

(Mad)Women in the West Indies: History and Identity in
the Caribbean Gothic

by

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As far as my identity is concerned, I will take care of it myself. That is, I shall not allow it to become cornered in any essence; I shall also pay attention to not mixing it into any amalgam. Rather, it does not disturb me to accept that there are places where my identity is obscure to me, and the fact that it amazes me does not mean I relinquish it.

Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*

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Introduction: The Female Gothic in the Caribbean

In the “literature of nightmare,” the all-to-real nightmares occurring throughout the Empire were never far from view (MacAndrew 3). Soon after its inception, gothic fiction began to draw on the colonial world at its margins as the source of the forbidden, the supernatural, and the frightening, and with this new colonial dimension came “a new sort of darkness—of race, landscape, erotic desire and despair” (Paravisini-Gebert, “Colonial and Postcolonial Gothic” 229). Of course, the Gothic often manipulated this new darkness to ideological ends, subordinating the bestial, inhuman colonial “Other” to the enlightened British self. Although it portrayed the colonies as violent, corrupt, and even hellish in order to draw out the contrast between what was British and what was not, several modern and contemporary Caribbean writers have appropriated the Gothic for their own, more radical, purposes.

In adopting gothic conventions, these writers draw from a genre known for its reactionary fear-mongering about racial miscegenation and female sexuality, in which the colonies are portrayed as sites where lurk a host of transgressive energies ready to erupt. Yet they have molded it into a vehicle for exploration of the issues at the forefront of postcolonial studies, particularly in the Caribbean. Three Caribbean writers in particular—Jean Rhys, Jamaica Kincaid, and Shani Mootoo—have adapted the Gothic to focus on the role a troubled colonial history plays as the impetus behind the emergence of forms of identity that challenge the essentialist, unified self of the white Western male produced by mainstream accounts of colonial history.

Female Caribbean writers working within the gothic mode have found a launching point from which to engage with the genre in the works of Charlotte Brontë, specifically in her indelible portrait of Bertha Mason, the infamous West Indian “madwoman in the attic.” Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* is of course the most famous example of this: Rhys “writes back” to *Jane Eyre* by depicting the circumstances that propelled Antoinette Cosway (her name for Bertha Mason) from the West Indies to Thornfield Hall, transposing the gothic elements of Brontë’s novel—haunted estates, madwomen, patriarchal villains, a threatening natural world—to the post-Emancipation West Indies. As a powerful, though not unproblematic, revision of a canonical Western novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea* has become “a ‘mother text’ in its turn,” influencing a new generation of writers grappling with the history of colonialism, especially in its literary incarnations (Paravisini-Gebert, “Colonial and Postcolonial Gothic” 253). Rhys’ influence, from her recasting of Bertha Mason to her ominous Caribbean landscapes, is evident in the works of Kincaid and Mootoo, two contemporary writers who continue their predecessor’s exploration of Caribbean female identity.

In responding to Brontë’s work, Rhys, Kincaid, and Mootoo not only engage with the Gothic, but with the Female Gothic, a subgenre of which the Brontë sisters, Ann Radcliffe, and Mary Shelley represent the formative pillars. The nature of the Female Gothic has been contested ever since its debut in critical literature as the title of a chapter in Ellen Moers’ *Literary Women*, first published in 1976 (Wallace and Smith 1). Moers’ definition of the Gothic echoes Walter Scott’s comments on *The Castle of Otranto*: the former asserts that “what [she] means—or anyone else means—by ‘the Gothic’ is not so easily stated except that it has to do with fear,”

while the latter, centuries earlier, wrote that the Gothic is the “art of exciting surprise and horror” (Moers 90; Williams 87). Moers’ account of the Female Gothic does not expand greatly upon this premise. Rather, she asserts that the subgenre comprises “the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic,” thus subsuming it within the more familiar (and implicitly male) tradition of Horace Walpole and Matthew “Monk” Lewis that itself escapes any firm definition beyond its ability to excite fear (90).

Moers does, however, identify two branches of the Female Gothic: the Radcliffean Gothic, in which a “traveling heroine” explores the female space of the gothic castle, and Mary Shelley’s Gothic, which centers on the “birth myth” of *Frankenstein* (126, 93). I will focus on the Radcliffean strain, as it is more strongly connected to Brontë and her Caribbean interlocutors.¹ As preliminary as Moers’ introduction to *Female Gothic* is, however, it is valuable in that it outlines certain problems that characterize discussion of the subgenre even today. Firstly, the Female Gothic is defined in by contrast to the “Male” Gothic, the dominant form whose own definition is fluid. Its characteristics—its narratives, characters, structure, and themes—are paired with corresponding male concerns. As a result, the Male Gothic is often taken to be focused on fathers, the Female Gothic on mothers; the gothic hero moves toward autonomy, the heroine toward marriage; the Male Gothic disrupts societal norms, the Female Gothic reaffirms them, and so on (Kilgour 37-38).

Following Moers, subsequent critics identify a set of features shared by Female Gothic fiction. At the thematic level, these include a preoccupation with

¹ As Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith note, *Frankenstein* “is in many ways closer to the literature of the male overreacher and thus to what critics have more recently defined ‘Male Gothic’” (2).

confinement, especially in domestic “female” spaces such as the home, the quest for a lost mother, and the threat of a violent patriarchal figure (Punter and Byron 279). Emphasis tends to shift from blatant violence (as in Lewis’ *The Monk*) to suspense surrounding the heroine’s fears and anxieties (279). Radcliffe, in particular, relies on the “explained supernatural,” a narrative technique that defuses disturbing supernatural events with a rational explanation. In part due to her legacy, the Female Gothic is often seen as reaffirming social order after its “momentary subversion”: the eruption of transgressive forces (revealing, for example, the idealized Victorian home to be a sort of prison) makes way for the “re-establishment of conventional life” through a marriage that reintegrates the heroine into society (Kilgour 8, 38).

Feminist readings, by contrast, attribute to the Female Gothic a more subversive nature, often focusing on *Jane Eyre*’s mad, bestial, and racially ambiguous Bertha Mason. A famous interpretation of the novel, for example, reads Bertha Mason as Jane Eyre’s “dark double,” the incarnation of the latter’s repressed rage, desire, and resentment (Gilbert and Gubar 360). Other feminist readings of the Female Gothic focus on the figure of the “all-powerful mother” figure as it is embodied by the gothic castle, and the manner in which trapped heroine’s exploration of this space represents the “exploration of her relation to the maternal body that she shares” (Holland and Sherman 283; Kahane, “The Gothic Mirror” 338). This approach to the Female Gothic foregrounds its interrogations of female power, sexuality, and identity. Whether read as conservative or subversive, the Female Gothic’s interrogation of female identity is therefore consistently tied to questions surrounding domestic space, sexuality, and motherhood.

This of course not to say that Brontë deploys the Gothic in the same way as Radcliffe or her other Female Gothic predecessors. Nevertheless, her use of these conventions in *Jane Eyre*, *Villette*, and *Shirley* cannot be separated from her concern with the place of women in society, female sexuality, and the female self—in short, the same issues engaged with, if less brilliantly, by the Female Gothic tradition that preceded her. Most importantly, the gothic tensions of her fiction are not always resolved in the name of preserving social order, as they are in Radcliffe's novels. Her adaptation of gothic conventions is more radical than Radcliffe's, yet not in the way that feminist and/or psychoanalytic critics have chosen to read certain Brontëan figures, that is, as manifestations of the repressed female psyche that surface briefly to disrupt the narrative (as with Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*, or the ghostly nun in *Villette*).

Instead, Brontë uses the Gothic to investigate issues surrounding the female self, its formation, and its internal divisions. She does not present these issues through a gothic lens merely for spooky effect, but instead identifies their origin as the unstable female self. More precisely, their distinctively gothic energies emerge from the structure unique to female identity—specifically, in the transgressive potential of a female self that resists, however fitfully, societal constraints. In other words, in Brontë's novels the condition of being an orphaned, unmarried, working woman—being a Jane Eyre or a Lucy Snowe—is a gothic experience. This aspect of Brontë's Female Gothic provides a rich vein for Rhys, Kincaid, and Mootoo to mine, as they demonstrate by continuing her investigation of gothic female identity and complicating it with transnational, racial, and gendered variations.

My understanding of the role the Gothic plays in Brontë's novels draws on the spatial model of the genre Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes in *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, and her use of *Villette* as a case study. Sedgwick interprets the heroine of *Villette*, Lucy Snowe, as a character internally divided between the twin poles of silence/speech and reason/passion, whose "constitutive doubleness" is "stabilized in the opposition between rigid demeanor and teeming inner life, and more importantly in the split between inward and outward linguistic acts" (*The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* 139). Sedgwick's spatial model identifies the collapse of this fragile doubleness as the genre's defining feature:

It is the position of the self to be massively blocked off from something to which it ought normally to have access...creating a doubleness where singleness should be. And the lengths there are to go to reintegrate the sundered elements—finally, the impossibility of restoring them to their original oneness—are the most characteristic energies of the Gothic novel. The worst violence, the most potent magic, and the most paralyzing instances of the uncanny in these novels do not occur in, for example, the catacombs of the Inquisition or the stultification of nightmares. Instead, they are evoked in the very breach of the imprisoning wall...The barrier between the self and what should belong to it can be caused by anything and nothing; but only violence or magic, and both of a singularly threatening kind, can ever succeed in joining them again. (13-14)

For Sedgwick, the Gothic is characterized not only by a divided self, but by the collapse of these divisions, what she later calls the moment of "violated separation" (105). She reads *Villette*'s most transparently Gothic element, the ghost of the nun that haunts the *pensionnat* where Lucy teaches, as the manifestation of this broken internal doubleness. For part of *Villette*, Lucy carries on a correspondence with Dr. John, with whom she has fallen in love. Her letters to him are uncharacteristically affectionate, but more importantly, while writing them she allows herself to feel a degree of passion she usually suppresses. Knowing that he does not reciprocate her love, Lucy buries their letters out of fear that Madame Beck, the headmistress who

monitors Lucy throughout her tenure at the *pensionnat*, will discover them. Later, in the novel's most gothic episode, Lucy encounters the ghostly nun in the exact location where she interred the letters. For Sedgwick, the nun accompanies the breach in Lucy's doubleness that is represented by her correspondence with Dr. John, one of the few moments she allows herself to feel—and more importantly, express—passion that is immediately curbed by Madame Beck's oppressive surveillance. In Sedgwick's terms, the correspondence with Dr. John “has been threatening to her [Lucy], not only in making her sense of isolating doubleness more palpable and pointed, but, in what is not perhaps entirely separable, in impelling her Catherine-like toward a breach of that doubleness” (144).² The ghostly nun is the manifestation of that threat. This model of the Gothic also applies to *Jane Eyre*: the scene in which Bertha Mason enters Jane's bedroom is terrifying because Jane sees Bertha's reflection in the mirror and identifies as her, if only briefly, thus uniting the two halves of her self.

Sedgwick presents a model of femininity that is itself gothic, perpetually on the cusp of violating the internal divides into which the self is pressured, in Lucy and Jane's cases, by their vulnerable positions as poor women alone in an inhospitable world. Lucy, for example, cannot express herself: she is aware that Dr. John prefers the doll-like Paulina, and lives under Madame Beck's watchful eye, whose reign she equates to that of a “secret junta” (*Villette* 460). The “Gothic” part of Brontë's Female Gothic is the result of consciousnesses deformed by stifling societies that

² The Catherine in question here is Catherine Earnshaw of *Wuthering Heights*, who comes to Lockwood in a dream, smashing his window and demanding to be let in. Sedgwick sees the image of her bloodied, frozen hands reaching through a shattered windowpane as the emblem “for many of the kinds of violated separation we have been calling Gothic” (*The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* 105).

cannot accommodate socially transgressive women: friendless orphans not attached to any family unit; unmarried middle-class women who earn their living; educated women more intelligent than most of the men around them. At times, their placelessness in society is literal: Jane wanders about the moor and almost dies after breaking off her engagement, Lucy wanders about the city of Villette in a hallucinatory haze after it seems that Madame Beck has definitively thwarted her engagement to M. Paul. Being unmarried, poor, and altogether unconventional is a highly precarious position for these women: they are transgressive characters, though their own internal architecture is contorted so that it will not disturb the social order.

If, in Sedgwick's model, the violation of boundaries is the source of the Gothic's energies, it follows that a non-gothic, unthreatening femininity is one that does not transgress these boundaries. The possibility of a femininity that does not respect the constraints imposed upon it becomes threatening in of itself. In this way, Brontë's revision of the Female Gothic deploys what could have remained a trite set of conventions to reveal the contradictions and internal polarizations demanded of women, illuminating the difficulties plaguing the female self in a world in which resistance to these pressures is a source of terror, even to women themselves.

This model of the Female Gothic lays out the stakes for Rhys, Kincaid, and Mootoo's engagement with the genre, though their heroines are worlds apart from Brontë's. In different ways, these three writers expand on Brontë's transgressive, gothic female subjectivities by situating them in the Caribbean, whose own history is one of repeated horrors. In the words of Edouard Glissant, the Caribbean is a site "characterized by ruptures and that began with a brutal dislocation," its "historical consciousness" coming together in "the context of shock, contraction, painful

negation, and explosive forces” (*Caribbean Discourse* 61, 62). Using the language of psychoanalysis also often applied to the Gothic, he describes the region’s “lived history” as “a steadily advancing neurosis” (65). In different ways, Rhys, Kincaid, and Mootoo’s novels all display gothic symptoms of this historical neurosis, each emphasizing the gothic past’s ability to engender the forms of relation Glissant proposes as a new model of Caribbean identity.

Rhys, Kincaid, and Mootoo offer three versions of an encounter with Caribbean history, all of which destabilize their protagonists’ sense of identity and gesture toward a conception of the self that complicates the divisions between English/West Indian, black/white, male/female, past/present, and even mother/daughter. Through the gothic mode, in other words, they grapple with Glissant’s concept of a new kind of Caribbean identity formed out of the ceaseless creation of relations within and across cultures that emerges from the plantation system.

However, their engagement with Glissant extends further than merely reproducing his ideas about identity and relation in literary form. Rhys and Kincaid’s novels feature protagonists whose identities are based in a form of Glissantian relation, but they temper his optimism regarding the ability of this type of self to transcend the past horrors out of which she emerges. It is, of course, crucial for Rhys and Kincaid that the self in question is female, as both writers suggest that negotiating relation is a punishing, if not doomed, enterprise for Caribbean women enmeshed in a system in which patriarchal and colonial oppression are inseparable. These two very different writers thus offer a gendered critique of Glissant’s claims in *Caribbean Discourse* and *Poetics of Relation*.

Mootoo also suggests the need for a new dimension lacking from Glissant's theory of relation, introducing the queer as a lens through which to understand Caribbean history's role in producing creolized subjects. Nevertheless, her adaptation of the Gothic resonates with Glissant's vision to a degree that Rhys and Kincaid's do not. From Rhys, to Kincaid, and finally to Mootoo, the Gothic thus serves as an elastic set of conventions and themes through which to explore pressing questions surrounding Caribbean history and identity.

This thesis begins not in the Caribbean, however, but in London, where Anna Morgan, the protagonist of *Voyage in the Dark*, longs for her childhood home in Dominica, much like Antoinette Morgan will at the end of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The first chapter uses Sedgwick's analysis of Lucy Snowe's divided identity as a launching point from which to explore the internal divisions that haunt Rhys' protagonists. Rather than being divided between passion and reason, or speech and silence, however, Anna and Antoinette are fragmented by their ambiguous position on the border between colony and metropole, West Indian and English, and black and white. Rhys' portrait of the white creole woman is profoundly pessimistic, depicting her protagonists' flawed forms of cultural hybridity as inadequate engagements with national and racial difference that leaves them stranded in two gothic sites: urban London and Thornfield Hall. The weight of the colonial past, and their inheritance from slave-owning colonists, are legacies that these women cannot transcend.

The second chapter reads Kincaid's *Lucy* and *The Autobiography of My Mother* through the lens of Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject in order to unpack the connection Kincaid draws between the overwhelming presence of the mother and the overwhelming presence of the past. Although Kincaid, like Rhys, is pessimistic about

the possibility of transcending colonial history, her novels distinguish themselves in their deployment of the abject mother as a figure through which to explore the fundamental instability of Caribbean female identity. In *Lucy*, a glimmer of hope emerges in the figure of the artist as an individual capable of liberating herself from the maternal past, though this is undercut by *The Autobiography of My Mother*, which finds Kincaid demanding that her protagonists—and her readers—confront the past though it puts the integrity of their sense of self at risk.

Finally, Mootoo's novel *Cereus Blooms at Night* opens up several new directions for the Caribbean Gothic. Mootoo diverges from Rhys and Kincaid in important ways. Firstly, her novel focuses not only on Caribbean women, but Caribbean individuals who identify as queer. Though this queerness is something to strive for, in Mootoo's eyes, she locates its origins in the gothic past that Rhys and Kincaid's protagonists attempt to escape. Mootoo's deployment of the Gothic is thus far from Rhys and Kincaid, for it borders on the optimistic. The past, in *Cereus Blooms at Night*, is a force that if attended to properly, will lead to a better—and queerer—future. Though it establishes links to *Wide Sargasso Sea* through its own version of the West Indian madwoman, *Cereus Blooms at Night* strikes the more optimistic note of Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*, identifying in the Caribbean's dark past the seeds of a new way of being. Mootoo's novel thus comes full circle from Rhys and Kincaid: her version of the Gothic and its excavation of the horrors of national, familial, and individual history no longer represent a confrontation to avoid, or to submit to unwillingly, but one to be sought after. In *Cereus Blooms at Night*, she stakes a claim for the continued relevance and value of a postcolonial Gothic that does more than condemn the horrors of the past.

“Such a Poor Ghost”: Jean Rhys’ Terrified (and Terrifying) Creoles

The last work Jean Rhys saw published during her lifetime was the short story collection *Sleep It Off, Lady* (1976). The final entry this volume, a two-page sketch entitled “I Used to Live Here Once,” offers a condensed representation of the Caribbean as it appears throughout her work. In this brief portrait of a white creole woman, Rhys reveals an interest in typically gothic preoccupations such as the enduring past and the fragility of the subject. “I Used to Live Here Once” begins with an unnamed protagonist approaching her old home in the West Indies. She crosses the river at the border of the property, noting the stepping-stones she once used are still intact, and proceeds up the road. Some things have changed, of course, yet she is “extraordinarily happy” to find that, for the most part, the house is “just as she remembered it” (175). Outside the new inhabitants play, two “very fair children, as Europeans born in the West Indies so often are: as if the white blood is asserting itself against all the odds” (176). Just as she shyly informs them that she once lived in their house, the story ends with a twist:

Her arms went out instinctively with the longing to touch them.

It was the boy who turned. His gray eyes looked straight into hers. His expression didn’t change. He said, ‘Hasn’t it gone cold all of a sudden. D’you notice? Let’s go in.’ ‘Yes, let’s,’ said the girl.

Her arms fell to her sides as she watched them running across the grass to the house. That was the first time she knew. (176)

In light of this revelation, the river the visitor traverses at the beginning of the story gains an ominous significance: she has “crossed over” in the metaphysical sense. In short, she is a ghost. The memory of her beloved Caribbean home may have haunted her, but now she is back to haunt it.

Written in Rhys' characteristically elliptical style, this ghost story exemplifies the gothic tenor of her portrayals of the Caribbean and of white Caribbean women such as herself. It is far from a sentimentally nostalgic portrait of exotic Caribbean origins. Though the protagonist—and the reader—may have expected a return to the paradise of childhood memory, the river she crosses recalls the Styx, suggesting that she has traveled into a more troubled afterlife. She enters into an uncanny world, where a “glassy look” distorts the sky, where her home has been rendered alien, and where she has been replaced by doubles of her childhood self (“I Used” 175). Yet while her home may be nightmarish, she longs to rejoin it. This desire, of course, will never be fulfilled: though the protagonist identifies with her former home and displays intimate knowledge of its geography and its inhabitants, she is irreparably divided from it. She is left trapped in an intermediate state, neither alive nor dead, of the past but in the present, at once at home in the West Indies and estranged from it. In this sense, she is another Anna Morgan or Antoinette Mason, the heroines of *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) and *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), who, torn between Dominica and England, navigate their own gothic worlds.

The Gothic is admittedly not a tradition in which Jean Rhys is often placed, though the relationship between *Wide Sargasso Sea* and its “mother text,” itself a seminal gothic novel, has been widely discussed. *Wide Sargasso Sea*, however, is usually taken to be anomalous in this respect, and Rhys' use of gothic tropes is implicitly assumed to stem from a desire to confront *Jane Eyre* on its own terms and not from an interest in the genre underpinning her body of work. And yet her other novels are also saturated with gothic elements, from the conventional figures of ghosts, doubles, coffins, and hallucinatory dreams, to thematic concerns with the

haunting power of the past, female sexuality, and motherhood. Furthermore, Rhys' novels also blur the distinction between real and unreal: the protagonist of *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939) speaks for her creator when she declares that "the truth is improbable, the truth is fantastic; it's in what you think is a distorting mirror that you see the truth" (74). Like gothic frame narratives, Rhys' novels are their own kind of distorting mirrors, frequently manipulating the relationship between past and present through extensive flashbacks. These gothic elements are most apparent in *Voyage in the Dark* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*: the former portrays Anna's life as a waking nightmare; the latter restages the gothic elements of *Jane Eyre* in a Caribbean setting.

Rhys's closest link to the Gothic—especially the Female Gothic—is her focus on female subjectivity. Classic Female Gothic texts, including Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, have often been interpreted as depictions of female identities fragmented by the constraints of a patriarchal system, as Sedgwick writes of Lucy Snowe in *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*. The protagonists of *Voyage in the Dark* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* are similar to Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe in that they suffer from divided consciousnesses on the verge of collapse. Rhys distinguishes herself from her predecessors, however, by linking the fragmentation of her protagonist's identities to their displacement from the West Indies: instead of repressing rage, passion, and sexuality, they are divided between the Caribbean homes they have left and their new European surroundings.³

Voyage in the Dark's Anna Morgan is an instance of Sedgwick's "violated separation" personified: torn between her Dominican past and her English present, she brings the colonies to England, and England to the colonies (*The Coherence of*

³ Interestingly, they share the same initials (A.M., Anna Morgan/Antoinette Mason).

Gothic Conventions 105). This confusion is reflected in her experiences in London, a gothic urban world where the boundaries between private/public and past/present are effaced, and where the opposition between colony and metropole, between “savage” Dominica and “civilized” London, is constantly undermined. Nevertheless, while *Voyage in the Dark* portrays Anna’s split identity as the product of a colonial system, it still functions within a set of binaries characteristic of imperial thought. Rhys demonstrates how Anna, in Glissant’s terms, merely “‘comprehends’ multiplicity,” without engaging with difference in a more profound way (*Poetics of Relation* 17). She continues, in other words, to consider black Dominicans as the “Other,” never putting her own self-understanding at risk by engaging in genuine relation.

Wide Sargasso Sea, by contrast, is a more sustained critique of the pressures exerted on female identity by the colonial system, as its protagonist, Antoinette Mason, is not only split, but fragmented. She is fractured by multiple allegiances—to her black caretakers and servants, to her French-Martiniquan mother, to Dominica itself, and of course to England—rather than split by a black Dominica/white England binary. A comparison of *Voyage in the Dark*’s Anna Morgan and *Wide Sargasso Sea*’s Antoinette Mason thus indicates that Rhys does more than adopt Sedgwick’s formulation of gothic female identity as divided. Instead, unlike *Jane Eyre*, *Villette*, or *Voyage in the Dark*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* portrays a certain kind of colonial identity, that of the white creole woman, as a gothic condition that defies categorization into Caribbean/English and white/black. This does not mean, of course, that Antoinette prefigures the creolized subject formulated by Caribbean theorists such as Edouard Glissant, Patrick Chamoiseau, Jean Bernabé, and Raphaël Confiant. Rather, Rhys portrays a cultural hybrid who disintegrates under the pressures of the colonial system

in which she is implicated, a figure not meant to herald a new way of being, but one that is meant to disturb—even terrify—the reader.

Since Ford Madox Ford's preface to *The Left Bank* (1927), Rhys' commentators have consistently isolated her interest in identity as the primary feature of her work. In a 1998 book arguing that Rhys should be understood as primarily a Caribbean writer, for example, Elaine Savory describes her work as "collectively, an extended essay on identity" (151). Other critics, such as Kenneth Ramchand and Veronica Marie Gregg, are more precise. In their eyes, Rhys' work centers on the creole woman, the white descendant of European settlers of the Caribbean. Ramchand, in his 1983 survey of West Indian literature, considers Antoinette Mason to be an example of "terrified consciousness," a term he adapts from Frantz Fanon's comment that decolonization is experienced as a "terrifying future in the consciousness of another 'species' of men and women: the *colons*, the colonists" (Ramchand 225; Fanon 1). Similarly, Gregg closes her study of the Creole woman in Rhys' fiction by claiming that the "creole mode of subjectivity becomes unraveled in a postcolonial Caribbean...such a subject can no longer exist" (197-8). The colonial identity with whose exploration Rhys is associated is thus tied to terror and instability—two primary elements of the Gothic's representation of the self. In *Voyage in the Dark* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* these terrified consciousnesses are illustrated in disturbing detail.

The first of Rhys' novels to foreground the heroine's struggle with her colonial identity, *Voyage in the Dark* (hereafter referred to as *Voyage*) follows Anna Morgan, a nineteen-year old girl from Dominica who drifts around pre-World War I England. After a brief career as a chorus girl, she enters a disastrous affair with an

older, wealthier man named Walter Jeffries, who soon leaves her. As she plunges lower and lower in British society, Anna is haunted by the memory of her home in Dominica. Eventually, she turns to prostitution and undergoes a botched abortion from which, it is implied, she will recover, only restart the same miserable lifestyle that nearly killed her. The novel opens on a note of rebirth, however, that of her immigration to England: “It was as if a curtain had fallen, hiding everything I had ever known. It was almost like being born again” (*Voyage* 7). It is therefore fitting that Rhys described Anna as a girl “divided...two people really...or at any rate [a] one foot on sea and one on land girl,” for her heroine is defined by a seemingly insurmountable chasm between her past and present lives (*The Letters of Jean Rhys* 241).

The opposition Anna creates between Dominica and England begins with her comparison of Roseau, Dominica’s capital, to Southsea, one of the towns she travels to as a chorus girl. Anna’s description of her hometown befits the orientalist fantasy evoked by her allusions to “Tyre and Sidon,” and she dwells at length on “the narrow street [that] smelt of niggers and woodsmoke and salt fishcakes” and “the smells of frangipanni and lime juice and cinnamon and cloves, and sweets made of ginger and syrup, and incense after funerals” (*Voyage* 7, 7-8). Her description of Southsea, by contrast, is devoid of any color or sensuality: “rows of houses with chimneys like the funnels of dummy steamers and smoke the same colour as the sky; and a grey promenade running hard, naked and straight by the side of the grey-brown or grey-green sea” (8). Dominica and England are defined as what the other is not—one is colorful, languid, and exotic, the other grey, industrial, and dreary.

The difference between the two is also a racial one, as demonstrated by Anna's memories of the yearly Carnival parade held in Dominica, which represents the divide between the white and black communities spatially. Inside her home, Anna watches the parade "from between the slats of the jalousies," surrounded by her disapproving family (*Voyage* 185). Her English stepmother protests that the parade is "not a decent and respectable way to go on," while even her more permissive family members frame their acceptance in racist terms, claiming that "you can't expect niggers to behave like white people all the time" (184-5). Outside is the domain of Dominica's black population, where the Carnival streams by: "it was all colours of the rainbow when you looked down at them and the sky so blue...dancing along dressed in red and blue and yellow the women...in all the colours of the rainbow and the sky so blue" (185). The white, English space of Anna's family home is thus juxtaposed to the black Dominican community beyond its walls, the division between them seemingly absolute. Though Anna subscribes to the notion that the separations between black/white and Dominican/English are incontrovertible, she would much rather be on the other side of the divide, claiming that she has "always wanted to be black...being black is warm and gay, being white is cold and sad" (31). Her awareness that this desire is futile underscores the gulf between black Dominica and white England.

Contrary to what is suggested by Anna's absolutist comment about a "curtain falling," however, the novel refuses to neatly separate these two worlds (*Voyage* 7). At the narrative level, this takes the form their simultaneity in Anna's stream-of-consciousness. Additionally, though the contrast between "home" and "abroad" is meant to valorize Dominica at England's expense, Anna's descriptions of the two

worlds mirror one another. The Carnival scene, for example, is more ambiguous than the inside/white, outside/black division implies. Anna's narration instead illustrates the convergence of these two worlds. In a delirious state after her abortion, Anna recalls the masks worn by black women that had "slits for the eyes mild blue eyes," and were painted with "a small straight nose and a little red heart-shaped mouth" (185). The masks, in other words, allowed these black women to adopt white racial characteristics, presumably to mock their oppressors as is traditionally permitted during Carnival. Thus when looking out at the procession of black performers, Anna identifies their "white" features. Conversely, when she describes an English crowd, she recycles the type of dehumanizing colonialist language that imagines black people as faceless hordes: she reduces London's crowds to "hundreds thousands of white people white people rushing along and the dark houses all frowning alike down one after the other all alike" and the European poor to swarms of "woodlice...their faces are the colour of woodlice" (17, 26). Anna has in this way inverted stereotypically white and black traits. Therefore, while she regurgitates the racialized descriptions of imperialist ideology, her application of them to both *Dominica* and England undermines the white/black distinction they were meant to uphold.

Similarly, Anna's reactions to European culture recall her exoticization of Afro-Caribbean culture. When she reads Emile Zola's *Nana*, for example, she does not react to the novel's content—that is, she does not "read it" in order to extract meaning from the words—but to its appearance: first to the cover, which depicts "a stout, dark woman," and then to the text itself, whose "endless procession of words" (a sort of parade themselves) Anna says gave her "a curious feeling—sad, excited, and frightened. It wasn't what I was reading, it was the look of the dark, blurred

words going on endlessly that gave me that feeling” (*Voyage* 9).⁴ Her response to the words’ appearance is emphasized, not their meaning (let alone that of the text as a whole). Her response, in other words, subverts the ability of Zola’s novel to speak for itself, just as her exotic representation of the Carnival procession dwells on the participants’ “dark” or “very black” skin, rather than acknowledging the subversive nature of their parade (185, 186). Anna’s inability to see past surface level characteristics thus extends to both black people (who she frequently fetishizes) and white people, and even to canonical Western texts. By portraying both Dominica and England in similarly dehumanizing terms, *Voyage* collapses the distance between the two worlds, at least insofar as they are represented in Anna’s consciousness.

The collapse of the Dominica/England binary is reflected in the collapse of Anna’s split sense of self. Rejected by both white English society and the black Caribbean culture she identifies with, Anna exists in the boundary between colony and metropole, a marginal position that is the result of an inability (not just her own, but her society’s) to separate national and racial identity. Identifying as a white Dominican is impossible for her, as her understanding of nationality is always racialized: to be English is to be white, to be Dominican is to be black. Of course, this strict dichotomy poses a problem for a white woman raised in Dominica who is neither accepted as English nor wishes to be. Anna’s solution is troubling: to prove her West Indian identity, she claims solidarity with black women. After insisting to a bemused Walter that she is a “real West Indian,” whose family had been established in the region for generations, she proceeds to identify with one of her family’s former slaves, a “Maillote Boy, aged 18, house servant” (*Voyage* 54). When she sleeps with

⁴ Anna’s reaction to it aside, Zola’s novel foreshadows her descent into prostitution.

Walter for the first time, Anna repeats Maillotte's name as a mantra, yet immediately recognizes that unlike the enslaved woman, she enjoys "it" (sex) and says she does not "want it any other way but this" (that is, she recognizes that her sexual experiences are both consensual and satisfying, unlike Maillotte Boyd, who, the novel implies, is raped by Anna's forbearers) (56). Rather than identify with a white ancestor, Anna chooses to appropriate one of their slaves as proof of her West Indian authenticity.

Rhys here reflects a point made by Glissant in *Poetics of Relation* concerning white planter culture. Glissant asserts that:

...the planters, colonists, or *békés*... strove to constitute to a white pseudoaristocracy. I saw pseudo because almost nowhere were these attempts at putting down roots within a tradition sanctioned by the stamp of time nor by any legitimacy of absolute filiation. Plantations, despite secreting manners and customs, from which customs ensued, never established any tradition of great impact. (*Poetics of Relation* 64)

Their attempts at establishing a creole legacy by suppressing racial difference certainly failed when their daughter identifies with a name on the family "slave-list" in order to justify her connection to the Caribbean (*Voyage* 54). In Glissant's terms, Anna's identity is neither rooted in filiation, as in European communities, nor in relation, a new understanding of the self that would require her to reject orthodox binaries and engage with difference in a more meaningful way. Her understanding of difference, using Glissant's terminology, involves "comprehending" it: a grasping, appropriative understanding that still subordinates the Other within dualism's "subtle hierarchies" (*Poetics of Relation* 17). She does not, in other words, put her own self at risk by engaging in a more destabilizing understanding of relation. For though she claims to want to be black, Anna is at her most assertive when refuting the insinuation that her mother was not white. This reversal on Anna's part reflects the fact that her

exotic portrayals of the black community depend on there being an absolute distance between her and them, a separation from behind which she can project meaning, contrasting their blackness to her whiteness in stark terms. This dualist perception of race, of course, does not diminish Anna's sense of being divided between England and Dominica. Rather, it demonstrates her immature conception of her native country and her racist attitude toward those she claims to identify with.

While Anna is aware that her appropriation of black identity is impossible, she knows she is not perceived as an "authentic"—i.e. white—European. Instead, her fellow chorus girls refer to her as "the Hottentot," and the English mock her West Indian accent (*Voyage* 13). One of the several advertisements Anna repeats to herself suggests her anxiety and confusion over racial authenticity. Listening to her stepmother Hester insinuate she is of mixed racial heritage, Anna recalls an ad for "Bourne's Cocoa" whose slogan is "What is Purity? For Thirty-five years the Answer has been Bourne's Cocoa" (59). Cocoa is doubly evocative in this context: it is both a plant cultivated in Caribbean plantations and a racial descriptor for skin color. Purity, and what it means to be "purely" black, or "purely" white, is clearly at the front of Anna's mind, for according to the logic that aligns black with Dominican and white with English, Anna is "impure." Neither English nor Dominican, Anna is somewhere in between.

As in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, Anna's split identity is manifested in the novel's gothic moments, including a recurring nightmare about her voyage from Dominica to England. This dream occurs at a moment of utter despair for Anna, who has just discovered she is pregnant. As she slips into the dream, gothic creatures begin to infiltrate her stream-of-consciousness, centered around the folklore taught to her by

Anne Chewett, the obeah woman she knew as a child.⁵ This figure, one of those “obeah women who dig up dead people and cut their fingers off and go to gaol for it,” triggers childhood memories of “obeah zombis soucrians—lying in the dark frightened of the dark frightened of soucrians that fly in through the window and suck your blood—they fan you to sleep with their wings and then they suck your blood” (163). Anna then imagines herself as one of these monsters: “they look like people but their eyes are red and staring and they’re soucrians at night—looking in the glass and thinking sometimes my eyes look like a souciant’s eyes” (163). Her identification with the souciant, a supernatural monster between human and animal with vampiric overtones, positions Anna as a similarly transgressive being.

Like *Villette*’s ghostly nun, Anna’s dream—one of *Voyage*’s most uncanny, gothic scenes—is rooted in the “violated separation” between the two halves of the protagonist’s self (*The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* 105). The dream opens by locating Anna within a geographic and cultural liminal space: “I dreamt I was on a ship. From the deck you could see small islands—dolls of islands—and the ship was sailing in a doll’s sea, transparent as glass. Somebody said in my ear, ‘That’s your island that you talk such a lot about’” (*Voyage* 164). This position is permanent, rather than transitory, for though she tries to “get ashore” she remains “powerless and very tired,” trapped as the “deck of the ship expanded” and “heav[ed] up and down” (165). This experience of perpetual marginalization culminates in “meaninglessness, fatigue, and powerlessness,” echoing Freud’s claim that the uncanny—one of the hallmarks of gothic fiction—is characterized by “the repetition of the same thing” that “recalls the helplessness we experience in certain dream-states” (*Voyage* 165; Freud

⁵ Obeah is one the folk religions of the African Diaspora practiced in the West Indies.

143). The overwhelming feeling of stasis and helplessness is repeated in Anna's comment that she "kept on dreaming about the sea," implying that she is haunted not by memories of her home but of what separates England from Dominica (165). In other words, the nightmare reminds her that she is helplessly trapped in the netherworld between the two.

Another element of the dream that casts her split identity in a gothic light is the figure of the "boy bishop," a child who falls overboard only to be saved and presented to Anna in a "child's coffin" (*Voyage* 165, 164). Her description of the "little dwarf" emphasizes his uncanny qualities, and is worth quoting in full:

...there was a sailor carrying a child's coffin. He lifted the lid, bowed and said, 'The boy bishop,' and a little dwarf with a bald head sat up in the coffin. He was wearing a priest's robes. He had a large blue ring on his third right finger.

'I ought to kiss the ring, I thought in my dream, 'and then he'll start saying, In nomine Patris, Filii....'

When he stood up, the boy bishop was like a doll. His large, light eyes in a narrow, cruel face rolled like a doll's as you lean it from one side to the other. He bowed from right to left as the sailor held him up. (165)

One interpretation of Anna's relationship to this "boy bishop" is that the child is her double, the part of herself that figuratively fell overboard and drowned on the way to England.⁶ For in fact, the dream never explicitly identifies the boy as the "somebody [who] had fallen overboard" (164). Instead, the moment someone falls overboard coincides with the moment that Anna tries "to catch hold of a branch and step ashore" (164). In addition, the child's marionette-like passivity echoes Anna's feeling of "powerlessness," both in the dream and throughout the novel (165). In dreaming of

⁶ It is also important to note that this figure is gothic in two ways: it is both a parody of the evil, grotesque Catholic priest of anticlerical gothic fiction and an eerily lifelike automaton similar to the one in "The Sandman," the E.T.A Hoffman story Freud uses as a case study in "The Uncanny."

coming face to face with her doppelgänger, Anna echoes Jane Eyre, who sees Bertha's face in the mirror at Thornfield: both women are reunited, albeit briefly, with the part of the self they are separated from. In Sedgwick's terms, the "barrier between the self and what should belong to it" is violated, and terror ensues (*The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* 14).

The gothic nature of the collapse between the Caribbean and England is underscored by a breakdown between private/public and past/present that lends Anna's experiences in London an uncanny quality. Like many of Rhys' novels, *Voyage* dwells on the eerie uniformity of Europe's urban centers using images like that of "rows of houses outside, gim-crack, rotten-looking, and all exactly alike," all "the same—all alike, all hideously stuck together—all the streets going north, east, south, west, all exactly the same" (*Voyage* 30, 103). England is defined by its homogeneity, as Anna's summary of her travels shows: "the towns we went to always looked so exactly alike...you were perpetually moving to another place with was perpetually the same" (8). This sameness is in stark contrast to the specificity of the minute sensory details Anna gives of Caribbean (she even provides Dominica's exact geographic coordinates).

Though this oppressive sameness characterizes all of England, it is not limited to the exterior, public cities streets that Anna lumps together sardonically as "a Coronation Street or High Street or Duke Street or Lord Street where you walked about and looked at shops" (*Voyage* 8). Instead, the city's eternal sameness seeps into the private spaces that Anna inhabits, crossing the threshold into the realm of the private until the various apartments she stays in are rendered interchangeable, down to the dinners served by various identical landladies: "the shapes of the slices of meat

were the same, and the way the cabbage was heaped was the same, and all the houses outside in the street were the same—all alike, all hideously together...all exactly the same” (103).

The invasion of the public into the private realm in *Voyage* is best illustrated by tracking the appearances of a certain set of paintings called the *Cries of London*. The *Cries of London* are not of Rhys’ invention but allude to a real genre of prints popular throughout the nineteenth century and earlier that depicted the urban poor (often street sellers, or “criers”) who fell “outside the pale of respectable society” in cities as diverse as London, Paris, York, Glasgow, and Dublin (Shesgreen 215). Though Anna lives in horror of the poor, what she calls “the ones without any money, the ones with beastly lives,” their images haunt her as she slides to the lowest rungs of English society (*Voyage* 126). These prints make their first appearance when Anna moves in with Ethel, an older woman for whom she briefly works as a manicurist. Ethel strains to convey a sense of propriety, hoping that Anna will be impressed with her “nice flat,” by showing off status symbols like a “piano” (132). The “*Cries of London* on the walls,” however, evoke the seediness of London’s lowest classes, implying the unspoken tawdriness of the arrangement she proposes to Anna.⁷

The paintings reappear when Anna moves into her call girl friend Laurie’s “swanky” new flat, full of “furniture and pink cushions and mats with fringes,” where “the *Cries of London* turned up...in the bedroom,” thus infiltrating the most intimate, private space of the home (*Voyage* 179). Yet even when they do not appear in pictorial form, London criers haunt Anna. While lying in bed in one of her first flats,

⁷ In the eyes of respectable society, Anna’s job as a manicurist is one step away from prostitution, as some of her clients’ expectations suggest.

she hears a Londoner hawking his wares, “bawling: ‘Bread, bread, bread, Standard bread’ . . . over and over again” (note that even the bread is “Standard,” as England’s homogeneity extends to its food) (25). Though Anna finds this actual cry of London “mad as a hatter,” it echoes in her bedroom and regulates her physical state, the words “going over and over again in [her] head” until she “began to breathe in time to them” (25). The *Cries of London* have thus not only followed Anna across the city, but have also progressed from the dining room, still a relatively social space, to the bedroom, the most private of spaces, where they determine the tempo of her breath. This progression demonstrates how the barrier between the miserable outside world and the private refuge of the home has dissolved.

Sasha Jensen, of *Good Morning, Midnight*, summarizes the ramifications of the collapse between public and private in a way that illuminates Anna’s quandary: “a room is a place where you hide from the wolves outside and that’s all any room is,” she says (38). Anna’s rooms are no longer a place where she can hide from the “wolves” populating the dehumanizing and exploitative external world. Instead, her existence has become a prolonged uncanny state, in which what should be intimate, private space is indistinguishable from the public sphere it was meant to be an escape from. London’s homogeneity renders it a waking nightmare from which Anna cannot awake: she cannot “get over the feeling that it was a dream” in which “the light and the sky and the shadows and the houses and the people” were “all parts of the dream, all fitting in and all against me” (*Voyage* 157).

The hostile nature of this seamlessly uniform world extends to English people as well as English places, as demonstrated by Anna’s description of Vincent, Walter’s

brother. Vincent, who does most of Walter's dirty work when it comes to getting rid of Anna, strikes her as having a "look in his eyes...like a high, smooth, unclimbable wall" with which "no communication was possible...you'd have to be three-quarters mad even to attempt it" (*Voyage* 172). Anna's nightmarish inability to communicate is further reflected in the proliferation of masks throughout the novel, not only in the Carnival scene, but also in the way that people's faces are reduced to frozen images, ciphers that reveal nothing, like Vincent's face and the "blank" expression landladies assume when they gather that Anna is financially dependence on men (76). Caught in a no-man's-land between Dominica and England, all spaces and all people become inhospitable to Anna. London is transformed into a gothic landscape where people are reduced to eerie figures: restaurant patrons are "upholstered ghosts," a kissing couple are "beetles clinging to the railings," Ethel, "an ant, just like all the other ants," and London's poor, "woodlice" (97, 34, 106, 126). Anna is as confined and haunted in her urban environment as the heroine of a classic gothic novel is in a castle, trapped by a patriarchal system in which men like Walter exploit her.

What emerges from *Voyage* is a portrait of a psyche uneasily divided between a Caribbean past and an English present, one that transforms London into a gothically nightmarish landscape. The gothic nature of Anna's experience is reemphasized by the novel's final pages, in which her botched abortion triggers a fever dream of memories. In this scene, Rhys superimposes a near-death experience, the loss of a child, and the loss of a childhood home upon one another to demonstrate how the trauma of leaving Dominica is mirrored in the trauma Anna experiences in the narrative present. The result of this collage of memories is to trap Anna ever more fatally in her nightmare of a life: the narrative is circular, the last sentence promising

that Anna will start “all over again, all over again” (*Voyage* 188). After manipulating the division between past and present throughout the novel, Rhys thus ends it by disrupting the separations between past, present, and future. Anna is confined in a circular narrative she cannot escape, burdened with a gothic split self on the constant verge of collapse.

Though reminiscent of the gothic doubleness in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, Anna’s condition is one particular to subjects of her type: those simultaneously pulled toward and rejected by both colony and metropole. While *Voyage* identifies the inadequacy of this binary, it presents neither a more complex understanding of hybridity, nor a positive model of hybrid identity that might thrive on difference, along the lines of Glissant’s notion of relation. Yet *Voyage*’s final pages gesture toward the need for a reconsideration of the black/white binary and the mutually constructing discourses of nationality and race, while demonstrating that this is impossible under the strictures of a colonial system. Anna’s Uncle Bo comments of the Carnival procession that “you can’t expect niggers to behave like white people all the time...it’s asking too much of human nature,” completely missing the point of the Carnival: the black Dominicans outside *are* behaving like white people, since they masquerading with white masks and white powder on their arms (*Voyage* 185). In fact, Anna herself undercuts Uncle Bo’s insinuation that black people are naturally more savage than white. She reveals she was raped, and gives the following description of the event: “I said, ‘Stop, please stop.’ ‘I knew you’d say that, he said. *His face was white*” (184, my emphasis). This is presumably not what her uncle meant by “behav[ing] like white people” (185). His use of the term “human nature” to support the notion of innate racial differences and hierarchies is telling, for Rhys’

novel critiques constructions of racial and national difference through its portrait of a consciousness in which the collapse between black/white and Dominica/England has scrambled assumptions that black equals Dominican and white equals English.

Voyage does not, however, escape the binaries it critiques: Anna remains “so nervous about how [she] looked that three-quarters of [her] was in a prison, wandering round and round in a circle” (76).

Wide Sargasso Sea enacts a more sophisticated analysis of the female creole by replacing the model of a divided self with a fragmented one, furthering *Voyage*'s critique of Dominican/English, black/white essentialism. In this novel, Rhys reimagines the life Antoinette Mason, better known as to most readers as Bertha, *Jane Eyre*'s “madwoman in the attic.” *Wide Sargasso Sea* is divided into three parts corresponding to 1) Antoinette's isolated childhood in Coulibri, a decaying former sugarcane plantation in post-Emancipation Jamaica that is burned down by its former slaves 2) her disastrous honeymoon with an unnamed Englishman, understood to be Mr. Rochester, at Granbois, her Dominican summer home, and 3) her final days imprisoned in what is presumably Thornfield's attic, during which she dreams of setting fire to the estate in a way that explicitly recalls *Jane Eyre*. In *Wide Sargasso Sea* Rhys adopts (and adapts) the gothic conventions and themes less evident in her previous works: haunted estates, witchcraft (in the form of obeah), zombies, madwomen, the destructive power of sexuality, the marriage of a powerless young girl, and the threats of incest and miscegenation. Furthermore, Rhys places her characters within a literary gothic context by having Rochester discover copies of Walter Scott and Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an Opium Eater* at Granbois: the medievalism of the former is well-known, as is the gothic sensibility of the latter

(Sedgwick, for example, devotes an entire chapter to De Quincey in *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*).

In addition, though Rhys' portrayal of Rochester is sometimes sympathetic, he nevertheless plays the role of the patriarchal gothic villain, driven by an inexplicably voracious drive to conquer and eventually imprison his victim. While other Rhys men—say Walter and Vincent Jeffries—are villainous in their use and disposal of women, they are defined by their banality. Their motivation, in other words, is to conform to a bourgeois code of propriety, not a combined response of “rage,” “jealousy,” and “hate” (*Wide Sargasso Sea* 144, 154). Rochester, by contrast, is explicitly described as an imperial figure: he resembles an “emperor,” declares of “wild, untouched” Dominica that he “want[s] what it *hides*,” and claims that his wife is “mad but *mine, mine*” (67, 79, 150, emphasis in original). Rhys' Rochester is a postcolonial revision of the gothic villain whose desire to imprison or otherwise abuse the heroine illuminates the intersection of patriarchal and imperial exploitation.

It is therefore unsurprising that this is the sole Rhys novel to have been labeled “gothic.” The first proponent of this interpretation was Anthony Luengo, in a 1976 article entitled “*Wide Sargasso Sea* and the Gothic Mode.” Luengo is above all interested in Rhys' adaptation of the “conventional machinery of the terror-Gothic” such as her substitution of the Caribbean forest for the haunted castle and her manipulation of stock gothic characters such as the “Gothic villain, the young hero, the ‘persecuted woman’ . . . and the *femme fatale*,” and he mentions the “nightmare” of Antoinette's “identity adrift” only in passing (172, 175). Yet the instability of Antoinette's identity, like Anna's, is the fundamental condition upon which the novel's gothic elements are built (169). While the imperfect rupture between the

Caribbean and England underlies *Voyage*'s gothic moments, the "violated separation" that characterizes Anna is multiplied in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, leaving Antoinette torn in various directions by her national, socioeconomic, and racial allegiances. As a result, a fragmented model of the self replaces *Voyage*'s binary one. Even the novel's title, at first slightly opaque, suggests this: the Sargasso Sea, a part of the Atlantic located northwest of the Caribbean, is known for the intertwined trails of seaweed marking its surface in which flotsam from passing ships become entangled. Rhys' title thus marries the problems of fragmentation and interconnection that characterize Antoinette Mason, while hinting at her treatment as worthless refuse by English culture.

Wide Sargasso Sea's title also suggests a link to Glissant that illustrates how Rhys' last novel furthers *Voyage*'s critique of binary identity categories. The epigraph to *Poetics of Relation* states: "the unity is sub-marine," a phrase ascribed to the Barbadian poet and scholar Edward Kamau Brathwaite. Glissant expands upon this image in *Caribbean Discourse*, in which he argues for a rejection of fixed roots in favor of "submarine roots: that is floating free, not fixed in one position in some primordial spot, but extending in all directions in our world through its network of branches" (67). This image of free-floating, intertwined branches is remarkably similar to the image evoked by the title of Rhys' novel. Antoinette Mason is caught in Glissant's network: she defines herself not by single point of origin but feels tied to the white creole community, her black caretakers, and even the Caribbean landscape itself. Yet Rhys' portrait of this kind of identity is clearly less hopeful than Glissant's, for Antoinette's difference is her undoing in a world that privileges essentialism. Instead, as in *Voyage*, Rhys gestures toward the need for what Glissant calls "not

merely the right to difference but...the right to opacity,” that will end “this old obsession with discovering what lies at the bottom of natures” until “every Other is a citizen and no longer a barbarian” (*Poetics of Relation* 190). As Antoinette’s fate suggests, in the world of *Wide Sargasso Sea* there is no alternative to citizen or Other/barbarian. Instead, her fragmented identity renders her monstrous and terrifying.

Before her mental breakdown as the madwoman in the attic, however, Antoinette reveals the fragility of her identity through a series of problematic and ultimately unsuccessful attempts to identify with a series of doubles. The first person with whom she attempts to identify is her mother (who Rhys subtly names Annette). As a child, Antoinette yearns for her distant mother’s affection, making “excuses to be near her” and imagining her mother’s hair as “a soft black cloak to cover me, hide me, keep me safe” (*Wide Sargasso Sea* 20). Her mother’s rejection notwithstanding, Antoinette resembles her in name, appearance, and mental instability, to the extent that Rochester starts calling her Bertha after he is told (incorrectly) that was her mother’s name.

Yet even before her mother rejects her, Antoinette already has another double: Tia, her black childhood friend (again, the similarity of their names is fairly obvious). In Antoinette’s mind, she and Tia are practically identical twins, as they had “eaten the same food, slept side by side, [and] bathed in the same river” (*Wide Sargasso Sea* 41).⁸ The relationship between Antoinette and Tia has been a source of contention among critics, many of whom rightly criticize the racist overtones in the latter’s

⁸ This character reinforces the link between *Voyage* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, for Antoinette mentions that Tia’s mother is “a woman called Maillotte” (19). This would

portrayal and dispute whether such a friendship could have truly occurred in the historical period during which the novel is set.⁹ While these criticisms are valid, Antoinette's narration must be called into question: Rhys does not paint her as a completely trustworthy, lucid victim, but as a participant in an imperialist society whose viewpoint is shaped accordingly. Rhys suggests that the relationship is imagined on Antoinette's part, though this clearly does not diminish its hold on her. Their rapport is in fact quite antagonistic, with Antoinette at one point calling Tia a "cheating nigger" (22). For her part, Tia uses her understanding of the intersection of class and race to respond in kind, mocking her supposed friend as a "white nigger" since "real white people...got gold money" (22).

When the black community expels the Masons from Coulibri by burning down their plantation house, Antoinette runs to join her "friend" under the assumption that she "will live with Tia" and "be like her" (*Wide Sargasso Sea* 41). Instead of welcoming her with open arms, however, Tia throws a rock at her face. Antoinette's next glance at Tia restages Jane Eyre's glimpse of Bertha in her mirror. In Brontë's novel, Jane's "little pale face" and "elfish" features are implicitly contrasted to Bertha's "discoloured," "savage face," and her "dark" lips, "black eyebrows," and "bloodshot eyes" (*Jane Eyre* 349, 301, 327). Rhys sets up a similar contrast between Antoinette and Tia: "I looked at her and I saw her face crumple up as she began to cry. We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was

make Tia, Antoinette's double, the possible daughter of the slave with which Anna wishes to identify.

⁹ Peter Hulme's article, "The Place of *Wide Sargasso Sea*," charts the many disagreements over this aspect of Rhys' text and whether it disqualifies the novel from being considered "West Indian," with a particular focus on the disagreement between Ramchand (who includes it in the West Indian literary tradition), and Brathwaite (who does not).

as if I saw myself. Like in a looking-glass” (*Wide Sargasso Sea* 41). Though Antoinette claims to see herself in Tia, what she notes are their differences. For Tia’s face is the mirror image of hers in the sense that it is an inversion of it, as indicated by the juxtaposition of water running down Tia’s face to the blood running down Antoinette’s. Antoinette desires to see herself in Tia, but this contrast reveals the gulf between them.

Antoinette’s final double is the Caribbean landscape, whose ominous lushness is one of the novel’s most striking features. Several critics have noted the link between Antoinette and the natural world. Luengo, for example, argues that Rhys’ use of Dominica’s landscape to reflect her characters’ inner states is a Gothic technique dating back to Radcliffe’s descriptions of Italy (76). Similarly, Savory writes that in *Wide Sargasso Sea* “the physical and the spiritual landscapes of Caribbean topography and climate and cultural identity interconnect” (145). Yet the Dominican natural world does more than reflect Antoinette’s mental state—it is one of the foundations of her identity. The first step in her identification with the land itself is the association between Granbois, Coulibri, and Antoinette’s mother. Since Granbois “had belonged to Antoinette’s mother,” it is a site that represents the intersection between mother and daughter. Granbois’ maternal connotations are echoed in Antoinette’s account of Coulibri, as she tells Rochester that when her mother became “ill” and was removed from her daughter it “did not seem strange to me for she was a part of Coulibri, and if Coulibri had been destroyed and gone out of my life, it seemed natural that she should go too” (*Wide Sargasso Sea* 60, 120). Furthermore, while describing Coulibri to Rochester, Antoinette strikes her forehead, declaring, “they destroyed it and it is only here now” (119). Performing a gesture that

locates Coulibri within her mind, Antoinette demonstrates that she has internalized her childhood home (119). Her beloved Granbois is taken from her as well: she considers Rochester's greatest betrayal of her to be his transformation of Granbois "into a place [she] hate[s]" (133).

But of course, it is Rochester whose tendency to equate Antoinette with her beloved island is most apparent. Consider the similarity, for example, of his description of his wife's "long, sad, dark alien eyes" to that of the Granbois bathing pool's "alien, disturbing, secret loveliness," or his comment that it is because "she belonged to the magic and the loveliness" of the island that he hates "the mountains and the hills, the rivers and the rain...its beauty and its magic and the secret I would never know...I hated its indifference and the cruelty which was part of its loveliness" (*Wide Sargasso Sea* 61, 79, 156). Antoinette wishes to identify unproblematically with the land itself, but that too is taken from her, just as she is rejected by her mother, the black community, Dominica, and England. Pulled in various directions by her various allegiances, her identity is fractured.

Like *Voyage*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* represents its protagonist's fragmentation at both the formal and psychological levels. Not only do three people narrate it, but other voices constantly interrupt whoever is speaking. These interruptions are particularly frequent in Antoinette's sections. Her first sentence—the novel's first—demonstrates how she risks being overwhelmed by other voices, as she parrots the exclusionary opinions of other while marginalizing herself: "they say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did...but we were not in their ranks" (note that like Anna, Antoinette does not consider herself truly white) (*Wide Sargasso Sea* 15). In addition, there are several temporal slippages in the novel. For example,

Antoinette mentions early on that it is “better perhaps to be peaceful and contented and protected, as I feel now,” without clarifying to which period “now” refers—whether it is her life in the attic (unlikely, as she spends most of it in a violent dissociative state), her childhood (also unlikely, as she narrates the bulk of it in the past tense), or whether she is speaking from beyond the grave (having accomplished what she “was brought here [to Thornfield]...to do,” i.e., to burn it down) (33, 171). The implication is thus that she is speaking from beyond the grave, a position in which, strictly speaking, her “self” would have ceased to exist. This confusion is only exacerbated when she later contradicts the calm assurance of her earlier statement by implying that her memory is fading, saying, “quickly, while I can, I must remember” (48). The breakdown of past, present, and future culminates in the attic at Thornfield, where she dreams of setting fire to the estate (as Bertha Mason does in *Jane Eyre*). She is caught in the past, calling “help me Christophine help me” while running by “the room where they brought me yesterday or the day before yesterday, I don’t remember” (170).

Antoinette’s hallucinatory experience in Thornfield recalls Jane’s experience in the red-room, both descriptively and in the dissociative episode it triggers. As she wanders around Thornfield’s halls, trying to avoid “that ghost of a woman who they say haunts this place,” she enters a “large room with a red carpet and red curtain...with so many candles and so much red” (*Wide Sargasso Sea* 168, 169). When the candles set fire to “the thin curtains that were behind the red ones” she exits the room and is confronted with her own image in a mirror: “It was then that I saw her—the ghost. The woman with streaming hair. She was surrounded by a gilt frame but I knew her” (169, 169). She is unable to recognize any version of herself,

watching “Antoinette drifting out the window,” running from the “ghost” in the mirror, and not responding to Rochester’s cries of “Bertha! Bertha!” (168, 169, 170). Having reached the ramparts, she disassociates from herself completely, saying, “someone screamed and I thought, *Why did I scream?*” (170).

Caught in the final throes of her dream at Thornfield, Antoinette sees in the sky a collection of objects that evoke her past and spur her to jump off the ramparts: “it [the sky] was all red and my life was in it...the red carpet downstairs and the bamboos and the tree ferns, the gold ferns and the silver, and the soft green velvet moss of the moss on the garden wall...then I looked over the edge I saw the pool at Coulibri. Tia was there” (170). Still in the dream, she imagines jumping off the ramparts and finally merging with her double while calling out her name. This again recalls Sedgwick’s model of the Gothic as motivated by “violated separation” (*The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* 105). The hallucinatory quality of Antoinette’s dream, and the gothic image of Antoinette/Bertha Mason standing atop the ramparts, Thornfield on fire around her, the “wind caught [in her] hair and stream[ing] out like wings,” all culminate in the desired fusion with her double she was denied as a child, a collapse between past/present, Caribbean/England, and self/other (*Wide Sargasso Sea* 170). The novel ends with this image, familiar to readers of the Gothic: Bertha Mason on the ramparts of a burning Thornfield, about to jump.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys does more than portray an unjust husband or an unjust colonial system. Rather, she targets a canonical text that helped efface the traces of the colonial reality. While in the attic Antoinette refers to Thornfield as a “cardboard house” that “is not England,” a peculiar description that evokes another kind of “house” that lives between two pieces of cardboard—books—which are in a

sense “cardboard world[s]...coloured brown or dark red or yellow” (*Wide Sargasso Sea* 163, 162). Burning down Thornfield is a way of destroying *Jane Eyre* and vindicating its live burial of Bertha Mason. *Wide Sargasso Sea* suggests that their gothic conventions aside, *Voyage* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*’s most gothic quality is that they resurrect the ghosts of the marginalized colonial world suppressed by British literature, whether by giving the madwoman in the attic a backstory or by forcing the West Indies and London to coexist in one person. These characters in turn become ghosts themselves: like the unnamed protagonist of “I Used to Live Here Once,” Anna and Antoinette are remnants of a past world that continues to haunt the present.

Most troublingly, Rhys’ novels present cultural hybridity as an agonizing experience. Considering these characters as hybrid products of two cultures brings Rhys into conversation with debates in postcolonial studies—especially prevalent in the Caribbean—about the hybrid nature of Creole identity and language. Rhys’ deployment of the Gothic to portray a destructive, terrifying type of hybridity is an important reference point for Kincaid and Mootoo, whose heroines are also cultural hybrids. Of course, neither Anna nor Antoinette (nor any of Rhys’ heroines) are “creole” in the sense that the term is now used. As much as Rhys likes to hint at their racial ambiguity, these characters are unquestionably white women whose social and personal identities depend on the subordination of black men and women.¹⁰ Yet as Antoinette’s lament demonstrates—“I often wonder who I am and where is my

¹⁰ Rhys stresses that that Europeans question her heroines’ racial status. As noted earlier, Anna’s fellow chorus girls call her a “Hottentot” and make fun of her accent, which her stepmother notes is similar to their black maid’s patois (*Voyage* 13). In addition, Julia Martin has “very thick dark hair” that stands “out rather wildly round her head” as well as the “hands of an oriental,” and Rochester remarks that Antoinette’s eyes “are not English or European” (*After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* 13; *Wide Sargasso Sea* 61).

country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all”—they are still the product of two cultures, caught between and alienated by both (*Wide Sargasso Sea* 93). What Rhys produces, in other words, is a negative portrayal of hybridity, whose perpetual isolation culminates in either in a living nightmare, or in death.¹¹

Ramchand diagnosed Anna and Antoinette as terrified consciousnesses whose world is crumbling around them. His formulation could be modified slightly: Anna and Antoinette are not only terrified consciousnesses, but terrifying ones. For in adapting gothic conventions, Rhys’ novels are part of a tradition that seeks to frighten and disturb the reader, not only the literary canon. The Gothic’s intended result—“pleasurable fear,” in Sedgwick’s formula—is a physiological response as much as an intellectual or emotional one, aiming to quicken its reader’s pulse, to make her feel dread and anxiety, in short, to bridge the gap between the imaginary and the corporeal (*The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* 10). It is perhaps in this respect that Rhys’ novels are most successfully gothic. Rhys once described her reasoning for tackling the subject of Brontë’s Bertha Mason by saying, “She seemed such a poor ghost. I thought I’d try to write her a life” (qtd. in Harrison 128). What Rhys accomplished in re-writing the story of Antoinette Mason, however, was to exchange a poor ghost for a terrifying one. The madwoman in the attic may no longer be a peripheral figure, but she is every bit as elusive, and every bit as frightening.

¹¹ Rhys’ original ending had Anna dying at the end of *Voyage*, but it was rejected by her editor, who thought a death from abortion would be both too shocking and too depressing for the reading public (Savory 91).

Mothers, History, and Horror in Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* and *The Autobiography of My Mother*

The Antiguan-American writer Jamaica Kincaid is another Caribbean novelist who continues the Female Gothic's interrogation of female identity. Two of her novels in particular, *Lucy* (1990) and *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996) are entangled in a complex relationship with Brontë, Rhys, and their representations of the fractured female self. Unlike Rhys, however, who undercuts her "very great and deep admiration for the Brontë sisters" with jabs at *Jane Eyre*'s "fat (and improbable) monster," Kincaid speaks of her predecessor in gracious terms, though she is also troubled by her novels' colonial inheritance (*The Letters of Jean Rhys* 271, 149). She once even declared, "I would happily sacrifice any amount of reading of any of my books for people to read *Jane Eyre*. You can't begin to understand me until you read certain things. I didn't begin to understand myself until I read certain things" ("On Gardening" 799). Kincaid shares with Brontë a focus on the experiences of socioeconomically marginalized women coming of age in colonial periods, and, like Brontë, makes liberal use of gothic conventions and themes. Of course, these similarities also accentuate their primary difference: Kincaid's protagonists are Caribbean women of color, not English governesses.

Kincaid pays direct homage to Brontë in *Lucy*, a coming-of-age novel that follows a nineteen-year-old Antiguan girl named Lucy Josephine Potter as she immigrates to a city that strongly resembles New York in order to work as an au pair for a wealthy white family. During the year the novel covers, her employers, Lewis and Mariah, divorce, and she decides to pursue photography and writing rather than study nursing as her parents had intended. The novel ends on an ambivalent note:

Lucy rents a room of her own and inaugurates her career by writing her full name on the first page of a new notebook, only to immediately erase the words in a flood of tears.

While semiautobiographical (Kincaid worked as an au pair for a similar family) *Lucy* also intervenes in the Brontë canon by transposing *Villette* into midcentury America. Kincaid renders the parallels between the two novels explicit: both heroines are named Lucy, both are withdrawn and angry young women who flee the constraints of their homes for ill-paid jobs in foreign countries, both enter relationships with men named Paul, and both are harshly critical of their surroundings. Additionally, *Lucy* features the equivalent to the nun “haunting” the pensionnat, though not in the trappings of a spooky apparition. Instead, Lucy Potter is haunted by her domineering mother, whose influence from afar undermines her efforts to establish herself as an economically independent and sexually liberated artist.

As its contradictory title suggests, *The Autobiography of My Mother* also involves a complex mother-daughter relationship. Set in Dominica, *Autobiography* centers on Xuela Claudette Richardson, the daughter of a Carib woman and an African-Scottish father. In a torrential monologue, she recounts the most important events of her life, from her mother’s death in childbirth, her father’s abandonment, multiple love affairs, and grisly abortions, to her loveless marriage to a white man. Xuela’s true theme, however, is the many ways in which colonialism has rendered her home a place where “brutality is the only real inheritance and cruelty is sometimes the only thing freely given” (*Autobiography* 5). She analyzes her compatriots’ responses to colonial oppression, focusing above all on her policeman father’s

mimicry of the white ruling class. Throughout, her portrait of Dominica is that of a bleak, haunted world where the atrocities of Caribbean history warp the present and are mapped directly onto the body: in one instance, the “aching vault” of Xuela’s womb is compared to the “cold vast vaults of water” in which sank “ships filled with people” (137, 136, 99). Her Dominica is a one where horror is part of the everyday. Chief among these traumas is the absence of her mother, which as Lizabeth Paravisini-Gerbert notes, symbolizes the social catastrophe that is “her people’s break from their aboriginal roots” (152). The tormenting power of this missing link to history is crystalized in a recurring dream, in which Xuela sees her mother, clad in the long white nightgown of a ghost, descend a ladder, only to disappear before revealing her face. As in *Lucy*, the mother’s absence only makes her influence more palpable.

Like Rhys, Kincaid explores the repercussions of Caribbean history on national and personal female identity, though her protagonists are creole in the sense that they are of both white and black descent. However, Kincaid’s interrogation of female identity is routed through her depictions of conflicted mother-daughter relationships, a theme not only touched on in *Wide Sargasso Sea* but one that is considered central to the Female Gothic. *Lucy* and *Autobiography* therefore engage with the Female Gothic tradition, for they continue to interrogate “the problematic boundaries of female identity and its relation to power, sexuality, and the maternal body” and the “frightening contraposition in the center of female identity—the conflict with the mother” (Kahane, “The Maternal Legacy” 243; Fleenor 27). Therefore, while Kincaid continues in the tradition of Brontë and Rhys’ fragmented, haunted female subjects, the origin of this fragmentation in her novels is neither emotional repression nor entrapment in the no-man’s-land at the interstices of

black/white and colony/metropole, but rather the ever-present history of colonial subjugation and its power to deform the present, as represented by the mother-daughter relationship. The novels' gothic qualities, in other words, are tied to threat the mother poses to her daughter's identity.

The gothic mode of *Lucy* and *Autobiography*, however, differs from that of Brontë and Rhys' novels. Kincaid distinguishes herself from her predecessors through an emphasis on the body, highlighting all that is repugnant and grotesque (in one memorable episode, Xuela uses her hand, rather than a surgical instrument, to abort her sister's child). Because of this emphasis on the body, Kincaid's style of Gothic could be characterized as horror, rather than terror. The latter, used in the previous chapter to describe the nightmarish quality of Anna and Antoinette's psychoses, implies the suspended fear of something obscured and intangible. Horror, by contrast, is more visceral, a disgusted response provoked by a material object. Kincaid's use of horror is significant because since Radcliffe it is terror, not horror, which has been associated with the Female Gothic.

Radcliffe assisted in the creation of this dichotomy by advocating for the supremacy of terror, which she relates to the sublime. Her partiality notwithstanding, her articulation of the horror/terror distinction is useful in order to understand the nature of Kincaid's adaptation of the Female Gothic. In the essay "On the Supernatural in Poetry" Radcliffe writes:

Terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them...where lies the great difference between terror and horror, but in the uncertainty and obscurity, that accompany the first, respecting the dreaded evil? (qtd. in McKillop 357)

For Radcliffe, terror functions by suggestion, rather than through overt representation. As one commentator on Radcliffe's distinction between these strains of the Gothic writes, "the difference between Terror and Horror is the difference between an awful apprehension and sickening realization: between the smell of death and stumbling against a corpse" (Varma 130). Horror is the domain of scandalous *male* writers like Matthew Lewis, whose novel *The Monk* resorts to "an exact portrayal of the physically horrible and revolting" (130). Radcliffe avoids this sort of direct description: in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, for example, she does not describe what it is under a black veil that causes the heroine to faint. Instead, Radcliffe lets the reader assume that it was a corpse for many pages before revealing the truth (it was a highly realistic wax figure—again, the suggestion of death, not its actual embodiment). Although horror is thus associated with male gothic writers, Kincaid uses gruesome depictions of the body—especially the female body—as an entryway into the Female Gothic's preoccupations with the omnipresent, omnipotent mother and female identity. Her deployment of horror, in other words, is compatible with the Radcliffian tradition to which she is tethered by Rhys and Brontë.

Lucy and *Autobiography* are therefore gothic novels in which Kincaid approaches Caribbean female identity through the horrors of the mother-daughter relationship. Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject will prove useful to examine this dynamic, offering a psychoanalytic interpretation of the interrelation of identity, horror, and the maternal.

Kristeva's ideas about the way that the self is created by the exclusion of certain threatening and unclassifiable elements are particularly useful for determining how identity is constructed and deconstructed in these novels. According to Kristeva

in *Powers of Horror* (1982), abjection—the “process of jettisoning of what seems to be part of oneself”—is a crucial step in the formation of subjectivity, as it establishes the borders of the self by expelling that which threatens it (McAfee 46). In her account of the abject, we instinctively feel revolted by feces, vomit, corpses, and above all, the mother, because they threaten the integrity of the boundaries of the self.

Importantly, abjection in Kincaid’s novels has a social dimension, for the threatening maternal figure is associated not only with the individual heroine’s past, but with Caribbean history. For this reason, the abject provides a useful lens through which to understand the role of the gothic past in these novels: Kristeva’s formulation of the abject captures how the past, expressed in Kincaid via the looming presence of the mother, poses an immense threat to both national and personal identity. Furthermore, the contrast between Lucy’s rejection of her mother and Xuela’s longing for hers, demonstrates a shift that occurs between these two novels in Kincaid’s depiction of the relationship between female Caribbean identity and colonial history.

Yet for Lucy and Xuela, abjection does not lead to a purely negative, paralyzing state, but to one of great creative potential. Lucy and Xuela’s creativity (used here in the broadest sense of the term) is grounded in their abjection. That is, it is at the moments when they come closest to confronting the maternal past, the moments when their identities seem about to disintegrate, that they discover their creative ability. They find a creative power in this confrontation, for in demanding that they constantly grapple with the past, abjection unlocks their capacity to recreate themselves and their world. This process is *re-creative* because their development is cyclical, not linear: Lucy and Xuela never definitively escape from the past’s hold

over them, but continue to grapple with the Caribbean as a site of the abject that fuels their own creative abilities. Like Rhys, Kincaid explores Glissant's notion of a new form of creolized identity that arises out of historical conditions particular to the Caribbean. However, Kincaid genders his model of the Caribbean as a troubled yet productive site of a new form of identity, suggesting that there is a dimension of Caribbean history whose effects are felt by and transmitted through women.

But what is Kristeva's concept of the abject and how does it apply to these novels? The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the adjective "abject," (from the verb meaning to cast out, reject, or expel), with synonyms like "despicable, wretched, self-abasing," "downtrodden, desperate," and "outcast." Kristeva's interpretation of the abject and abjection is more precise. Working in the psychoanalytic tradition, Kristeva argues that what we think of as abject (that which is wretched, outcast, despicable) is tied to a particular stage of psychological development. In *Powers of Horror*, she argues that the abject refers to that which provokes the revulsion one feels when faced with the threat of "meaninglessness" caused by the collapse of fundamental binaries such as human/animal, subject/object, self/other, and inside/outside (2). The abject is what must be excluded in order to make possible these kinds of order: she lists corpses, excrement, and other bodily fluids as examples of "death infecting life," elements that "*show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live" (4, 3, emphasis in original).¹² In short, the abject "disturbs identity,

¹² Xuela's stepbrother's body exemplifies the abject corpse: "Before he died, from his body came a river of pus. Just as he died, a large brown worm crawled out of his left leg... They became inseparable then, my brother and the worm that emerged from his body just as he died" (*Autobiography* 111). Note the breakdown between human/animal and inside/outside signified by the worm and the pus.

system, order” (4). Abjection, as the *process* of expelling the abject, “manifests itself as both physical nausea and Sartrean existential nausea” that recalls the “sickening experience of entrapment at the border between identity and non-identity” (Hurley 144). Since a central part of Kristeva’s focus is on abjection as a stage of psychosexual development, she argues that what must be banished, aside from bodily fluids or the corpse, is the “maternal entity” (13). Although this is a fraught process, a “violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling,” separating from one’s mother is necessary in order to establish the borders of the space within which one’s identity can be formed (13). Abjection, for Kristeva, is never finalized: the abject always lingers at the margins of identity, fascinating as much as it repels. The abject, in her words, is a “vortex of summons and repulsion [that] places the one haunted by it literally beside himself” (1).

Kristeva’s account of the maternal abject is illustrated by the mother-daughter dynamics in *Lucy* and *Autobiography*: the more the protagonists are drawn to their mothers, the more they lose their sense of identity. Lucy, for example, wishes to escape her mother’s stifling presence out of fear that she will become a mere “echo” of the woman (*Lucy* 36). Since she cherishes individuality (she claims she “would rather be dead than become just an echo of someone”), she tries to deny her mother’s hold over her—to expel the abject element that threatens her fragile sense of self. For this reason she migrates to America, fleeing a mother who “would have been mystified as to how someone who came from *inside her* would want to be anyone different from her” (*Lucy* 30, my emphasis). Lucy’s emphasis on the maternal womb is important because it suggests the breakdown between inner/outer and self/(m)other

that characterizes abjection. Lucy flees a mother who threatens to engulf her, to re-absorb her “inside” the maternal body. Nevertheless, her refusal to reply to her mother’s many letters testifies to a bond whose intensity borders on the romantic: she desires to “burn them [the letters] at the four corners and send them back to her unread...an act, [she] had read somewhere, of one lover rejecting another” (91). Yet she feels that if she read the letters, she “would die from longing for her [mother]” (91). Lucy is caught between longing and fear, echoing Kristeva’s description of the abject as that which “simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject” (5).

As Kristeva describes, Lucy’s sense of self is “annihilate[d]” by her encounter with the abject mother (2). When her cousin confronts her about answering her mother’s letters, Lucy comes psychologically and physically undone:

My head ached, my eyes ached, my mouth was dry but I could not swallow, my throat ached, inside my ears was the sound of waves wanting to break free but only dashing against a wall of rocks. I could not cry. I could not speak. I was trying to get the muscles in my face to do what I wanted them to do, trying to gain control over myself. (*Lucy* 123)

Her self is dissolved into a fluid sea and thrown into flux, striving to destroy the barriers (imagined as a “wall of rocks”) that delimits it. In this moment of abjection, she is transported to the moment before she rejected her mother, to a state before her subjectivity had coalesced, and even to an infantile physical state in which she cannot control her body. Lucy, aware that she is about to “break apart” (in Kristeva’s terms, be “pulverize[d]”), only saves herself by aggressively denying her cousin’s mocking suggestion that she and her mother are alike (*Lucy* 122; Kristeva 5). While she once again distances herself from her mother, the latter haunts her, remaining “something rejected from which one does not part” (Kristeva 4).

Midway through the novel, Lucy is thus left to realize that her effort to separate herself from her mother by migrating has failed: “I had spent so much time saying I did not want to be like my mother that I missed the whole story: I was not like my mother—I was my mother” (*Lucy* 90). This crisis triggers a relapse in the form of “violent headaches, exactly like the ones that used to afflict [her] mother” (93). These headaches are another expression of her mother’s absolute power over her: “they frightened me because they reminded me of my mother...when I suffered from these same headaches that no medicine would send away, I would see her face before me, a face that was godlike” (93-94). Lucy then decides to live up to her self-assigned namesake—Lucifer—and cast herself away from everything her mother stands for in an effort to escape her godlike power.

Lucy’s attempt at distancing herself from her mother takes the form of reinventing herself as a sexually liberated woman and artist, behavior that would have horrified her mother’s Victorian sensibilities. She does this by beginning a relationship with an artist named Paul. However, Lucy soon finds that this is an imperfect solution, for two reasons. Firstly, it requires that she perform the role of the exotic black woman, a “woman on whom not long ago [she] would have heaped scorn,” by allowing Paul to marvel at her hair and compare her to the exotic plants in his apartment (*Lucy* 100). More importantly, Lucy finds that this relationship is defined by the same possessive desire she found unbearable coming from her mother, and decides to end the relationship when she surmises from a photograph Paul has taken of her that “he got the idea he possessed [her] in a certain way” (155). Her mother’s suffocating love has tainted Lucy’s every relationship, whether familial or romantic. In other words, Lucy’s relationship with Paul has become another form of

the possessive relationship she has with her mother. Lucy's attempt at sexual liberation through Paul is therefore unfulfilling because it recreates the destructive relationship she is fleeing, if in an attenuated way. Her mother's threatening presence has infected every aspect of her life, pursuing Lucy across the globe and undermining what she thought would be a fresh start.

In contrast, Xuela embraces the disintegration of identity that accompanies the desire to fuse with her mother. Unlike Lucy, of course, Xuela is separated from her mother by more than geography, as *Autobiography*'s opening sentence makes clear: "My mother died at the moment I was born, and so for my whole life there was nothing standing between myself and eternity" (3). Xuela is constantly looking over her shoulder for her missing mother, "looking for that face, the face I would never see," never ceasing to resent the "confusion of who is who, flesh and flesh" between mother and child that she was denied (5, 199). She achieves a measure of closeness to this absent figure by identifying her mother—and crucially, her mother's people, the Caribs—with Dominica itself. Through her identification with the natural world, Xuela is able to reach her mother and experience abjection.

When reminded by her elementary school teacher that her mother was a Carib, Xuela segues into a meditation on the natural world in which the embrace of the Dominican landscape stands in for that of her mother. Dominica becomes a maternal presence: "both a mystery to [her] and the source of much pleasure," its "face of a gray sky...following [her] to school," the sound of falling cedar flowers that of "a soft kiss" (*Autobiography* 17). The island itself becomes the medium through which Xuela attempts to commune with her lost mother (in this way, she recalls Antoinette and her relationship to Granbois). After sinking into the world around her "as if it

were a pile of feathers,” Xuela sees her mother “come down a ladder,” dressed in a ghostly “long white gown” (18). It is therefore through her closeness to the natural world that Xuela conjures up the haunting maternal presence.

Xuela’s desire to be united with her mother nevertheless precipitates the aspects of abjection that Lucy tries her best to avoid, first and foremost the disintegration of her identity. At the end of the novel, having moved into the Dominican mountains “where [her] mother and the people she was of were born,” Xuela rejects the divisions between self and (m)other, claiming that “this account of my life has been an account of my mother’s life as much as it has been an account of mine...In me is the voice I never heard, the face I never saw, the being I came from” (*Autobiography* 206, 227). The novel’s title signals Xuela’s embrace of abjection: the contradiction inherent in writing an autobiography of one’s mother suggests her rejection of any separation between the two.

The disintegration of Xuela’s identity via her willing abjection is reflected in the gothic nature of her world, much like the collapse of Anna Morgan’s identity was reflected in gothic London. In *Autobiography*, however, Dominica is not characterized by the collapse of public/private by but various manifestations of the abject, each of which blurs the distinction between life/death, inner/outer, and self/other. The novel gathers together all of the examples Kristeva offers of the abject: broken limbs, scarred skin, blood, pus, saliva, rotting corpses, and even cannibalism (the consumption of one human body by another) appear in disturbing detail. In Xuela’s Dominica, humans are transformed into zombies by the degradation of their circumstances. Such is the case of the cruelly named Lazarus, a poor gravedigger whose “living death” renders him “a living carcass” that “smell[s] like something

rotten” (*Autobiography* 140, 141). Yet even the richest are hounded by the abject, flies constantly buzzing around their mouths as if in anticipation of death. Xuela’s stepbrother, for example, heir to her father’s wealth, dies in agony, his body “covered with small sores, his entire being not dead, not alive” (109). The manner in which his body is rendered abject, his flesh “vanish[ing] as if devoured by an invisible being,” mirrors how the abject consumes Dominica (109).

The supernatural power of obeah, whose role is similar to that in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, is also associated with the abject. In one instance, Xuela explains how the unlikely marriage between her employers, Madame and Monsieur LaBatte, took place with obeah’s help: “she [Madame LaBatte] fed him food she had cooked in a sauce made up of her own menstrual blood, which bound him to her” (65). Menstrual blood, like excrement, is a kind of “defilement,” a source of anxiety that “life withstands, hardly and with difficulty,” as indicated by the frequency of purification rituals surrounding menstruation (Kristeva 3). Madame LaBatte’s use of it in a love potion suggests it as an example of the abject in its power to attract and overwhelm. The elements that make *Autobiography* a recognizably gothic novel—its grotesque bodies, zombies, and obeah—are in this way incarnations of the abject that Xuela has welcomed into her life by consciously effacing the boundaries of her self in her longing for an absent mother.

Though Kincaid deploys fewer gothic conventions in *Lucy*, this novel’s gothic elements are also tied to the abjection triggered by the protagonist’s mother. In the moments that Lucy succumbs to the abject mother, her vision of the world resembles Xuela’s. For example, when she realizes that she is cajoling one of her young charges in the same way her mother did her, it is as if a veil has been stripped back from the

scene to show its true ghastly nature. She looks up at Mariah, the image of the immaculate housewife, and sees her transformed into a skeletal wraith, a “hollow old woman, all the blood drained out of her face, her bony nose bonier than ever, her mouth collapsed as if all the muscles had been removed, as if it would never break out in a smile again” (*Lucy* 46). Similarly, one of Lucy’s recurring dreams about her mother precedes an insight into the collapse of Mariah’s marriage. After dreaming of “a present . . . wrapped in one of [her] mother’s beautiful madras head-kerchiefs” Lucy looks at Mariah’s family and knows she is “looking at ruins,” equating the family to a gothic castle prior to its fall (88). Pulled back toward her mother, Lucy is caught in a world that resembles Xuela’s waking nightmare in its emphasis on the dead and the decayed, even though, unlike Xuela, she does not embrace abjection.

The full importance of the contrast between Lucy and Xuela’s respective rejection and embrace of their mothers is illuminated by the connection Kincaid draws between the figure of the mother and Caribbean history. Whether overbearing or absent, the mothers in *Lucy* and *Autobiography* represent more than the protagonists’ personal history. In *Lucy*, as in *Autobiography*, the mother becomes the symbol of a history of crimes—colonial mimicry, for Lucy, genocide, for Xuela—that insistently haunt the protagonists. The maternal in these novels is thus a matrix in which mother, motherland, and past cannot be disentangled. This fusion of personal and social history is central to both *Lucy* and *Autobiography*, for it adds a historical and social resonance to their abjection: it is not just the mother that challenges the boundaries of their identity, but the past and all its horrors.

In *Lucy*, the mother is associated with a past of colonial mimicry. Like Xuela’s father, Lucy’s mother is a colonial mimic who has internalized Victorian

attitudes about female sexuality as well as the colonial hierarchy that consigns her daughter, as a woman of color, to servitude. One example of her adoption of British values is the way that she discusses female sexuality and abortion. Kincaid uses these topics, which are clearly linked, as an entryway into obeah, the world of female knowledge capable of subverting patriarchal and colonial control of the female body. Though Lucy's mother recalls Xuela in that she knows which herbs will induce abortion, her manner of transmitting this knowledge to her daughter performs a charade of Western "civility." Instead of embracing obeah and its abortifacients as a necessary, even empowering, part of an active sexual life, Lucy's mother refuses to acknowledge the real purpose behind teaching her daughter "which herbs to pick and boil, and what time of day to drink the potion they produced, to bring on a reluctant period" (*Lucy* 69). She diminishes obeah with the excuse that she is showing Lucy a way of "strengthening the womb," though both are fully aware "that a weak womb was not the cause of a missed period" (70). This pretense conforms to the mother's desire for a veneer of social propriety, culminating in the fact that the two "curtsy to each other at the end" (70). Obeah, a form of resistance to the colonial patriarchy, has become unspeakable, along with the specter of female sexuality that it raises.

Even more damagingly, Lucy's mother betrays her daughter by sharing the desires of patriarchal colonial society that relegates women of color to the lowest rungs of society. The roots of this betrayal are seeded by the birth of Lucy's three younger brothers. When each of these children are born, Lucy's parents "announced to each other with great seriousness that the new child would go to university in England and study to become a doctor or lawyer or someone who would occupy an important and influential position in society" (*Lucy* 130). Convinced as a child that

she is “identical” to her mother, Lucy feels “a sword go through [her] heart” at the realization that, their closeness notwithstanding, “there was no accompanying scenario in which she saw me, her only identical offspring, in a remotely similar situation” (130). Significantly, the only positive maternal figure in Lucy’s life is her grandmother, a Carib Indian who is “the person [Lucy] liked best in all the world” (7). By linking herself to her grandmother, Lucy valorizes her connection to a pre-colonial past over her mother’s assimilation to colonial system that subjugates women of color.

Autobiography also associates Xuela’s mother with colonial crimes, this time with the genocide that decimated Dominica’s native population. Xuela characterizes the remaining Caribs, of which her mother was a member, as historical artifacts: “they were extinct...like living fossils, they belonged in a museum, on a shelf, enclosed in a glass case” (*Autobiography* 198). Xuela’s Carib mother thus becomes the symbol of an extinguished people whose genocide remains “something no one could bring herself to mention” (88). She serves, in other words, as a reminder of a historical event that many would like to forget: the abject mother and the abject event—genocide—are collapsed into each other. Xuela’s mother is the ghost of an atrocity whose memory haunts the island, whose memory her daughter tries to save from the “great yawn of nothingness” (198).

In Kincaid’s novels, the Caribbean is thus rendered a site of abjection, a gothic world where the maternal past continually threatens the possibility of a unified, discrete identity. The gothic, haunted nature of Kincaid’s Caribbean is distinctly feminine, as it is through the mother-daughter relationship that the horrors of the past are transmitted in a way that disrupts the self. In a sense, Kincaid could be seen as

gendering Glissant's concept of Caribbean history as the catalyst for a new form of identity based on relation rather than rootedness, for it is through their mothers that the protagonists (willingly or otherwise) are able to confront their past.

Yet for all its gothic effects, the abjection both Lucy and Xuela endure enables their creative abilities. Only for Lucy, however, does artistic creation offer a possible exit from the perpetual cycles of abjection, by enabling an individualist escape from "History" and its horrors. Lucy conceives of her artistic ability as a heightened form of perception—like Xuela (as well as many gothic novelists) she is interested in challenging realist portrayals of the world. Fittingly, the art she gravitates toward is that which undermines conventional forms of visual representation. This is what she admires about Paul's paintings, for example: "none of the paintings was straightforward; instead, the people all looked like their reflections in a pool whose surface had just been disturbed. The colors were strange—not the colors any real person would be" (*Lucy* 97). For Lucy, however, the ability to see "some of the things [she] had not seen," to see beyond the surface of reality, is tied to the moments at which she experiences abjection, as demonstrated by her vision of Mariah as a skeleton, or of Mariah's family as ruins. Abjection affects her view of the world, enabling her to see beyond the prosaic surface of reality.

The notebook Mariah gives Lucy exemplifies the connection between abjection and Lucy's artistic abilities. In addition to being the gift of a surrogate mother figure, the notebook also evokes the maternal body, its cover "dyed blood red" and its pages "white and smooth like milk" (*Lucy* 162). Mariah gives Lucy the notebook so that she can begin her new vocation, which Lucy promptly does by writing her full name on the first page along with the phrase "I wish I could love

someone so much that I could die from it” (164). This desire for a love affair recalls the one she has already experienced with her mother, who she claims to have repudiated. Her attraction to the abject mother once again undoes her: Lucy starts crying, and her tears dissolve the words she has written into “one great big blur” (164). Her first act of artistic creation is thus to long for her mother, at the risk of effacing the new identity symbolized by her name in the diary. Yet artistic creation here occurs on a material symbol of the mother’s body, indicating that while abjection hinders Lucy’s quest to be an individual, it is simultaneously the material on which and of which she will write. Her artistic vision of the world is not only grounded in abjection, but will be recorded upon the symbol of the abject mother’s body.

Lucy’s artistic abilities are thus tied to abjection. Nevertheless, the novel suggests that her rebirth as an artist enables her to resist the abject forces represented by her mother and colonial history. Though not always successful, Lucy strives to transcend her recurrent abjection by emulating the artists she learns about from Paul’s parties and from museums. She imagines artists as perpetual outsiders, individuals isolated from all forms of human connection whose position “allowed for irresponsibility,” and declares that she wants to “to be with the people who stand apart” (*Lucy* 99). When Mariah takes her see the works of an unidentified famous painter, Lucy immediately identifies with his decision to leave a “comfortable life with his wife and children” for “the opposite part of the world” (95).¹³ In this painter, she sees kindred soul, a “hero,” who, like her, found his birthplace to be “an unbearable prison,” and so “rebell[ed] against an established order he had found corrupt...even though he was doomed to defeat” (95). Lucy too wishes to escape her

past, though her success is similarly uncertain. Deeply affected by the painter, she strives to model her new self upon the figure of the individualistic, nonconformist artist he represents to her.

Inspired by this artist, Lucy approaches her future as “a book of blank pages” (*Lucy* 163). Her life becomes an artistic project: “I understood that I was inventing myself, and that I was doing this more in the way of a painter than in the way of a scientist” (134). Her only tools, she claims, are “memory,” “anger,” and “despair” (134). The past is here the catalyst for her rebirth as an artist, that which enables her to renegotiate the boundaries of her identity even while threatening it. Yet unlike Glissant’s creolized identity, which is founded on a multiplicity of relations with others, Lucy’s is highly individualistic, as it depends on alienating herself from all forms of social interconnection. Like the painter she so admired, she feels distanced from her surroundings, looking out the window of her new apartment only to find that “everything I could see made me feel I would never be part of it, never penetrate to the inside, never be taken in” (154). Though she cannot emigrate again, she begins to end all her close relationships: leaving Mariah, distancing herself from Paul, and even acting coldly toward Peggy, her best friend and roommate. At the end of the novel it is unclear how successful Lucy will be in her endeavor: her struggle to become a new person is also one that cuts her off from the rest of the world.

Autobiography, by contrast, is a more socially minded novel, one that deepens the social dimension of the abject as part of its critique of unified identity. It is also a more pessimistic one, focusing instead on the need for to grapple with the past.

¹³ The artist in question is implied to be Paul Gauguin, both due to the biographical details Lucy mentions and because the novel’s cover features one of his paintings.

Lucy's individualism is not possible for Xuela, who demands a confrontation with the abject maternal past as a means of exposing how Dominica and its people have been defined as the abject by the colonial system. Kincaid's imbrication of the abject mother, abject history, and the Dominican people is exemplified in one of *Autobiography's* key episodes, in which Xuela recalls seeing a supernatural being lure a classmate to his death. While crossing a river on the way to school, she and her classmates spot a naked woman standing in the mouth of the river surrounded by mangoes whose "shades of red, pink, and yellow were tantalizing and mouth watering" (*Autobiography* 35). Mesmerized, one of her classmates swims out to her; the woman remains frustratingly out of reach, and he drowns. Reflecting on the event, Xuela concludes that this mysterious river woman was in fact "a something that took the shape of a woman" (37). Unlike her classmates, she refuses to dismiss what she saw:

...they no longer believe what they saw with their own eyes, or in their own reality. This is no longer without an explanation to me. Everything about us is held in doubt and we the defeated define all that is unreal, all that is not human...Our experience cannot be interpreted by us; we do not know the truth of it. (37)

She continues:

Belief in that apparition of a naked woman with outstretched arms beckoning a small boy to his death was the belief of the illegitimate, the poor, the low. I believed in that apparition then and I believe in it now. (38)

Xuela's description of this encounter identifies her community as the abject element that the rest of the world exploits in order to define themselves. In other words, when the "vanquished" are labeled "not human," space is cleared for those who are (215, 37). Her community is stripped of any positive meaning, and their experiences are excluded from the realm of "human" life. Because of this, Xuela's people are

deprived of the ability to make intelligible claims about the “reality of [the] terror of their world” (37).

That Dominica’s people are defined as “abject” is also revealed by the perceived differences between the two languages they speak—English and Creole (what Xuela calls “French patois”). Xuela mentions that she speaks the island’s colloquial tongue in defiance of the assumption that it is “the made-up language of a people regarded as not real—the shadow people, the forever humiliated, the forever low” (49).¹⁴ In other words, this language is not considered a valid form of expression, its content notwithstanding. It is therefore telling that Xuela, who is fluent in both English and French patois, calls the latter the “language of [her] thoughts,” as this reflects both her defiance of her colonial education’s ability to shape her inner self and her understanding that this self is worth nothing in the eyes of the world (219). In this way, Xuela portrays herself as part of a people who have been defined as the abject, that which cannot peacefully coexist with ordered, rational civilization and must thus be restricted to its fringes.

This river-woman incident also indicates that Xuela’s classmates, and colonized Dominican subjects more broadly, have internalized their characterization as the abject by refusing to recognize anything that might disrupt the rationalized colonial order, even when it presents itself in a motherly guise. Xuela portrays the river-woman as an image of the beauty maligned by white colonizers, describing her as “beautiful in a way that made sense to us, not a European way: she was dark brown

¹⁴ Rather than a dialect of French, the Antillean Creole spoken on Dominica is a language in its own right. It is noteworthy that Xuela diminishes her language’s uniqueness in this way, since many Caribbean writers and intellectuals, especially those of the Créolité movement, have called for the use of Creole—rather than English, French, or Spanish—to create a more authentic Caribbean literature.

in skin, her hair was black and shiny...her face like a moon, a soft, brown, glistening moon” (*Autobiography* 35). The overtones of a fertility figure are transformed into maternal ones when Xuela compares the river-woman’s apparition to “an act of faith, like the Virgin Birth” (37). More than a refusal of the white femininity that the children have been taught to idealize, the river-woman takes the place of the Virgin Mary, the venerated mother of Christian theology. Yet this maternal presence is one whose reality Xuela’s classmates cannot bring themselves to accept, just as they cannot speak of the Carib genocide. As Xuela notes, this refusal to confront their history results in a place like Roseau, where “the reality of every situation was so horrible that it had to be disguised and called something else,” and she derides the fact that this city is called the “capital” of Dominica, as though it were a “center of commerce and culture” and not an “outpost of despair” (61). The river woman is thus an example of a neglected cultural touchstone that would disrupt the façade of colonial order, if only its witnesses acknowledged it as such.

Yet notwithstanding her embrace of the abject and its subversive potential, Xuela is extremely pessimistic about the possibility of changing the reigning social order. In fact, her desire to move closer and closer to her mother, and thus farther and farther into the past, exemplifies *Autobiography*’s fatalistic attitude toward the possibility of escaping the cycle of abjection. Xuela’s marriage to Philip, a white man, illustrates this refusal on her part to imagine escaping from the tyranny of history. She describes their marriage as “a kind of tragedy, a kind of defeat” that traps the pair in the very dynamic of vanquisher/vanquished of whose legacy they “were weary” (*Autobiography* 212, 221). As she realizes her desire to “be a part of anything

that is outside history” will never be fulfilled, Xuela contents herself with a form of “revenge” that seems to punish her as much as it does Philip (218, 216).

Xuela’s nihilism reflects Rhys at her bleakest, in that both profess extreme pessimism about the possibility of communicating across racial lines, and more broadly, of imagining social relations not deformed by the ghosts of colonialism. Xuela’s marriage to Philip in this way echoes the relationships between white creole women and their black caretakers in Rhys’ novels: the former long to be accepted by the latter, but are always denied entrance into their world. In *Autobiography*, Xuela suppresses the compassion she feels for her husband, though she admits she is “capable... of making his suffering real to [her]self,” instead seeking revenge for the “past he had inherited” (219). She refuses to act as the medium through which “great acts of transgression [are] followed by profound redemption” by “block[ing] his entrance into the world in which we lived” (215, 224). Xuela does this by thwarting his various attempts to gain knowledge about the island: when Philip collects and identifies reptiles, she surreptitiously switches the animals from one terrarium to another; similarly, when he asks her to translate patois, she purposefully omits or obscures what was said (224). In this way, she ensures that the island “would always remain strange to him,” asserting her right to identify with Dominica over his and exiling him to the limbo Anna and Antoinette inhabit (218). There is no escape for Xuela and her husband: she refers to Philip as “all the children [she] did not allow to be born,” suggesting that they are a couple that reproduces not children, but their home’s tortured history of white/black, conqueror/conquered antagonism.

As Paravisini-Gerbert has astutely noted, while *Autobiography* “uses various characters as examples of the colonial ‘conditions’ outlined by Fanon,” Xuela

diverges from Fanonian thought by “reject[ing] political action as a path to liberation,” leaving her “unable—unwilling, perhaps—to look beyond her anger to a future of transcendence through violent revolution, prompting instead the question of whether the societies of the Caribbean, like Xuela, are damaged beyond repair” (163). For Xuela, the narratives of liberation, like those of redemption (another target of hers), are themselves transgressions that diminish the magnitude of colonialism’s evils. Both imply a self-guided reckoning with the past that merely reestablishes the colonizer’s right to impose his or her will on the world.

Along with her rejection of liberation and redemption, Xuela rejects the essentialist national or racial identities bound up in the Western colonial project. Unlike Philip, who “believed in a race” and in “a nation” Xuela refuses both: “I refused to belong to a race, I refused to accept a nation...the crime of these identities...I do not have the courage to bear” (225, 226). More than *Lucy*, *Autobiography* incorporates Glissant’s notion of an anti-essentialist identity based on relation, rather than rootedness. However, like Rhys, Kincaid does not view this identity as capable of transcending the colonial condition out of which it was born. Through Xuela, she critiques unified, rooted identity, but does not put forth this character as a positive alternative. After denying to be categorized by her race or nationality, Xuela asks, “am I nothing, then? I do not believe so, but if nothing is a condemnation, then I would love to be condemned” (226). Xuela’s “nothing” recalls the way she defined herself and her fellow black Dominicans as the abject during the river-woman episode: they are the “nothing” in contrast to which white, Western individuals are “somethings” who are accorded meaning and value. They are that which is cast off (“condemned”) and whose very status as such reveals the “crime[s]”

of the society that marginalizes them. Xuela's identification as "nothing" and "condemned" is therefore an indictment of colonial society and its assumptions about the self: in defiantly identifying herself and her people with the abject, Xuela claims their role as that which pulls their oppressors "toward the place where meaning collapses," where they would confront the horrible reality that capable of annihilating their own self-understanding (Kristeva 2).

Xuela's misery and anger, as well as the grotesquely warped self-understanding they create, are thus not without a purpose. While she is not explicitly an artist, as Lucy strives to be, she is nevertheless the creator of her own narrative. She opens herself to the destabilizing past, trading in a stable identity for the ability to speak of her situation in powerful terms. In other words, she sacrifices her sense of identity for a specific goal: the power of the "conquered" to speak of "the past such that in [her] defeat lies the beginning of [her] great revenge" (*Autobiography* 215, 216). The impossible desire to reunite with her mother and her past, to serve as the vessel of their resurrection, is an imaginative project that enables her to glimpse what has been left out of the official "volumes" in which the conquerors codified their history (132). This imaginative project gives Xuela a godlike power of judgment over history: she appoints herself the "designated crier" who will remind the colonizer of his or her sins:

...to confess your bad deeds is also at once to forgive yourself, and so silence becomes the only form of self-punishment: to live forever locked up in an iron cage made of your own silence, and then, from time to time, to have this silence broken by a designated crier, someone who repeats over and over, in broken or complete sentences, a list of the violations, the bad deeds committed. (60)

Xuela seizes this right for herself and crafts a lengthy response to the novel's driving question: "what makes the world turn against me and all who look like me?" (132). Her project, and that of the novel, echoes Glissant when he writes that "no imagination helps avert destitution in reality, none can oppose oppressions or sustain those who 'withstand' in body or spirit. But imagination changes mentalities, however slowly it may go about this" (*Poetics of Relation* 183). *Autobiography* is an imaginative exercise of this order, one that works to destabilize Western constructions of the self.

Lucy and Xuela's confrontations with their mothers and their history results in the boundaries of their selves being subject to continual renegotiation, an unending process mirrored in the novels' unresolved, almost unfinished, endings. The reader is not left with a definite sense of the character's trajectory, but only with the knowledge that they will continue to grapple with the past. The conflicts driving their narratives, in other words, are not resolved, neither woman transcending the difficulties facing them—Lucy never manages to separate herself definitively from her mother, Xuela never manages to reunite with hers. They are still prey, as Kristeva puts it, to "the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling" (13).

This creates a certain level of dissatisfaction in the reader, but one that calls attention to the productive powers of horror and the way that creativity—not to mention creative women—are born out of this confrontation with the Caribbean's gothic past. This dissatisfaction serves another purpose as well. In depicting the abject, these novels become abject elements of their own in relation to the reader, forcing her to consider that which she—and more broadly her society—has cast off.

These gothic novels are in this sense as much a direct address to the reader as *A Small Place* (1988), Kincaid's polemic against the neocolonialist tourist industry's exploitation of Antigua, which is written entirely in the second person. In *A Small Place*, the narrator describes the resentment Antiguan feel toward tourists by saying that "they [the Antiguan] envy your [the tourist's] ability to turn their own banality and boredom into a source of pleasure" (19). Gothic literature, especially that set in the colonial world, is often guilty of this: it transforms ordinary human lives into the otherworldly, the disturbing, and the unknown. Instead of seeing their lives as human, it renders them the "other" or the "object" as part of an "aesthetic of pleasurable fear" that brings excitement into the tranquil homes of expectant readers (*The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* 10). The final lines of *A Small Place* suggest that in *Lucy* and *Autobiography* Kincaid turns this aspect of the genre on its head. Concerning the legacy of slavery in Antigua she writes:

Of course, the whole thing is, once you cease to be a master, once you throw off your master's yoke, you are no longer human rubbish, you are just a human being, and all the things that adds up to. So, too, with the slaves. Once they are no longer slaves, once they are free, they are no longer noble and exalted; they are just human beings. (*A Small Place* 81)

In revealing how her subjects are constructed as the object in horrifying detail, rather than simply reproducing their representation as such, Kincaid confronts the reader with a notion that is perhaps more destabilizing than the unknowable terrors haunting ideologically conservative Gothic fiction. Caribbean subjects, in her version of the Gothic, are neither "rubbish," nor "exalted," but—like the reader—"just human beings" (81). By problematizing who is defined as the object, Kincaid demands that the reader, like Lucy and Xuela, reconsider the boundaries of her own identity and confront the horrors of her world—horrors that she may have helped create.

“The Promise of a Cereus-Scented Breeze”: Gothic Pasts and Queer Futures in Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*

For all her radicalism, Xuela’s understanding of gender is quite regressive. Defining her womanhood, she claims, is easy: “two breasts, a small opening between my legs, one womb; it never varies and they are always in the same place” (*Autobiography* 159). Though the genre has an undeniable conservative streak, gothic fiction often problematizes this kind of gender essentialism in order to disquiet its readers. In *Lesbian Gothic: Transgressive Fictions*, which traces the development of lesbian gothic fiction from the 1970s to 1990s, Paulina Palmer writes that “Gothic and ‘queer’ share a common emphasis on transgressive acts and subjectivities” (8). As its cast of monsters attests, the targets of Gothic fiction have conventionally been oppositions between masculine/feminine, self/Other, white/black, alive/dead, and civilized/primitive. The most recognizable creatures of the genre straddle these divides: the vampire is an undead being whose insatiable bloodlust evokes uncontrollable sexuality, the zombie, a soulless corpse that refuses to die. To this list we could add Bertha Mason, the infamous madwoman in the attic who haunts Caribbean writers appropriating the gothic mode. She exemplifies the expression of fears surrounding cultural, racial, and sexual transgression, for she cannot be categorized: she is between white and black, Caribbean and European, human and beast, mad and sane.

Similarly, queer fiction and theory interrogate the norms regulating sex and gender identity by unpacking binaries like heterosexual/homosexual, male/female, natural/perverse, and center/margin. While, like the Gothic, the queer cannot be reduced to a single definition, one entry point is Sedgwick’s explanation that queer

indicates “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances, and resonances, lapses, and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t be* made) to signify monolithically” (“Queer and Now” 8, emphasis hers).¹⁵ In this usage, “queer” individuals are those whose sexuality is not directed toward the opposite sex, or those whose biological sex does not correspond to their gender. While the Gothic and the queer share an interest in the failure of dichotomous categories to capture the diversity of human identity, this does not mean that their ideological projects are necessarily compatible. As Palmer writes,

While challenging conventions of realism and exposing the fragility of the *status quo* by focusing on dimensions of existence that transcend the everyday reality that realist texts tend to ignore, [the Gothic] is not necessarily politically subversive. Gothic fiction and film...often encode a reactionary value system that conflicts with or undermines the radical potential of the genre. (9)

Queer writers, whose aim is to often debunk the notion that aberrance from the norm is necessarily to be feared, must tread carefully when adapting a genre that often equates the transgressive with the monstrous. For Palmer, this occurs via solely parodic re-appropriation of Gothic conventions like the witch or the vampire.

Leaving aside Palmer’s parodic examples, it is possible for queer gothic fiction to find a degree of transformative potential in the gothic mode, transcending its binaries altogether, or will it merely reestablish them? Can the writer of a queer gothic text avoid the conventions that often portray deviance as something to be feared? The issue is compounded in a Caribbean context, as the writer must respond to a literary tradition in which fears of sexual and racial degeneracy are entwined.

¹⁵ A preeminent queer theorist, Sedgwick wrote her first book on the Gothic (*The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*).

How can a Caribbean writer depicting queer subjects deploy gothic conventions without being trapped in a reactionary worldview?

Shani Mootoo demonstrates one way of doing so. She and her work cross national, cultural, and generic boundaries: a painter, video artist, and poet as well as a novelist, she was born in Ireland, raised in Trinidad, and is now based in Canada. The self-described writer of “queer Indo-Trin-Can stories,” her novels investigate the juncture between queer and transnational identities, frequently hopping between Caribbean and Canadian locales (“Starboy” 94). Mootoo speaks of two diasporas throughout her work: the relatively recent flow of Caribbean peoples to the Global North, and the nineteenth-century migration of her Indian ancestors to the Caribbean as indentured laborers following the abolition of slavery. Her novels focus on these diasporas—very much linked, in Mootoo’s view—and on how they foreground notions of cultural hybridity and authenticity, often through the perspectives of queer characters.

For Mootoo, diaspora and queerness are inseparable. In an essay entitled “On Becoming an Indian Starboy” (referring to a Bollywood archetype whose version of masculinity she emulated as an adolescent), she “rereads the history of the Indian diaspora as a queer one” by exposing the incessant self-reinvention migration facilitated (Taylor 69). Mootoo writes:

Given my own coordinates, transnationalism seems to have been bred in the marrow. It and various forms of queerness swing hand in hand... I suspect that that once an Indian from India stepped foot on one of those boats in the nineteenth century, bound for the islands of the British Empire, in leaving behind language, family ties, community, the village, tradition in general, very specific religious rites, he or she was transitioning into a queerness of no return. Those of us in more recent times, responding to a restlessness no doubt provoked by that earlier rupture, have migrated elsewhere yet again. And, now, far from Trinidad, we continue to invent entirely new ways of being. Yet

by dint of the original displacement, we seem destined to limp along in a limbo of continuously changing and challenging queerness. (“Starboy” 83-84)

The “changing and challenging queerness” Mootoo speaks of here is not limited to sexual or gender queerness. Rather, it is an example of what Sedgwick, speaking of theorists such as Gloria Anzaldúa, calls queerness extended “outward along dimensions that can’t be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all: the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these *and other* identity-constituting, identity fracturing discourses,” that seeks to capture the “fractal intricacies of language, skin, migration, state” (“Queer and Now” 9, emphasis hers). By applying the term in a transnational context, Mootoo expands queerness to indicate the rejection of fixed categories determining one’s identity in favor of continual self-invention. To be queer can thus also mean to be “a person in a country and in communities that are constantly transitioning” (“Starboy” 94). It is the process that is highlighted, the incessant construction and deconstruction of identity and the resulting indeterminate state that cannot be sorted into a single normative category. To be a transnational subject is to be a queer subject: both are states of continual transgression and reinvention. In the transnational subject we therefore find one example of the transgressive subjectivity of interest to both queer and Gothic fiction.

Mootoo’s use of the term “limbo” in this excerpt from “Starboy” is doubly significant. Firstly, in Catholic theology Limbo is a space of in-betweenness: located on the border of Hell, its inhabitants are neither saved nor damned. Therefore, in one sense, when Mootoo writes that “we seem destined to limp along *in a limbo* of continuously changing and challenging queerness,” she indicates that the world Indo-Trinidadian traverse is a perpetual borderland itself characterized by indeterminacy at several levels (“Starboy” 84). Secondly, as the name of a famous Trinidadian dance,

“limbo” also has an active, performative dimension. “To limp along in a limbo” is thus also to dance, to navigate space, to contort one’s body around the obstacles in one’s path. Mootoo’s transnational queerness is therefore embodied both by the subject in question *and* by the environment—it ties a new “way of being” to a new world (located, of course, in the New World) (84).

Mootoo’s development of these new, transnationally queer subjects and their world resonates with a central gothic concern shared by Rhys and Kincaid, that of the past that refuses to be laid to rest. In fact, Mootoo’s version of transnational queerness is predicated on a gothic understanding of the fragile separation between past and present. Her description of a present-day reality fatefully warped by historical events—“we seem destined to limp along”—is gothic, a space where the past lingers, intrudes upon, and deforms the present (“Starboy” 84). Transnational queerness, in other words, is born of a gothic world in which the past is not past. Mootoo’s combination of the transnational, the queer, and the Gothic recalls Rhys and Kincaid’s descriptions of Caribbean immigrants forced to reinvent themselves in the face of an inhospitable new world. After all, Antoinette and Anna’s identities are fractured by their dual separation (Mootoo’s “rupture”) from colony and metropole, while Kincaid’s Lucy is a recent immigrant who imagines that as an artist, she will be a perennial outsider capable of reinventing herself at will. Therefore in one sense, Mootoo uses new terminology to describe the gothic conditions that have afflicted our heroines thus far.

Yet Mootoo’s treatment of gender and sexuality complicates the emphasis on the past’s power to fragment identity with which her predecessors are preoccupied. Yes, her transnational characters are gothic insofar as they are haunted by a troubling

past. However, in addition to collapsing the distinction between past and present, Mootoo's works strives to transcend the distinctions between the natural/unnatural and normal/perverse upon which the Gothic typically relies as a source of fear—distinctions that Rhys and Kincaid carry over into their novels.¹⁶ Instead, she endows “entirely new ways of being”—queer ways of being—with a liberatory potential capable of grappling with the dark past that shaped them, without being paralyzed by it (“Starboy” 84). Mootoo suggests that an openness to the past, for all its horrors (which she does not shy away from depicting in agonizing detail) creates new subjectivities, and eventually new communities, that will not be trapped in a cycle of reenacting history's mistakes.

The Guadeloupien novelist Maryse Condé praised Mootoo's first novel, *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), for achieving “the evasion of certainties in its simultaneous exploration and subversion of various categories of belonging,” and concludes that the novel is a “plea for a rescue from history, and from the tyranny of categories, and certainty” (64, 70).¹⁷ Her last statement could be slightly rephrased: the novel depicts a rescue from history, via an escape from the “tyranny of categories.” In *Cereus Blooms at Night*, the shared queerness achieved once the “tyranny of categories” is brought to an end represents the first step toward rescuing oneself, and one's community, from entrapment in the recurring nightmare of history.

Cereus Blooms at Night (which I will refer to from now on as *Cereus*) exemplifies the Caribbean Gothic that continues Rhys and Kincaid's interrogation of

¹⁶ Rhys exploits the uncanny to chilling effect, Kincaid the abject—both collapsing the distinction between familiar/strange and mother/daughter.

¹⁷ Condé has also tackled the Gothic tradition in her work. Most notably, her novel *Migration des coeurs* (1995), rewrites *Wuthering Heights* in a Guadeloupien setting.

female identity in the wake of colonialism as well as the gothic transnational queerness of “Starboy.” Set on the fictional Caribbean island of Lantanacamara, in the deceptively named village of Paradise, the novel depicts a small community descended from Indian indentured laborers.¹⁸ Like many Gothic novels, *Cereus* uses a frame narrative, in which a young male nurse named Tyler, recently returned from his studies abroad in the “Shivering Northern Wetlands” (a thinly veiled version of Britain), narrates the life story of Mala Ramchandin, the local madwoman. Ostracized by the community (i.e., cast out of Paradise), Mala was once the mysterious inhabitant of a decrepit house on the edge of town whose destruction in an equally mysterious fire sends her to live in the Paradise Alms House, an elderly home where Tyler has just begun working as a nurse. With rumors swirling about the dead body found in her house prior to the conflagration, Tyler is the only attendant who dares care for her. Gradually, he pieces together her history, discovering that her mother left the family to elope with her female partner, that her father then began sexually abusing her, and that her beloved sister, also the target of their father’s abuse, fled as a teenager. As he unravels Mala’s past, Tyler himself undergoes a process of transgender self-discovery prompted by the visits of a trans man named Otoh, whose father, Ambrose, played a key role in Mala’s decline.

Eventually, the two narrative threads converge: Mala is revealed to have had a mental breakdown when Ambrose, her first love, discovered her father’s abuse.

¹⁸ Lantanacamara’s social fabric—a mix of people of Indian and African descent—resembles Mootoo’s native Trinidad. Its name, however, derives from a species of verbena indigenous to the region called *Lantana camara* that emits a very unpleasant smell. As one critic pointed out, the knowing reader is thus given a clue into the “stench that always already permeates Paradise” even before learning the full extent of the island’s social ills (Sandilands 97).

Distraught, she kills her father and locks his body in a room in their house, where it remains in a state of perpetual decomposition. From that moment on, she never leaves her grounds, taking refuge instead in her fetid, overgrown garden. She becomes the local witch, only emerging to scare off the children who pelt her house with mango pits. Ambrose purposefully sleeps away the rest of his life, awakening only once a month to send his son to the Ramchandin estate with supplies for Mala. Decades later, Otoh cannot resist entering her forbidden garden. Rejoicing at what she assumes is her old love's return, Mala shows him the corpse buried in the house, only for Otoh to flee from the horrifying sight, drawing the attention of the police. In order to prevent her arrest, however, he sets fire to the estate, destroying the garden, house, and all evidence of any crime on Mala's part. The novel ends on an optimistic, almost comic, note: Mala and Ambrose are reunited, and Tyler and Otoh declare their love for one another.

Such an ending in a novel that describes at length the horrific violence suffered by its protagonist is, at first, surprising. Yet Mootoo does not turn to devices like Radcliffe's "explained supernatural" to disarm her novel's troubling aspects. Instead, the Ramchandin home, as the gothic castle embodying not just its own painful history, but that of the island as well, is key to both Mala's recovery and that of Paradise as a community. It is therefore through her adaptation of that famous gothic set piece that Mootoo crafts an iteration of the postcolonial Gothic that—unlike Rhys and Kincaid—envisions a gothic relationship with the past as the first step toward building a community capable of escaping it.

A haunted castle where "trouble was lurking like a diseased phantom, waiting to be revealed," the Ramchandin home is *Cereus'* most transparently gothic element

(*Cereus* 170). Together, the crumbling house and wild garden create a gothic landscape of “overripe fruit, decaying vegetation and corpses, [and] pungent odours of decay and deterioration,” located in taboo space just outside the borders of Paradise (Casteel, “Gothic Gardens” 62). Rather than simply reproduce the conventional gothic castle, however, Mootoo adapts it to her Caribbean setting in order to illustrate the effects of the island’s colonial history at both the social and individual levels.

Mala’s home outwardly resembles the medieval fortresses characteristic of gothic tradition that begins with the decaying ancestral home in *The Castle of Otranto*. Though the house bears “remnants of an old-fashioned gentility,” by the time Mala is an adult it is falling apart, permeated with “the odour of age, filth and rot” (*Cereus* 135). Its layout is that of a walled, moated castle whose disintegrating walls collapse the boundary between inside and out. Concealed by an “impenetrable sea of brambles and stinging nettles,” the house is circled by “dank pools, thick layers of rotten water that had seeped into crevices and settled under thin slabs of broken concrete,” its walls crumbling under “decades of dust; clumps of matted cobwebs; old cavities eaten away by wood lice; lazy, unperturbed daddy-longlegs... stout cloud-white moths polkadotting the wood... hatchlings lurking, squirming squishily as they sought the warm sunlight” (113, 153). Modern life does not penetrate its borders: after entering Otoh notes that “the sounds that he took for granted—the pounding of hammers, the swish of cars and barking of dogs—receded. Rather there was the buzzing of insects, the flutter of wings and the sounds of a breeze” (150). Later, it will occur to him that without a functioning gas line, or even matches, Mala has been without the means to build a fire for decades. Of course, like any proper Gothic

castle, the Ramchandin house hides a dark secret. Chandin's body, the original source of the house's repulsive odor, rots in a first-floor room concealed by the overgrown cereus, which has spread over the house's walls as ivy would in a northern climate. Like the titular home in *The Castle of Otranto*, crumbling under Manfred's unjust rule, the gothic qualities of the Ramchandin home are thus linked to the transgressions of an evil patriarch. While nobody guesses at the secret hidden behind its walls, the townspeople sense there is something disturbing about the house, and children passing by always take care to walk on "the other side of the street" (113).

Mootoo anchors Mala's home within both the Gothic and Caribbean literary traditions by alluding to Bertha Mason, the madwoman of the West Indies depicted in *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Mala and Rhys' Antoinette share several biographical similarities: both were abandoned by their mothers at a young age, both suffer abuse at the hands of patriarchal figures that symbolize the colonial exploitation of the West Indies, and both are considered mad. Like Rhys, however, Mootoo emphasizes the complexity underlying her protagonist's apparent madness, since what appears to be Mala's insanity is in fact a heightened connection to nature in which she finds solace, though it is beyond other characters' comprehension. She is, in this sense, like Antoinette, who similarly finds a measure of escape in Coulibri's garden. Roaming about her childhood home, Antoinette recounts how "watching the red and yellow flowers in the sun thinking of nothing, it was as if a door opened and I was somewhere else, something else. Not myself any longer" (*Wide Sargasso Sea* 25). Mala too becomes "not herself" when confronted by nature, the aroma of the cereus flowers enabling her to disassociate from memories of her childhood self and the horrors she suffered.

However, when Mala is seen through Ambrose's eyes after his return from studying abroad in the Shivering Northern Wetlands, she is reduced to *Jane Eyre's* bestial, subhuman Bertha Mason. After discovering Chandin's abuse, Ambrose returns to Mala's home to find "instead of the woman he had made love to the day before, an unrecognizable wild creature with a blood-stained face, frothing at the mouth and hacking uncontrollably at the furniture in the drawing room" (*Cereus* 228).¹⁹ As Casteel suggests, this scene is "an ironic replaying of *Jane Eyre*," that portrays Mala as "a beast-like Bertha to Ambrose's Rochester" ("Gothic Gardens" 62). The novel's most sophisticated, educated character, who revels in his newfound eloquence, is thus also the one who falls back onto the conventional trope of the Caribbean mad woman developed by gothic literature.

Yet it is only *following* Ambrose's betrayal that Mala's house begins to resemble Thornfield Hall: beside herself, she kills her father and locks him not in the attic, but in a first-floor room. This parallel with *Jane Eyre* suggests that Ambrose's betrayal has two aspects. Firstly, he succumbs to the "thought that a call for help would expose the shameful goings-on in the house, to which he had become connected" and abandons Mala to her home, where for all he knows Chandin still lives (*Cereus* 228). But he also abandons her to the Bertha Mason narrative of female madness he has internalized, refusing to see Mala as more than a madwoman and thereby excusing himself from the responsibility of saving her. His description of her is a self-fulfilling prophecy: in seeing her as a madwoman, he condemns her to be

¹⁹ Jane's description of Bertha Mason: "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: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its face" (*Jane Eyre* 338).

one. Though a far more positive character, Ambrose here recalls Rhys' Rochester, who molds Antoinette into another person by repeatedly calling her Bertha, ignoring her perceptive retort that in doing so he is practicing another form of the obeah he so despises. Both men have practiced a form of obeah: they have shaped these women into who they want. Mala, like Antoinette before her, is the victim of Western constructions of the Caribbean woman.

Just as Mala is another version of Rhys and Brontë's Bertha Masons, her home is another Coulibri or Thornfield: a gothic estate that is destroyed in a massive fire. *Cereus* adapts the gothic castle to a postcolonial environment by portraying the Ramchandin home as a site marked not only by patriarchal violence, as in the European tradition, but by colonial violence as well. Mootoo accomplishes this by associating the trauma Chandin experienced at the hands of a racist colonial system with the abuse he inflicts on his daughters. Adopted as a child by Lantanacamara's first missionaries, the Thoroughlys, Chandin longs for their daughter, Lavinia, the very woman with whom his wife will run away. Chandin's desire to imitate his adoptive family in order to catch Lavinia's eye is noted by the Reverend, who warns him that any union between the two would be incestuous. Even as a teen Chandin knows this is a complete fiction, so painfully aware is he that his racial status—"his looks, the colour of his skin, the texture of his hair, [and] his accent"—marks him as placeless within the white Thoroughly household (*Cereus* 33). The Reverend's hypocrisy is finally revealed years later, when he proudly announces Lavinia's engagement to a wealthy white Wetlander after brushing over the detail that the two are cousins. Therefore, as Wesling suggests, the Thoroughly's home "becomes a site for the racialized discipline of Chandin" by substituting the incest taboo "for another

prohibition, that of miscegenation” (662). Chandin experiences the mutilation of family bonds twice over: he is both removed from his home at a young age and inserted into a colonial domestic space predicated on the subordination, if not total denial, of his race.

His incestuous abuse repeats this pattern of violated of family relationships. The night he begins abusing his daughters, soon after Sarah and Lavinia elope, he has taken them to sleep in his bed out of fear that their mother will return for them. Then, in a “fitful, nightmarish sleep, [he] mistook Pohpoh [Mala] for Sarah,” commencing the nightly sexual violence lasts that until his death (*Cereus* 65). The townspeople echo this mistaken identity explanation by decreeing that the Ramchandins are cursed by an inability to determine correct family relations, as Mala is “a woman whose father had obviously mistaken her for his wife, and whose mother had obviously mistaken another woman for her husband” (109). What they fail to note, however, is that this curse originates not with Chandin, but with the households that shaped him: Chandin was made into a participant in the colonial system’s perversion of the family structure. While the Thoroughlys do not interact with Mala, the violence they initiated in uprooting Chandin thus replicates itself throughout her life. The patriarchal evil terrorizing the Ramchandin home is grounded in colonial abuses, rendering it “a site not for the escape from the violence of the state, but for its enactment” (Wesling 663).

As discussed, this gothic castle’s colonial past is also illustrated by its garden, which is not the exotic and “untouched” Caribbean paradise it at first appears to be (and which the village is ironically named after). Nor is it, however, a fallen Eden, the

inverse of that stereotype.²⁰ While the massive trees and vibrant animal life may recall a primordial, pre-colonial refuge untouched by humans, Mootoo's references to the natural sciences historicize the garden by associating it with the scientific endeavors that accompanied colonial expansion. In "New World Pastoral" Casteel lists several ways in which Mootoo highlights "the implication of the natural sciences in commercial and colonial interests" (22). As she notes, many characters behave like naturalists: Pohpoh collects seeds and cuttings to take with her when she expects to leave Lantanacamara with her mother; Ambrose returns from the Shivering Northern Wetlands with a degree in entomology and plans to expand Paradise's tourist industry; Otoh recalls the financial impetus of colonial exploration when he notes that the rare peekoplat birds perched in Mala's massive mudra tree would sell for a fortune; and Tyler directly references the colonial botanical gardens when he recognizes the cereus plant from "the Exotic Items Collection of the SNW National Botanical Gardens" (*Cereus* 22). Even the cereus, which is so closely identified with Mala, arrives in her garden thanks to the colonial appropriation of Caribbean flora. It was a gift from Lavinia, who one day arrives with two cuttings of it "ripped from Mrs. Thoroughly's garden" (53). Though it may be native to Lantancamara, the cereus plant is not native to Mala's home—it is transplanted from a British colonial's "well-ordered, colour-coordinated" garden (53). As the central symbol and title of the novel, the cereus exemplifies the interconnections formed between colonizers and

²⁰ Coulibri is often depicted as this kind of postlapsarian Caribbean landscape. In one instance, Antoinette directly compares her home to a fallen Eden, asserting that "our garden was large and beautiful as that garden in the Bible—the tree of life grew there. But it had gone wild" (*Wide Sargasso Sea* 17). The snakes that she sees roaming the property emphasize these Biblical overtones.

colonized, and the way that the complexities of this encounter were flattened into the false image of the atemporal, “exotic” New World.

The narrator’s decision to list the animal life infesting Mala’s home using the scientific names “Aves, Hexapoda, Gastropoda and Reptilia” is therefore in keeping with the novel’s depiction of the garden as the target of the West colonial and scientific endeavors (*Cereus* 128). The old glass aquarium Otoh comes across lying in the grass outside Mala house is the lasting symbol of colonial naturalism: years earlier, she and Ambrose had planned on using it to keep spiders in a harebrained scheme to cultivate their thread. Just as Ambrose internalized the narrative of “mad” Bertha Mason, he has here also internalized the drive toward capitalistic colonial exploitation of the natural environment. His plan to expand the island’s tourist industry reveals his implication in the naturalist exploitation of the island:

I am thinking...of purchasing a pirogue, a small boat, to take foreign visitors who come in search of nature’s tropical wonders up the river...the swamp is the home of magnificent birds, so colourful and varied in size, with fantastic appendages that make them appear to have escaped the pages of a fairy tale...those foreign naturalists would give their arm and a leg to see what lives in that swamp. (200)

Though self-aware, he intends to be a willing participant in the construction of Lantanacamera as an ecological paradise ripe for imperial exploration and exploitation.

Remnants of the naturalist project even make their way onto the pages of the novel itself, as its subsections are separated not by numerals or chapter headings but by small drawings of insects that recall “the illustrations that nineteenth-century naturalists habitually included in their diaries and publications” (Casteel, “Gothic Gardens” 59). With these illustrations, the text becomes a garden of its own, one that again resists categorization into pre- or postlapsarian. These drawings remind the

foreign reader to consider the implications of her own approach to the Caribbean landscape, and in a more abstract sense, to the Caribbean landscape that is the novel. That is, they gesture toward assumptions surrounding the works of postcolonial writers, namely, how they are commonly labeled “raw” or “authentic” (often euphemisms for “unsophisticated”) in a way that echoes the colonial discourse that called the New World “untouched.” *Cereus* anticipates this reductive treatment of Caribbean literature, referencing the practice by inserting small naturalist drawings directly into the text and thus preempting the reader’s misinterpretation. In this way, Mootoo’s text bears the marks of colonial and neocolonial exploitation just like the Ramchandin home it describes, though in reference to the literary marketplace.

While Mala’s home is founded and shaped by colonial violence, it is also, of course, the site of Mala’s personal traumas, where she periodically relives the catalyst for Chandin’s abuse: her mother’s departure. Her mother, Sarah, and Lavinia, the Reverend Thoroughly’s daughter, originally intend to take the children with them, but their plans are foiled when their father returns unexpectedly in the midst of their frantic departure and grabs hold of Mala and her sister. This moment repeats itself for Mala when the conditions are the same as they were that fateful morning; the ten o’clock sun hitting the back porch roof, making it “dazzle like a blinding star” (*Cereus* 131). In these moments, Mala succumbs, crying out “the only words she had spoken in ages. ‘Oh God. I beg you. Please, Doh leave me, I beg you, oh God, oh God, doh leave me, I beggin you” (133). Mala’s memory is not only sparked but embodied by the natural world surrounding her, in which the “light,” the “blueness of the sky,” and the “colour in the trees and shrubs in the yard” all “pull together in perfect imitation of another moment, long ago” (131). Animals stand in for her sister

and Lavinia, “the noise of the insects screaming, *Pohpoh, Pohpoh, I want Pohpoh*. Insects spawning in pools of water, their drones shouting, *Sarah!*” (131). Just as Coulibri and Granbois stood in for Antoinette’s mother, and Dominica stood in for Xuela’s, the natural world around Mala stands in for her missing family members. In each novel, the past is embedded in the very landscape, though Mootoo is ultimately much more optimistic about the role of history than either Rhys or Kincaid.

Nature becomes the repository of the past in other ways as well. The light glancing off the roof like a “blinding star” that triggers Mala’s episode, for example, recalls the cereus, whose name Lavinia instructs the children to pronounce “like the bright, fuzzy star” (i.e. Sirius, the brightest star in the night sky) (131, 54). The insects flourishing in Mala’s house that feast on Chandin’s corpse are another example. Gradually, the insects consume his body, covering it in a white sheet made of “thousands of tiny white moths [that] had so tightly packed themselves side by side that the tiny hooks on the edges of their wings had locked together, linking them to form a heavy sheet that was slowly devouring the corpse underneath” (184). The moths absorb the material remains of her abusive father, figuratively spreading his evil, ghostly presence throughout the grounds as they “slid[e] from cracks in the walls of Mala’s house” to “sample the syrupy, perfumed juices” (138). In this castle, nature is the conduit through which the past is kept alive.

Cereus fully destroys the boundary between past and present in its depiction of the garden as a site in which Mala disassociates from her childhood self, nicknamed Pohpoh. This too is triggered by a natural event: the blossoming of the cereus, an otherwise unsightly cactus that flowers only once a year. The morning after the event, “fortified by the night’s display,” Mala recalls her younger self’s escapades

out and about Paradise (*Cereus* 142). For the remainder of the section, Pohpoh's nighttime journeys throughout the village are interwoven with Mala and Otoh's timeline, which tracks the days leading up to his discovery of the corpse. Past and present therefore coexist in the narrative itself: Mala and Pohpoh are treated as separate characters, their sections interspersed with no indication given as to their chronological order, the brevity of the sections and frequency of their alternation increasing as the two converge in the garden. Past and present coexist in Mala's mind as well: she imagines that Pohpoh really is a different person, even attempting to hide the child behind her when the police arrive, having been drawn by Otoh's flight from her home.

Importantly, the novel portrays this connection between past and present as having a reparative potential. Though the elderly Mala admits that "she had rather disliked [Pohpoh] many years before when they were one and the same," she now imagines rectifying the past: "she wished that she and that Pohpoh could have been two separate people...that she could have been the mother of Pohpoh or at least her older sister" (*Cereus* 173). She imagines herself, in other words, as the missing maternal figure that could have shielded her from her father's abuse. By disassociating from her past self, however, Mala does succeed at intervening in the past to "free" her former self. As Mala puts "all her effort into protecting Pohpoh," the imaginary child feels her influence, noting that "it had always been this way for her: just as she was about to succumb, an irrational strength would surface, taking control, propelling her toward feelings of invincibility...Pohpoh felt, for once, that she was not alone" (175). When Mala takes Pohpoh along with her to show her the

material proof that the man who terrorized them is no longer a threat, she imagines speaking to her younger self:

Things bad at home, child? I understand. I understand *everything*. Today is the last day that anybody will be ever be able to reach you...I does see how your father does watch you. His eyes just like my father own. You resourceful. I wasn't resourceful. You do for yourself better than me! (184)

Having become the maternal figure she sorely lacked as a child, Mala imagines that Pohpoh will accomplish what she had always dreamed of. Presented with proof of her father's dead body, the child takes flight until "down below, her island was soon lost among others, all as shapeless as specks of dust adrift on a vast turquoise sea" (186). Though Mala has not actually altered the past, she has corrected it through and in her imagination. Furthermore, the moment Pohpoh is liberated coincides with Mala's liberation from her gothic castle. After nurturing Pohpoh, she is taken to the Paradise Alms House, where she meets Tyler, who quite literally nurtures her by, at times, holding her "against [his] chest" and "rocking" her to sleep like a mother would an infant (21). At the Paradise Alms House, surrounded by Tyler, Ambrose, and Otoh, she is gradually reintegrated into society.

As a gothic castle haunted by the violence Paradise must cast out in order to deserve its name, Mala's home manifests the social and individual dimensions of its colonial past. Yet while it bears the scars of colonial history, the fusion of past and present the house represents as a site "outside normative linear time" is critical to Mala's rehabilitation (Hoving 156). Furthermore, the Ramchandin home resists not only temporal norms, but both social and sexual norms as well, as it is characterized by the transnational queerness described in "Starboy." Mala's home, in other words, is the site in which Mootoo links the gothic past to the blossoming of sexual and transnational queerness. Like her description of the haunted transnational subject in

“Starboy,” the Ramchandin home’s immersion in the past occasions its queerness, transforming it into the model for a “new way of being” (84).

In the Ramchandin garden Mootoo offers nature as an example of a queer entity whose fluidity evades the essentialism projected onto it by those who assume sexuality is a matter of the “natural” and the “unnatural.” As Corr suggests, by “blending images of different kinds of “nature” (sexual/ecological), Mootoo’s novel acknowledges the natural quality of sexuality while emphasizing that sexualized and gendered identities are not the product of nature” (70). In other words, the garden undoes the systems of classification ascribed to nature as part of the colonial project. In fact, the wild, overgrown garden that lends the Ramchandin home much of its gothic aura is characterized by the very transgressions prohibited by strict dichotomies. It is the site of multiple border crossings, where the boundaries between past/present, life/death, regrowth/decay, sanctuary/danger, inside/outside, and paradise/dystopia collapse. In Hoving’s terms, Mala’s garden is a world in which “nature is not presented as an essence from which one could deduce norms about what is natural but as hybrid interrelatedness” (164). The past coexists alongside the present; flora and fauna are caught in an intermediate state of decay and regrowth and contribute to the breakdown between inside and outside; animals breed on the corpse that they consume; the flourishing vegetation springs up “wherever birds and insects dropped their seeds,” even on the roof; the termite infested walls let light stream through the barred windows; Otoh thinks he has entered “a paradise,” but encounters the foul stench of a sewage pit (*Cereus* 115, 153). Mala’s home even resists intruders who conform to gender norms, as Otoh’s failed attempt to enter while wearing a dress

demonstrates. He eventually succeeds, but only when dressed in his father's old suit, an outfit that crosses not only genders, but also, as Hoving notes, generations (162).

The cereus cactus becomes the emblem of the garden's transgressive qualities, and by extension, Mala's. It is both ugly and beautiful, its trunk "ragged and unsightly" until it blooms, at which point the "white and crimson flowers, gleaming like stars" send "dizzying scent high and wide into the air" (*Cereus* 54, 152, 134). Additionally, as Hoving points out, the cereus plant is hermaphroditic: like all cactuses it has both a stamen and an ovary, "male" and "female" characteristics (162). Nor is it rooted or "native" to one place. Instead, the cereus is a transnational plant that migrates from garden to garden, its exposed roots reflecting the social connections it forms as it is exchanged between different transgressive individuals. The chain begins with Lavinia, who gives a clipping to Pohpoh and Asha; Otoh then takes a clipping to the Paradise Alms House, where he and Tyler together tend to it and agree to consummate their relationship the night it blooms. The cereus plant represents not only queerness, but is the token passed between the novel's budding queer community.

Mootoo's revision of the gothic garden as a queer site is illuminated by a comparison to *Jane Eyre*, whose symbolic counterpart to the cereus is the massive chestnut-tree cleft in half by lightning before Jane's first, aborted marriage to Mr. Rochester. Both plants are laden with gothic overtones: the "wreck of the chestnut-tree" is "black," "riven," and "ghastly," while the cereus conceals the room in which Chandin is buried (*Jane Eyre* 318). Yet contrast between the two is revealing. Jane praises the chestnut tree for qualities the cereus lacks:

You did right to hold fast to each other," I said: as if the monster-splinters were living things, and could hear me. 'I think, scathed as you look, and

charred and scorched, there must be a little sense of life in you yet, rising out of that adhesion at the faithful, honest roots: you will never have green leaves more—never more see birds making nests and singing idylls in your boughs; the time of pleasure and love is over with you: but you are not desolate: each of you has a comrade to sympathise with him in his decay.’ (318-319)

While Jane imagines the tree as a “community of vitality,” she identifies rootedness as its most important characteristic, the source that will sustain what little life is left in the organism (318). The cereus, by contrast, flourishes where transplanted and expands as an “unruly network” that is not rooted in a single place (*Cereus* 5). The cereus, in other words, is rhizomatic. As a model for a new kind of queer identity and communities, the rhizomatic cereus establishes a link between Mootoo and Glissant, who frames his theory of creolization as an effort to assert “the rhizome of a multiple relationship with the Other” (*Poetics of Relation* 16). To Glissant’s rhizome of relation, Mootoo’s cereus adds a component of sexual queerness as one of the catalysts of new forms of social interconnection. That is, while the chestnut tree remains a “ruin” forever, a “community of vitality [that] was destroyed,” the cereus creates new life out of decay (*Jane Eyre* 318). Although the cereus as well is associated with death, its exquisite flowers spark “pleasure and love,” their scent causing passers-by to be “pleasantly besotted” and compelling them “to stop in front of Mala’s house to caress and steal probing kisses” (*Jane Eyre* 319; *Cereus* 138). The cereus thus models individual and social queerness for those who, like Mala, closely observe it.

The queerness with which Mala is imbued via her garden manifests itself both at the bodily and linguistic levels. Tyler, for example, says that rather than emitting the “sweet yet sour smell [he] had come to expect whenever close to an old person,” she gives off “an aroma resembling rich vegetable compost” (*Cereus* 11). Similarly, a

besotted teenaged Ambrose imagines if he gets close enough to Mala he will smell the “fearfully strong but compelling odour” of “two very different scents—balsa wood from the silk cotton tree he used to make spinner with, and the ripened fruit of the cannonball tree” (217). Mala’s body, in other words, evokes the natural world more than it does common “human” smells. She is so close to nature, in fact, that she has invented a way of communicating based on her immediate connection to it. After Ambrose leaves her, Mala withdraws from language, turning to “sentence[s] constructed primarily of images punctuated by only one or two verbalizations: a noun tentatively uttered in recognition, a descriptive word confirming a feeling or observation” before ultimately “rid[ding] herself of all words” (126). In their place, she achieves a visceral communion with nature in which “every muscle of her body swelled, tingled, cringed, or went numb in response to her surroundings—every fibre was sensitized in a way that words were unable to match or enhance” (127).

Yet everyone assumes that Mala is not only mute, but unable to engage with the world. When she first arrives at the Alms House, she refuses to communicate with the other residents, making “no sounds besides crying, moaning, wailing, and sighing” (*Cereus* 23). Even Tyler assumes that she is mute before she reveals her ability to ventriloquize the sounds of the natural world around them. Far from being silent, Mala is able to mimic birds and insects, “calling out, only loud enough for [Tyler] to hear, perfect imitations of all the species of birds that congregated in the garden and dotted the tropical Lantanacamaran sky” (24). Her language may not be verbal, but it is nonetheless a form of communication through which Mala expresses herself. Like the Indo-Trinidadians Mootoo described in “Starboy,” Mala is exiled in her garden, where she is forced to leave behind “language, family ties, [and]

community” (83). And, like them, she has created a new, queer, way of being, one that hinges on a visceral connection to the natural world that Paradise is unable to access. Through her connection with nature, she embodies queerness.

To Mala’s queer nature *Cereus* juxtaposes Paradise’s use of the terms “natural” and “unnatural” in order to regulate gender and sexuality. Throughout the novel, Mootoo pays particular attention to the various ways that Lantanacamarans use these terms, as seemingly every character deploys them differently. As a result, neither is a fixed category. For example: Tyler feels he is at his most natural in a woman’s nurse uniform, but is mocked by his fellow nurses merely for wearing a brightly colored scarf; Paradise considers Mala tainted by incest, yet Tyler associates her with the natural world; Reverend Thoroughly considers racial miscegenation unnatural, yet he demands that Chandin, his adopted son, acknowledge his “pure” brotherly bond to Lavinia; and Otoh unwillingly assures a minor character that her harassment of Mala many years earlier was merely “the natural stuff of childhood,” but wonders why he was never driven to join their cruel games (*Cereus* 37, 137). The “nature” that is associated with queerness is clearly not the “nature” referred to by some of these characters.

The opposition between natural and unnatural is particularly confused where the stakes are highest. Unsurprisingly, homosexuality is widely considered perversion in Lantancamara. Sarah and Lavinia’s lesbian relationship is considered so unnatural and shameful, for example, that the couple fled the country. Similarly, before giving Tyler a gerbera daisy as a gift for Mala, the otherwise friendly gardener hastily tells Tyler, “I not funny, you know” (*Cereus* 69). Toby, another gardener at the home, is more overtly homophobic, “shaking his head and spitting low curses in [Tyler’s]

direction” (7). Yet others, by contrast, feel that homosexuality is natural: Pohpoh, for one, associates Sarah and Lavinia’s relationship with the “freedom and wildness” of their garden (53). Far from being mutually exclusive essences, what is socially decreed to be “natural” as opposed to “unnatural” is thus riddled with contradictions. What is natural for one person is unnatural for another; rather than representing universal, essential categories, they are dependent of the speaker who deploys them.

Mootoo enacts her strongest critique of gender binarism through Otoh and Tyler, both trans individuals who escape the categories male/female and homosexual/heterosexual. Otoh, for example, is “the object of desire of almost every Lantanacamaran woman” who simultaneously causes men to be “shocked and annoyed by their own naggingly lascivious thoughts of him” (*Cereus* 135). In other words, though “unnatural,” he naturally arouses desire in both men *and* women. The novel refrains from labeling his sexuality or that of his admirers, who do not know they are lusting after a biological female. Otoh’s transition was similarly “natural” and unquestioned. Though born biologically female, at five years of age he transitions so flawlessly that he quickly convinces his parents that he is “an authentic boy” (110). His transformation was so seamless, in fact, that he confounds the medical establishment: “even the nurse and doctor who attended the birth, on seeing him later, marveled at their carelessness in having declared him a girl” (110). And so, until the end of the novel, he remains a potentially disruptive force that defies categorization. Yet he is isolated, unable to form a serious relationship or be sexually active for fear of “unzipping his trousers” and facing “the wrath of Paradise” (111).

Crucially, it is thanks to Mala that Otoh and Tyler encounter each other and embrace their “shared queerness,” a trait they feel they share with her (*Cereus* 48).

First, with Mala's help, Tyler learns to embrace his queerness. Tyler admits that prior to the events of the novel he hated his "unusual femininity," having internalized the idea that his queerness, the state of being "neither properly man nor woman but some in-between, unnamed thing" was "depraved" and "perverse" (71). At Mala's encouragement, he puts on a dress and make-up, reveling in the experience:

My body felt as if it were metamorphosing. It was as though I had suddenly become plump and less rigid. My behind felt fleshy and rounded. I had thighs, a small mound of belly, rounded full breasts and a cavernous tunnel singing between my legs. I felt more weak than excited but I was certainly excited by the possibilities trembling inside me (76).

At first dismayed by Mala's lack of interest in his transformation, he then realizes that since "she was not one to manacle nature...she was permitting mine its freedom," her apparent disinterest is acceptance (77). Mala, who has absorbed the queer qualities of her garden, thus facilitates the birth of other queer individuals.

To illuminate the role of the past in creating Mala's queerness it is useful to compare her home to Ambrose's. If Mala's home cannot escape the past, then the Mohanty home is predicated on concealing it. Outwardly, the Mohanty home presents the façade of the model heterosexual family, comprising a father, mother (Elsie), and son. Yet they are an utterly dysfunctional, "once-a-month" family (*Cereus* 112). Having married Elsie because she resembles his lost love, Ambrose develops "a propensity for month-long slumbers from which he miraculously awakened only long enough to replenish Mala Ramchandin's supplies" (109). For Ambrose, self-described "expert in the field of passivity," sleep is a way to avoid confronting his betrayal of Mala: "I slept because I couldn't face myself...I slept to avoid the nausea that seemed to sour my insides and the weight of defeat crushing my heart whenever I

thought of my inaction” (234). His is an extreme solution to the problem of the troubling past—he shuts it out, sacrificing the present along with it.

But Ambrose is not the only one in his family who deliberately obscures the past. Elsie too, while a loving and supportive mother, accepts Otoh’s transition not purely out of love for her child but partially from convenience. As her marriage disintegrates, she finds herself “hungry for a male in the house” and plays along with Otoh’s transition, as he “so much like an authentic boy” (*Cereus* 110). Only when the issue of Otoh’s marriage prospects arises does she admit her full knowledge of his transition. Even then, however, she is in favor of concealing Otoh’s history in favor of preserving the social order, at least at surface level. The result is a revelation that leaves her son flabbergasted:

You think I am stupid or what? Now the fact of the matter is that you are not the first or the only one of your kind in this place. You grow up here and you don’t realize almost everybody in this place wish they could be somebody or something else? That is the story of life here in Lantancamara...every village in this place have a handful of people like you. And is not easy to tell who is who. How many people here know about you, eh? I does watch over the banister and wonder if *who* I see is really *what* I see. (237-238)

While Elsie supports her son, she defines identity as a fixed essence. In her eyes, Otoh is a particular “kind” of person, and the gender that someone like him performs—the “what” Elsie sees—is subordinate to their fundamental identity, the “who” they “really” are. While she assuages Otoh’s fears about being “abnormal” by revealing that there have always been trans individuals in their village, she keeps this secret to herself, rather than openly acknowledging it in a way that would threaten the integrity of the male/female binary. In short, she is the opposite of Tyler, whose flamboyant performativity is that of a person who “must, as a matter of life and death, wear scent in the crook of [his] elbows...readier than ever to present [himself] like a

peacock in heat” (246). In the Mohanty household, the past is never allowed to disturb the present, in the name of preserving the heterosexual nuclear family as the fundamental unit of Lantanacamaran society. Yet this domestic idyll (at least in comparison to the Ramchandin home) is held together by the most fragile of bonds, as its dissolution after Mala’s reappearance indicates. Ambrose finally awakens when Chandin’s body is discovered, prompting Elsie to leave her family in favor of a different social arrangement, the platonic friend group.²¹ In Paradise, a new unit of queer kinship emerges: Ambrose and Mala, Otoh and Tyler.

Furthermore, the social ramifications of Elsie’s attitude and the denial of the past her family practices are implied by the name of the street the Mohanty family lives on: Government Alley. This detail, mentioned only a few times throughout the novel, is noteworthy because it underscores that Mala’s fate is a social failure, not only a domestic one. Chandin’s abuse was an open secret in the village, yet many excused his behavior, as he was once “the much respected teacher of the Gospel,” and “such a man would take to the bottle and to his own child...only if he suffered some madness” (*Cereus* 195). The blame is cast on Mala and her mother: “what man would not suffer a rage akin to insanity if his own wife...left her husband and children” (195). As her father was once aligned with the Thoroughly family and through them the colonial state, no action is taken to save Mala. Rather, the legacy of colonial violence is left to repeat itself. This pattern repeats itself in Ambrose, who is associated with the state through his foreign education, made possible thanks to a

²¹ Although whether this social circle is a queer one is not clear, as it is mentioned only briefly, it is significant that Elsie does not return to her parent’s home but rather sets out to make her own life outside the confines of the heterosexual family.

scholarship offered by Reverend Thoroughly. As has been discussed, he too abandons Mala, the most vulnerable inhabitant of Paradise, to her fate.

Only when the inhabitants of Government Alley are reshuffled is Mala reintegrated into society. Like a Radcliffean heroine, she escapes her castle and reunites with her partner, who is now free to be with her. Her last appearance even implies that she has been freed of her past. Sitting on a bench next to Ambrose, “she pointed up into the sky and traced a distant flight pattern that she alone could see...In a tiny whispering voice, she uttered her first public words: “Poh, Pohpoh-poh, Poh, Poh, Poh” (*Cereus* 248-9). As the free bird she sees is implied to be Pohpoh, then it is also, in a way, herself. Tyler too is liberated, claiming that his life has “begun to bloom,” and agreeing with Otoh to consummate their relationship the night the cereus blooms (105). The novel’s ending is almost comic: after their many travails and misunderstandings, the two couples are reunited. All that is missing is a double wedding.

Though it is a gothic novel, *Cereus*’s depiction of how to overcome colonial history runs counter to the pessimism of Rhys and Kincaid’s novels. Unlike its predecessors, the novel is sanguine about the future, not in spite, but *because* of the gothic resurgence of Caribbean history. The fate of Mala’s home illustrates the novel’s vision of a community that will improve itself by attending to its history. The terrible gothic space she once inhabited does not disappear completely. Instead, the aftereffects of the fire reintegrates it is reintegrated into Paradise, along with its one-time inhabitant: “the house and the trees and shrubs and every bit of live and dead matter that had thrived on the Hill Side property remained floating through the town in an irritating dust, suspended in a thick, black cloud” (*Cereus* 188). The ashen

remains of Mala's gothic, queer home are dispersed over the entire village, echoing the cereus' and Mala's transplantation to the Alms House, but on a larger scale. No longer a taboo space, the house, along with encounter with the past it embodies and the queerness it gave birth to, becomes a source of commonality for the budding community formed by Ambrose, Mala, Tyler, and Otoh, and it is implied, for others as well. In fact, their small community is born at the same time as this cloud of ash: the novel opens with Tyler arriving just as Paradise is "clutched by a menacing cloud that hung low over the town for several days and would not budge" (6).

The novel's optimism is therefore grounded not in diminishing the colonial past's horrors, but in confronting them, absorbing them, and in so doing revealing new ways of being that enable one to live openly in the present. As Tyler's first description of his new home informs us, Paradise is in the process of effacing its past by expanding "over the sugar cane fields that surround it" (*Cereus* 5). Conversely, Paradise Alms House, the most positive space in the novel, where a new queer community is born and where the cereus is planted, is open to reminders of the island's colonial past. To reach it, one must "cut through a cane field and carry up on a lane that ends at the top of a small hill. The home with its excellent view of the cane fields is in the shadow valley below. There is nothing beyond" (122). The Alms House overlooks the past: there is nothing to contemplate but the cane fields, symbols of the island's colonial history.

The novel's ending exemplifies its simultaneous gesture toward the past and future. Curious about Asha's fate, Tyler locates a number of lost letters from Mala's missing sister that were never delivered to the Ramchandin house (the postman refused to go there, "deeming [it] to be a place of sin and moral corruption") (*Cereus*

243). This series of letters reveals that, after leaving, Asha wrote to her sister many times, begging Mala to join her. The letters kept on arriving, even after Asha moved to the Shivering Northern Wetlands and then to Canada, where she had hoped to be reunited with their mother. The final paragraph retroactively explains the premise of the whole novel: it is an extended letter to Asha, asking her to return to Lantanacamara and to Mala, for whom Asha is “the promise of a cereus-scented breeze on a Paradise night” (249). The novel thus ends by both looking back on the missing piece of Mala’s past and gesturing to the promise of a queer future evoked by the “cereus-scented night” (249).

Mootoo’s subsequent novels, though not gothic, express a similar hope for a new social order that celebrates differences in class, race, and sexuality. *He Drown She in the Sea* (2005) and *Valmiki’s Daughter* (2008) are, like *Cereus*, set in versions of Trinidad, though contemporary ones. While they are free of *Cereus*’ gothic trappings, Mootoo’s emphasis on the importance of attending to colonial history in order to envision a more egalitarian, but not homogeneous, future remains constant. Dolly, the mother of *He Drown She in the Sea*’s protagonist, reminds her son about their wealthy employers: “They cross them terrible waters—let me tell you—in the same stinking boats...no matter how some rise, how some fall, or how some stay put...all, one and all, stem from the same tide” (201). *Cereus*’ “one and all” is more ambitious than Dolly’s, who speaks of the history of indentured servitude shared by Trinidadian Indians. Nevertheless, “one and all” could be the slogan for the queer community formed at the end of *Cereus*: not one that ignores its differences but one that finds common ground in them, acknowledging the shared past that shaped each

individual into who they are. In Mootoo's novels, the darkest chapters of colonial history are also the ones with the most transformative potential.

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