



2013

### Speaking Through Death in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Monir Birouk

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion>

---

#### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Birouk, Monir (2013) "Speaking Through Death in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*," *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol6/iss1/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

# speaking through death

in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Jean Rhys's  
*Wide Sargasso Sea*

*Monir Birouk*

Putting an end to one's own life or the life of one's own child is probably the most horrendous and shocking thing one might ever do. Yet, life often becomes so intolerably onerous that a person can experience release and find redemption in the very act of destroying himself or herself. Perceiving all self-destructive gestures as acts of despair, however, leaves us ignorant of the potential meanings of resistance that the subject might have inscribed into the tragic act of effacing himself or herself. In certain instances, self-destructive acts are not so much gestures of despair as they are acts of resistance that plea for the other to recognize equivalence. In other words, speaking through death by erasing one's self from life can become a product of and a threat to the oppressive dominant power.

Is power so pervasive that the individual's acts and decisions are inevitably shaped by its structures? The question has been the site of many theoretical debates about subjectivity. With the rise of post-structuralism in the seventies and eighties of the twentieth century, theories about the unlimited scope of power such as Althusser's theory about ideology, Foucault's theory about

disciplinary power, and Lacan's theory about language influenced the emergence of many postcolonial critics of subjectivity. The conception, therefore, of a subjectivity that is always already shaped and predetermined by the coexisting structures of power and knowledge eventually results in a considerable theoretical investment in deconstructing the processes of othering and subjectification, resulting in an epistemic distrust of the subject's autonomy and agency. Yet, the suspicion about the subject's free will does not completely obliterate the possibilities of resistance and agency. Although Michel Foucault, for example, stresses the pervasiveness of power structures, he acknowledges, especially in his later writings, the possibility of marginal resistance. For Foucault, power is always constitutive of resistance:

Power can only be exercised over another to the extent that the latter still has the possibility of committing suicide, of jumping out of the window, or of killing the other. That means that in the relations of power there is necessarily the possibility of resistance, for if there is no possibility of resistance, of violent resistance, of escape, of ruse, [or] of strategies that reverse the situation, there would be no relations of power. (Tran 20)

Hence, for Foucault the body is not a mere site for the play of the dominant structures of power and knowledge; it functions also as a site of resistance. This resistance can sometimes be as radical as effacing the self, a gesture which may subvert or bring about fissions in the hegemonic order.

In light of this dual conception of the subject as simultaneously shaped by power and endowed with the capacity to resist it, Toni Morrison and Jean Rhys transpose their protagonists in *Beloved* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* respectively from victimization and dis-empowerment to the subjective space of resistance and agency. Morrison's and Rhys's dramatizations of the subjugation and dehumanization of their female characters are done with the purpose of giving them voice and agency, even if their empowerment is achieved through death. Hence, what unites these characters, who belong to disjunctive spaces and times, is their decisions to resist violence and pain by effacing the self and speaking through death. The self-erasing of the female body, on which cultural and gendered violence has been inscribed, becomes a subversive act of resistance against the oppressive order.

Against the grain of the interpretations that circumscribe Sethe's and Antoinette's self-inflicted deaths as acts of despair and passivity, I argue that their self-inflicted deaths bear signs of defiance and resistance. To read their

self-effacements as mere flights and desperate escapes to end suffering mutes them and casts them as silent and submissive subjects; but above all, it empties their gestures of their purported potential for resistance. Although it is admittedly difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain whether a self-effacing act is carried out of despair or out of resistance, one can still make conclusions drawing on signs in the narrative that gesture either towards passivity or resistance. The means through which the self-destructive act is carried out for example, as well as the record of the character's acts of resistance or submission, however minute are they, often help the reader to infer the extent to which an act of self-destruction is defiant or submissive.

Hence, the mandatory task of tracking the traces of subjugation the act of self-effacement leaves behind should be accompanied by the corollary task of excavating the traces of agency and signs of resistance, which may be submerged by the interpretive discourse. To be sure, defiant gestures of self-destruction are often preceded by either open or covert gestures of resistance that challenge the system from within and may pass due to a careless or hasty reading for signs of consent to the dominant order. The failure to perceive these signs of resistance occurs in a couple of critical studies of *Beloved* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which will be examined in the following sections. The means through which the self is effaced constitutes yet another helpful way of interpreting the gesture as resistance or surrender. The bloody and aggressive nature of these self-erasing gestures set them in contradistinction to both the romanticized passivity that characterizes self-effacing gestures in 19th century literature and the pathological suicides that fill Modernist novels. Perhaps we need a more probing expression to appraise the self-effacing gestures in *Beloved* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* than Higonnet's depiction of 19th century romanticized suicides as gestures of "speaking silence" (Higonnet 1986). In these postcolonial novels, the victimized subaltern makes sure that does not pass away in silence; her self-destruction is vengeful in nature and is often accompanied by a violent gesture such as murder or immolation.

One can hardly agree with Foucault's notion that "death is power's limit" (Simons 85); for power is hardly absent before, during, and after the self-effacing gesture. Morrison and Rhys go beyond the liberating intent of and Antoinette's mortal gestures by questioning the debilitating effects of the interpretive discourse after the subaltern's embrace of death. The female characters who speak through death in *Beloved* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* are stigmatized and recast as outlaws. Their self-destructive acts are misread and depoliticized,

and in the case of both Sethe and Antoinette, those self-destructive acts are perceived through a reductive ethical lens, instead of a political lens. Overall, I perceive the inscription of death on the body not as power's limit, but rather as a sign whose "supplements" are perceptible in the interpretive discourse after the self-effacing gesture, as well as in the probable "fissions and elisions" that it might generate.

To examine the dynamics of resistance which certain acts of self-destruction bear, I will turn in the following section to the exploration of both the "unnamed woman[s]" self-destruction and Sethe's act of infanticide in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* to see the extent to which the acts are meant, in the novel, to empower or dis-empower the self-erasing characters. The next novel that I will examine is Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which concludes with the controversial scene of Antoinette's suicide. Against the grain of the mainstream critical appraisals of Antoinette's character I argue that her self-death is an act of defiance against the colluding patriarchal and imperial orders. My aim in analyzing these two novels is to call to attention the explicit and implicit signs of resistance that the acts of self-erasure or infanticide often bear in the post-colonial novel.

## Sethe: Speaking Through Death against the Racial Order

Perhaps there is no African-American novel that so powerfully delineates the pathos of slavery as does Toni Morrison's, *Beloved* (1987). The novel brings into sharp focus the shattering and debilitating effects of slavery on the black community even after their purported liberation, and it puts emphasis on the necessity of "rememory" as an essential step on the trajectory of healing the traumatized black psyche. My concern, however, is less with the processes of "rememory" and healing, which a great number of critics exhausted, and more with the black female subject whose body becomes a site whereupon pain and subjugation were inscribed by the supremacist white racial machinery before she spoke through death. Sethe's horrendous act of killing her own daughter functions in the novel as the fulcrum around which the whole narrative hinges.

Sethe's gesture can also be considered as an act of self-erasure since her children are an extension of herself; thus, ending the life of the "best part of her"

is symbolically tantamount to killing herself. For understandable purposes, the scene has received much critical attention, but it is perceived, often through the lenses of post-structuralist psychoanalytical theories, as a shattering effect of the slavery system. As a result of such readings, the discourse of victimization and historical wounds is foregrounded at the expense of that of agency and resistance which receives a fairly pale treatment. My concern, therefore, is to explore how Sethe is given agency through inscribing death on her children, and how her self-consciousness is shaped not only by the memories of enslavement but also by her ancestors' defiant gestures of effacement as well. In the course of my analysis, I equally try to trace the fissures which Sethe's murderous act might have created in the slavery system, and I try to see how her unspeakable act is interpreted by both the white supremacist institution and the black community.

In *Beloved*, Morrison's choice of a narrative mode that goes back and forth between the past and the present instead of a linear narration is particularly suggestive of how the historical inexorably inhabits the present. Sethe is haunted by the brutal and dehumanizing practices to which her ancestors were exposed during the ghastly journeys of the Middle Passage. In Morrison's novel, the Middle Passage is represented as a source of Sethe's traumatic memories as much as it is represented as a site where her ancestors tried to regain their agency and subvert the slaveholders' power. Self-effacing gestures to escape ill-treatments on board ships were not uncommon. However, because of the dearth of historiographical data which records the slaves' self-destructions, these gestures received less attention and are often glossed over in critical studies of African-American literature. Although Toni Morrison's Master's thesis was about suicide in the works of William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf (Gillespie 410) and her novels are teeming with instances of self-death, there is still a great gap in studies of this theme in Morrison's works. Out of all the critical studies about Morrison's oeuvre, to my knowledge, only one article, Katy Ryan's "Revolutionary Suicide in Toni Morrison's Fiction", addresses self-destruction in Morrison's novels. In her article, Ryan draws attention to this gap, observing how the scene in *Beloved* that depicts the slave woman who throws herself from the ship into water often escapes the attention of critics (Ryan).

Morrison's insertion of self-effacing gestures in her novels is an attempt to counterbalance the prototypical image of submissive and silent slaves that are chained and packed in miserable conditions overboard or who are overworked, flogged and tortured in plantations with a narrative that portrays

the slaves' attempts to reclaim their agency. In *Beloved*, Morrison insists in several instances, through the narrative voice of *Beloved*, that the unnamed slave woman overboard "is not pushed' into the sea but chooses to go." This insistence confers agency on the woman and grants her control over her body (Ryan). The self-erasing gesture of the unnamed woman in *Beloved* reverses the typical representation of self-destructions in nineteenth and Western literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Neither a jilted lovelorn nor a psychically disordered being, the self-effacing woman in the novel is a being who is driven by the desire to escape the white man's control over her body. According to Katy Ryan, self-effacement in Morrison's novels "functions as a political form of resistance [and as] a break in history" (Ryan), in the sense that it interrupts the linear flow of the white supremacist narrative and disrupts its self-proclaimed control over time and space. In this sense, the annihilation of the self and its ultimate disappearance through self-destruction is more than a gesture of escape and despair; it also marks the slaveholders' failure to exert full control over the black in whom they perceive a profitable economic potential. As Diedrich, Gates, and Perderson point out, "when losses in human lives through disease, epidemics, or suicide were high and caused much alarm", caring for slaves and keeping them "in good shape was a major concern in the general economy of the trade. Captains had to commit themselves to carry the captives safe, whole, and fit for sale" (Diedrich and Gates 35). Self-destructions in this sense form hiatuses in the temporal linearity of the slavery system.

However, displacing self-destruction from passivity to resistance does not necessarily qualify it as revolutionary. The shades of resistance, as many critics note, vary from the most overt to the most covert and from the aggressive to the subversive. Obviously, the self-effacing gesture of the woman who defies the slaveholders' orders and threats to jump overboard is not a covert gesture of resistance, but neither is it revolutionary. I locate the resistance potential of the unnamed slave's gesture in the latter's capacity, together with other transmitted oral narratives of defiance, to embed Sethe's memory with a discourse of resistance and agency. As I stated above, the Middle Passage in Morrison's novel survives not only as fragments of traumatic and painful memories, but also as a space where the white racial narrative is interrupted and subverted through a variety of resistance strategies which the slaves resort to, one of which is self-destruction. Thanks to the shared communal memory, it is the survival of the memory of the unnamed slave's self-death and many other similar gestures of slaves who are right "under the sea" which empowers Sethe, in one way or in

another, to aspire for autonomy and regain her agency, though she does in a brutal and indisputably unethical way.

In addition to the unnamed woman's self-destructive act in the novel, the reader comes across scattered cases of infanticide in the narrative. For African-American women, it was not uncommon to dispose of the children that the women unwillingly bore as a result of rape by white masters. In *Beloved*, Nan, Sethe's mother's friend, told her that her mother threw all the children to whom she gave birth during the Middle Passage from the white crew except her because she is fathered by a black man: "she threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away" (Morrison 74). Another character in the novel, Ella, a black slave and a member of the Underground Railroad who helped Sethe to cross Ohio River, left her baby that she bore of a white man to die out of neglect. These instances of infanticide with which Sethe is familiar thanks to oral memory, must have shaped her self-conscious defiant escape from Sweet Home plantation, and ultimately her decision to inscribe death on her children. Her mother's experience in particular, as Henderson states, "enables Sethe to reread or reemploy her own experiences in the context of sacrifice, resistance and mother-love" (Henderson 96). Sethe's act, however, should not be conflated with her mother and Ella's, for while her mother's and Ella's infanticides are driven by hate and shame of having a mulatto child that is born out of rape, Sethe's self-destructive gesture is paradoxically instigated by extreme "thick" love for her children (Morrison 164).

Sethe's inscription of death upon her child is an outrageous act which imposes itself on the narrative to the point of overshadowing other resistance strategies which Sethe devised to escape the time and space enclosure which the racial order imposes on her. Tracing these minimal strategies of resistance (defiance of Schoolteacher, escape, sending her two boys away to Cincinnati) divulges how Toni Morrison counterbalances victimization with agency in the novel, this tracing helps in framing Sethe's ultimate act of slitting her child's throat in the realm of resistance.

Consequently, Sethe's horrific act of slitting her little girl's throat can only be examined in light of her desire to free herself and her children from the shackles of slavery. At the moment when the four horsemen, Schoolteacher, his nephew, a slave catcher and the Sheriff loom in the horizon tracking Sethe to where she thinks she is free, Sethe decides to send her children "where they should be safe" (Morrison 163). When the horsemen approach 124 Bluestone



house, the bloody act already reached its climax: “inside, two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other” (Morrison 149). In Western literary depictions of infanticide, the mother’s killing of her child is often driven by a sense of guilt and remorse as a result of illegitimate conception out of wedlock. Accordingly, scenes of infanticide are portrayed as inevitable punishment of the female subject’s deviation from the circumscribed sexual normativity. In a traditional Scottish ballad entitled “The Cruel Mother,” the poet depicts a mother who “sat down below a thorn / Fine flowers in the valley”, and “twinned the sweet babe o’ its life / And the green leaves they grow rarely” (Ledwon 18). The idyllic scenery in the poem serves as a backdrop against which the mother is presented as a cruel and brutal being. In contradiction to conventional literary depictions of infanticide, Morrison reverses the trope of the fallen “bad mother” which dominate western literature, and re-institutes the image of the “good” African-American mother who erases from life “the best part of her” out of “too thick” love (Morrison 202), and not out of guilt or remorse. In other words, the slave mother’s killing of her child is a response to the choice between life-in-death or death-in-life, a choice that radically differs from the context of sexual relationships which stereotypically frame mainstream Western literary infanticides. Morrison blurs the boundaries between death and good mothering in order to foreground Sethe’s “existential” choice. It is not, therefore, surprising that Morrison dramatizes the scene in such an abashedly violent and bloody way.

Notwithstanding Morrison’s empowerment of her novel’s protagonist, she does not romanticize her self-destructive act. Sethe is portrayed in the novel neither as a heroine nor as a criminal. Although the author grants agency to the novel’s protagonist, she is reluctant to confer any absolute ethical judgment on her act. Indeed, Morrison problematizes Sethe’s bloody gesture, building her narrative in a way that evades judgmental foreclosure. Despite the underlying sympathy which she displays towards Sethe, she nonetheless maintains a kind of moral ambiguity all through the narrative. In the novel, Sethe is both condemned (legally and politically through imprisonment and socially through ostracization) and forgiven (through a reconciliation and reunion with her community). She is almost compared to a beast “you got two feet, Sethe, not four” (Morrison 165), but she is at the same time described in elevating terms as an extremely affectionate loving mother. In a statement which echoes the Keatsian negative capability, Morrison asserts that what Sethe did “was the

right thing to do, but she had no right to do it" (Morrison and Taylor-Guthrie 272). Against mainstream critical discussions of this issue, I argue that Sethe does not withhold moral judgment; what she withholds is *absolute* and *unconditional* judgment. Sethe's self-destructive gesture is framed by the double-bind of the ethical and the political; consequently, misreading it in light of only one component of this binary will certainly yield a distorted understanding. The dilemma, therefore, is that what Sethe does is ethically condemnable, but, at least for her, it is politically required. The issue of the moral appraisal of self-destructive acts is not epistemologically unrelated to that of representation.

In *Beloved*, the voice of Sethe is suppressed by the white racial discourse, but more tormenting for her, by that of the black community itself. When the four horsemen backed off upon the sight of Sethe's murder, Schoolteacher dehumanizes her, likening her to a horse or a hound which is enraged by excessive punishment (Morrison 149). Indeed, Schoolteacher's position is typical of the racial discourse which strips blacks' resistance of its political significations, reducing it to an ahistorical act of barbarity which the slave brings with him from the fearsome jungles of Africa. Moreover, the slavery system's acknowledgment of its responsibility for Sethe's gruesome act is dislocated by the paternal discourse of the white man. While Schoolteacher attributes Sethe's inscription of death on her child to the negative effects of the 28 days of relative freedom that she had in 124 Bluestone house, the sheriff contends that "slaves needed every care and guidance in the world to keep them from the cannibal life they preferred" (Morrison 151). The white man projects his fears of cannibalism, bestiality and barbarity on Sethe's rebellious act to overshadow its emancipatory intent. To be sure, the transparency of representing the other's actions and desires is always at stake, but it is more so when discourse and power coalesce in a blatantly overt way. Morrison's novel, Sethe's act is discharged of any political meaning, and incriminated by the respective discursive and coercive powers of the media and the court. Although Sethe's rebellious gesture is transposed from the private to the public sphere, her bloody appeal for what Spivak calls "comparativism" is hardly heard.

Morrison is, however, much more concerned in her novel with the black community's reaction to Sethe's self-effacing gesture. The black community's unwillingness to understand and forgive Sethe's murderous act marks her as an outcast and aggravates her traumatic suffering. The price was too high: ostracism, limited mobility, a broken family and psychological suffering. As Debra King points out, the liberatory intent of Sethe's self-effacing gesture "collapses

beneath the weight of social mandates defining good mothering” (Henderson 96). All in all, the re-union of Sethe with her community at the end of the novel, the exorcism of the ghost and the disappearance of *Beloved* all release Sethe from the tyranny of guilt, but do not release the reader from the troubling questions which Morrison triggers in his mind.

Yes, although Morrison ends her novel with a resolution which delivers Sethe of her long-repressed and tantalizing guilt, she ingeniously dramatizes Sethe’s murderous act in a way that resists easy polarizations. Although the reader cannot fail to discern the liberating impulse of her inscription of death on her child and, metaphorically, on herself, the reader finishes reading the novel with big questions that touch upon the definition of mothering and the ethical justifiability of self-destructive gestures.

## Antoinette: Speaking through Death against Imperialism and Patriarchy

In *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Jean Rhys’s masterpiece, the journey of Antoinette to self-erasure is marked as well by dehumanization and. Though she is much less exposed to physical violence than Sethe is, Antoinette’s defiant act of self-erasure is precipitated by an ignominious solidarity of racial, colonial and patriarchal violence that inscribes her, like Sethe, as a banished Caribbean who is reduced to sheer physical existence on the margins of the metropole. In her novel, Jean Rhys rewrites the history of the creole woman to showcase that her self-erasure is not instigated by sheer insanity but by a long process of cultural othering and material dispossession by the coalescing forces of British imperialism, its legacies, and its patriarchy. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys does not only divulge the vestiges of Antoinette’s defacement that Charlotte Brontë conceals in *Jane Eyre*, but also empowers her through death. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, self-inflicted death marks the fate of Antoinette as well; the latter disappears from the narrative leaving the reader with the task of piecing together the significations of her self-erasure. Antoinette’s mortal incident is only hinted at in the novel, a fact which complicates even further the task of interpretation. Antoinette’s act unfolds in her last dream with which Rhys concludes her novel; there in the dream, in the realm of the subconscious, she sets fire to Thornfield Hall,

and jumps from its battlements. Nevertheless, Antoinette's self-effacement is only concretized by Bertha in Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, to which *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a prequel.<sup>1</sup> Since Antoinette's self-erasure in *Wide Sargasso Sea* occurs in the third and last chapter where Rhys moves to the narrative space of *Jane Eyre*, there is no way one can read Antoinette's self-destructive act without juxtaposing both novels.

The moment of Antoinette's self-effacement has stirred much critical debates with regards to the questions of agency and resistance, and it is perceived either as a logical conclusion to her passivity, or as a political gesture of resistance. To jettison the claim that Antoinette is depicted in the novel merely as a victimized and passive subject, I first trace the resistance strategies to which she resorts, before decoding the signs of resistance that wrap her self-destructive act. The questions of the representation and interpretation of Antoinette's self-destruction, and the appraisal of Rhys's enterprise to grant her protagonist agency through death will be addressed as well.

Obviously, Antoinette is not a classic heroine nor is she presented in the novel as a powerful resistant figure. Indeed, Rhys is much criticized for rendering her protagonist a passive and submissive character. While I do agree that Antoinette is not represented as a powerful character in the way Sethe is, I stress that these critics fail to recognize the strategies of resistance which she makes. This failure in turn throws its shades on their understanding of her self-erasure, stripping it of its resistance potential and placing it exclusively within the province of victimhood and passivity.

In Rhys's novel, Antoinette is represented as a victim of "the axiomatics of imperialism" (Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," 247), but also as a subject who tries to subvert the gendered colonial violence which is perpetrated on her. In a short but interesting article, Joseph Walker, offers a compelling analysis of the radical possibilities which may develop on the fringes of power. Inspired by bell hooks' seminal article "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," Walker argues against conceiving of the margin as the exclusive "space of powerlessness and restriction", while eliding how it functions as a "space of radical openness . . . a profound edge" which "nourishes one's capacity to resist" (35). It is from her position in the margins of imperial and patriarchal power that Antoinette sets to subvert her perpetrator's domination. When Rochester appropriates Antoinette's name and identity into

---

<sup>1</sup> Rhys's novel should not be, though, taken as an explanatory prequel since it creates a counter-discourse to that in Brontë's *Jane Eyre*.

a fictional Bertha which he creates in his mind, Antoinette objects: “my name is not Bertha; why do you call me Bertha?” (Rhys 81). Conscious of the power of renaming, she asserts that “[N]ames matter. like when he wouldn’t call me Antoinette” (Rhys 180). In her attempt to save her crumbling marriage, and to reverse Rochester’s hateful sentiments towards her, Antoinette resorts to a marginal local source of power, obeah (also called voodoo, a folk Caribbean magic which is contrasted with Rochester’s Christian belief in the novel). She asks her, nurse Christophine, an Obeah black woman to prepare for her a potent which would render peace to her conjugal relationship with Rochester. In as much as black magic constitutes a source of resistance for Antoinette, it also stands as one of fear and anxiety for Rochester, mainly because it belongs to the “uncontrollable” which escapes his Eurocentric rationality.

However, since these resistance strategies are weak in nature because they are undertaken within the boundaries of the dominant system, “Antoinette is doomed; her marginal space has collapsed into Rochester’s center” (Walker 46). Once she moves to the metropole, Antoinette, now an allegedly mad person, becomes not only more self-conscious of her subjugation, but also more violent and aggressive. Her violent attack with a knife on Richard Mason her brother-in-law for example thwarts the claim of her submissiveness and passivity (Rhys 184). All in all, Rhys’s protagonist is far from being totally silent and submissive, and failing to recognize the mutation of her defiance from what Katrak calls “passive agency” in the West Indies to open and aggressive resistance in the metropole will eventually lead to misreading her self-effacement, her last gesture of resistance (Katrak 15).

My intention in the above argument, therefore, is to place Rhys’s protagonist in the inter-space between victimhood and resistance, although, I admit, Antoinette’s character suffers from several drawbacks that weaken but do not negate her resistance. Doing so, I readily dismiss readings which are unable to perceive the complicated character of Antoinette, and consequently index her self-erasing gesture merely as a tragic accident and a permanent silence. One proponent of such reading is Lucy Wilson whom Mardorossian cites in her article “In Double (De)colonization and the Feminist Criticism of *Wide Sargasso Sea*.” According to Mardorossian, Wilson “reads Antoinette’s suicide as the logical outcome of her passivity and defeat which, she emphasizes, it is futile to try and present as a positive and self-determining gesture” (Mardorossian). Antoinette’s double gesture of setting fire in Thornfield Hall and jumping from its battlements hardly sustains Wilson’s assertion. In the novel, fire is deployed

as a means of destruction; burning Thornfield Hall—the symbol of metropolitan and patriarchal power—before her self-destruction, is an aggressive act of resistance.

In Antoinette's last dream, fire reminds her of a gesture of vengeance which she must carry out: "I looked at the dress on the floor and it was as if the fire had spread across the room. It was beautiful and reminded me of something I must do" (Rhys 110). The dream in which Antoinette immolates Thornfield manor house and jumps is very suggestive. Here is the celebrated passage which I quote at length with some omissions:

I saw the chandelier and the red carpet downstairs. . . . I heard the parrot call as he did when he saw a stranger, *Qui est la? Qui est la?* and the man who hated me was calling too, *Bertha! Bertha!* . . . But when I looked over the edge I saw the pool at Coulibri. Tia was there. She beckoned to me and when I hesitated, she laughed. I heard her say, *You frightened?* And I heard the man's voice, *Bertha! Bertha!* All this I saw and heard in a fraction of a second. And the sky so red. Someone screamed and I thought *Why did I scream?* I called '*Tia!*' and jumped and woke. (Rhys 110)

Tellingly, Antoinette's self-death is a realization of her assertion earlier in the novel of her identity in sinister overtones: "I will write my name in fire red" (Rhys 53). In contrast to Brontë's Bertha who always shrieks and laughs, Rhys's protagonist is a subject who does not only self-consciously pose questions about who she is and why she is brought to England (Rhys 107), but also as one who decides to take action and wrest the power of othering from her oppressor. Her last statement in the novel, "Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do" evidences how self-effacement in the postcolonial novel is generally represented as an outcome of the subject's self-knowledge and not as a symptom of abnormality and mental disorders as it is typical of modernist literary suicides. The creole's body becomes a repository of both power and resistance inscriptions. Since "there are always two deaths, the real one and the one people know about" (Rhys 77), as Antoinette says, she chooses life-in-death rather than a submissive death-in-life. What Antoinette's act registers is her rebellion against the conditions of her subjugation; the extent to which the self-effacing subject succeeds in making her voice heard depends on the power of the gesture as well as on the historical moment which frames the act.

As I said above, the moment of Antoinette's self-effacement should be cross-examined in the narrative spaces of both *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso*

*Sea*. In her novel, Jean Rhys tries to do justice to Antoinette's rebellious mortal act to save it from the Eurocentric misrepresentation. In a letter she wrote to her editor, Rhys expresses her intention to give voice to the silenced creole woman in *Jane Eyre* because she was "vexed at her [Brontë's] portrait of the "tiger paper' lunatic" that stands for "only one side—the English side" (*Letters* 206–207). In Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, the creole woman's self-destruction, like Sethe's murderous act in *Beloved*, is divested of its political signification, and annexed to madness and lunacy. Bertha is no better than Sethe; both are dehumanized. While Sethe is compared by Schoolteacher to an enraged hound or a horse, Antoinette's destructive gesture in *Jane Eyre* is envisaged as one of a being who occupies the borderlines between humans and animals. In an oft-quoted passage in Brontë's novel, Jane describes the Creole woman as a figure who "ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it groveled, seemingly on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal" (Brontë 257–58). More significantly, Bertha appears in the novel as the sacrificial "animalistic other" whose self-death and disappearance from the narrative save Brontë's heroine from marginality and empower her. In "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," Spivak asserts that "[Brontë's Bertha] must play out her role, act out the transformation of her 'self' into that fictive Other, set fire to the house and kill herself, so that *Jane Eyre* can become the feminist individualist heroine of British fiction" (251). Rhys's writing back to Brontë's novel, and her characterization of Antoinette as a victimized and gendered colonial subject ensure that the death of the creole mad woman in the attic is not discursively assimilated for the sake of Jane's happiness.

So far, I traced the signs and significations of resistance and agency that mark Antoinette's self-destructive gesture, and I explained how Rhys tries first to justify Antoinette's self-effacement as a response against colonial and gendered violence, and second to save it from the discursive appropriation in Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. I conclude this section by an appraisal of Antoinette's self-erasure, raising the question of how successful is Rhys's attempt to grant her protagonist agency. Although I argued, against the grain of major readings of Rhys's novel, that Antoinette is empowered and given agency through death, I still share some of their concerns about some of the narrative shortcomings of the novel.

To begin, Antoinette's self-destructive act is dramatized merely as a dream in Rhys's novel which closes with Antoinette waking up and walking through



Thornfield Hall's corridor on her way to realize it. Consequently, Antoinette's final gesture is enacted and concretized within the narrative space of Brontë's *Jane Eyre* by Bertha. Rhys's inability therefore to maintain narrative control over the destiny of her protagonist weakens her enterprise of writing back to the center. Besides, Antoinette's final gesture is ethically problematized when we examine it in light of Rhys's stance towards the local black subjects in the novel. Disconcerting in the novel is Rhys's registration of Antoinette's self-effacing gesture as a political act of resistance against the imperial and misogynistic inscriptions at the expense of black subjectivity. The novel is replete with instances of Antoinette's racist stances against black subjects, although she simultaneously expresses her wish to reconnect and identify with the local culture. She denigrates for instance her black servants, and insults both Tia and Christophine, calling the former a "cheating nigger" (Rhys 14), and the latter an "ignorant, obstinate old negro woman" (Rhys 112). Correspondingly, Antoinette's speaking, through death, against colonial and gendered violence is ethically jeopardized since she replicates the same racial axioms of imperialism which she defies. In this respect, I join Laura Ciolkowski, who argues that the novel as a whole "discloses the complicated relationship between Antoinette's complicity with and her resistance to the English imperial project" (Ciolkowski 353). Antoinette's act is riddled with ambivalence, being at once an instance of native resistance and a gesture which discursively contributes to the stifling of black voices in the novel.

To conclude, the highly ambivalent narrative construction of Rhys's novel is undoubtedly responsible for the nuanced meanings which Antoinette's self-effacing gesture bears. This ambivalence is primarily the result of two factors: the first is its problematic discursive relation to the British canon, and the second is the dialogic nature of the novel which, recalling Bakhtin, is traversed by polyphonic voices, a discursive strategy which Rhys resorts to undermine the monologic voice of Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. However, Rhys's project to write Bertha a life succeeds in imparting meaning on Antoinette's double gesture of immolation and self-effacement, saving her from being a mere sacrificial figure who must die so that Brontë's British heroine would be rescued from marginality. Rhys's empowering of her protagonist through death remains problematic however, and is certainly enervated by the fact that she writes her novel as Spivak claims "in the interest of the white creole" (253), and at the expense of the West Indian black subject.



## Conclusion

To be sure, self-destruction and resistance stem from the realm of identity politics. The desire to understand how the will to die or the will to kill one's children far exceeds the instinctual calls of survival, how people dare sacrifice their lives to respond to violence, pain, and ignominy and how their emancipatory intents are often appropriated when they are filtered through the distortive lenses of the dominant power's discursive structures motivated my re-reading of the self-destructive scenes in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Yet, underlying these politically oriented motives is a concern about the primordial and indivisible value of human life itself. Indeed, the somewhat naive hope to understand and limit the roots and causes of violence is what ultimately guides this article. It is my conviction that identity politics with its legitimate and necessary concerns about equivalence and "planetarity" should be redressed, but by no means substituted, by the ethics of recognition and responsibility. If there is any one important question this essay hopes to raise, it would be this: can self-erasures of the type I discussed in this essay be eliminated if their causes, gendered violence and pain, are tracked and reduced, if not eradicated? Research about these issues, I believe, is not for mere abstract theoretical contemplation; it is, and should be, guided by a pragmatic impulse to lessen and minimize violence and pain in the world.

# Works Cited

- Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1987. Print.
- Ciolkowski, Laura E. "Navigating the 'Wide Sargasso Sea': Colonial History, English Fiction and British Empire." *Twentieth Century Literature*. 43.3 (1997): 339–59. Print.
- Diedrich, Maria, Henry Louis Gates and Carl Perderson. *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage*. New York: Oxford UP, 1999. Print.
- Gillespie, Carmen. *Critical Companion to Toni Morrison: A Literary Reference to Her Life and Work*. New York: Facts On File, 2008. Print.
- Henderson, Mae Gwendolyn. "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Re-Membering the Body as Historical Text." *Toni Morrison's Beloved: A Casebook*. Nellie Mc Kay and William Andrews, ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999. 79–106. Print.
- Higonnet, Margaret. "Speaking Silences: Women's Suicide" in Susan Rubin Suleiman. *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986. Print.
- Ledwon, Lenora. "Maternity as a Legal Fiction: Infanticide and Sir Walter Scott's The Heart of Midlothian." *Women's Rights Law Reporter*. New Jersey University. Fall. 1996.
- Madorossian, Carine Melkom. "Double (De)Colonization and the Feminist Criticism of *Wide Sargasso Sea*." *College Literature*. 26.2 (1999): *General OneFile*. Web. 13 Jul. 2012.
- Morrison, Toni and Danille Kathleen Taylor-Guthrie. *Conversations With Toni Morrison*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi. 1994. Print.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. First ed. New York: Longman. 1998, Print.
- Rhys, Jean. *Letters: 1931–1966*. eds. Francis Wyndham and Diana Melly. London: André Deutsch. 1984, Print.
- . *Wide Sargasso Sea*. London: Penguin Books, 1969. Print.
- Ryan, Katy. "Revolutionary Suicide in Toni Morrison's Fiction." *African American Review*. 34.3 (2000): Indiana State University. *JSTOR*. Web. 5 May. 2012.
- Simons, Jon. *Foucault and the Political*. London: Routledge, 1995. Print.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism." *Critical Inquiry*. 12.1 (1985): 243–61. Print.
- Tran, Jonathan. *Foucault and Theology*. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011. Print.
- Walker, Joseph S. "When Texts Collide: The Re-Visionist Power of the Margin." *Colby Quarterly*. 35.1 (1999): Print.