplished.

Instead of a region with many influences that are separate from one another, Hall suggests that the Caribbean be understood as a region whose identity is blended "through, not despite, difference; by hybridity." (235). It is this understanding of hybridity that Homi Bhabha

believes is most equipped to understand postcolonial cultures like those of the Caribbean. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha suggests that to conceptualize Caribbean cultural identity, it is necessary to see it as:

an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of a culture's hybridity. To that end we should remember that it is the 'inter' – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *inbetween* space – that carries the burden and meaning of culture. (Bhabha 56).

To Hall and Bhabha, the most accurate way of understanding Caribbean cultural identity is as an ever-evolving and ever-mixing culture that embraces its different influences. Thus, contrary to Négritude, there is no return to Africa, and contrary to Fanon, there is no divorce from Europe. Instead, Bhabha and Hall suggest that the cultures that have influenced and mixed to form the Caribbean cultures of the contemporary world cannot be separated from one another; the hybridization of these cultures is precisely what defines the Caribbean.

As the simultaneously conflicting and complementary positions of Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Stuart Hall and Homi Bhabha illustrate, Caribbean cultural identity was being negotiated throughout and beyond the 20th century. This incomplete understanding of Caribbean cultural identity is part of the reason examining Caribbean literature is so valuable. Literature and other forms of artistic expression are means through which culture is imagined, created, and discussed. In the opening paragraph of his book, Bill Ashcroft writes that "Literature offers one of the most important ways in which these new perceptions are expressed" (Ashcroft 1). Thus, literature offers a space where theories are imagined and explored. The focus of this essay is not to pit these theories against one another to find the one "true" understanding of Caribbean cultural identity; such work is not only impossible, but harmfully short-sighted.

Rather, the focus of this essay is to place 20th-century Caribbean con-texts in conversation with the theories of Caribbean theorists like Césaire, Fanon, Hall, and Bhabha in order to illustrate the diversity of perspectives this region holds on its own cultural identity.

A Tempest by Aimé Césaire

Overview

To understand how these three con-texts contribute to the conversation on Caribbean cultural formation during the 20th century, it is useful to start with one of the most well-known Caribbean con-texts written by one of the most important theorists of the Négritude Movement, Aimé Césaire. In his retelling of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, titled *A Tempest*, Césaire restages the conflict between Prospero, Caliban, and Ariel as an allegorical battle between the colonizer and the colonized. As a founder of the Négritude Movement, Césaire's text predictably reflects many of the main ideas from *Discourse on Colonialism* especially regarding the unification of the Black Diaspora along shared ancestral lines. However, Césaire wrote *A Tempest* nearly twenty years after he published *Discourse on Colonialism*, which results in him critically engaging with his own theories as well as the theories of other Caribbean scholars that emerged during the time between the two works' publications. Specifically, Césaire focuses heavily on language in *A Tempest*, considering the role both colonial languages and native languages can play in asserting cultural identity and resisting colonial oppression. In addition, Césaire also considers the role African cultural revitalization can play in understanding Caribbean cultural identity by evoking Yoruba deities and animism throughout his text. Lastly, he considers the concerns Fanon and Hall raise regarding the erasure of differences between members of the Black Diaspora by placing Caliban's and Ariel's differing strategies of resistance in conversation with each other.

Why *The Tempest*?

Césaire's choice to depart from William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is noteworthy in and of itself. Not only is Shakespeare one of the pillars upon which the English literary canon is constructed, but, of all his plays, *The Tempest* most closely addresses the themes of colonialism in which Caribbean scholars like Césaire are particularly interested. While there are various interpretations of Shakespeare's understanding of and stance on the colonizer/colonized dynamic in *The Tempest*, there is no question that Shakespeare's text directly engages with these topics. It is difficult to reach consensus on Shakespeare's positions on colonialism during his period, but it appears that he does not wholly agree with the British crown's belief in their divine right to colonize the new world. Rather, Joseph Khoury argues that *The Tempest* intentionally problematizes the colonizer/colonized relationship through Shakespeare's creation of a colonized character who transgresses the expectations the British Empire created around those like him. This colonized character, Caliban, is "a complex, intelligent, poetic, and resistant creature," which, at the very least, indicates that Shakespeare was not trying to reaffirm the portrayal of colonized peoples who are stereotypically represented as just the opposite (23). The inclusion of a transgressive colonized character in the text places it in conversation with the topics of colonialism, enslavement, and the authority of the British Empire. Indeed, by creating a nuanced African character who has been enslaved by a powerful European authority, Shakespeare creates space for critically engaging with the moral question of European colonialism and enslavement because, "Only the slave who desires freedom resists the master" (23). If Shakespeare did not wish to call these topics into question, he likely would not have crafted such a nuanced and argumentative colonized character as Caliban. Thus, *The Tempest*'s pre-existing engagement with European colonialism makes it a particularly useful text for Césaire to depart from.

However, Césaire doesn't engage with *The Tempest* solely because it calls into question the system of European colonialism. Rather, because Shakespeare's play *also* perpetuates certain problematic colonial ideologies, Césaire's engagement with the text is simultaneously an expansion on Shakespeare's original problematizing of colonialism *and* a correction of its various shortcomings and problematic representations. One overarching problem of Shakespeare's play is the way he repeatedly perpetuates representations of colonized peoples as savage, uncivilized, stupid, monstrous, and deformed. Additionally, Caliban, who takes on all these representations, ultimately calls his own rebellion against Prospero the foolish ideas of a "thrice double-ass" and begs for Prospero's forgiveness, which certainly falls short of an anti-colonial conclusion to the play (Shakespeare V.i.296). To Laurence Porter, these simultaneous realities of Shakespeare's play indicate that Césaire's intent in departing from it is "not to attack Shakespeare as a racist" nor to fully embrace Shakespeare as a revolutionary actor on behalf of colonized peoples (362). Rather, by taking up *The Tempest*, Césaire's intent is to "bring forward latent meanings or make visible its [*The Tempest's*] internal ambiguities and misgivings" (Breslin 252). In other words, it is because *The Tempest* already engages with these colonial issues, but leaves much more to be said, that Césaire can add to, further problematize, and examine the limitations of the original text. Thus, departing from *The Tempest* is a calculated choice by Césaire that allows him to place the Caribbean in conversation with a piece of the English literary canon that is already connected to many of the areas Césaire seeks to address in *A Tempest*.

Caliban and Prospero as Colonized and Colonizer

In Césaire's *A Tempest*, he makes a few significant changes to Shakespeare's original that contribute to the overall effect the con-text has on the reader's understanding of Caribbean

cultural identity. To start, there are the differences that Césaire makes explicit from the outset. First, Césaire emphasizes who this play is meant for through including a subtitle that reads “Based on Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*: Adaptation for a Black Theatre.” Khoury suggests that while Shakespeare’s play problematized the relationship of the colonized and colonizer for his “strictly English (i.e colonizer) audience,” by including this subtitle, Césaire is reaching an audience that includes both the colonizers (through using a piece of the English literary canon) *and* the colonized (through adapting the play for a “Black Theatre”) (23). Writing for an audience on both sides of the colonial relationship, Césaire creates space within the English literary canon for the colonized, whom the canon has historically excluded, and puts Black experience and identity at the center of this shift.

The next explicit change Césaire makes from the outset of his text is the change in article from “The” to “A” in the title of his play. By titling his adaptation *A Tempest*, Porter suggests that both Prospero’s colonization and Caliban’s revolt are meant to be understood as just one of many instances of the same thing (373). In other words, by changing a single article in the title, Césaire makes clear that colonialism and resistance to colonialism are pervasive and Caliban and Prospero’s relationship is emblematic of a much larger trend that exists across the colonized world. By pointing to the larger context of many different rebellions, Césaire is drawing connections between the many “tempests” he is seeing across the Black Diaspora to suggest a unification around the resistance to colonial authority.

This expansion of the play from a singular story to an allegory for European colonization is further established by another change Césaire makes in his cast of characters. In Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, he lists Caliban as “a savage and deformed slave” and Ariel as “an airy spirit” whereas Césaire alters their descriptions to read “Caliban, a black slave,” and “Ariel, a mulatto

slave.” By making these two changes, Césaire not only corrects the colonial stereotype of African-descended peoples as monstrous and inhuman creatures, but he also makes explicit that his con-text is meant to be understood as analogous for the Caribbean whose early colonial racial categories can be simplified to the terms of Black, White, “Mulatto” (or mixed-race), and Creole (an identity mostly absent from Césaire’s con-text). In Shakespeare’s original, the racial dynamics were only investigated through interactions between Caliban and Prospero (the colonized and the colonizer), but Césaire accurately points out that colonial relationships are rarely so simplistic. By transforming Ariel into a mixed-race slave, Césaire continues to add nuance to the racial dynamics of the Caribbean in relation to European colonial forces. In Ariel’s and Caliban’s debate partway through the play—discussed in greater detail in the following pages—Césaire does not follow in the colonizer’s footsteps by categorizing all African-descended peoples as the same; rather, Ariel and Caliban have different experiences and hold different perspectives despite both being enslaved by Prospero.

Caliban’s Language(s) of Resistance

One of Césaire’s and Fanon’s central arguments in their understanding of Caribbean cultural formation is the role language plays in both enforcing and resisting colonial oppression. However, a central disagreement between Césaire and Fanon is the utility of the language of the colonial oppressor, in both their cases, French. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon argues that because the French language has been forced upon Black Caribbeans through it being the “official language” of the colonies and through the harsh punishments teachers impose on schoolchildren who speak Creole instead of French, using the French language psychologically ties Black Caribbeans to their own oppression (28). Additionally, Fanon suggests that “to speak a language is to take on a world, a culture,” which means that when Black Caribbeans cease to use

their local dialect, they risk becoming alienated from their culture and taking on the culture of their oppressor (38). While Fanon does not go as far as to say Caribbeans cannot use their colonial language—a claim made by Ngugi wa Thiong’o in *Decolonizing the Mind*—and suggests that “Mastery of language affords remarkable power,” he cautions that, by using the French language, it is possible that Black Caribbeans are further cementing the longevity of European culture in the Caribbean (18). In *A Tempest*, Césaire engages with Fanon’s concern over the resistive power of the colonial language by making language—both Caliban’s indigenous language and Prospero’s colonial language—a central aspect of Caliban’s resistance to his colonial oppression.

Césaire centers language as a key tool for resisting colonial authority as soon as Caliban enters the play. As Prospero calls upon Caliban, Caliban’s first word is “Uhuru!”—the Swahili word for freedom—which Prospero is unable and unwilling to understand. Prospero then demands that Caliban greet him in his colonial language to which Caliban responds with a “froggy, waspish, pustular and dung-filled ‘hello’” paired with a wish for Prospero’s timely death. (Césaire *A Tempest* 17). The greetings Caliban offers to Prospero both do significant work to combat Prospero’s colonial authority. By speaking in both his native language and in Prospero’s colonial language, Caliban simultaneously asserts his history and identity for his own ears and challenges Prospero’s authority in a way that his oppressor cannot dismiss. While Fanon would suggest that Caliban ties himself to his colonial oppressor through adopting his language, Césaire suggests that Caliban’s use of his native language and Prospero’s colonial language challenge and combat Prospero’s colonialism in important ways that cannot be accomplished by only one language or the other. Because Prospero and colonizers in general reduce non-European languages to an inferior status, they can always dismiss anything said in those languages.

However, because European languages have not been dismissed like non-European languages, using Prospero's own language allows Caliban and other colonized peoples to argue without being dismissed. In other words, Césaire's Caliban suggests both native languages and colonial languages can produce anti-colonial and culturally formative work.

Caliban's introduction in Césaire's play is far from the only time he uses the colonizer's language against the colonizer. As Khoury points out, in each of Caliban's scenes, he uses language to resist Prospero. Through his refusal to answer Prospero's call to him in Prospero's language (16); his praise of his mother and his assertion of his claim to the land (17-18); his singing of songs about traditional African deities and cultural practices in the colonial language despite Prospero's violent distaste for them (25); and more, Caliban uses Prospero's language to rebel against him. One particularly powerful instance of Caliban's use of language is his renaming of himself when he asserts "I'm *telling* you that from now on / I won't answer to the name Caliban" because "It's the name given me by your [Prospero's] hatred, and every time it's spoken it is an insult" (20). In this moment, Caliban resists the colonizer's use of language—Prospero imposing a name onto Caliban—by using the colonizer's language to point out the connection the name has to his oppression and to assert his true identity. Simultaneously, Caliban uses the colonial language to illustrate how it has been used to oppress him. Although Audre Lorde once suggested that one could not dismantle the master's house using the master's tools, it appears that Césaire's Caliban is attempting and succeeding in doing just that.

Joseph Khoury, like Frantz Fanon, suggests that Césaire's belief in the resistant power of the colonial language is potentially risky as it tethers resistance directly to the colonizer's culture. Khoury points to Homi Bhabha's concept of *mimicry* to consider the limitations of the colonized taking up the colonizer's language in such cases as Césaire's. To Bhabha, mimicking

the colonial authority's language can contain an element of resistance, but it paradoxically "at once destroys and produces agency" through its inevitable ties to European colonial empires (Khoury 26). Were Césaire's Caliban to speak only in the colonial language Prospero forced on him, Fanon's and Bhabha's concerns about tethering oneself to the colonizer through language would have merit. However, because Caliban uses Prospero's language to assert his own history, identity, and culture, as well as his native language to produce a rallying cry for freedom multiple times throughout the play—as suggested by Prospero saying "[Caliban is] mumbling in his native language again" (Césaire *A Tempest* 17)—Judith Sarnecki suggests that "Caliban beats Prospero at his own game, mastering his own language so well that he can bend it to his own revolutionary purposes" (281).

Caliban himself recognizes the simultaneous utility of using Prospero's language and the danger of relying too heavily on it. Throughout the play, Prospero and those he enslaves directly tie his power to his language. When Caliban states that Prospero only taught him parts of his language so he understood his orders and that "All your science you keep for yourself alone, shut up in those big books," Prospero's language becomes representative of his power (Césaire, *A Tempest* 17). Caliban understands that Prospero draws significant power from the spells contained within his books (a symbol for language), but he only wishes to destroy them, not appropriate them for himself. In the final act of the play, after using Prospero's language to resist his authority at every opportunity, Caliban nonetheless says that in his vision for freedom, "I'd get rid of you! I'd spit you out, all / your works and pomps! Your 'white' magic!" (60). With these words, Césaire's Caliban suggests that his use of Prospero's language is only a temporary act and that as soon as it has served its purpose to overcome Prospero's colonialism, Caliban will "spit it out" to be done with it once and for all. Sarnecki suggests that this utilization of, but

eventual rejection of, the colonizer's language "reverses the power dynamic operational in colonization. It is through this reversal that a later move to creolization is possible" (279). In other words, using the colonizer's language to resist the colonizer creates a possible future where the colonizer's language is no longer necessary and can be replaced by the Creole languages of the decolonial space they left behind.

While Fanon's concern that using the colonizer's language creates a tie to the colonizing power is a fair one, Césaire illustrates ways that the colonial language can be used for revolutionary goals. Caliban's use of Prospero's language is central to his resistance against colonial oppression, but because he simultaneously uses his native language and is willing to throw away the colonizing language as soon as it has served its purpose, he is able to prevent himself from becoming constrained by it.

Ariel's Problematic Freedom

Although the roles of Caliban and Prospero fit relatively well into the strict binary of colonized and colonizer, Ariel plays a unique role in this dynamic as a mixed-race slave who utilizes a different approach to achieving freedom than Caliban. Where Caliban seeks freedom through combative resistance to Prospero's oppression, Ariel attempts to convince Prospero to free him by serving him so faithfully, that Prospero will be convinced of his humanity. During the most extensive interaction between Caliban and Ariel in the play, Ariel lays out his strategy of achieving freedom when he states "Prospero is the one we've got to change. Destroy his serenity so that he's finally forced to acknowledge his own injustice and put an end to it" (Césaire *A Tempest* 27). To Ariel, by proving his humanity to Prospero, Prospero will inevitably realize that his actions as a colonial oppressor are morally corrupt which will lead to his eventual freeing of those he has enslaved. Ariel imagines this idyllic future by saying:

I've often had
this inspiring uplifting dream that one day Prospero, you,
and me would all three set out, like brothers, to build a
wonderful world, each one contributing his own special
thing: patience, vitality, love, willpower too, and rigor,
not to mention the dreams without which mankind
would perish." (27)

Ariel's vision is one that brings together all three of those involved in this colonial enterprise—Prospero (colonizer) and Caliban and Ariel (colonized)—to bring about a better world for them all. However, Ariel's strategy relies on Prospero recognizing Ariel's humanity, something Caliban believes to be impossible. In response to Ariel's dream, Caliban argues that attempting to create a consciousness in Prospero is a fruitless task because he is a "crusher, a pulverizer" who would never be willing to relinquish his power over those he oppresses (27). Pointing out that Prospero has promised Ariel his freedom a thousand times and has never followed through, Caliban suggests that Ariel is a coward whom Prospero will continue to exploit if he is able to (26).

Caliban's and Ariel's conflict over how to achieve freedom from Prospero has far greater implications than the fates of the characters in the play. Because Caliban, Ariel, and Prospero are analogous to the colonized and the colonizer dynamic on a smaller scale, how Césaire positions them in relation to the issues of colonization, freedom, and more gives insight into his opinions on those same topics. Thus, examining the fates of each of the three characters is important to this analysis.

Starting with Ariel's fate, against Caliban's expectations, Prospero does free Ariel in the final act of the play; however, Ariel's freedom is tentative at best. After Ariel has done all that he has been asked to do by delivering the shipwrecked sailors to Prospero, Prospero states "Yes,

Ariel, today you will be free” to which Ariel becomes jubilant (58). However, as soon as Ariel breaks into a song of celebration in which he says he will use his newfound freedom to inspire a yearning for freedom in all those who remain in bondage, Prospero immediately reassumes his position as colonial oppressor by policing what Ariel can say through insisting “you are not going to / set my world on fire with your music, I trust” (58). This gently implied threat becomes harsher as Ariel continues to sing despite Prospero’s distaste, culminating with Prospero’s final words to Ariel in the play: “That is a very unsettling agenda! Go! Scram! / Before I change my mind!” (59). By saying “before I change my mind,” Prospero suggests that he can and will forcibly return Ariel to slavery the moment it suits him, indicating that Ariel’s freedom is permanently under threat by Prospero.

Additionally, where Ariel’s strategy relied upon Prospero recognizing his colonizing actions as morally corrupt, there is no indication that Prospero has come to this desired revelation. As Paul Breslin points out, “Prospero releases him [Ariel] only because he no longer needs him, [...] Prospero’s conduct toward Caliban shows that he has not really changed” (255). Because Prospero originally plans to leave the island to return to Europe, Ariel’s services are no longer important to him. However, once Prospero eventually chooses to remain on the island, the fate of Ariel becomes less certain, because if Breslin is correct in saying Prospero hasn’t changed, what would prevent him from seeking out the same luxuries Ariel provided to him previously? If this is the case and Prospero has the power to return Ariel to bondage—something that is likely, since Prospero enslaved Ariel previously and has not lost any power since then—Ariel’s freedom is at the very least under threat. Thus, although Ariel is technically free by the end of the play, his freedom will always remain beholden to his colonial oppressor.

Ariel's strategy of seeking freedom and his earning of a murky form of freedom is a central concern to both Césaire and Fanon, who believe that seeking freedom—including freedom of self-determination, expression, and cultural practices for the entire Caribbean—cannot be truly accomplished if the region is still beholden to their colonial oppressors. To Fanon, Ariel, like many African-descended peoples, has been psychologically conditioned—through racism, colonization, and other tools of colonial oppression—to “want to prove to white men, at all costs, the richness of [his] thought, and the value of his intellect” (Fanon *Black Skins* 12). Fanon suggests that this “inferiority complex” is deeply embedded in the consciousness of the Black Diaspora and creates an endless and impossible goal in the mind of a Black person to prove to colonial oppressors that “he is a man, their equal” (66). However, as is shown in Ariel's superficial freedom, his goal of proving himself human to his colonial oppressor—a goal that Fanon argues is shared by many members of the Black Diaspora—is not possible because those who engage in the practice of enslavement and colonization do not have a moral consciousness capable of recognizing those they oppress as human. To Césaire, this inability to recognize those they oppress as human beings is a central reason colonial empires are “morally, spiritually indefensible” (Césaire *Discourse on Colonialism* 32). Since Prospero and the European colonial powers he represents are morally incapable of recognizing the colonized as human, Ariel's strategy of appealing to the consciousness of his oppressor can only bring about superficial or temporary freedom.

In addition to Ariel's questionable freedom, his strategy of acquiring that freedom is only accessible to him because of privileges afforded to him that others do not possess. As a mixed-race person, Ariel, within a Caribbean context, has more privileges afforded to him because of his proximity to Whiteness, a proximity Caliban does not share. To Porter, “Ariel's subservient

attitude is explained by the preferential treatment he has received from Prospero and from the lure of eventual emancipation that Prospero has dangled before him” (371). However, Ariel’s unwillingness to resist Prospero acts to the detriment of Caliban, who bears the brunt of Prospero’s wrath. To Rob Nixon, Ariel’s willingness to allow Caliban to suffer to get preferential treatment from their oppressor positions him as “a colonial collaborator, a political and cultural sellout who [...] is reduced to negotiating for liberty from a powerless position” (Nixon 573). As a result, Caliban is alone in both his resistance and his punishment because he “unfortunately, cannot rely on anybody’s assistance, not even, as we have just seen, Ariel’s” (Khoury 30).

However, while it is easy to position Ariel as an enemy to Caliban, Césaire avoids doing so because both men are oppressed by Prospero, and thus share a common goal, even if they approach that goal differently. Caliban himself does not hold Ariel’s strategy against him as his parting words to Ariel are “Farewell, Ariel, my brother, and good luck” (Césaire *A Tempest* 28). While Ariel’s strategy appears incapable of bringing about true freedom, Césaire gives it due diligence even while illustrating the shortcomings he sees in the strategy. In differentiating Caliban’s and Ariel’s strategies, the effect is “to represent them as part of a social class, to deexoticize them, and to reinforce their allegorical function as a symbol of oppressed peoples everywhere” (Porter 372). This acts as Césaire’s way of engaging one of Fanon’s and Hall’s critiques of the Négritude Movement: that it positions all African-descended peoples as the same under the umbrella of Négritude. In positioning Caliban and Ariel as opposed strategically, but united in accomplishing a common goal (resisting colonial oppression and achieving freedom) Césaire allows for differences within the Black Diaspora that were previously unclear.

Since Ariel’s strategy is incapable of bringing about true freedom, according to Césaire and Fanon, Césaire considers another strategy of seeking freedom from colonial oppression:

Caliban's fight for emancipation from Prospero. From the moment Caliban enters the play in Act I, he actively resists Prospero's oppression. Although Prospero holds power over Caliban through the magic he wields—which Caliban refers to as “anti-riot arsenal... gadgets to make you deaf, to blind you, to make you sneeze, to make you cry” (54)—Caliban resists when he can. One way Caliban resists Prospero is through critically engaging with Prospero's European values that are founded on White supremacist ideology. When Prospero weaponizes European beauty standards by calling Caliban an “ugly ape,” Caliban undermines those imposed standards by saying “You think I'm ugly... well, I don't think you're so handsome yourself” (Césaire *A Tempest* 17). When Prospero demeans Caliban's ancestry and cultural practices by saying his family tree is “better not to climb” because his mother Sycorax was monstrous, Caliban takes the opportunity to reassert his and his mother's claims to the land and express gratitude for his heritage (18). When Prospero attempts to argue that he “civilized” Caliban by educating him, Caliban scoffs and argues “What do you think you'd have / done without me in this strange land? Ingrate! I taught you / the trees, fruits, birds, the seasons” (18-19). In each of these cases, when Prospero attempts to paint Caliban as inferior and beholden to him—as colonial oppressors do to those they colonize—Caliban confronts Prospero head-on and logically rebuts Prospero's false claims. Rather than do what Prospero demands and believe what Prospero says to ingratiate himself to his colonizer like Ariel does, Caliban forcibly declares himself human by undermining and criticizing the tools Prospero uses to make himself appear superior.

In the ending lines of the play, Caliban is offered the opportunity to “make peace” with Prospero. However, unlike Ariel, Caliban refuses by yelling “I'm interested in being free! Free, you hear” (61). Choosing to continue his fight for freedom despite his most recent attempt failing suggests that unlike Ariel, Caliban is unwilling to remain beholden to Prospero's colonial

authority. In the closing lines of the text—which will be discussed in the following section—Caliban’s strategy reaches its completion as he cheers for freedom as Prospero grows increasingly weak in his old age.

Négritude Put Into Practice

Written by Césaire, *A Tempest* unsurprisingly echoes many of his central arguments on the utility and importance of a unification of the Black diaspora around its shared cultural connection to the African continent. However, in Césaire’s play there are some significant limitations to his cultural theory. Exploring Négritude’s echoes in *The Tempest* as well as its limitations within its allegorical connection to the larger Black diaspora is the focus of this section.

To start, Césaire’s positions on Négritude come through in numerous places throughout the text. One key area is in Caliban’s assertion of the value of his identity as an African man on numerous occasions despite the harsh criticism he receives from the colonizers around him. As has been discussed previously, Caliban’s appreciation and celebration of his mother Sycorax is a significant moment of cultural pride for Caliban. Through evoking Sycorax, Caliban asserts that he and his mother not only held dominion over the island in the past, but still hold dominion in the present despite Prospero’s colonial seizure. When Prospero attempts to dismiss Sycorax’s claim due to him seeing her as monstrous—“A witch from whom—and may / God be praised—death has delivered us” (18)—Caliban comprehensively refutes him by instead reasserting his mother’s value and her continued existence within the land Prospero has attempted to steal.

Caliban states:

she was my mother, and I won’t
deny her! Anyhow, you only think she is dead because

you think the earth itself is dead... It's so much
simpler that way! Dead, you can walk on it, pollute it,
you can tread upon it with the steps of a conqueror
I respect the earth, because I know that Sycorax is alive. (18)

With these words, Caliban puts into practice multiple teachings of Négritude scholars. First, he is tracing and celebrating his own history to his pre-colonized self. Second, he refuses the colonizer's attempt to belittle or diminish his non-European culture. Third, he revitalizes African traditional cultural beliefs through his belief in animism. Animism is a central aspect of numerous African traditional cultural practices which emphasize the agency and consciousness of inanimate objects like land, water, wind, etc. By asserting that Sycorax's soul lives on in the land, Caliban asserts his culture's continued existence and relevance despite Prospero's actions. Paula Willoquet-Maricondi suggests that the "divinity, in animistic religions, manifests through Place; thus, Place is sacred. This concept of divinity is present, in *A Tempest*, in the characters of Wind, of Shango, of Eshu, and of the island's spirits—characters that symbolize a resurrection of an Ethiopian world view" (51). Through Caliban's use of traditional cultural animism, he puts into practice one of the central tenets of Négritude teachings.

The inclusion of the African "devil-god" Eshu acts as another way Césaire implements his Négritude teachings into his play. In Shakespeare's original play, the three goddesses Iris, Ceres, and Juno arrive to bless the marriage union between Ferdinand and Miranda. However, in Césaire's con-text, the three goddesses are joined by a fourth deity, the Yoruba trickster god Eshu, who sings a sexually explicit song against the wishes of Prospero, the goddesses, and the young couple. Eshu's presence serves multiple important purposes. First, Eshu arrives specifically because "no one invited me... / And that wasn't very nice! Nobody remembered poor / Eshu! So poor Eshu came anyway" which highlights that even when the colonial authority

attempts to erase the cultural practices of those it colonizes, the culture of the colonized (in this case, their religious practices) still persist (48). Thus, Eshu's presence combats Prospero's attempt to erase Caliban's culture.

In addition, Eshu's presence discredits any religious justifications for Prospero's colonial authority. During the colonial period and the history that followed, European empires consistently used religion to justify their colonization of the globe under divine right. In the original play, the presence of only Roman and Greek (European) gods suggests that Prospero's actions as a European colonizer and manipulator are blessed by the gods themselves, all of whom are European in origin. In Césaire's play, however, he removes this claim to divine authority from Prospero by including a god who spits in the face of European colonialism. With his presence, Eshu also undermines Prospero's authority by showing that he is not all-powerful as Ariel insisted he was earlier in the play (Césaire, *A Tempest* 28). For the first time in the play, Prospero's magic fails him as he is confused as to how Eshu has arrived despite his magic trying to prevent him from doing so. Prospero expresses this concern when he whispers, "Is my magic getting rusty?" which illustrates that despite the colonizer's weapons, he is neither invincible nor unbeatable (48). In fact, Eshu's presence explicitly harms Prospero as Prospero states:

He's gone... what a relief! But alas, the harm / is done! I am perturbed... My old
brain is confused / Power! Power! Alas! All this will one day fade [...] My /
power has gone cold. (49-50)

Merely the presence of African culture threatens Prospero's authority and power. This terrifies Prospero as he immediately attempts to reassert his colonial authority by forcing Ariel to violently put down Caliban's rebellion. This fear-induced reaction illustrates the fickle control colonizers like Prospero have over those they colonize and the ways in which a revitalization of African cultural practices can expose this weakness in colonial authority.

At the conclusion of the play, Caliban's and Eshu's undermining of Prospero's colonial authority through the revitalization of African cultural beliefs and practices helps Caliban overcome Prospero's colonialism and move closer to freedom. As the play comes to an end, Prospero decides to remain on the island with Caliban so that he can, in his words, continue to arrange "out of confusion / one intelligible line / Without me, who would be able to draw music from all / that?" (64). To Prospero, the island only has value if he himself is present to install civilization in the otherwise uncivilized place. However, as Caliban's animism has illustrated, the island holds an identity that is wholly distinct from Prospero's colonization of it. The effect of this comes forth in the closing lines of the play as much time has passed, leaving Prospero "aged and weary" with a voice that is "weak, toneless, trite" (65). While Prospero continues to impose his colonial authority on the island, the island itself rebels against him. Despite his yells that he will "defend civilization," he is "under siege" by the natural environment of the island; opossums, peccaries, the jungle, the cold, all threaten his weakened state. And as Prospero is left freezing without the warmth of the fire and besieged on all sides by the island rejecting his colonization of it, the play concludes with Caliban's shout of "FREEDOM HI-DAY! FREEDOM HI-DAY!" (66). Thus, as a direct result of Caliban's use of the Yoruba tradition of animism and his appeals to the African deities of Eshu and Shango, Prospero and the colonialism he represents are decaying as the natural state of the island is returning with the soon-to-be free Caliban liberated from Prospero's colonization.

Conclusion

While Césaire's text engages heavily with the ideas of the Négritude Movement by using *A Tempest* as an allegory for it, there is a potential limitation to Césaire's text. The potential limitation takes shape as a key difference between Caliban and the greater Black diaspora within

the Caribbean that he is meant to be representative of. In the narrative, Caliban resists his colonial oppressor from his *native* land, while Black Caribbeans have been alienated from their ancestral homeland through their forced migration to the Caribbean archipelago. In other words, a perceived shortcoming of the text is that while Caliban can rely upon his known history and ties to his native land, Black Caribbeans cannot. Although this in and of itself is not disqualifying, a central critique Fanon levies at the Négritude Movement is the movement's failure to address the difficulties, if not impossibilities, of returning to African cultural practices when Black Caribbeans have been alienated from those cultural practices. Caliban, as an enslaved individual who still has extensive ties to his homeland and cultural practices, is far from the perfect analog to the inhabitants of the Caribbean who have come from vastly different and often unknown places and cultures.

However, this aspect of the narrative is not as limiting as it initially appears. Although Caliban technically resides on his native island, he is still alienated from his native culture because of Prospero's colonization of his land and his destruction of Caliban's mother and cultural teacher Sycorax. The text never explicitly states how old Caliban was when Prospero first arrived, but he was likely quite young. Caliban states that Prospero referred to him as "dear Caliban," and "my little Caliban," when he first arrived, monikers which are certainly associated with children more than adults (18). In addition, Caliban does not remember the name his mother gave to him, suggesting that either he has forgotten it due to many years passing since he last heard it, or he was so young when Prospero arrived that Caliban has always been the name he remembers from his childhood (20). Whichever one is true, Caliban must have been quite young when Prospero first arrived to overthrow his mother, which implies that even if Caliban is technically native to the island, he has experienced cultural absence and erasure like those within

the Caribbean that Césaire is writing to. As the variety of Caribbean belief systems like Obeah, Voodoo, and Myal, show—each of which have ties to various African traditions—Black Caribbeans held onto aspects of their cultural traditions in order to form new ones in the Caribbean, just as Caliban does in *A Tempest*. Thus, Caliban’s actions to reclaim and assert his true cultural identity and practices as an African man evoke the same effect as Césaire’s Négritude because he, just like Black Caribbeans, rejects the colonial culture that has been forced onto him and instead recenters African cultural systems that colonial actors attempted to erase.

Césaire’s *A Tempest* acts as an excellent illustration of the power contexts hold to resist colonial oppression and theorize and represent ideas on Caribbean cultural formation. Césaire’s text utilizes the concepts of the Négritude Movement that he helped found to illustrate the constructive and resistive power a recentering of African cultural practices holds to produce culture in the Caribbean.

***Omeros* by Derek Walcott**

Overview

Derek Walcott's *Omeros* illustrates another way a Caribbean author departs from a piece, or pieces, of the Western literary canon to theorize, represent, and imagine Caribbean cultural identity as well as 'write back' to colonial empires. Writing in conversation with Hall and Fanon, Walcott's *Omeros* rejects the Négritude Movement's focus on recentering Africa and its cultural traditions. Instead, while Walcott believes the African continent can offer significant insight into the history of enslavement, colonialism, and the cultures that influenced the formation of culture in the Caribbean, Caribbean cultural identity is separate and distinct from African traditions because of the numerous cultural sources it draws from. Through Walcott's story of Achille's hallucinatory return to Africa, Ma Kilman's healing of Philoctete's racial wound, and the inclusion of the White and Creole Caribbean stories of Major Plunkett and the narrator, Walcott paints Caribbean cultural identity as a hybridized culture that draws from numerous traditions that have come together in the Caribbean through the mixing and interacting of multiple cultural influences.

Why the Epic Poem?

Derek Walcott's *Omeros* does not draw from a single Western literary classic. Instead, he draws upon the form of the epic poem, specifically departing from Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and Virgil's *Aeneid*. Unlike the pre-texts of Césaire's *A Tempest* and Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, it is difficult to argue that Homer's or Virgil's texts are implicated with or connected to European colonialism in the original periods they were written in. The colonial period that Walcott is addressing did not occur until many centuries after the two epic poets wrote their texts. However,

this does not mean that Homer and Virgil are completely divorced from European colonialism nor that Walcott's departure from these pre-texts is not combating European colonialism.

As Barbara Goff discusses in her book *Classics and Colonialism*, Western literary classics have played “an active role both in imperialist and colonialist movements and in the opposing movements of resistance” (6). Over time, European empires have used Greek and Roman classics as proof of the existence of their unparalleled cultural heritages which worked to “announce its claim to be the new heart and centre of Europe, a centre which proclaimed not only [the given empire's] cultural identity with the ancient version of Europe but also its new ability to reach beyond itself and engage with foreign lands and other empires” (Goff 7). While Goff says that European empires used their cultural heritages to place themselves at the center of Europe, Europe had used their cultural heritages to place itself at the center of the world. As a result, the proclaimed longevity of Western European canons was used by European powers as a sign of legitimacy and to justify their perceived right to expand their influence beyond their traditional boundaries. These expansionist ideologies led to the colonialist and imperialist ventures of the colonial period. Then, when those colonial and imperialist ventures occurred, the classics were used as both a way to teach colonialist ideologies to the colonial populations in Europe, and a way of replacing indigenous cultures with European ones in colonized territories through colonial education systems. As Guillory points out, European literary classics acted as a “discursive instrument of ‘transmission’ situated historically within a specific institution of reproduction: the school. [...] the school functions as a system of credentialization by which it creates a specific *relation* to culture” (56). In other words, Western literary classics acted to allow European empires to transmit their cultural beliefs and traditions both at home and in their colonized territories.

Thus, despite the works of Homer and Virgil not originally being connected to future European colonialism, Western European empires used them and other Western literary classics to accomplish various colonial and imperial goals. By departing from Homer and Virgil, Walcott is not necessarily challenging *them*, but rather the role they have played in the dissemination and legitimization of European cultures during the colonial period. Thus, by departing from the epic poems of Homer and Virgil, Walcott's *Omeros* critically engages with European colonial empires and their histories of enslavement, cultural erasure, trauma, and more.

Wounds of the Past

Throughout Walcott's poem, a central theme he engages with is how harms of the past resonate in the present. The symbolism of Philoctete's wound as the historical scars of enslavement, Achille's and Plunkett's searches for their lost ancestries, and the simultaneous presence and absence of the Indigenous populations of the island, all suggest that Walcott's text is particularly interested in investigating the role historical trauma plays in the present. Specifically, as Caribbeans descended from enslaved Africans, Achille's and Ma Kilman's searches for their cultural identities become central to the poem's narrative. In line with the Négritude Movement's teachings, both Achille and Ma Kilman look to Africa, hoping to find what they feel is missing from their lives. However, while both characters discover important aspects of their history and heal some of their generational trauma, their return to Africa fails to provide them with the cultural identities they both are searching for. Rather, through tracing their histories, Achille and Ma Kilman discover that they cannot return to the past and find the cultural identities they seek in recentering African traditions alone; rather, their cultural absences can only be filled when they embrace a new Caribbean cultural identity that includes, but is not defined by, a connection to African cultural traditions.

Achille's Temporary Return to Africa

In Book Two Chapter XXIV of the text, after his lover Helen leaves him for his rival Hector, Achille takes to the sea where he experiences a hallucinatory journey to Africa brought on by sun exposure. This spiritual journey comes as a direct result of Achille imagining the bodies of the thousands of Africans who died in bondage on their forced journey across the Atlantic Ocean. Following an African swift—an important symbol of the poem that becomes representative of the continued presence of African cultures and traditions in the Caribbean through cultural hybridization—Achille travels across the ocean to his ancestral home in Africa while questioning his identity as a Black Caribbean man: “for the first time, he asked himself who he was [...] this engine that shot ahead of each question like an answer, once Achille had questioned his name and its origin” (Walcott 130). The narrator frames this journey initially as Achille taking a journey to the place he feels he most belongs as he writes “[he] felt he was headed home” (131). This suggests that when beginning his journey, he has adopted the mindset of the Négritude Movement due to his belief that his identity as a Black Caribbean lies in Africa which was erased from him because of his ancestors’ enslavement and forced migration to the Caribbean. In framing Achille’s journey this way, Walcott theoretically puts into practice the Négritude Movement’s central claim: that cultural identity for the Black Diaspora can be found by recentering African cultures and traditions. If Achille were to successfully discover his identity by returning to Africa, it would suggest that Walcott agrees with the Négritude Movement’s central claim. However, since Achille’s journey is ultimately unsuccessful, Walcott suggest that the Négritude Movement is wrong to emphasize the recentering of African traditionalism.

From the start of Achille's return to Africa, the cultural identity he seeks to find is absent. As he first arrives, everything he sees is partially distorted and inauthentic as Walcott describes the environment as "like the African movies" and as "real mirages" (133). With these descriptions, the landscape of Achille's spiritual journey is not a completely accurate picture of a "true Africa": it is distorted, whether through a camera's lens or through an illusory mirage. Stuart Hall discusses this illusory Africa in his essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" when he writes "It [Africa] is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return. [...] It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth" (Hall 226). Because Achille's ties to the African continent have been at least partially erased due to the history of enslavement and colonialism, it is impossible for him to return to Africa because there is no singular or fixed Africa to begin with.

The more Achille continues his spiritual journey, the more he realizes the impossibility of finding his identity in a mythic African past. A central aspect of this division between Achille's identity and the identity of his ancestors is the time that separates them. When looking at his ancestral father Afolabe, Achille seeks to find his own features in Afolabe's face, a search for a mirrored identity. However, Achille quickly comes to the realization that "Time stood between them" and prevents him from finding a true cultural connection with his ancestor (Walcott 136). Expressing to Afolabe that he "yearns for a sound that is missing" Afolabe is unable to fill that cultural absence because Achille, "[the] nameless son, [is] only the ghost of a name" that cannot be resurrected (Walcott 138-139). These barriers between Achille and his ancestors' culture lead to a shift in Achille's understanding of home from Africa to the Caribbean. While wading in a peaceful river with his ancestral tribesmen, Achille's thoughts drift to St. Lucia when the narrator writes, "There was peace on the waveless river, but the surf roared in his head" (Walcott 141).

When drinking alcohol, Achille becomes tearful as his memory shows him a vision of home where “Philoctete [is] standing in green seawater up to his waist, hauling the canoe in, fist over fist” (Walcott 141). Awakening from his sleep, Achille hopes to smell the salt of the sea, but is disappointed when he smells “the sluggish odour of river” instead. (143). In each of these cases, Achille’s time in the African past reconstitutes his conception of home. When he started his journey, he “felt that he was headed home” (131), but by the end of his journey to Africa, home, to Achille, has shifted back to the Caribbean: “that was how they danced at home” (143). To Robert D. Hamner, as Achille’s spiritual journey continues, he “is realizing that although the experience he is gaining through racial memory is his birthright, Africa is no longer his personal home. He has been a rootless West Indian too long to deny the other components of his psyche” (77). Africa cannot be home for Achille because his identity has been influenced by many other cultures as a result of him being Caribbean. This makes his return to Africa an impossible endeavor, which can be further understood in context of two of the poem’s pre-texts, Homer’s *Odyssey* and Virgil’s *Aeneid*.

Katabasis and the African Underworld

Although Achille’s spiritual journey to Africa does not provide him the sense of home he originally sought, Walcott does not suggest that the journey was a failure. As multiple scholars have argued—Nayak, Ciocia, Zargazadeh—Walcott frames Achille’s journey using the epic trope of *katabasis* that plays a central role in two of *Omeros*’ pre-texts: *Odyssey* and *Aeneid*. Citing Edith Hall and Justine McConnel, Zargazadeh defines *katabasis* as an epic motif in which “the traveler undergoes a series of trials through which he is metaphorically destroyed and reborn anew, often with new strength or knowledge” (147). Zargazadeh goes on to explain that a *katabasis* very often culminates with the traveler visiting the underworld where he “has the

chance to speak with the dead,” often someone he was close to, to learn important information that will aid him in his journey (148). Drawing from *Odyssey* and *Aeneid*—both of which feature a *katabasis* in which the protagonist communes with his deceased parent—Walcott frames Africa as the allegorical underworld, where Achille, following in Odysseus’ and Aeneas’ footsteps, travels, gains important information, and ultimately leaves to return to his true home. In doing so, Walcott suggests that while the African traditions of the past cannot be returned to completely, they can bring about cultural understanding in the Caribbean present.

Understanding Achille’s journey to Africa as a *katabasis* reveals Walcott’s understanding of what cultural meaning the Caribbean can and cannot gain from the African continent. One of the most important aspects of a *katabasis* is that it is definitionally a temporary visit, never a permanent one. As Nayak discusses, in both *Odyssey* and *Aeneid*, the characters traveling to the underworld are explicitly warned that they cannot linger for long (10-11). Succinctly put by Zargazadeh, “the realm of the dead cannot be *home* for the visiting epic hero” (149). While Achille is never explicitly warned of the temporary nature of his *katabasis*, a raid on his ancestral village by slavers that Achille can only watch with “useless arms” makes it clear that he cannot remain, nor can he do anything to change the realm of ghosts in which he finds himself (Walcott 144). At the conclusion of the raid, Achille himself comes to the realization that “He foresaw their future. He knew nothing could change it” (146). The unalterable past of enslavement and colonialism “demonstrates the unreachability of Africa—that it is a dead realm for Afro-Caribbeans” (Zargazadeh 149). Thus, through positioning Achille’s return to Africa as a *katabasis*, Walcott suggests that due to centuries of enslavement, colonialism, cultural erasure, and more, Achille, like all other Black Caribbeans cannot return to Africa.

However, while a full return is not possible, Achille's *katabasis*—just as with Odysseus' and Aeneas' *katabasis*—still helps Achille gain important information that will ultimately help him accomplish his true goal. Aeneas' *katabasis* centers on him being visited by his father's ghost, who urges "[Aeneas] not to give up on his course to Italy" by showing him "a vision of future Romans, through whom he can trace an unbroken line" (Nayak 8-9). Odysseus' *katabasis* occurs when he speaks to his mother's ghost, who provides him the directions he needs to find his way home to Ithaca. Walcott himself evokes this homeward return when he frames Helen, Achille's lover, as "not Helen now, but Penelope, / in whom a single noon was as long as ten years / because he had not come back" (Walcott 153). In the single afternoon Achille has been missing to undergo his hallucinatory *katabasis* to Africa, he has undergone an equivalent of Odysseus' famous ten-year journey which culminates in his final return to his home island Ithaca and his ever-waiting wife Penelope. In both Odysseus' and Achille's journeys, it is their communion with their parent's or ancestor's ghost that allows them to finally complete their journey to their true home: Ithaca for Odysseus and St. Lucia for Achille.

Africa's Cultural Resonance Through Time

By concluding Achille's *katabasis* with his understanding that the Caribbean, not Africa, is his true home, Walcott suggests that Caribbean cultural identity is inherently a hybridized culture that has important ties to African traditions but is not wholly constituted by them. During his spiritual journey to Africa, Achille witnesses a dance done by the men of the tribe which he recognizes as similar to a dance he has seen on his home island. Describing this dance, Walcott writes:

On the day of the feast, they wore the same plantain trash
like Philoctete at Christmas. A bannered mitre

of bamboo was placed on his head, a calabash

mask, and skirts that made him both woman and fighter.

That was how they danced at home, to fifes and tambours,
the same berries round their necks and the small mirrors

flashing from their stuffed breasts. One of the warriors
mounted on stilts walked like lightning over the thatch
of the peaked village. Achille saw the same dances

that the mitred warriors did with their bamboo stick
as they scuttled around him, lifting, dipping their lances
like divining rods turning the earth to music,

the same chac-chac and ra-ra, the drumming the same,
and the chant of the seed-eyed prophet to the same
response from the blurring ankles. The same, the same. (Walcott 143)

Despite being removed from Africa by three hundred years of colonialism, Achille's memory of this dance from St. Lucia suggests Achille's ancestors' practices remains culturally important to him, Philoctete, and other Black Caribbeans. Later in the text, Achille and Philoctete perform a modified version of this dance which helps them simultaneously remember the past, and culturally heal in the present. At the close of Christmas, the island holds a massive celebration on the following day, Boxing Day. The date of this celebration is important as it illustrates that it is a hybridized one: the cultural practices of African-descended peoples are being used to celebrate a holiday directly tied to European cultural tradition. Christmas dinner the night before the dance is also hybridized as it consists of traditional British foods and drinks for Christmas feasts like scotch, black pudding, and a roasted yule ham, as well as traditional Black-Caribbean foods like

souse, rice, and cornmeal pies cooked in banana leaves (273). These hybridized celebrations culminate in the performance of Achille and Philoctete the following morning.

As Achille prepares to perform, he describes the dance as a celebration not only of the past, but also of the present. The narrator suggests that the bells Achille wears on his ankles as part of his attire represent “not chains from the Bight of Benin, / but those fastened by himself [...] Today he was African, his own epitaph, / his own resurrection” (273). In other words, Achille is dancing not to remove the traumas he and his ancestors have experienced in the past—the Bight of Benin being a major port for the trade of enslaved African peoples during the enslavement period—but rather for the traumas he himself has experienced in the present. This is echoed by Philoctete whose ancestral wound cannot bother him during the celebration because “the cancer’s / anemone [will be] gone from his shin” due to him dancing with his companions. (274). In preparation for the dance, both Achille and Philoctete see it as a way to simultaneously address the past and present. This culminates with the dance itself, which brings together the understanding of historical trauma with present healing when Walcott writes:

...All the pain

re-entered Philoctete, of the hacked yams, the hold
closing over their heads, the bolt-closing iron,
over their eyes that never saw the light of this world,

their memory still there although all the pain was gone.
He swallowed his nausea, and spun his arms faster,
[...]

...He let the runnels of sweat
dry on his face. Philoctete sat down. Then he wept. (Walcott 277)

Through this dance, Philoctete sees the whole colonial history of his people, imagining the raids on African villages through the destroyed yams Achille saw during his *katabasis* (144), the hold of the ship trapping them inside, and the iron manacles that kept them restrained. However, because he is doing so while revitalizing the dance of his ancestors, the memory does not come with the pain he has experienced throughout the text, merely the knowledge.

At the conclusion of the dance, Philoctete beginning to weep presents itself not as a sense of loss, but as a cathartic release at having experienced these revelations. Srila Nayak discusses this balance of the past and present through the dance by saying:

[their dance] becomes part of the epic's larger therapeutic absorption of Africa into the narrative of the Caribbean present [...] Historical memory is channeled into a temporally contained ritual enactment that sustains a consoling connection with the past without allowing a fixation on the past to override the present.
(Nayak 23)

The past helps those in the present heal without requiring them to do the impossible task of travelling back in time hundreds of years. One of Stuart Hall's central arguments is that the Africa Négritude scholars wish to return to is "no longer there. It too has been transformed" (Hall 231). However, that does not mean that Africa has been lost in the Caribbean. Hall suggests that during the enslavement period, the cultural identity of Africa was "present everywhere" in everything from the significant influence of African languages on the Creole languages that evolved in the region, to the everyday customs and practices of the enslaved, to the religious and spiritual stories the enslaved passed down to their children. These ideas lead to Hall arguing that African culture, while impossible to retain in its entirety, "remains the unspoken, unspeakable 'presence' in Caribbean culture" (230). In simpler terms, Africa is not something that Caribbeans need to return to because it already survives in the hybridized traditions of the region. Achille's *katabasis* and his dance with Philoctete act as Walcott's way of

illustrating Hall's idea that "this is the Africa we must return to – but 'by another route': what Africa has become in the New World" (232). The discovery of Africa's presence in Caribbean cultures becomes the medicinal work Walcott's *Omeros* seeks to perform.

Ma Kilman's Healing of Philoctete

In *Omeros*, Walcott's goal of finding African resonances in the cultures that have developed in the Caribbean over centuries is not limited to Achille's story. Rather, each of the other main characters—including the non-African Caribbean characters—play vital symbolic roles in Walcott's exploration into a hybridized Caribbean cultural identity. The connected stories of Philoctete and Ma Kilman focuses on Ma Kilman healing the wound Philoctete carries on his shin that he believes to have been caused by "the chained ankles of his grandfathers" (Walcott 19). Philoctete, like Achille, believes that the history of enslavement has completely severed him from his ancestral African traditions resulting in his wound which "will never heal" (19). However, when Philoctete seeks out the advice of Ma Kilman, an elderly woman who owns the *No Pain Café*, her journey to heal him reveals even more African traditions present in the modern-day Caribbean. During this interaction, Ma Kilman states:

'It have a flower somewhere, a medicine, and ways
my grandmother would boil it. I used to watch ants
climbing her white flower-pot. But, God, in which place?;

"Whither was this root? What senna, what tepid tisanes,
could clean the branched river of his corrupted blood,
whose sap was a wounded cedar's? What did it mean,

the name that felt like a fever? Well, one good heft
of his garden-cutlass would slice the damned name clean
from its rotting yam...' (Walcott 19-20)

With these words, Ma Kilman realizes that a cure for Philoctete's physical wound lies in the medicinal practice of her ancestors. Additionally, since Philoctete's wound has been tied to the symbolic wounds of colonization and enslavement, Ma Kilman's cure can be tied to the healing of those symbolic wounds as well. For Hamner, this suggests that "the symbolic ramifications of Philoctete's wound become paramount, and Ma Kilman's quest must be to reestablish a connection with her ancestors in order to help him" (43). As with Achille's *katabasis*, Walcott suggests that the answer to healing the traumas that affect the present is the rediscovery of the past's continued presence in the modern-day Caribbean.

To successfully heal Philoctete's ancestral wound, Ma Kilman undertakes a journey in which she reconnects with the gods and traditions of her African ancestors. In Book Six of the text, Ma Kilman prepares a medicinal bath to cure Philoctete's wound but she still cannot remember the final, integral ingredient that her grandmother taught her. To find this ingredient, Ma Kilman travels deep into the woods to seek out that which she has lost to time. While doing so, she notices that a line of ants has been following her during her journey, speaking a language that at first, she cannot understand. However, as she reconnects with her ancestral past, slowly the language of the ants becomes clearer, as she realizes they have begun "talking the language of her great-grandmother." (Walcott 244). At this point in the text, the symbolism of the line of ants as representative of the voices of African ancestry has been established numerous times. In an earlier scene during Achille's *katabasis* in which he sees his captured ancestors being led in chains to the slave boats, he is said to watch them moving away "until the line was a line of ants. He let out a soft moan / as the last ant disappeared" (145). By the time Ma Kilman sees the ants guiding her to her ancestor's lost knowledge, the ants have connected the past to the present through the continued presence of African identity. However, Ma Kilman cannot understand

what knowledge her ancestors are attempting to tell her until she begins to reconnect with the culture she has forgotten.

As Ma Kilman travels further into the forest, she rediscovers the gods and cultural practices of her ancestors that have been absent from her life. Specifically, Ma Kilman has lost her cultural connection to the natural world that, when reestablished, will offer her the cure for Philoctete's wound. Clad in a long dress, straw hat, an oppressively hot wig, and a cumbersome purse, Ma Kilman battles with nature as she moves further into her journey. Her travels are framed as impossibly difficult as she suffers from the blistering heat and "pull[s] at the itch in her / armpits, nearly dropping her purse" (238). As she does so, she notices that there are echoes of her grandmother's culture in the forest that surrounds her. She notices "gods in leaves," but she struggles to see them saying:

...so the deities swarmed in the thicket

of the grove, waiting to be known by name; but she
had never learnt them, though their sounds were within her,
subdued in the rivers of her blood. Erzulie,

Shango, and Ogun; their outlines fading, thinner
as belief in them thinned, so that all their power,
their roots, and their rituals were concentrated

in the whorled corolla of that stinking flower.

All the unburied gods, for three deep centuries dead,
but from whose lineage, as if her veins were their roots,

her arms ululated, uplifting the branches
of a tree carried across the Atlantic, that shoots
fresh leaves as its dead trunk wallows on our beaches. (242-243)

In this moment, the African deities of Shango, Erzuile, and Ogun become directly tied to the plants that grow on the island. Specifically, the plant that Ma Kilman seeks to cure Philoctete's wound is one that connects Africa to the Caribbean over three centuries. Walcott meditates on this "stinking flower" and the journey it took to reach the Caribbean for a full two pages during Ma Kilman's journey. Walcott describes the flower's turbulent journey as one that reflects the forced migration Ma Kilman's African ancestors undertook to ultimately arrive in the Caribbean. The seed of this plant is said to have traveled to the Caribbean when the narrator writes, "A swift had carried the strong seed in its stomach / centuries ago from its antipodal shore" (Walcott 238). After centuries, this odorous flower eventually "climbed like the ants, the ancestors of Achille, / the women carrying coals after the dark door / slid over the hold" (Walcott 239). Although forgotten, this flower that Ma Kilman seeks ties her to the African continent across centuries of separation, with the swift once again acting as a symbol of this connection. It is this plant that Ma Kilman uses to eventually cure Philoctete because the ancestral wound he suffers from can only be healed through a rediscovery of African ancestral traditions that persist into the present-day Caribbean.

In her 1982 essay, Sarah McClure discusses the ways in which African plants were brought to the Caribbean by the enslaved to preserve their cultural and medicinal traditions. While McClure is skeptical of Walcott's and others' suggestion that birds carried seeds of certain plants from Africa to the Caribbean, she indicates that enslaved Africans carried with them seeds of native African plants that were important to their cultural traditions and religious practices. Historical accounts cited by McClure suggest that often the only things newly enslaved Africans would carry with them were beads and sacred objects coated with the seeds of specific medicinal plants (McClure 295). This likely introduced some of these plants to the Caribbean where they

continued to be used by the enslaved and their descendants for various traditional practices. This is not to say that the traditions preserved and practiced for centuries in the Caribbean were identical to those practiced in Africa; rather, when speaking about a specific plant that made this journey, McClure writes, “Both African and Caribbean cultures show similarities in the uses of this plant; some of these uses are of certain West African origin while others are unique to the Caribbean” (294). These connected but distinct traditional uses of these African plants in the Caribbean further the idea of a hybridized Caribbean cultural identity that draws from African traditions, but is not defined by them alone. McClure expresses this idea explicitly when she writes “The more important plant charms and medicines were assimilated into their [Black Caribbeans’] new culture, as was the Obeah religion” (298). This assimilation of African plants into the new culture of the Caribbean reflects Ma Kilman’s journey to cure Philoctete’s wound. Only when she sheds her colonial clothing, prays in the language of her grandmother, and performs an Obeah ceremony in the forest can she bring about true healing for the ancestral wound Philoctete bears on his shin (Walcott 244).

Adding further evidence for Walcott’s understanding of a hybridized Caribbean culture is the way in which Ma Kilman’s spiritual beliefs incorporate her African traditions, as well as Christian ones. In the narrative, Ma Kilman is known as one of the most skilled practitioners of Obeah on the island. Obeah is a hybridized spiritual belief system unique to the Caribbean which originates in African traditions but has evolved in the Caribbean due to the mixing of various cultures and other influences; Obeah will be discussed in greater detail in the section on *Wide Sargasso Sea*. However, just as Ma Kilman is an Obeah woman, she is also undeniably a member of the Christian faith, as she attends mass every Sunday and discusses her Christian faith numerous times throughout the text. Even during her journey to reclaim her lost ancestral

knowledge to heal Philoctete, Ma Kilman does not reject her Christian faith. Although she sheds the clothing she wears to Sunday mass during her journey into the forest, she does so “carefully,” which suggests that she is not throwing away her Christian identity in exchange for her African one (243). Her clothing will be waiting for her once her journey is complete, just as her Christian faith will be. Thus, throughout the narrative, Ma Kilman is at once a member of the Christian faith *and* a practitioner of Obeah.

Ma Kilman’s mixed spiritual identity as a Christian and Obeah woman culminates toward the end of the text when she uses this mixed identity to help Major Plunkett mourn the death of his wife Maud. When sitting with Major Plunkett, Ma Kilman draws upon both European Christian traditions and Caribbean Obeah practices to bring the grieving man closure. As she experiences a vision of Maud in a heavenly afterlife, Ma Kilman places within her Bible a sprig of the croton plant—a plant indigenous to some regions in sub-Saharan Africa—and she lights incense on the table next to her traditional beads (Walcott 306). The European Christian practices and the Caribbean Obeah practices complement each other because Ma Kilman’s identity is not solely based on one religious tradition or the other, but a synthesis of the two.

Just as with Achille’s and Philoctete’s dance on Boxing Day, the cultural identities of Ma Kilman and other Caribbean characters in *Omeros* are ones that draw from multiple cultural influences that cannot be separated from each other. Ma Kilman, Achille, Philoctete, and those with whom they share the Caribbean possess a blended, hybridized cultural identity that is intricately woven together through centuries of interactions between their foundational cultures. To return to Africa—as Achille realizes through his *katabasis* and Ma Kilman realizes through healing Philoctete’s wound—would further fracture their cultural identities because, not only is there no mythic Africa to return to, but their cultural identities consist of multiple other

influences that would be erased during this impossible journey. Thus, Derek Walcott's *Omeros* suggests that African traditions and cultures are undeniably present in the Caribbean, but they only constitute part of the hybridized cultural identities the Caribbean possesses.

Plunkett and the Tethers of European Presence

Walcott's understanding of the Caribbean as a hybridized culture presents itself in another aspect of *Omeros* that warrants discussion. Between chapters focused on the poem's central narrative about Achille, Hector, and Helen, Walcott turns the narrative's attention to two non-African characters, the Creole narrator of the story, and the British expatriate Major Dennis Plunkett. While Walcott does not provide clear answers to the role Creole and European Caribbean inhabitants play in a larger Caribbean cultural context, he does use Plunkett and the narrator's presence to further explore the possibilities of understanding Caribbean culture as a hybridized one. How Plunkett and the narrator evolve during their time on St. Lucia is represented through two main symbols, Helen's stolen story and Maud Plunkett's embroidered funeral cloth, both of which suggest that St. Lucia's cultural identity is not yet formed but is being created through the mixing of the numerous identities that exist on the island.

When the text begins, Major Plunkett has recently settled in the Caribbean with his wife Maud after serving in the military during World War II. During his introduction, Major Plunkett fills the role of a European colonial presence through his connection to the colonizing force of a European military as well as his perception of the Caribbean and its peoples as beholden to Europe. Plunkett and the narrator become fascinated with Helen, a Black Caribbean woman who works as Plunkett's maid, whose story they immediately attempt to subsume into a larger European story. As told by the narrator:

Helen needed a history,

that was a pity that Plunkett felt towards her.
Not his, but her story. Not theirs, but Helen's war.

The name, with its historic hallucination
brightened the beach; the butterfly, to Plunkett's joy,
twinkling from myrmidon to myrmidon, from one

sprawled tourist to another. Her village was Troy,
its smoke obscuring soldiers fallen in battle.

Then her unclouding face, her breasts were its Pitons. (Walcott 30-31)

Despite emphasizing the importance of Helen having her own story, Plunkett and the narrator immediately connect her name to a figure from European culture: Helen of Troy. By reducing Helen's identity to her namesake's story, the two men ultimately reduce her identity to one that is defined by its connection to Europe. In his chapter, Kelvin Toh writes that Plunkett's fascination with Helen evokes the colonizer/colonized dynamic because "as a colonizer, Plunkett wants to discover her more so that he can possess her. That is why, although he feels for her, she is still very different and he finds himself the only one capable of telling her story" (60). This colonial and paternalistic desire to write Helen's story for her also applies to the island of St. Lucia as the narrator states "the island was once / named Helen; its Homeric association / rose like smoke from a siege" (Walcott 31). To Ciocia, Plunkett's and the narrator's attempt to tell Helen's and St. Lucia's stories is flawed in their inability to allow their stories to be untethered from European culture. By wrapping Helen's and St. Lucia's stories in metaphors and allusions to Homer's epics, Plunkett and the narrator "avert us from the simple truth and beauty both of the young woman (Plunkett's maid), and of the island" (Ciocia 90). In other words, Plunkett's attempts to tie Helen's and St. Lucia's identities to Europe undermines and removes the uniqueness of their Caribbean identities. Thus, in his introduction, Plunkett assumes the role of

the colonial actor who seeks to extract information from the Caribbean and its peoples to capture it and them for himself.

Despite his solidly colonial introduction in the poem, Plunkett's identity shifts as the story progresses, culminating in him becoming representative of the possibility for European inhabitants of the Caribbean to become a part of a hybridized Caribbean cultural identity. Toward the conclusion of the text, after Plunkett has spent considerable time in the Caribbean and undergone his own *katabatic* journey in search of his identity, his perception of Helen and St. Lucia changes dramatically. Specifically, the death of Plunkett's wife Maud acts as the catalyst for him and St. Lucia to accept each other.

Those in attendance at Maud's funeral represent the range of identities the Caribbean possesses as all the central characters of the plot are present as well as the "big shots," "every brown dignitary," and the sizable Black congregation (Walcott 266). However, where the narrator expects everyone to be present at the funeral out of some sense of obligation to the Plunketts rather than an empathetic connection to them, he is surprised to see Achille weeping, thinking:

... I saw that the eyes were wet

as those of a boy, and my eyes were watering too.

Why should he be here, why should he have come at all,
none of them following the words, but he has such grace

that I couldn't bear it.

[...]

Could he, in that small

suit too tight at the shoulders, who shoveled the pens

in the rain at Plunkett's love him? Where was it from,
this charity of soul, more piercing than Helen's

beauty? Runneling his face like the road to the farm?
We sang behind Plunkett, and I saw Achille perspire
over the words, his lips following after the sound. (Walcott 265)

To Anna Boyagoda, the questions the narrator asks in his interior monologue are meant to be understood symbolically as larger questions of identity between Black Caribbeans and White Caribbeans. Boyagoda writes that the narrator's question is meant to be understood as:

Could Achille, the representative of the African Diaspora, love Plunkett, the representative descendant of the colonial masters? The answer is no. [... but] could Achille, a St. Lucian fisherman who toils for Helen and grieves over the modernization of his island, love Plunkett, a pig farmer who desperately wants to be considered just another St. Lucian local? And to this question, the answer is immeasurably yes. (86)

While Plunkett and Achille's representative identities in theory cannot find connection due to the historical conflict between them, their shared experience of loss—Plunkett through Maud and Achille through Hector—allows for a connection that transcends their individual identities. Boyagoda suggests that “the immediacy of the men's shared experience of loss prevails over any prior divisions set in place by race and class” which in turn presents a genuine moment of cross-cultural connectedness (82).

The connection between Achille and Plunkett at Maud's funeral acts as the beginning of a new understanding of an expanded Caribbean cultural identity that is explored by the narrator throughout the remainder of Plunkett's story. One of the most significant symbols that conveys the hybridization of Caribbean culture is the embroidered silk blanket that covers Maud's coffin. This covering is one that Maud herself created before her death and depicts numerous birds from

various parts of the world where Caribbean inhabitants originate. When describing the silk embroidery after Maud's funeral, the narrator notes:

And those birds, Maud Plunkett stitched into her green silk
with sibylline steadiness were what islands bred:
brown dove, black grackle, herons like ewers of milk,

pinned to a habitat many had adopted.
The lakes of the world have their own diaspora
of birds every winter, but these would not return.

The African swallow, the finch from India
now spoke the white language of a tea-sipping tern,
with the Chinese nightingales on a shantung screen,

while the Persian falcon, whose cry leaves a scar
on the sky til it closes, saw the sand turn green,
the dunes to sea, understudying the man-o'-war,

talking the marine dialect of the Caribbean
with nightjars, finches, and swallows, each origin
enriching the islands to which their cries were sewn. (Walcott 313-314)

This description helps illustrate the Caribbean's blended cultural identity. The racial makeup of the Caribbean is represented through the "brown dove," "black grackle," and white "herons" and the diversity of origination is represented through different birds from Africa, Persia, British-colonized India, and the indigenous birds of the Caribbean islands. The narrator notes that Achille is struck by this image during Maud's funeral when he states:

Then Achille saw that swift
pinned to the orchids, but it was the image of a swift

which Maud had sewn into the silk draping her bier,
and not only the African swift but all the horned island's
birds, bitterns and herons, silently screeching there. (Walcott 267)

Pairing these two passages together reveals that the various birds embroidered together onto the silk sheet of Maud's casket are representative of the extremely diverse population of the Caribbean. While the African swift has played a central symbolic role in the text to suggest the presence of African cultural identity in the Caribbean, the African swift is only one part of the Caribbean's colorful aviary. The Caribbean's population consists of an untold number of migrations from every region of the world. And the narrator suggests that the Caribbean benefits from the diversity of its flock as he writes, "each origin / enriching the island to which their cries were sewn" (314). At the funeral, as Achille, Philoctete, and Helen pay their respects to Maud, Plunkett's eyes widen in surprise at their presence and he nods to them in gratitude, suggesting that this moment of connectedness has meant something to all of them (267). This small moment of empathy between the symbolic representatives of two conflicting sides of Caribbean colonial trauma introduces the possibility for them and all other Caribbeans to find cultural connection despite their different origins.

The diverse Caribbean flock is evoked again later in the text to continue exploring the possibilities of a hybridized Caribbean cultural identity. As has been previously discussed, Plunkett approaches Ma Kilman after Maud's death to commune with Maud's spirit, using a mixture of Obeah and Christian practices to do so. Just as this scene represented the hybridization of Ma Kilman's cultural identity, it does similar work for Plunkett who turns to Caribbean spiritual practices as a means of bringing him closure after Maud's death. As Plunkett leaves Ma Kilman's abode, he experiences a vision from Maud in which he describes,

...Innumerable flocks

of birds screamed from her guidebooks over the shacks
of the village, their shadows like enormous fans,
all those she had sewn to the silken quilt, with tags

pinned to their spurs, and he knew her transparent hands
had unstitched them as he watched them flying over
the grooved roofs till they were simply the shadow of...

of a cloud on the hills. (Walcott 308)

Just after seeking out an Obeah woman to help him heal from the pain of losing his wife, Plunkett sees a vision of the Caribbean in which all its inhabitants live together and fly free. This is an idyllic vision in which the Caribbean is free from its divisions as all the birds merge together to form a single, united shadow on the landscape. It is unclear if this vision is meant to be understood as the Caribbean as it is, will be, or could be, but it is one that explores the possibility of a Caribbean whose cultural identity is shaped and strengthened by its diversity. And, although it appears as mere embroidery and visions, the symbol of the mixed Caribbean flock has profound effects on Plunkett and the narrator. As the text ends, the narrator's understanding of the Caribbean as a hybridized culture finally leads to him seeing Helen in all her beauty, free from the restraints he and other colonial actors have placed upon her.

As has been mentioned already, Plunkett's and the narrator's attempts to possess Helen and St. Lucia is part of what defined them as European colonial actors. Thus, their acceptance into a larger Caribbean culture must coincide with their rejection of these colonially motivated actions which becomes a central aspect of the concluding pages of the poem. After Maud's funeral, the narrator takes a walk with Plunkett on the beach during which they reflect on their

colonial understanding of St. Lucia. Where previously both Plunkett and the narrator have attempted to project a story onto Helen and the island in a harmful way, as they walk on the beach, they come to a realization:

[...] There, in her head of ebony,
there was no real need for the historian's
remorse, nor for literature's. Why not see Helen

as the sun saw her, with no Homeric shadow,
swinging her plastic sandals on that beach alone,
as fresh as the sea-wind? Why make the smoke a door? (Walcott 271)

In this moment, just a few pages after Maud's embroidery presented the possibility of a hybridized Caribbean culture, Plunkett and the narrator reflect upon their own colonial actions to possess and speak for Helen and question the harm their actions have done—and those of other colonial actors in the region. By placing a piece of European culture, that of Homer's epics, onto this Black Caribbean woman, they begin to question if their actions have not elevated her story but eclipsed it.

The self-reflective question Plunkett and the narrator consider after Maud's funeral is answered in the remaining pages of the poem as Helen's story is untethered from Homer and allowed to shine on its own. In the final four pages of the text, the perspective shifts to the narrator once more, who sits in the *No Pain Café* and observes Helen as she works. Helen, as she has throughout the book, is painted as a representative of the island as "She is dressed / in the national costume: white, low-cut bodice, / with frilled lace at the collar" (322). As she moves between tables, Helen is described as an alluring work of art whose beauty draws the eyes of everyone present. However, where previously her beauty has been framed in direct relation to the

Helen of Greek legend, for the first time, the narrator describes her as wholly distinct from her namesake. The narrator thinks,

Africa strides, not alabaster Hellas,

and half the world lies open to show its black pearl.

She waits for your order and you lower your eyes
away from hers that have never carried the spoil

of Troy, that never betrayed horned Menelaus
or netted Agamemnon in their irises. (Walcott 323)

For the first time in the text, Helen is free from the European cultural tethers Plunkett and the narrator have placed upon her. Shining through is her true image, her true identity, which is of the highest value and beauty despite having nothing to do with Europe. Taking in Helen's beauty, the narrator reflects on the symbolic nature of seeing Helen as she is, rather than through a European filter. He thinks:

But the name Helen had gripped my wrist in its vise

to plunge it into the foaming page. For three years,
phantom hearer, I kept wandering to a voice
hoarse as winter's echo in the throat of a vase!

Like Philoctete's wound, this language carries its cure,
its radiant affliction; reluctantly now,
like Achille's, my craft slips the chain of its anchor

moored to its cross as I leave it. (323)

In this moment, the narrator realizes that his focus on Helen's symbolic connections to European culture have not only harmed her—and the Caribbean she represents—but also him—and the larger European identity he represents. By saying that his craft has freed itself from its anchor, the narrator is also free to untether his own Creole Caribbean identity from Europe's colonial presence. While Major Plunkett is not mentioned in these final pages, the narration opens the possibility that he too can join the Caribbean's flock with the rest of those who have migrated to this region they all call home.

Thus, although a majority of Walcott's story focuses on his Black Caribbean characters seeking out and discovering their Caribbean identities, his inclusion of White and Creole characters undergoing similar journeys suggests that Caribbean cultural identity is something all the region's peoples can discover if they search for it. To Walcott, Caribbean cultural identity is not a singular thing, but an ever-evolving mixture of cultures that creates unity for the region through its diversity. In the end, despite their different origins and experiences, Achille, Helen, Ma Kilman, Philoctete, the narrator, and Major Plunkett are all part of the same colorful Caribbean flock.

Wide Sargasso Sea by Jean Rhys

Overview

The third and final con-text explored in this paper offers yet another unique perspective on the question of Caribbean cultural identity. Jean Rhys wrote *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a prequel to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* from the perspective of Bertha Mason, Rochester's first wife whom he locked up for a decade prior to the novel's narrative due to her supposed madness. In Rhys' text, Bertha is originally named Antoinette until her husband forcibly renames her Bertha later in the narrative. By focusing on Antoinette's/Bertha's story, Rhys brings to the forefront the question of identity for White Creoles like her who trace their ancestry to Europe but call the Caribbean home. Where Césaire and Walcott, who are both Black Caribbeans, told their novels through the stories of mostly Black Caribbeans—Walcott's character Plunkett is one exception—Rhys' novel is told exclusively from the perspectives of a White Creole woman and her English husband who, although not named in the novel, is meant to be understood as Rochester from Brontë's novel. Rhys engages with Stuart Hall's and Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity by focusing on Antoinette's struggle to find her identity as a White Creole woman. In doing so, Rhys suggests that Caribbean culture is inherently hybridized—created from a mixing of many cultural influences. This hybridized culture is one that unites Black Caribbeans and White Caribbeans through shared cultural practices and a shared rejection of European colonial oppression.

Why *Jane Eyre*?

While the pre-texts of both *Omeros* and *A Tempest* are only peripherally connected to the period of colonization when their 20th-century Caribbean authors are writing, the pre-text of Jean

Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* is directly implicated in the era of Europe's colonization of the Caribbean. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* was originally published in 1847, a little over a decade after the British parliament ended slavery in all territories under British control—though apprenticeship arguably continued a slave-like system for a few more years. Susan Meyer argues that Brontë was quite knowledgeable of British colonialism during the period in which she wrote. Brontë illustrates her knowledge by authoring hundreds of pages set in a fictional British colony in Africa during her adolescence, her inclusion of detailed descriptions of torture methods used by White plantation owners in the West Indies to punish rebellious slaves, and her inclusion of characters connected to various British colonies in the Caribbean throughout many of her novels (Meyer 247). Brontë's relationship to British colonialism is arguably at its most explicit in *Jane Eyre* through the text's inclusion of Bertha Mason—the insane West Indian Creole wife of Rochester whose ghostly presence haunts the narrative—as well as Jane's financial connection to the island of Madeira, where British and Portuguese merchants historically made fortunes using slave-labor to produce wine. These two aspects of *Jane Eyre* offer important insights into colonialism for Brontë's historical period, but fall short in numerous aspects that Rhys seeks to address in her con-text.

First, it's useful to look at Bertha Mason's characterization in *Jane Eyre*. As Maisha Wester points out, Gothic literature during the 18th and 19th centuries portrayed White Creoles in ways that reflected various racial concerns held by European colonial empires at the time. Prior to widespread slavery in colonized territories, the lines between White Europeans and Black Africans were drawn with relative ease. However, after a few generations of significant interactions between White and Black inhabitants of colonized territories, the lines inevitably blurred. During this period, White Creoles—or people born in the Caribbean to European

parents—were seen as tainted or corrupted because they were “culturally miscegenated as a result of their environments in which they were greatly outnumbered by Blacks” (Wester 409). While not portrayed as racially equivalent to Black people, when they were represented in literature, White Creoles shared many stereotypical characteristics painted onto Black people at the time. In these representations, Creoles “reveal extravagant tastes, volatile temperaments, bestial sexual appetites and atrocious fits of passion” (Wester 409) which worked to symbolically separate them from White Europeans. When actual racial mixing occurred in the region—often through coerced or forced sexual relationships between White slave-owners and the people they enslaved—mixed-blood Creoles of the Caribbean were represented as “not just morally degenerate, but physically and psychologically degraded too” (412). These representations within Gothic literature apply to *Jane Eyre*, in which Brontë’s representation of Bertha Mason closely mirrors those found across Gothic literature at the time.

In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha is undeniably Creole, in that Rochester describes her to Jane as the daughter of “Mr. Mason, a West Indian planter and merchant” and a mother of unknown origin. (Brontë 351). However, Bertha’s racial makeup—as either a mixed-race Creole or a White Creole—is never explicitly stated in the text. As Susan Meyer discusses, since Rochester, a wealthy British aristocrat, is allowed to marry Bertha, “she is clearly imagined as white—or passing as white—in the novel’s retrospective narrative,” but when Bertha appears in the text, she is closely associated with Blackness (252). When Jane describes Bertha to Rochester, she says that she had “a discoloured face – a savage face” as well as “purple” skin, and “swelled and dark” lips, all descriptions closely tied to the racialization of Black people at the time (Brontë 327). The ambiguity and shift in Bertha’s racialized appearance connect to the fluid understanding of race for Caribbean Creoles during the period as well as colonial anxieties about

the perceived racial degradation of Whiteness in proximity to Blackness. This is especially apparent through Jane's description of Bertha as animalistic when she narrates:

In the deep shade, at the farther end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it grovelled seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face. (Brontë 338)

Despite ostensibly being a White British woman born in one of England's territories, Bertha's connection to the Caribbean has made it so greater British colonial society no longer identifies her with her father's culture: in Meyer's words, "Bertha has *become* black" (252). While Meyer's claim potentially goes too far—after all, to say that Bertha has literally become Black carries problematic implications in that it erases and replaces real Black cultural identity—Brontë undoubtedly reproduces colonial anxieties about a perceived threat of racial degradation of Caribbean Creoles. And Brontë's choice to do so not only problematically represents Caribbean Creoles as sub-human, but also supports the prosperity of colonial actors in the story, especially Jane.

In Gilbert and Gubar's book *The Madwoman in the Attic*, they argue that Bertha is meant to be understood as a "dark double" to Jane because Bertha's anger and violent rage in the face of her confinement within the attic of Thornfield Hall mirrors Jane's internal rage at the patriarchal and financial barriers she faces throughout her life (360). Bertha's actions throughout the text all work to externalize Jane's anger as her "truest and darkest double: she is the angry aspect of the orphan child, the ferocious secret self Jane has been trying to repress" (360). This "doubling" of Jane and Bertha works to connect the two women based on their shared experience with British oppression and their shared desire to be free from it. While creating unification through similar experiences is not problematic in and of itself, as Meyer points out, Brontë does

not pay heed to the distinctions between the two women's oppression, choosing instead to make "class and gender oppression the overt significance of racial 'otherness' [...] what begins as an implicit critique of British domination and an identification with the oppressed collapses into merely an appropriation for the metaphor of slavery" (Meyer 250). In other words, the mirroring of Bertha and Jane only serves to benefit Jane's narrative, by allowing her to equate her oppression with enslavement. Brontë does not explore Bertha's unique form of oppression due to her status as a Creole Caribbean woman other than to differentiate her from Jane. With this absence, Brontë's inclusion of Bertha in her narrative uses Bertha and the racialized oppression of Caribbean Creoles as a tool to further the story and prosperity of Jane, even when it results in the continued racialization of Bertha.

Just as Bertha acts as a mirror to Jane by showing how the two women are similar, she also acts as a foil to Jane by showing how the two women are different. As Paula Sato discusses, while Jane uses her wits and intellect to overcome the challenges she faces, Bertha uses violence to do the same by setting fires and using everything from her teeth to a kitchen knife as a weapon for her resistance (99). In doing so, Brontë creates a distinction between the two women that is implicitly racialized as Bertha's violence is tied to primal savagery, associated with Blackness, while Jane's reasoned resistance is tied to rationality associated, with Whiteness and European culture. When these two approaches are placed side-by-side during Bertha's burning of Thornfield Hall, Sato argues that:

Jane, in rescuing Rochester from his burning bed, shows that she can live harmoniously with the white patriarch, [and] Bertha demonstrates that she wants to destroy him. In the end, the Creole demon who has been standing in the way of Jane's God-ordained marriage to Rochester is herself destroyed. (99-100)

In the burning of Thornfield Hall, Brontë at once racializes Bertha as a savage and monstrous creature while painting Jane as “the abused slave who learns to be docile, and thus, deserving of freedom” (98). When Jane saves Rochester from Bertha—resulting in Bertha’s death and Rochester’s ability to marry again—Jane earns her freedom at the cost of Bertha’s literal death and her symbolic solidification as a racialized monster.

This is not the only time Brontë ties Jane’s prosperity to the suffering of the Caribbean and its various peoples. As Alexander Valint points out, the inheritance Jane receives from her uncle John Eyre grants her substantial economic freedom, but this inheritance’s “specific origin [is] in the slave-tainted economy of Madeira” (322). Madeira, as Valint explains, was a major wine-producing island that profited heavily from the slave trade, which suggests that Jane’s inherited fortune directly results from European colonialism and slavery. While Jane uses her wealth to help oppressed women like her gain some economic freedom, she is only able to do so through the fortune she acquires through the economic exploitation of the Caribbean. Once again, Brontë’s novel ties Jane’s liberation from oppressive English patriarchal and financial systems to the suffering of the racialized peoples of the Caribbean.

These two examples of Brontë’s harmful racialization of Bertha Mason’s Creole identity and her willingness to use slave labor to financially liberate her title character, are precisely the aspects of *Jane Eyre* that Jean Rhys sought to address and challenge in her con-text *Wide Sargasso Sea*. By taking up the perspective of Bertha Mason and giving voice to her untold story, Herischian, quoting Harrison, suggests that Rhys seeks “not only to correct an omission, but also correct what she considered a misreading of ‘Creole women’” (73). Thus, addressing the problematic representations of the cultural and racial identities of Caribbean Creoles becomes a central focus of her text. Rhys’ engagement with this aspect of *Jane Eyre* and the Gothic

tradition the text belongs to is why *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a particularly valuable example of how con-texts can be used to represent and theorize Caribbean cultural identity.

Antoinette's Navigation of Her Creole Identity

Throughout Jean Rhys' novel, Antoinette's central struggle is to find her identity, which exists in a limbo state between her White British ancestry and her Caribbean upbringing. As a White Creole, Antoinette is excluded from both sides of her cultural identity; White Europeans distance themselves from her due to her proximity to Blackness, while her White heritage makes her an outcast from Black Caribbeans. To Murdoch, this split identity "posits Bertha/Antoinette as both native and Other, a 'white Creole' intrinsically unable to locate her true subjective space in white-dominated slave-based colony" (256). Through focusing on Antoinette, Rhys takes up the same racial question English society was particularly concerned with during the enslavement period that was discussed in the previous section. However, unlike Gothic novelists during Brontë's time, Rhys, as a Caribbean Creole herself, peels back the racialized stereotype of the Caribbean Creole to interrogate the question of identity at the core of the colonial Caribbean: what does it mean to be a person between identities and cultural influences in the Caribbean? To answer this question, Rhys articulates her understanding of Caribbean cultural identity in two ways which will be the focus of this section. First, Rhys suggests that White Caribbeans cannot return to Europe and European culture because European culture defines them as a racialized "other." Second, Rhys uses the Caribbean spiritual belief system Obeah to suggest that White Creoles and other Caribbean populations have formed unique cultural identities in the region through the hybridization of European, African, and Indigenous cultural traditions.

No Return to England

When attempting to make sense of her cultural identity, Antoinette spends much of the text trying to reintegrate herself into British society and culture. As was discussed previously, colonial anxieties spawned from the proximity of White European planters and Black African slaves made it so Caribbean Creoles like Antoinette became their own racialized category separate and distinct from White Europeans. However, this racialization was not one that Antoinette and other Caribbean Creoles placed upon themselves, nor one that was explicitly stated. As a result, Antoinette struggles throughout the novel to make sense of her cultural absence through attempts to reclaim her Whiteness by reintegrating herself into White British society. However, as the text progresses and Antoinette sacrifices increasingly vital aspects of her freedom and identity to reclaim her English identity, Antoinette eventually comes to realize that no matter what she does, she will always remain racially tainted in the eyes of English society.

At the start of the novel, Antoinette and her mother Annette are nearly destitute after losing their wealth due to the end of enslavement and the financial irresponsibility of her now-deceased father Alexander Cosway. Although their poverty does not reduce them to the same status as the formerly enslaved Black Caribbeans on the island, it does create a distinct separation between them and the wealthy British class to whom they are beholden. Alexandra Neel suggests that this reduced status historically acted as a way for British colonial powers to render “former slaves and creole women alike as socially and civilly dead,” as a means of maintaining power in the region (1). Creole women in particular were targeted due to the perceived dual threat they posed to both racial and gender norms of British society. Thus, the loss of financial power of White Creoles was used by greater English society to entrench them in

their racialized status. Faced with their reduction of status due to poverty and racialized perceptions of Creole women, both Antoinette and Annette are desperate to find ways to reclaim their sense of personhood; they do this by attempting, and ultimately failing, to reestablish their connection to Whiteness and English culture.

Antoinette's and Annette's attempt to reclaim their White English identities takes form in numerous ways. Annette's marriage to the wealthy Englishman Mr. Mason, the family's failed attempt to restore the Coulibri Estate to its former glory, and the symbol of the Miller's Daughter painting all act as ways for Rhys to show the impossibility for White Creoles of reintegrating themselves in British culture. In each case, their attempts to return to an English cultural identity result in the further degradation of their personal identities and their loss of autonomy which consequently implies that the adoption of a new cultural identity separate from the British is necessary for White Creoles to survive in the Caribbean.

Early in the story, Annette attempts to reintegrate herself and her daughter into English society by marrying Mr. Mason, a wealthy British businessman who epitomizes the British colonial state due to the status his wealth affords him. With Mr. Mason as the authority in the household, Annette and Antoinette adopt a British way of living as Mr. Mason tries to reestablish the presence of British culture in everything from his insistence that they dress in English clothing (Rhys 15) and eat English food (21), to his arrogant refusal to learn of the customs and practices of the Black Caribbeans who inhabit the island (21). One of the main symbols of British colonial authority that Mr. Mason attempts to revitalize is the Coulibri Estate, the family's old plantation property that remains symbolic of the history of enslavement on the island. The earliest characterizations of the Coulibri Estate are centered on the natural beauty of

its diminished state since the end of enslavement. When describing the estate for the first time, Antoinette recalls:

Our garden was large and beautiful as that garden in the Bible—the tree of life grew there. But it had gone wild. The paths were overgrown and a smell of dead flowers mixed with the fresh living smell. Underneath the tree ferns, tall as forest tree ferns, the light was green. Orchids flourished out of reach or for some reason not to be touched. One was snaky looking, another like an octopus with long thin brown tentacles bare of leaves hanging from a twisted root. Twice a year the octopus orchid flowered—then not an inch of tentacle showed. It was a bell-shaped mass of white, mauve, deep purples, wonderful to see. The scent was sweet and strong. I never went near it.

All Coulibri Estate had gone wild like the garden, gone to bush. No more slavery—why should *anybody* work? This never saddened me. I did not remember the place when it was prosperous. (Rhys 10-11)

This description of the natural beauty of the garden post-enslavement implicitly suggests that the environment is naturally designed to flourish in the absence, not presence, of slavery. It is specifically the lack of the slave labor needed to cull the weeds and natural growths on the property that enables its natural beauty, suggesting that the natural state of the island is one free from enslavement. This makes it so Mr. Mason's attempt to repair the Coulibri Estate acts as a symbolic attempt to reproduce the unnatural state of enslavement in the Caribbean by White Europeans. While Mr. Mason is temporarily successful in restoring the estate—“it was clean and tidy, no grass between the flagstones, no leaks. But it didn't feel the same” (18)—the estate is eventually destroyed in a fire started by a gathering of local Black Caribbeans, once again returning it to its natural state.

Mr. Mason's attempt to conquer nature also takes form through Annette's pet parrot Coco whose wings Mr. Mason clips so that he cannot fly. Like Mr. Mason's attempt to revitalize Coulibri, his clipping of Coco's wings acts as another example of the harmful effects European presence has on the Caribbean. Coco, a green parrot native to the Caribbean, repeatedly asks the

question “Qui est là,” (translated from French to “Who’s there?”) to which he answers “Ché Coco” (“Dear Coco”) (25). Coco’s repeated question and answer brings up the idea of identity especially when it becomes the same question Annette asks after she has been institutionalized for insanity soon after the Coulibri fire (28) and the question that Antoinette thinks of as she lights Thornfield Hall on fire at the end of the novel. (112). When Mr. Mason clips Coco’s wings, he uses his power to enslave a creature native to the Caribbean which becomes symbolic of his control over Annette and Rochester’s control over Antoinette later in the text. As Jennifer Gilchrist discusses, “Mason clipped Coco’s wings to control and domesticate a Jamaican bird; likewise, the English have imposed the Law on post Emancipation West Indian society to restrain planters and civilize freed slaves” (470). Through Annette’s and Antoinette’s mirroring of Coco following the two fires of the novel, Rhys suggests that Mr. Mason—as a representative of English colonial authority—has attempted to violently control the post-emancipated Caribbean including Creoles like Antoinette and her mother through imposing English cultural practices and beliefs.

The English cultural practices Mr. Mason and Mr. Rochester represent in the text appear to offer Antoinette a cultural identity she can adopt. Excited at the prospect of finally being secure in an identity, Antoinette thinks “I was glad to be like an English girl” (Rhys 21). However, through one of the central symbols of the narrative, Rhys makes clear that Antoinette, and White Creoles like her, can never truly become English again and that attempting to do so is a self-damaging act. Antoinette’s attempt and ultimate failure to become English presents itself through her identification with a painting she calls “The Miller’s Daughter.” After Mr. Mason has entered their lives and instilled an English way of living for the family, Antoinette thinks:

So I looked away from her at my favourite picture, ‘The Miller’s Daughter’, a lovely English girl with brown curls and blue eyes and a dress slipping off her

shoulders. Then I looked across the white tablecloth and the vase of yellow roses at Mr Mason, so sure of himself, so without a doubt English. And at my mother, so without a doubt not English, but no white nigger either. Not my mother. Never had been. Never could be. Yes, she would have died, I thought, if she had not met him. And for the first time I was grateful and liked him. (Rhys 21)

In this moment, the question of Antoinette's identity takes center stage as she associates the Miller's Daughter and Mr. Mason's English Whiteness as above the status of her mother Annette. Whiteness, to Antoinette, is framed positively—both the aesthetic beauty of the Miller's Daughter and the confidence and heroic traits of Mr. Mason are tied to their Whiteness—while Caribbean Blackness is framed negatively. In contrast, Antoinette associates her mother's vulnerability to her proximity to Blackness and is grateful that her mother, while not English, is not fully Black either: “no white nigger.” As Lorna Burns discusses, throughout the text, Antoinette attempts to mirror the Miller's Daughter in “hopes to become more like the image of English virtue she believes her husband desires in a wife” (34). However, these attempts fail to overcome an impossible obstacle: her mixed heritage. Despite acting and dressing like the Miller's Daughter, Burns writes that “Antoinette, like her mother, is [not English] [...] her Creole heritage evokes for Rochester a different set of becomings that express degeneracy, madness and illicit sexuality” (34). Even if Antoinette perfectly adopts the characteristics and appearance of the Miller's Daughter, she will still be unable to become English because of her status as a Caribbean Creole and the proximity to Blackness implicit within that identity.

Antoinette's inability to truly become like the Miller's Daughter due to her Creole identity culminates in one of her final interactions with Rochester before he declares her insane and locks her away. After Antoinette has dressed in Rochester's favorite dress multiple times throughout the novel, Rochester thinks “She was wearing the same white dress I had admired, but it had slipped untidily over one shoulder and seemed too large for her, I watched her holding her left wrist with her right hand, an annoying habit” (Rhys 76). In this moment, as Antoinette's

white dress falls off her shoulder in an identical way to the Miller's Daughter's dress, instead of Rochester seeing a beautiful and proper English lady, he instead sees Antoinette as untidy and ill-mannered. She literally does not fit the role of the Miller's Daughter in her English husband's eyes as he sees her dress as too large. Throughout the text, Antoinette's attempts to become like Miller's Daughter results only in the further degradation of her own agency. Alexandra Neel captures this idea when she writes, "while Antoinette innocently conceives of the 'Miller's Daughter' as an enviable identity, it rehearses her fate as a thing within a system of patriarchal sexual barter: The Englishman's Wife" (Neel 2). All of Antoinette's efforts to become like the Miller's Daughter fail to grant her the White English identity she seeks, while these efforts simultaneously succeeding in granting her the least desirable aspects of the Miller's Daughter's identity, her confined and subjugated state. In other words, Antoinette's mixed heritage prevents her from ever becoming the "lovely English lady" she imagines the Miller's Daughter to be, because she will always lack the central component necessary for this transformation to occur: Whiteness.

Cultural Hybridity through Christophine's and Antoinette's Obeah

When Antoinette is unable to adopt a White English identity, Jean Rhys subtly suggests an alternative understanding of Caribbean cultural identity for Black Caribbeans and Creoles alike. This inclusive Caribbean cultural identity is one founded on the concept of hybridity which centers on a mixture of numerous cultural sources that results in a new hybridized culture. Using the works of Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall, it becomes possible to understand Christophine, Antoinette, and their relationship with Obeah practices as representative of the possibility of a hybridized Caribbean cultural identity that brings together White and Black Caribbeans in a united rejection of European oppression.

In the text, Obeah plays an important symbolic role for two of the central characters, Christophine and Antoinette. Obeah, which was discussed briefly in the previous section on *Omeros*, is defined by Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert as:

...not a religion so much as a system of beliefs rooted in Creole notions of spirituality which acknowledges the existence and power of the supernatural world and incorporates into its practices witchcraft, sorcery, magic, spells, and healing [...] the term has come to signify any African-derived practices with religious elements, and despite continued criminalization, has come to represent a meaningful and rich element in the Caribbean's ancestral cultural heritage that needs to be nurtured and preserved. (155)

Obeah as a Caribbean spiritual belief system has historically played a vital role in the spiritual lives of enslaved Africans and their descendants, as well as in their resistance to enslavement, apprenticeship, and European colonial presence in the region. In his chapter on Obeah, Murrell summarizes the history of Obeah's power to resist colonial oppression when he writes, "[Obeah] was first used by slaves, and later by their descendants, to secure justice and revenge on other Africans and colonists who controlled, exploited, or abused them" (Murrell 229). Additionally, just as Obeah was used to resist slaveholders and other colonial actors, Bilby and Handler suggest that enslaved Africans and their descendants also used the spiritual belief system to heal illnesses, prophesize the future, protect against injury, and bring prosperous harvests (Bilby and Handler 158). Thus, on numerous Caribbean islands, Obeah became a tool used to achieve "what the slave community defined as socially beneficial goals" (155).

As a spiritual belief system whose practices were often used to resist the colonial authority of the island, Obeah became a target for colonial governments. In Jamaica alone, the colonial government passed four anti-obeah vagrancy laws and provisions during the period of enslavement as well as five additional vagrancy acts that subsumed Obeah restrictions within them by decreeing "all persons pretending to be dealers in obeah...shall be deemed rogues and

vagabonds” (Bilby and Handler 169). Even into the near present, the most recent anti-Obeah law—the 1898 Obeah Act which was revised in 1973—remained on the books until the early 21st century and punished Obeah practitioners with incarceration for up to a year, hard labor, or whipping (169). The numerous anti-Obeah provisions in the Caribbean illustrate the power Obeah held and holds to resist colonial oppression in the region.

One important thing to note about Obeah is that it is definitionally a Caribbean spiritual belief system. Although many Obeah traditions originate from the African continent, it is the way in which multiple tribal religions merged and mixed in the Caribbean during the enslavement period that created the distinct spiritual belief system of Obeah. Michael Rasbury suggests that Obeah, as well as other Caribbean belief systems are syncretic, in that they come about through the growth and interaction between multiple religious or spiritual systems (458). In addition, Rasbury suggests that Obeah and Rastafarianism—another Caribbean belief system—are created from “a unique set of complex relationships between cultural belief and oppressive historical circumstances” (458). Bilby and Handler echo Rasbury when they write that the various African traditions were “modified over the years by the New World environment, including its plant and animal life; European practices, beliefs and material culture (e.g., glass bottles, rum); and the social conditions and community tensions that existed under slavery” (154). In other words, Obeah cannot be separated from the historical and cultural context of the Caribbean because it only formed from of a medley of influences coming together in that specific place and time.

Another aspect of Obeah that is important to understanding Rhys’ symbolic use of the belief system is that it is historically not exclusive to Black Caribbeans. While the wide majority of those who practice Obeah are African-descended peoples, other communities in the Caribbean

have been historically known to practice Obeah as well. Records as early as 1655, when the British first took over Jamaica from the Spanish, suggest that “Obeah was practiced in Maroon communities among free Africans, poor whites, and slaves on plantations” (Murrell 232). Later in the 1860s, when Protestant missionaries came to Jamaica en masse, an offshoot of Obeah known as Myal grew in popularity due to its incorporation of Christian doctrine into African traditions (Paravisini-Gebert and Olmos 175). This further syncretization of Obeah expanded the belief system to greater populations while still furthering the anti-colonial movement that was integral to Obeah. This is seen in the fact that traditional Obeah leaders working with Native Baptists (another Christianized Caribbean religious group) helped lead the 1831 slave rebellion that helped bring about emancipation a few years later (Paravisini-Gebert and Olmos 176). The evolution of African traditions into Obeah, its offshoots, and other hybridized Caribbean belief systems results in a tradition that is of the Caribbean and for the Caribbean’s diverse inhabitants. In the present, despite its continued illegality in some of the region,

Caribbean people of all hues visit Obeah men [...] Politicians discretely visit them during their political campaigns; business people and other professionals, some of whom are Christian, seek their spiritual baths for protection from the evil eye or to receive blessings for good fortune.

Obeah appeals to descendants of indentured immigrants and slaves, persons of both high and low society, the propertied class, people of African and European descent, and other creole peoples... (Murrell 235)

The accessibility of Obeah as a tradition that originates from African practices but has syncretized with a variety of religious, cultural, and geographical influences unique to the Caribbean makes it a particular useful example of a hybridized Caribbean cultural practice for Rhys’ novel.

This understanding of obeah as a syncretized cultural belief system connects to Stuart Hall’s and Homi Bhabha’s concept of cultural hybridity. As was discussed previously, cultural

hybridity is a theory on the formation of culture in colonized regions which suggests that regions like the Caribbean have ever-evolving cultural identities that are created from hybridization, or cross-cultural mixing. The evolution of Obeah as a cultural belief system that originated from African traditions, but that became something new due to these traditions being influenced when they were brought to the Caribbean, represents Hall's argument for cultural hybridity. Hall writes,

The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite difference; by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. One can only think here of what is uniquely – 'essentially' – Caribbean: precisely the mixes of color, pigmentation, physiognomic, type; the 'blends' of tastes that is Caribbean cuisine... (Hall 235-236)

The blending of cultural belief systems that brings about Obeah in the Caribbean is a quintessential example of hybridity. Jean Rhys utilizes the hybrid nature of Obeah in *Wide Sargasso Sea* to represent her conception of Caribbean cultural identity. By having Antoinette, a White Creole, and Christophine, a Black Martinican, both use Obeah to resist the racist and patriarchal colonial state and to assert their own agency, Rhys suggests that they share a Caribbean cultural identity that lives through not despite their differences.

Throughout the novel, Obeah is used by Antoinette and Christophine to understand, articulate, and resist their oppression along racialized and gendered lines. For Christophine, as a formerly enslaved Black Martinican woman, Obeah acts as a means of protecting herself from forces that seek to take advantage of her perceived vulnerability. Early in the text, when Antoinette is still a child, she recalls the intense sense of fear she felt when she visited Christophine's room in the Coulibri Estate. Antoinette recalls:

one day when I was waiting there [in Christophine's room] I was suddenly very much afraid. The door was open to the sunlight, someone was whistling near the stables, but I was afraid. I was certain that hidden in the room (behind the old black press?) there was a dead man's dried hand, white chicken feathers, a cock with its throat cut, dying slowly, slowly. Drop by drop the blood was falling into a red basin and I imagined I could hear it. No one had ever spoken to me about obeah—but I knew what I would find if I dared to look. Then Christophine came in smiling and pleased to see me. Nothing alarming ever happened and I forgot or told myself I had forgotten. (Rhys 18)

In this passage, which acts as one of the first moments in which Rhys describes Christophine, it is Christophine's connection to Obeah—the dried hand, chicken feathers, a bleeding chicken are all items associated with Obeah practices (Woltmann 85)—that creates a sense of fear in Antoinette. From this moment forward when characters become fearful of Christophine, this earlier scene acts as a reminder of the connection between that fear and Christophine's Obeah practices. On numerous occasions throughout the text, the fear Christophine evokes as an Obeah woman both protects and empowers her and those she cares about. During the Coulibri fire, just as the estate's residents are about to be attacked by the mob, Coco the parrot's fiery demise causes them to pause because Antoinette recalls "I heard someone say something about bad luck and remembered that it was very unlucky to kill a parrot, or even see a parrot die" (Rhys 25). Woltmann directly ties this moment to Christophine's power through fear as "parrots were seen as part of the instruments of obeah," and this cultural belief in the bad luck of seeing a parrot die gives Christophine and the family an opportunity to escape from the mob (86). Later in the text, one of Rochester's servants, Amélie, who verbally and physically attacks Antoinette, ceases her violence out of fear when Christophine threatens her with "a bellyache like you never see bellyache" (61). The supposed ability to cause a sickness like an incurable bellyache is one of Obeah's most well-known abilities, so Christophine's threat and Amélie's fear are once again tied to her practice of Obeah.

The fear Christophine instills in others through her obeah practices also provides her the ability to resist Rochester and the larger English colonial state he represents. On numerous occasions, including in his own interior monologue, Rochester suggests that he is fearful of Christophine. When Antoinette tells him of the sense of fear she felt as a child, Rochester immediately projects his own fears of Christophine onto Antoinette by asking her if Christophine frightened her and goes on to suggest that if she was a little taller and dressed differently, “I might be afraid of her” (44). Rochester’s fear of her allows Christophine to subtly resist and undermine him by waking him up earlier than he wishes, (50), serving him dinner later than he likes, (53), speaking about him in a language he doesn’t understand (54), and openly criticizing him when she eventually quits on her own terms (60). When Rochester considers firing her prior to her quitting, it is specifically his fear of her that prevents him from doing so as he thinks “Sometimes a sidelong look or a sly knowing glance disturbed me, but it was never for long. ‘Not now,’ I would think. ‘Not yet’” (53).

The fear Rochester has of Christophine, like Antoinette at the start of the novel, is due to her relation to Obeah. After witnessing Christophine threaten Amélie with sickness, Rochester becomes deeply interested in Obeah, specifically the concept of the zombi—a figure that exists in Obeah and other Caribbean spiritual systems—which he explores by reading a fictional English text on Obeah titled *The Glittering Coronet of Isles*. (64). This text, which paints Obeah in strictly negative terms eventually leads to Rochester becoming so paranoid and fearful because he believes that Antoinette and Christophine are attempting to poison him—when Antoinette is really attempting to use Obeah to make him love her again—that he uses his power to threaten Christophine with arrest and to imprison Antoinette by having her declared insane. With Rochester’s fear leading to the ruination of his relationship with Antoinette and his

eventual fleeing from the Caribbean, the power Obeah and those who use it possess to resist colonial actors and oppression is undeniably potent. Additionally, it is Antoinette's adoption of Obeah as a way to resist Rochester's colonial and patriarchal oppression of her that leads to her finalized identity as a Caribbean woman.

There are numerous moments in the text when Antoinette's relationship with Obeah takes a central role in her agency. However, two scenes best capture Antoinette's adoption of a Caribbean cultural identity through her use of Obeah. The first of these moments, when Antoinette asks Christophine how to use Obeah to make Rochester fall in love with her, comes mid-way through the text and works to illustrate Antoinette's incomplete realization of herself as a Caribbean woman. The second moment, Antoinette's burning of Rochester's Thornfield Hall, concludes the text with Antoinette successfully using Obeah and fully stepping into her identity as a Caribbean woman.

When Antoinette first uses Obeah to make Rochester love her, her failure stems from her incomplete understanding of what Obeah is at this point in the text. After Antoinette asks Christophine to use Obeah to help her, Christophine laughs at Antoinette for two reasons: that Obeah cannot make Rochester love Antoinette because "If the man don't love you, I can't make him love you" (67), and because Obeah is not meant to be practiced by White people. "Too besides, that is not for béké. Bad trouble come when béké meddle with that" (68). Both of Christophine's reasons suggest a few important implications for understanding Antoinette's identity at this moment in the text. First, Antoinette does not understand what Obeah can and cannot do, suggesting that she, like Rochester, only understands Caribbean cultural practices like Obeah from an outsider's perspective. As Bilby and Handler discuss in their article, Obeah was used to accomplish what oppressed Caribbeans "defined as socially beneficial goals" (155).

Antoinette becoming the perfect Englishman's wife serves to further entrench English authority over the Caribbean, which perverts one of the foundational goals of Obeah as a means of resisting colonial oppression. Matthew Cutter suggests that Antoinette failed because "instead of trying to free herself from the colonizer, she attempts to change him" (Cutter 132). Obeah is a tool of resistance meant to harm colonial oppressors, but Antoinette attempts to use it to help one. This failure to understand what Obeah is meant to be used for is a large part of why her use of it fails.

A second implication of Christophine's reasons that Antoinette's request is impossible is that Antoinette still sees herself as a White Englishwoman, not a Caribbean Creole. Christophine makes this explicit when she refers to Antoinette as *béké*, a Creole word that translates to "a white person" (Rhys 68). It might appear that Christophine's use of *béké* refers to Rochester in this sentence, as Antoinette's intended Obeah targets him, but by saying "when *béké* meddle with that" Christophine suggests that the person using Obeah—the meddler—rather than the target of Obeah, cannot be *béké*. In addition, as has already been discussed, there Obeah possesses a long history of being used to resist White Europeans during and after enslavement in the region, so *béké* reasonably cannot refer to Rochester who is just another European oppressor. Thus, the *béké* Christophine refers to must be Antoinette, suggesting that only a Caribbean person can successfully use Obeah and that Antoinette is not, at this point in the story, culturally Caribbean. Janette Martin's argument that Rhys uses Obeah as "metonym for a word beyond the reach of those outside the culture," suggests that because Antoinette is still trying to hold onto her White identity, Antoinette is still outside the hybridized culture necessary to use Obeah (Martin 4).

Pairing these two implications together, since Obeah is used to resist colonial oppression and further what colonized Caribbeans deem "socially beneficial goals," Antoinette's use of

Obeah to make a White European love someone desperately trying to be a White European is outside of its capabilities (Bilby and Handler 155). Christophine's categorization of Antoinette as White and Antoinette's attempt to use Obeah for reasons it is not intended for causes Antoinette's Obeah to fail, leading Rochester to believe he was poisoned. The reasons for this failure become quite significant later in the text because, according to Christophine's statement, when Antoinette successfully uses Obeah in the closing pages of the novel to burn down Thornfield Hall, she must definitionally no longer be *béké*. By using Obeah correctly, Antoinette must have finally become Caribbean.

Antoinette's identity shifting from that of a White European incapable of using Obeah to that of a Caribbean woman capable of using Obeah does not occur immediately. Instead, it is her zombification at the hands of both Rochester and Christophine that allows her to understand herself as a Caribbean woman in the final moments of the text. In her chapter "Great Mistake to Go by Looks," in her book *Snow on the Cane Fields*, Judith Raiskin focuses on the role the Obeah and Voodoo conceptions of the zombi plays into the development of Antoinette's identity. In her text, drawing on Alfred Métraux, Raiskin defines a zombi as a person that exists between life and death who functions as a completely subjugated slave who serves their master without any agency or consciousness of their own (Raiskin 132). In the Caribbean, "the zombi can be seen to represent the condition of both the slave and the colony itself; like the colony, the zombi is a functioning economic body serving the demands of the master while its soul (or culture) has been stolen or forcibly put to sleep" (132). In Rhys' text, there are numerous examples of Antoinette being described as zombi-like. Raiskin suggests that her position as a White Creole in of itself makes her zombi-like because she is "caught in the limbo state of the zombi, fully alive in neither the English nor the black culture" (135). Additionally, within the text, when Rochester

first marries Antoinette, he describes her as “cold as ice” (Rhys 45), Rochester conflates her sleeping with her death (56), Christophine says she has a “face like dead woman” (70), and she is compared to lifeless dolls and marionettes on multiple occasions. In each of these instances, Antoinette is positioned within the idea of the zombi figure, foreshadowing her complete transformation later in the text.

The culmination of Antoinette’s zombification comes after her failed use of Obeah to make Rochester love her. As Rochester’s lack of love for Antoinette persists, Antoinette finally realizes that European oppressors like Rochester cannot be changed, only resisted. Where previously Antoinette meekly accepted Rochester calling her Bertha instead of her real name, she now openly combats Rochester by asserting “Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name. I know, that’s Obeah too” (Rhys 88). This is an important moment in the text as, for the first time, “she finally names him as her oppressor, as a slave master” (Raikin 140). When Antoinette then threatens Rochester with his death, it is Christophine who places her into a zombi-like state to protect her from Rochester’s inevitable rage. In this moment, Christophine’s use of Obeah to place “Antoinette back to the safe position behind the zombi mask” prevents Antoinette from suffering further as she is fully unaware. It is as a zombi that Antoinette is “at once the most oppressed of all slaves and the most disquieting and threatening figure to her master and his entire class” (Raikin 142). This is because the figure of the zombi that Antoinette now becomes is not a helpless being, it is “a dormant spirit of outrage and revolt waiting to awaken to destroy the oppressor and to ravage his goods” (142). Antoinette’s zombification through Obeah practices places her in a position to commit a massive act of resistance against her colonial oppressor. In the final scene of the novel, Antoinette’s

identity as a Caribbean woman finally solidifies in her mind as she successfully uses Obeah to destroy a symbol of the colonizer's power, Rochester's English estate, Thornfield Hall.

After forcing Antoinette to flee Dominica with him, Rochester imprisons her in the attic of Thornfield Hall, his massive English manor that symbolically "acts as a place in which English subjectivity constitutes itself by incarcerating its racial, colonial other" (Henderson 101). It is here that Antoinette spends years repeatedly asking herself, "What am I doing in this place and who am I?" (Rhys 107). As has been the case the entirety of the novel, the question that plagues Antoinette's mind is one of her identity. Her attempt to become the perfect English wife to Rochester failed and she remains in a limbo state, a zombi isolated from the world. Then, Antoinette receives a dream, one that she believes tells her what she must do. Antoinette envisions herself sneaking downstairs in the middle of the night, lighting fire to the estate, and seeing people and images that were important to her as she jumps from a window. When she awakens from her dream, Antoinette realizes that "at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do" as she grabs a candle to make her dream a reality (112).

This prophetic dream has its roots in Obeah and Myal traditions as the belief systems suggest that a "trance allows for the possibility of a direct interaction with ancestral spirits and the living, who in turn become the spirits' vehicle for prophecy, healing, advice, and revenge from those who harmed them when alive" (Parasivini-Gebert and Olmos 173). Antoinette thus becomes a vessel through which retributive justice flows to address the long history of English subjugation of the Caribbean and its peoples. Antoinette's call for Christophine is a prime example of this as Antoinette believes that she has been protected by a wall of fire Christophine herself created (Rhys 112). Later in the passage, Antoinette sees her childhood friend Tia who helps her find the courage to jump from the window which wakes her from her dream. Both of

these Black Caribbean women appear to Antoinette in this moment to help her accomplish her final resistance against her colonial oppressor, acting as her spiritual ancestors who she calls upon through Obeah practices.

Despite Antoinette presumably dying after jumping from the window, as she associates herself with Coco—the parrot that died during the fire at Coulibri— Sandra Drake suggests that her fatal leap also has greater implications in the Obeah belief system. Drake argues that Antoinette’s death is not the suicide of a madwoman, but rather, “Her ‘real’ death is her subjugation by Rochester—by the colonizer—the long slow process of her reduction to the zombi state chronicled in the novel” (200). Antoinette herself suggests this earlier in the novel when discussing her mother Annette’s madness by saying, “She did die when I was a child. There are always two deaths, the real one and the one people know about” (Rhys 77). In other words, Rochester’s subjugation of Antoinette has already brought about her true “death” in that her agency, freewill, and mind have been stripped from her by Rochester. In contrast to this, in Afro-Caribbean tradition, Drake says, death “is not an end or even a disengagement from life: it is more a change of state” (201). In this reading, Antoinette follows Afro-Caribbean beliefs in the afterlife by taking a final fatal leap to fully free herself from Rochester’s grasp and transition to a new state of being. In Antoinette’s use of Obeah to burn down Thornfield Hall and free herself from her colonial shackles, she completes her transformation from a White Creole willing to sacrifice everything to become English again, to a Caribbean woman who does sacrifice everything to resist the colonial oppression she and her fellow Caribbeans face. In her burning down of her prison, Antoinette “becomes keeper, mistress, and protector of the divine flame that brings freedom—becomes a fit ‘daughter’ of Christophine” (Drake 202). As Antoinette is

surrounded by the fire she started, for the first time in the novel, she is secure in her identity; she is Caribbean.

In telling the story of a White Creole struggling to decipher her own identity and ultimately finding the answer in the embrace of a hybridized Caribbean culture, Jean Rhys reclaims what it means to be a Creole woman from the harmful representations that pervades the Gothic literature of Brontë's time. In doing so, Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* illustrates the value con-texts possess to write back to the problematic aspects of the canons they draw from, while simultaneously providing alternative answers and understandings of the important questions their authors face.

Conclusion

As has been stated from the outset of this paper, the three con-texts at the center of this research act as examples of the kind of interrogations into Caribbean cultural identity that Caribbean authors continue to explore in their literature. It bears repeating that this paper avoided making judgments as to the veracity of the various ideas expressed by any of the authors and theorists presented in this research. This was an intentional choice because such judgments should not be made while this research is still in its infancy. Caribbean retellings of Western literary classics are numerous, so placing this research in conversation with the con-texts of other Caribbean authors is certainly worth exploring to get a more extensive understanding of the range of perspectives the region has to offer. George Lamming's *Water With Berries*, Kamau Brathwaite's *Caliban*, Wilson Harris' *Palace of the Peacock*, and V. S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* are just a few possible texts to examine in conjunction with this research.

In addition, this research opens many possible avenues to explore the role retellings play in other postcolonial contexts. While conducting the research for this paper, retellings from nearly every colonial context presented themselves. Nez Perce author Beth Piatote's *Antikoni* retells Sophocles' *Antigone* to discuss the repatriation of Native American remains. Iraqi author and documentarian Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* retells Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to consider the implications of Western military presence in post-2001 Iraq. Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* engages with Joseph Conrad's representation of African peoples in his novel *Heart of Darkness*. British-Nigerian poet Patience Agbabi's *Telling Tales* retells Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* to consider England's relationship with its African immigrant populations. Each of these authors use the tool of retelling to interrogate their relationships to European colonialism from their own colonial contexts. Where the strategies and

intentions of these retellings differ from one another and overlap with one another remains an intriguing area of research that is yet to be sufficiently explored, and it is my hope that the research conducted in this paper helps emphasize the importance of doing so.

With the expansive possibilities of future research laid out, I wish to return to the Caribbean for a final time. The true depth and complexity of the Caribbean cannot be captured in a single thesis, but the three con-texts discussed in this paper act as powerful representations of the range of perspectives the region holds on its own cultural identities. In a region whose identity has been historically defined by the European powers that colonized it, engaging with the literary works of those powers has not only allowed Caribbean authors to write back to their historic oppressors and fill in the stories of those who were erased, but also to write forward to those whose stories have yet to be told. The different perspectives represented in this research illustrate the power held by just one literary strategy to resist oppression, produce self-determination, and reclaim cultural identity. While the work these Caribbean authors started continues into the present where colonialism and its consequences still loom, the story of the Caribbean is being retold by those whose voices have been historically silenced. And as those voices retell the story of the Caribbean in all its intricate and complicated beauty, all we must do is listen.

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