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Exploring Madness and Ableism in the Context of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Sara Dorsten

Ableism and racism have an intertwined relationship in that both are used as oppressive forces. Colonizers use forms of oppression to Other people they want to exploit, and in relevance to this essay, they apply some form of disability to the oppressed people to rationalize why they are inferior. This carries forward in a troublesome way because characters of color in Postcolonial writing often accuse each other of madness, thereby utilizing a form of oppression against an already oppressed character. *Wide Sargasso Sea* provides a ripe ground for contextualizing how colonizers use accusations of madness to exercise control, and this text can be used to extend how Postcolonial writers and scholars continue to use ableist language as they discuss the oppression of people of color.

Wide Sargasso Sea is Jean Rhys's attempt to rewrite Bertha Mason's story from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha is Mr. Rochester's first wife, vilified because she is insane and Creole. Brontë does not provide much background for Bertha's character, and all description the reader has

is skewed from a British, male voice, as Mr. Rochester provides the account of their marriage. Mr. Rochester describes, “I found her nature wholly alien to mine; her tastes obnoxious to me; her cast of mind common, low, narrow, and singularly incapable of being led to anything higher” (Brontë 261). Mr. Rochester is only released to marry Jane after Bertha dies in a fire of her own making. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys seeks to flesh out Bertha, known in this story as Antoinette, by telling of the character’s childhood, her marriage to Rochester (though he is not named as such), and final moments from her perspective. Rhys remains true to many of the details Mr. Rochester provides, such as her “giant propensities” or her mother’s insanity (261). However, Rhys takes these details and teases them out to reason why Rochester might describe her this way or what causes her and her mother’s madness. By writing Bertha’s story, this character is no longer left as a unidimensional figure representative of racial stereotypes and British fears of Brontë’s time, described only by the voice of the oppressor.

Just as people who believe their race is superior to others are called racist, so people who believe that their able body is superior to impaired bodies are called ableist. As Fiona Kumari Campbell further explains the term, “[k]ey to a system of ableism are two elements: the concept of the normative (and the normal individual); and the enforcement of a divide between a ‘perfected’ or developed humanity and the aberrant, unthinkable, underdeveloped, and therefore not really human” person with a disability (13). Consequently, ableism refers to privileging able bodies over disabled bodies and ties in with racism because both terms serve to oppress so-called “different” bodies. To discuss, “norm,” and by extent “aberrant” or “different” bodies, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s term, *normate*, is useful. Garland-Thomson defines *normate* as “the social figure through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings . . . what emerges is a very narrowly defined profile that describes only a minority of actual people” (8). Since this construct is fabricated by the hegemony, an example of the ideal *normate* in western society is a physically fit, white male. Disability is another socially constructed idea, just like *normate*. The Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation put forward this definition: “it is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments, by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society” (qtd. in Shakespeare 215). For example, paraplegia is the physical manifestation of impairment, whereas the lack of

access ramps in a society that privileges able bodies creates disadvantage and disability. Extending this concept of disability further, a person who may not have a physical or mental impairment can still be branded as disabled by a society or institution.

When dominant powers seek to exploit people of color, they often create disability by framing a particular race as inferior through their physical embodiment—that is, both in their physical manifestation and in the “pleasures, pain, suffering, sensorial and sensual engagements with the world” (Wilkerson, *Keywords for Disability Studies* 67). This idea becomes especially clear with the example of Samuel Cartwright, a medical professional who wrote in 1851 about supposed mental illnesses amongst black people, including “Drapetomania,” a disorder that caused slaves to run away. Slavery apologists skew the negative embodied experience of slaves and cast it in a disabled mold. Along the same vein, in an article published in the *New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal*, Cartwright explains the belief that due to a black person’s bodily disposition toward slothfulness, they need frequent exercise. According to Cartwright,

The black blood distributed to the brain chains the mind to ignorance, superstition and barbarism, and bolts the door against civilization, moral culture and religious truth. The compulsory power of the white man, by making the slothful negro take active exercise, puts into active play the lungs, through whose agency the vitalized blood is sent to the brain to give liberty to the mind, and to open the door to intellectual improvement. (qtd. in Gilman, *Difference and Pathology* 139)

Through medical language, Cartwright—and ostensibly other people of his time, as can be assumed by the acceptance of his work for publication—utilized the embodiment of black people to rationalize slavery. This belief of laziness echoes in *Wide Sargasso Sea* when British characters speak about characters of color. When Mr. Mason and Annette discuss leaving Coulibri because Annette is afraid that the black people of the area may be a threat now that her family is rich, Mr. Mason replies, “They’re too damn lazy to be dangerous” (Rhys 19). A similar exchange occurs between the husband and Antoinette when the husband voices his dislike of Christophine. The husband grumbles, “she looks so lazy. She dawdles about,” and Antoinette contradicts, “She seems slow, but every move she makes is right so it’s quick in the end” (Rhys 51). Though the characters may not apply laziness in

terms of embodiment and disability in the same sense that Cartwright does, one can still see how stereotypes may originate and disseminate in society. Cartwright combines skin color and pathology to Other people of color. Society endorses Cartwright's views, and therefore is critiqued in literature like *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

The Other applies not only to race, but to any way that one person distances him or herself from another. To paraphrase Sander Gilman's explanation of how stereotypes are formed in his book *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness*, when a person is first born, he or she cannot identify a difference between the outside world and his or her own identity, and over time a split occurs. With this split, children recognize that there is the self that they have control over, and the rest of the world that they do not. They deem the self as good, and any difference that occurs in the world as bad (Gilman, *Difference and Pathology* 17). There are two different ways that people stereotype; one way is what Gilman calls pathological stereotyping, which is similar to Othering, and the other is stereotyping that people use every day to "preserve our illusion of control over the self and the world . . . The former is consistently aggressive toward the real people and objects to which the stereotypical representations correspond; the latter is able to repress the aggression and deal with people as individuals" (*Difference and Pathology* 18). At its basis, stereotyping is a necessary part of human development. However, once people stray into pathological stereotyping, that is when identifying differences turns into racism. Furthermore, when a person is stereotyped as Other, multiple negative qualities apply to distance that Othered person as much as possible, which is why ableism transfers so seamlessly into racism.

Multiple forms of oppressive language coincide to Other Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. One way that Antoinette is Othered is by her label of Creole. Creole, as people use it today, has a different meaning than it did historically. As the word is used in the text, Creole refers to "those of English or European descent born in the Caribbean," and not necessarily a person of mixed race (Rhys 18). It is exactly this chasm between Europe and the Caribbean that causes both the white and the black characters of the story to distance Antoinette, as she is referred to both as "white nigger" and "white cockroach" (Rhys 61). The white Creole of the Caribbean were thought to inhabit a place below Europeans and above people of color. Even though Creoles like Antoinette were white, they were thought to be tainted by their

Caribbean environment. Because Antoinette is Creole, she is a prime target for the Rochester character to take advantage of her. Though the Rochester character marries Antoinette for her wealth to gain his father's favor, he resents her for this perceived taint in her blood. As he thinks to himself, "Creole of pure English descent she may be, but [her eyes] are not English or European either" (Rhys 39). Despite their common English descent, the husband still Others Antoinette and harnesses the forms of oppression already in place to manipulate her.

Additionally, the reader has a skewed view with the husband's perspective in the second part of *Wide Sargasso Sea* that implicates him in his mission to discredit Antoinette. He already feels out of place in Jamaica and envies how at ease Antoinette seems, as he observes, "The two women stood in the doorway of the hut, gesticulating, talking not English but the debased French patois they use in this island. The rain began to drip down the back of my neck adding to my feeling of discomfort and melancholy" (Rhys 39). This reference shows how the husband is excluded from this conversation because he does not speak the local language. Furthermore, his discomfort in the rain highlights Antoinette's previous carefree response "[n]o, the rain is stopping" to his warning that she will be soaked when she walks to her friend (Rhys 39). She connects with the people around her (even if it is through what he calls a "debased" language) and she is unaffected by the very weather that he finds so uncomfortable. To the husband, Antoinette appears to belong in the surrounding environment, reinforcing his idea of a Creole's tainted blood.

Therefore, the husband steps quickly into resenting Antoinette and projecting madness onto her. Though a claim of insanity as grounds for divorce was not available during the setting of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, isolating people with mental illnesses was common practice. Indeed, this time period is prefaced by what Michel Foucault terms "The Great Confinement" of the 17th century that is characterized by the widespread establishment of institutions and asylums. (This common confinement of mentally ill persons remains in place until Deinstitutionalization occurred in 1955). In the 19th century madness often localized around what was socially unacceptable, and therefore the mad person would be removed from society for the benefit of all. As Foucault claims, "confinement is explained, or at least justified by the desire to avoid scandal" (62). Depending on the action and its severity, a person who transgressed social norms would be deemed mad

and confined (either by the family in the home or in an asylum) to avoid scandal. Though the Rochester character cannot obtain a divorce by accusing Antoinette/Bertha of insanity, he can easily remove her from the public eye to move about in society as he wishes. In discrediting her, the husband Others Antoinette by manipulating her into seeming insanity, and this method is convincing because madness was typically gendered as female. According to Elaine Showalter, “madness is a female malady because it is experienced by more women than men. The statistical overrepresentation of women among the mentally ill has been well documented by historians and psychologists. . . . By the middle of the nineteenth century, records showed that women had become the majority of patients in public lunatic asylums” (3). Societal factors of gender and race, as well as how interrelated these ideas are with disability, make it easy for the husband to persuade people to believe that Antoinette is mad. However, because Jean Rhys provides Antoinette’s perspective in the first part of the text, the reader has a coherent voice to offset the fully “mad” Bertha in *Jane Eyre*.

In order to manipulate Antoinette to cause a scandal, the Rochester character raises her stress level, increasing the odds that she has an emotional breakdown. One way that the husband puts pressure on Antoinette is by being critical of her behavior. This is evidenced by the husband’s distaste for her interactions with Christophine, as shown by the exchange

“Why do you hug and kiss Christophine?” I’d say.

“Why not?”

“I wouldn’t hug and kiss them,” I’d say, “I couldn’t.” (Rhys 54)

Part of this exchange continues the racism as outlined earlier in this essay, but it also serves to distance Antoinette from other white people, including the husband. His hidden meaning is that Antoinette is too close to blackness, too comfortable with it, and is therefore too different from him. Another way that the husband raises Antoinette’s stress level is by calling her by something other than her name. Though this renaming connects Antoinette to *Jane Eyre*’s Bertha, it is also a manipulative technique. Antoinette opposes this treatment by saying, “Bertha is not my real name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name” (Rhys 88). The husband’s intent to reshape Antoinette into another person is reinforced by his continued renaming, as he does not stop calling Antoinette “Bertha.”

Finally, the husband reaches Antoinette's breaking point by openly sleeping with another woman. The husband narrates, "I pulled [Amelie] down beside me and we were both laughing . . . I had not one moment of remorse. Nor was I anxious to know what was happening behind the thin partition which divided us from my wife's bedroom" (Rhys 84). The husband's choice to sleep with a black woman conveys to Antoinette just how little she means to him. The Rochester character establishes early on what dislike he has for people of color; indeed, though he thinks Amelie is "gay" and "natural," after he sleeps with her, he thinks, "In the morning, of course, I felt differently. . . . Her skin was darker, her lips thicker than I had thought" (Rhys 84). Because of how clear the husband makes it that he dislikes people of color, his actions show Antoinette that he would rather sleep with someone he hates than her. Even without Amelie's race in question, this break in their relationship is enough to traumatize Antoinette. The husband's actions increase the tension that Antoinette feels, thereby also increasing her mental strain.

That the Rochester character intentionally pushes Antoinette to madness cannot be argued away, as both Christophine and the husband himself reinforce this concept. After the Rochester character sleeps with Amelie, Christophine confronts him about his actions. Christophine accuses, "You want her money but you don't want her. It is in your mind to pretend she is mad. I know it. The doctors say what you tell them to say" (Rhys 96). Christophine highlights the authority that white men have over other people, especially a marginalized character like Antoinette that exists in the plane between white and black. The husband does not directly admit to this scheming but implicates himself to the reader by narrating "It was like that, I thought. It was like that" after another one of Christophine's accusations, "I don't know all you did, but I know some. Everybody know that you marry her for her money and you take it all. And then you want to break her up, because you jealous of her" (Rhys 91). The argument that the Rochester character envies Antoinette is not a reader's assumption but comes straight from a character's conclusion. The husband further implicates himself to the reader by thinking in response to Christophine's accusation. With the husband's form of Othering, three factors bind together, and one cannot be discussed without the other. The husband oppresses Antoinette because she is a Creole woman, and because both race and womanhood are seen as close to madness, she gains this third label as well.

The observation that the husband does not pretend that Antoinette is mad, but rather triggers her, points to a conception of mental illness that is ahead of Rhys' time. Even now, psychiatrists do not have a conclusive explanation for mental illness, though until recently the manifestation of madness was generally accepted in somatic terms. The relics of the somatic foundation of madness carry on, as the chemical imbalance of the 21st century replaces the humoral imbalance of the Greeks (Harper 9; Gilman, "Madness" 115). However, even the idea of chemical imbalance is no longer widely accepted in medical circles; rather, mental illness is reimagined in a way much like how Rhys portrays it in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Psychiatrists characterize mental illness in along the same lines as the aforementioned social model of disability, in that "psychological disorders are conditioned by social pressures. . . . Relationship breakdowns and bereavement, for example, are common causes of mental distress. In cases of long term distress, childhood experiences of neglect or abuse, whether physical, verbal or sexual, are also very important" (Harper 11). This understanding of mental illness as caused by social pressures binds closer the ties of madness with race and gender. This is shown through an analysis of Antoinette as a Creole woman by exploring and dismantling the societal structures around her.

Even if the husband did not manipulate Antoinette to a mental breakdown, other factors in her life contribute negatively to her mental health. Zygmunt Bauman outlines social factors that affect mental health as, "the combined experience of *insecurity* (of possession, entitlements and livelihood), of *uncertainty* (as to their continuation and future stability) and of *unsafety* (of one's body, one's self and their extensions: possessions, neighbourhood [sic], community)" (qtd. in Harper 13, italics in original). All of these factors apply to Antoinette through the course of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The beginnings of these factors appear in Antoinette's childhood, and seem to also contribute to her mother's mental breakdown. Annette repeatedly asks Mr. Mason to leave Coulibri; Antoinette narrates, "This began when they had been married for over a year. They always said the same things and I seldom listened to the argument now. I knew that we were hated" (Rhys 19). Annette feels insecure, uncertain, and unsafe because she can feel the judgement of the local characters of color about her new marriage. Though she may have felt uncertain before her marriage because her family was poor, now that she has money again, she feels the resentment of others, therefore compounding uncertainty with insecurity and unsafety. These feelings

are all justified when the local characters of color set Coulibri on fire. Mr. Mason may not have meant to drive Annette to madness as the husband does later, but the same mental break occurs, as “she began to scream abuse at Mr. Mason, calling him a fool, a cruel stupid fool. ‘I told you,’ she said, ‘I told you what would happen again and again.’ Her voice broke, but she still screamed. ‘You would not listen, you sneered at me, you grinning hypocrite, you ought not to live either” (Rhys 24). Though Antoinette does not experience emotional turmoil as her mother does here, this traumatic childhood experience prefaces and mirrors her later experiences after she marries the Rochester character.

Antoinette’s sensations of insecurity, uncertainty, and unsafety localize around her economic status, just as her mother’s do, except that the situation is flipped. Rather than feeling these ways because she gains money in her marriage, she feels insecure, uncertain, and unsafe because she no longer controls her own money. Antoinette tells Christophine, “[h]e would never give me any money to go away and he would be furious if I asked him. There would be a scandal if I left him and he hates scandal. Even if I got away (and how?) he would force me back” (Rhys 68). Her insecurity and uncertainty manifests in her economic situation and her unsafety ties to how the Rochester character may treat her if she tries to control her own funds.

The important takeaway for this discussion of how madness is forced onto Antoinette is how mental illness and other forms of disability are used to oppress people of color. Ato Quayson skillfully connects disability with colonialism by claiming,

Attitudes to disabilities in the West also evolved in response to interactions with other races. The colonial encounter and the series of migrations that it triggered in its wake served to displace the discourse of disability onto a discourse of otherness that was correlated to racial difference. . . . Disease provided a particularly supple set of metaphors to modulate some of the social anxieties that emerged in the colonial period around interracial encounters. (10–11)

Rhys deconstructs the application of disability to Othered people in *Wide Sargasso Sea* by expanding on Bertha’s story from *Jane Eyre*. In her chapter “‘Fighting Mad’: Between Sides and Stories in *Wide Sargasso Sea*” Kelly Baker Josephs recognizes Rhys’ force in rewriting Bertha, “Of her ending, Rhys writes: ‘I want it in a way triumphant!’ Bertha must be recuperated as

more than a unidimensional lunatic figure, a plot device necessary merely for the maturation of *Jane Eyre*" (89). Though Josephs focuses strictly on the role of madness in Caribbean writing during and after decolonization, her observation here is a crucial argument in Disability Studies. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder argue, "disability pervades literary narrative, first, as a stock feature of characterization and, second, as an opportunistic metaphorical device. We term this perpetual discursive dependency upon disability *narrative prosthesis*" (205, italics in original). Bertha's role in *Jane Eyre* represents the first in this category, as her image as a mad Creole woman simply serves to distance her from British society. To a certain extent, Antoinette's role in *Wide Sargasso Sea* represents the second point.

As much as Rhys wrote a much more complex version of Bertha, madness remains representative of the effects of colonialism and male power in the story. At least, that is what scholarship on *Wide Sargasso Sea* seems to imply, as there has not been a sustained analysis of the text from both a Postcolonial and a Disability Studies lens together. Josephs' argument comes close, but even she writes in the introduction of *Disturbers of the Peace: Representations of Madness in Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, "My object in the following chapters is to answer these questions by drawing connections between the writers' representations—and repetitions—of madness and the issues inherent in decolonization . . . I find the repeated representations of madness at the juncture of creative expression and political and social commentary" (2). Here, Josephs, like many other Postcolonial scholars, addresses only a single aspect of madness in the context of Postcolonialism and does not address the oppressive nature of using disability to speak of societal problems outside of disability itself. The reason a single-lensed approach to madness in Postcolonial texts is so troubling is based on the same premise as this essay: colonizing powers use disability to oppress people they wish to exploit. Therefore, if Postcolonial writers and scholars also use ableist language, then they are partaking in the same form of oppression that colonizing forces once used as well.

The latter part of this argument is not to say that *Wide Sargasso Sea* provides a negative representation of madness and disability like *Jane Eyre* does. Rather, *Wide Sargasso Sea* shows that a nuanced application of both Postcolonialism and Disability Studies can be approached, but that scholarship has yet to apply both theories together thoughtfully. This discussion of *Wide Sargasso Sea* also serves to open up a conversation about

how Postcolonial scholarship and writing tends to use ableist language. Tanya Titchkosky addresses this issue in her insightful article, “Life with Dead Metaphors: Impairment Rhetoric in Social Justice Praxis.” Titchkosky speaks to Frantz Fanon’s metaphor of amputation as a sustained example, but also mentions other terms like *“color blind, deaf to the call of justice, suffering from historical amnesia; blind to structural oppression, limping under the weight of inequality; an amputated self, simply crazy, subject to colonial aphasia, agnosia, even alexia; nothing but a deformed autonomy made to fit a crippled economy—devastatingly disabled”* (270, italics in original). Disability may have a strong metaphorical force when speaking about social justice or other related topics, but using this type of language tends to undercut an argument about colonialism when scholars realize that that these metaphors partake in another form of oppression.

Racism is an oppressive force in and of itself. In justifying racism, applications of dominant force like colonization also use ableism to further Other and distance people of color. Colonial forces may use the embodiment of the native or other person they racialize to justify exploiting him or her, but as is shown in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, accusations of madness also tie into this oppressive force. Rhys already moved scholarship forward in addressing ableism and racism by rewriting a Creole woman’s story to expose these oppressive forces in motion. More Postcolonial scholars and writers should follow this example by addressing ableism and racism together, so that they do not implicate themselves as part of dominant oppressive forces that they seek to deconstruct.

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