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Recrossing the Sargasso Sea: Trauma, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, and His Critics

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Abstract: In an oft-cited passage in his 1974 monograph *Contradictory Omens*, Edward Kamau Brathwaite declares that white creoles have forfeited their claim to the spiritual life of the Caribbean. Whether intended or not, his pronouncement raised doubts about the standing of Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) in the Caribbean canon. Brathwaite brought discomfiting attention to his own "black West Indian" identity (38) as well as the identities of Rhys and several prominent scholars who had written about the novel. The dialogues of misrecognition that have characterized several of the more notable exchanges between Brathwaite and his principal critic, Peter Hulme, illustrate the need for a reading practice for Caribbean trauma texts that recognizes, as Cathy Caruth has argued, that authors and critics are implicated in one another's histories. The need for such recognition is particularly urgent in the case of critics who see themselves connected to the historical traumas staged in the texts they investigate. Rather than following the model of canonical European trauma texts, especially Holocaust accounts, in which perpetrators and victims are opposed in both individual and collective binaries, Caribbean texts offer more complex sites for the study of trauma literature. Victims may be identified with groups that have perpetrated pervasive cultural trauma and perpetrators of psychological trauma may belong to groups of the dispossessed. These crosscurrents provide highly productive grounds for deepening our understanding of readers' and critics' responses to trauma texts and to one another.

Keywords: trauma literature, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, cultural trauma, ethics of reading, reading practices

I. Introduction

In his oft-cited and most controversial judgment in *Contradictory Omens: Cultural Diversity and Integration in the Caribbean* (1974), Edward Kamau Brathwaite asserts that white creoles have forfeited their place in the cultural life of the Caribbean: "White creoles in the English and French West Indies have separated themselves by too wide a gulf and have contributed too little culturally, as a group, to give credence to the notion that they can, given the present structure, meaningfully identify or be identified, with the spiritual world on this side of the Sargasso Sea" (38). His judgment came at the conclusion of his argument that the novel and several of its critics had ignored "vast areas of social and historical formation" (38) that inevitably separated black West Indians from the white creoles who had pursued an agenda of cultural domination. Brathwaite's seemingly harsh criticism of Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is rooted in a profound discomfort with Rhys' personal identity as a descendant of the white creoles who perpetrated vast abuses in the colonial era in which her novel is set. Whether intended or not, his pronouncement raised doubts about the standing of Rhys' novel in the Caribbean canon. Brathwaite brought discomfiting attention to his own "black West Indian" identity (38), as well as the identities of Rhys and several prominent scholars who had written about the novel. In turn, Brathwaite's commentary, which includes references to certain literary critics' ethnicities, has unsettled scholars who would prefer that he bracket his own position as a victim of cultural trauma and, especially, the racial identities of those whom he opposes and instead focus on the texts at issue. In the years following the publication of *Contradictory Omens*, Brathwaite's notorious comment has been deployed repeatedly without respect for the specific context in which it appears or the subsequent evolution of his views.

In this essay, I revisit what may seem to be an old debate for two reasons: Brathwaite's encounter with Rhys' text is a moment of considerable interest in Caribbean letters and it has been misunderstood. Brathwaite's contemporaries paid insufficient attention to the context of his writings in his professed personal intellectual itinerary, which I will discuss further in relation to his much later *Barbajan Poems 1492–1992*, or, as he put it, "where I'm 'coming from, as they say, & where I goin" ("Post-Cautionary" 70). Moreover, later critics failed to notice that Brathwaite's views had changed markedly from his well-known enunciation of them in *Contradictory Omens*.[1]

In addition and perhaps more exigently, the terms of the debate are altered when they are considered in light of the evolving field of cultural trauma studies, which posits that traumas experienced by a collectivity mold its members' senses of their identities and affect their experiences of the present, even in the case of individuals who have no direct personal connection to the traumatic events in question. Ron Eyerman emphasizes how "collective memory provides the individual with a cognitive map within which to orient present behavior" (65).[2] In *Contradictory Omens*, as I will discuss, Brathwaite describes the Caribbean subject's imperative to situate him- or herself with respect to the region's plural histories. Individuals negotiate their relationship to the collective identity of the group with which they identify. Neither the individual's own construction of his or her identity nor the individual's conception of the collectivity's identity is presumed to be stable but rather results from a continuous process of interpretation and understanding.

Jeffrey C. Alexander writes that collective memory is a "sociological process" that affects members of a "collectivity" who look back to a profound historical injury and in doing so recognize "ideal and material consequences" that result in an "identity revision" (22). Alexander describes the process as dynamic:

> This identity revision means that there will be a searching re-remembering of the collective past, for memory is not only social and fluid but deeply connected to the contemporary sense of the self. Identities are continuously constructed and secured

> not only by facing the present and future but also by reconstructing the collectivity's earlier life. (22)

Indeed, Brathwaite's relationship to his own cultural history has evolved continuously throughout his long career, from its origins in his studies at a prestigious grammar school in Barbados and then at Pembroke College, Cambridge. Eyerman's conception of cultural trauma as involving a continuous process of constructing identities that are shaped by a collective memory of the past offers a sharp and perhaps welcome departure from the genealogy of trauma that traces its origins to Sigmund Freud in that the subconscious, which inherently resists investigation, cedes its pride of place to an accessible if somewhat vague conception of collective memory or identity. Theories of cultural trauma[3] may also supplement the paradigm of psychological trauma, which takes as its object the traumatized individual, by clarifying the manner in which the traumatic histories of communities affect the formation of the identities of those who feel connected to them. These connections need not be direct and may ultimately link figures like Rhys and Brathwaite as stakeholders in historical traumas, even if they trace their lineages to opposite sides of the perpetrator/victim divide.

Literary theorists concerned with complex texts set in one period, composed by authors writing in another, and critiqued, in the case of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in a third, may find it difficult to rely on conceptions of collectivities in any period that are presumed to have coalesced around an "identity." However, when the object of investigation shifts from a collectivity to a particular individual's conception of his or her relationship to his or her community, a reader may be better able to evaluate the influence that an individual's affiliations exercise on that writer's work. Brathwaite's frequent invocations of identity in *Contradictory Omens* arise from his personal negotiation with the hybrid identities of a variegated Caribbean. He seeks to articulate "[his] own idea of creolization" (25) in which identity is not received but asserted by the individual. Brathwaite generally uses "received" in a negative context, as that which is imparted by a colonial power over which the subject has little control, including cultural products

(Brathwaite, *Contradictory* 23), industrial goods (27), and education (37). In contrast, hybridity is not an objective condition but rather the result of an individual's interpretation of his or her relationship to his or her cultural and ethnic history. He writes: "Although there is white/brown/black, there are infinite possibilities within these distinctions and many ways of asserting identity. A common colonial and creole experience is shared among the various divisions, even if that experience is variously interpreted" (25). Brathwaite suggests that identity should be continuously interrogated by an individual with a stake in the region rather than simply assumed.

While Brathwaite sees identity as conditioning stakeholders' responses to texts, he never argues that commonality of race between a critic and a subject of inquiry confers an interpretive advantage. In contrast, an example of this other kind of thinking is contained in Laura Niesen de Abruna's essay "Twentieth-Century Women Writers from the English-Speaking Caribbean." She writes:

> [T]here is a political problem in looking to Rhys, a white Creole writer, for a representation of successful syncretism between black and white Caribbean women. . . . Although Rhys cannot claim fully to understand the "Otherness" of most West Indian women, because most are African-Caribbean rather than white Creole, she does seem able to return to the West Indian Bertha Mason the dignity taken away by Charlotte Brontë. (96)

Although Niesen de Abruna describes this problem as political rather than literary, it is important to interrogate her assumption that commonality of race connotes understanding (and collapses "otherness") even when, in this case, the object of investigation is the fictional character of Tia, an impoverished and illiterate girl living in a destitute community of ex-slaves on a plantation in the first half of the nineteenth century. While Brathwaite claims that the readings he and others produce are affected by their respective "derivations," he does not argue that these derivations imply a hierarchy of understanding.

Thus, Brathwaite disclaims objectivity in his writing on *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a consequence of his identity, and he implies that other Caribbean

critics of the novel would be subject to the same effect. If their identities were plural, then so too would be the totality of these readings of the text. He contrasts the diverse readings of Caribbean critics with those of "metropolitan critics who were impressed with its [the novel's] **fin-de-siècle** quality" (Brathwaite, *Contradictory* 34; emphasis in original). These critics were, in his view, indifferent to the historical context of the colonial era in which the novel is set and were instead motivated by a shared nostalgia for *Jane Eyre*:

> Among West Indian critics, on the other hand, there was no such unanimity, because here one's sympathies became engaged, one's cultural orientations were involved; one's perception of one's personal experience in its relationship to what one conceived to be one's history. It is dishonest, I think, to try to hold that it is possible to be an impartial critic in cases where one's historical and historically received image of oneself is under discussion. (34)

That Brathwaite is framing both black and white West Indians' historically received images of themselves within the real experience of cultural trauma *avant la lettre* may be seen in his discussion of Kenneth Ramchand who, in Brathwaite's view, "sees the novel as an illustration of the 'terrified consciousness' (the tag is from Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*) of white West Indians in a black West Indies" (34; emphasis in original). Certainly, non-Caribbean critics have produced diverse readings of *Wide Sargasso Sea* in the years since *Contradictory Omens* was first published. However, Brathwaite's insight into the effect of cultural trauma on critical writing remains fresh. When Brathwaite argues that it would be dishonest to insist on holding Caribbean critics to an inherently unattainable standard of impartiality, he disrupts a convention of scholarly discourse that rules out critics' personal histories as a legitimate topic of critical discussion.

As Brathwaite perhaps infelicitously puts it, expanding the study of "derivations" to call attention to the ethnicity of an individual who, in his view, was engaging in mimicry, is not without its perils, as may be observed in his disparagement of certain critics whose views he implies

are products of their ethnicities (34). Yet here, too, there is a distinction to be drawn. We may readily grant individuals' rights to invoke their cultural identities in their work but view speculation on the possible influence authors' unarticulated ethnic and cultural histories have on their writings to be unacceptable.

In order to appreciate the way that Brathwaite identifies Rhys with Antoinette and himself with Tia, as he later does (and as I shall describe) in the *Barbajan Poems*, it is useful to consider *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a trauma text, although one that does not follow the model of canonical European trauma texts, especially those set during the Holocaust, in which perpetrators and victims are opposed in both individual and collective binaries (Metz 1022–23). Tia is a perpetrator, but she is also a member of a group of victims: the impoverished, recently freed slaves on the Coulibri plantation. Antoinette is both a victim of psychological trauma and a member of a group of perpetrators: the white creole plantation owners. Psychological trauma and cultural trauma operate in opposing directions in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, as the victim comes from a group of perpetrators and the perpetrator from a group of victims. This opposition generates productive tensions; relationships between individuals and communities are revealed to be more complex and more fully contextualized within their specific histories than has been previously understood. Tia is not simply the instrument of Antoinette's psychological and physical wounds but a particular character who must be studied in the context of her relationship to her community's historical circumstances.

Authors, readers, and critics respond to texts and one another in modes that are inflected by their respective relationships to traumatic histories staged in the works that they write, read, and discuss. Critics should exercise ethical self-awareness of the influence that their identities have on their responses to the texts that they critique; they should also recognize that their dialogic partners are affected by their own identities. This is particularly the case in the investigation of trauma texts. In this regard, it may be helpful to think of texts in terms of a reading practice that Derek Attridge describes: "I do not treat the text as an object whose significance has to be divined; I treat it as something that

comes into being only in the process of understanding and responding that I, as an individual reader in a specific time and place, conditioned by a specific history, go through" (39–40). Cathy Caruth's principle that "[h]istory is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (24) is a call for dialogue between individuals who recognize and respond to the traumatic histories of the other.

II. Crosscurrents of Psychological and Cultural Trauma

In a pivotal moment early in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette rushes toward her friend, Tia, a black girl of about her age, for shelter as her family's estate, Coulibri, burns to the ground in a fire set by disgruntled ex-slaves. Tia responds by throwing a jagged stone at Antoinette's head, grievously wounding her and setting off a decline in her mental health that progresses throughout the novel, which ends just before her suicide. In this traumatic moment, Tia acts as a perpetrator. Through her willed act of violence, she transforms Antoinette into a victim who thereafter bears the psychological scars of her traumatization. However, as a member of a community that has suffered profoundly from slavery, racism, and economic exploitation, Tia is a victim of cultural trauma caused by the group to which Antoinette belongs. The traumatic moment in the narrative is precipitated by Antoinette's failed attempt to renounce her membership in this group of victimizers to join Tia's community of victims. Tia and Antoinette's reciprocal and opposing positions in the traumatic moment condition their responses to each other and the reader's response to the text.

Readers that connect their own personal histories with the traumas staged in the narrative may find the instabilities in the positions of victim and victimizer particularly fraught. Antoinette first hears Tia singing, "Go away white cockroach, go away, go away. . . . Nobody want you. Go away" (Rhys, *Wide* 13). Her racism and classism (not to mention manipulation and general nastiness) are a stunning reversal of the overwhelming reality of white-black relations in the colonial Caribbean. To gain some insight into Antoinette's experience with her friend, we must see Tia, in all of her complexity, through Antoinette's eyes in the traumatic moment:

> Then, not so far off, I saw Tia and her mother and I ran to her, for she was all that was left of my life as it had been. We had eaten the same food, slept side by side, bathed in the same river. As I ran, I thought, I will live with Tia and I will be like her. Not to leave Coulibri. Not to go. Not. When I was close I saw the jagged stone in her hand but I did not see her throw it. I did not feel it either, only something wet, running down my face. I looked at her and I saw her face crumple up as she began to cry. We started at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking-glass. (27)

In this moment, Antoinette and Tia each experience an overwhelming sense of loss, with Antoinette's blood and Tia's tears making the psychic wounds of each visible to the other. In transforming Antoinette into a victim, Tia becomes a perpetrator, but in doing so unavoidably wounds herself psychologically. Her act of violence disrupts the callous indifference she has developed toward all members of the group that has victimized her community. While Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's 1985 reading of the looking-glass as symbolic of Antoinette's narcissistic mirroring of herself onto Tia is perceptive and productive,[4] to see Tia only as a projection of Antoinette—to not see her at all—denies Tia agency as both perpetrator and victim and robs her of her human capacity to both experience and inflict suffering. Antoinette's traumatic memories retain excessive agency in her subconscious. As an individual, she's subject to classic psychological trauma. Our reading of this pivotal moment is affected by our various relationships to the cultural traumas that the respective communities of Antoinette and Tia exemplify.

In the dream narrative in the penultimate paragraph of the novel, Antoinette, renamed Bertha by her husband in an exercise of patriarchal domination, assumes the identity of the madwoman locked in the upper reaches of Thornfield Hall in *Jane Eyre*. She revisits the site of her original trauma in a dream just before she sets the hall alight with a candle and jumps to her death from its burning ramparts:

> The wind caught my hair and it streamed out like wings. It might bear me up, I thought, if I jumped to those hard stones.

> But when I looked over the edge I saw the pool at Coulibri. Tia was there. She beckoned to me and when I hesitated, she laughed. I heard her say, You frightened? And I heard the man's voice, Bertha! Bertha! All this I saw and heard in a fraction of a second. And the sky so red. Someone screamed and I thought Why did I scream? I called "Tia!" and jumped and woke. (Rhys, *Wide* 112)[5]

Tia's irruption into Antoinette's nightmare is recognizable as a manifestation of Antoinette's unassimilated traumatic memories of her separation from Tia through a violent act. Antoinette's experience is consistent with Caruth's characterization of "unclaimed experience," the term she coined to describe the manner in which traces of a victim's traumatic experience lie inaccessibly in his or her subconscious and manifest themselves periodically in nightmares, flashbacks, and repetition compulsions (59, 62).[6]

The nature of the representation of trauma, however, is less important for my purposes than its reception. Trauma readings must remain alert to the manner in which the ideological biases of the narrative may inhibit the reader's capacity to respond to complexities and instabilities in the protagonists' positions. Antoinette narrates the first part of *Wide Sargasso Sea* from the standpoint of a young girl who is unaware of the larger context of race relations on her plantation. The reader knows that Coulibri is falling into decline and can infer that the ex-slaves are suffering from their loss of employment on the plantation, but the text itself is not concerned with the general condition of the Jamaican ex-slaves for whom the promise of the Emancipation Act of 1833 has been betrayed.

Indeed, apart from her mother's apprehension that Mason's plan to import coolie labor might provoke a violent reaction among the ex-slaves, the historical circumstances of the ex-slaves is of scant concern to any of the white creoles in the novel. The white creoles' concern for their own travails, in contrast to their disregard for the ex-slaves' history of profound abuse and exploitation, is illustrated by Annette's appropriation of the word "marooned" (Rhys, *Wide* 10, 15), which she reorients from a touchstone of courageous black resistance to slavery to a

metaphor for her family's condition of social and physical isolation from the local white plantocracy. The reader's only glimpse of the general condition of slaves comes in a remark made by Christophine, Annette's longtime black servant, who expresses her disdain for neighbors who have managed to perpetuate the cruel abuses of slave owners in the post-slavery era: "They got jail house and chain gang. They got tread machine to mash up people's feet. New ones worse than old ones—more cunning that's all" (15). Significantly, Christophine addresses these remarks to Antoinette, who is not then in a position to fully absorb them, rather than to her mother.

Rhys thus demonstrates her awareness of the gross racist abuses that persisted after emancipation. Christophine's reflections on the failure of emancipation to change the realities of black lives on the plantations, in an aside to the reader, distinguish Rhys's awareness of the injustices of slavery and colonialism from her characters' indifference to them. Brathwaite does not argue that Rhys is racist or even that her novel is so flawed as to be unworthy of study; rather, he contends that it must be read as a product of white creole culture rather than as an expression of Caribbean culture or spirituality. *Contradictory Omens* argues that texts written from the perspective of the perpetrators of cultural trauma occupy a fraught position as exemplars of the literature of the historically oppressed. The questions Brathwaite poses challenge readers to scrutinize their responses to texts that lay bare historic racial fault lines between those groups that suffered cultural trauma and those that inflicted it.

III. Brathwaite and His Critics

Ironically, although Brathwaite disdained scholarly convention, his standing as a preeminent Caribbean intellectual made his judgment of the inadmissibility of *Wide Sargasso Sea* into the Caribbean canon unsettling. Had Brathwaite merely deplored the elision of Afro-Caribbean histories, his commentary would have passed without objection. However, in his attacks on Rhys, Kenneth Ramchand, and Walton Look Lai, he acts as an aggressor even as he positions himself as the inheritor of a traumatic history of Afro-Caribbean victims. Interpreting these

dual positions requires a nuanced reading practice for Caribbean trauma literature that recognizes how the respective positions of readers and critics condition their responses to trauma texts and one another.

For West Indian scholar Evelyn O'Callaghan, Brathwaite's judgment on *Wide Sargasso Sea* was particularly consternating: "Imagine my alarm then when, researching the work of Jean Rhys, I read Edward Kamau Brathwaite's statement. . . . Did this mean that I had to ditch Rhys from my project? Which writers could I legitimately include? Had I any right to my own opinion?" ("Jumping" 34). Elaine Savory, whose doctorate is from the University of the West Indies and who has worked on Rhys and Brathwaite over many years, is uneasy with Brathwaite's references to the race of scholars he critiques but wishes to put his debate with Peter Hulme, which focused heavily on the legitimacy of Brathwaite's discussion of the ethnicities of certain of Rhys' critics, in a more positive light: "Hulme's original essay and his reply (*Wasafiri* 20 & 23) both indicate his desire to circumvent race, as when he prefers Wilson Harris to Brathwaite on the grounds that Hulme reads Harris as being indifferent to the colour of the writer as long as the text is a Caribbean text" (33). Savory defends Hulme's position, but she gestures to Brathwaite's stature when she writes that "the Hulme-Brathwaite exchange will open the door to a more direct discussion of race in our work and in our times" (34). Since the Hulme-Brathwaite debate ended with each critic professing to be completely misunderstood by the other and denying the validity of the other's views, it is difficult to see how their dispute led to more constructive exchanges about race.

However, I contend that Brathwaite's *Contradictory Omens* does not construct an argument about *Wide Sargasso Sea* per se, but plays out his theory of what he calls "acculturation." If the only interest of the British cultural project is to subjugate local cultures to its own ends rather than to enter into dialogue with them, then the only useful response that Brathwaite foresees to the products of a culture bent on acculturation is to exclude them from the Caribbean canon. Thus, at the core of his critique of Look Lai's reading of the novel is his belief that "what really interests Look Lai about *Sargasso Sea* is not the deep subtle hopeless black/white 'West Indian' relationships . . . but the relationship between

creole and metropole- which was clearly Jean Rhys' concern also" (35; emphasis in original). Brathwaite argues that Look Lai, like Rhys, was investigating an English novel set in the West Indies, not a West Indian novel engaged in the central concern of the era in which the novel is set, the "hopeless black/white 'West Indian' relationship."

Perhaps in part because *Contradictory Omens*, a slim volume published in Jamaica, exists in relatively few libraries, critics fail to notice that the well known last line of the quotation with which I began this essay that refers to the "spiritual world on this side of the Sargasso Sea" is not Brathwaite's own language but a quotation from a work of Look Lai,[7] a historian at the University of the West Indies in Trinidad. Look Lai writes that "[Antoinette/Bertha's] own final realization that personal salvation, if it is to come at all, will come, not from the destructive alien embrace of Thornfield Hall, but only from a return—however difficult—to the spiritual world on the other side of the Wide Sargasso Sea" (qtd. in Brathwaite, *Contradictory* 38). Brathwaite slightly alters the last line in his notorious declaration, but he is drawn to Look Lai's imagery even as he opposes Look Lai's interpretation of Antoinette's suicide as an attempt to rejoin Tia in her spiritual home in the Caribbean. In his view, at best Antoinette could rejoin "the carefully detailed exotic fantasy of the West Indies" that, like the "cold castle in England . . . exist[s] inside the head" (36). In Look Lai's reading, Antoinette's jump is an affirmative and redemptive act.[8] Brathwaite writes, justly in my view, that Look Lai's reading "is hopeful and optimistic, but totally lacking in recognition of the realities of the situation" (*Contradictory* 38), by which he means the prevailing conditions of racial division in the West Indies.

Brathwaite's reference to "the realities of the situation" is not grounded in his textual interpretation of the novel and he does not propose a more realistic reading of the friendship between the girls or of the dream sequence at the end of the text. Rather, he dismisses the premise of the possibility of any fictional representation of friendship between two girls on opposite sides of the racial and ideological divide in the period in which the novel is set and in so doing negates it as a legitimate object of scholarly investigation. In Brathwaite's view, engaging with Rhys' text

on its own terms by entering into a debate about whether the friendship is portrayed credibly or whether it is plausible that the two girls would have met would legitimize Rhys' undertaking. In *Contradictory Omens*, he contends that white creoles have forfeited their access to the world of Caribbean spirituality not only by declining to participate in it but also by attempting to dominate it and replace it with their own culture. (Later, however, he considerably modified his position on Rhys and her work.)

Brathwaite's resistance in *Contradictory Omens* to the cultural products of white creoles extends to the writings of non-Afro-Caribbean scholars. Brathwaite disparages Look Lai as "a West Indian of Chinese derivation [who] is anxious to take the novel out of the boudoirs of the English critics and place it firmly in the West Indies where he maintains it belongs" (34). Look Lai, he suggests, shares the basic worldview of the metropolitan critics who see the novel as a fin-de-siècle romance. Although Look Lai argues that Antoinette has an authentic connection to the spiritual world of the Caribbean, he is more interested in her predicament within the framework of an English novel set in the West Indies than in engaging with the black West Indian world itself. Similarly, Brathwaite casts Ramchand, who was born in Trinidad, served in the Trinidadian government, and spent a large part of his career at the University of the West Indies, as "a critic of East Indian derivation, whose orientation is 'West Indian'" (34). Brathwaite's references to Look Lai's and Ramchand's racial identities have been the subject of endless protestations, most notably by Hulme, who argues that Brathwaite rejects aspects of their critiques of *Wide Sargasso Sea* on purely racial grounds ("Response" 49).[9] However, when read in the context in which they appear in *Contradictory Omens*, Brathwaite's provocations are best interpreted as performances of his outrage over the history of white creole involvement in the Caribbean. They illustrate his central point that critics' understandings of particular texts arise in specific cultural contexts. He advances the unremarkable proposition that critics, he included, read texts in which their own racial identities are at issue through the lens of their own "historical and historically received" images of themselves. However, when the debate is viewed through the lens of cultural

trauma theory, ordinary matters of interpretation may inflame wounds that arise from individuals' relationships to historical traumas to which they feel connected.

IV. Creolization, Acculturation, and Interculturation

Brathwaite's 1974 discussion of "orientations" and "derivations" in relation to Look Lai and Ramchand is best understood as a product of his model of "creolization" in which he offers a taxonomy of different cultural heritages, each grounded in a racial/ethnic identification: "My own idea of creolization is based on the notion of an historically affected socio-cultural continuum, within which (as in the case of Jamaica), there are four inter-related and sometimes overlapping orientations" (25).[10] For Brathwaite, derivation refers to race/ethnicity and is fixed, while orientation is a matter of culture that, although linked to race, is mutable. When Brathwaite refers to Look Lai as "a West Indian of Chinese derivation" and Ramchand as "a critic of East Indian derivation, whose orientation is 'West Indian,'" he is not proposing, as Hulme suggests, that their writings be discounted purely because of their races. Rather, he is accounting for their ethnicities, which he defines as countries of origin (44), in a monograph largely dedicated to exploring plural cultures. Indeed, as noted previously in Ramchand's invocation of Fanon to describe the trauma experienced by whites at the time of emancipation, Brathwaite credits Ramchand with identifying himself as a West Indian, thus transcending his ethnic derivation as East Indian (34).

Although Brathwaite clearly connects race to culture, he does so primarily in his historicization of an individual's understandings of his or her identity, or, as he puts it, "one's historical and historically received image of oneself" (34). He states his "conviction that we cannot begin to understand statements about 'West Indian culture,' . . . unless we know something about the speaker/writer's own socio-cultural background and orientation" (33). To interpret a particular statement about textual representation of "West Indian culture," the reader must be alert to the speaker's cultural history and orientation, his or her "directions, positions, assumptions and ideals" (25). However, although Brathwaite extols the intermixing of races, he does not include white creoles in the

admixture because he believes that they arrived in the Caribbean bent on dominating and enslaving it rather than entering into a relationship with it. He sees no positive outcome, at least in the post-Emancipation era in which *Wide Sargasso Sea* is set, of countenancing representations of that world that are authored by white creoles.

When critics cite Brathwaite's comments on white creoles as evidence of his racism, they duplicate the attitudes of the white creoles in *Wide Sargasso Sea* who see themselves as victims of racism and racially motivated violence rather than as perpetrators of such offenses, as history demonstrates. In *Contradictory Omens*, Brathwaite seeks to find a pathway out of the patterns of interracial animosity and black alienation that plague the Anglophone Caribbean.[11] He does so by diagnosing two alternative modes of creolization: acculturation, which operates by the imposition of European cultures onto Afro-Caribbean peoples and constitutes a form of epistemic violence, and interculturation, which is characterized by a dynamic and reciprocal mode of absorption of European cultural norms into a cultural intermixing that recognizes cultural hierarchies even as it undermines them.[12] Brathwaite blames acculturation, which he associates with white creoles, for turning racial groups living side by side into enemies who fight with one another for superior positions as imitators of white Europeans. In contrast, he imagines that interculturation will result in different racial groups opening themselves to horizontal influences as they together resist European cultural products.[13] Thus, Brathwaite declines to separate *Wide Sargasso Sea* from its status as a product of a white creole culture that created the Afro-Caribbean folk through captivity, transportation, and enslavement and then eradicated their culture and spiritual foundation through acculturation.

Having set forth these patterns of creolization, Brathwaite applies them to his reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea*: "With this in mind, we may now turn to the passage quoted above [a longer excerpt of Tia's wounding of Antoinette] by a white creole expatriate West Indian-born novelist, which purports to describe the feelings of a very sensitive white creole girl just after emancipation" (34). Brathwaite's disdain for Rhys betrays the psychic scars he carries from his personal identification with the Afro-Caribbean people victimized by white creoles, which he per-

forms when he writes that he will "always be attacked on this by those who don't want a blk norm for the Caribb" ("Post-Cautionary" 70). His lack of sympathy for the position of "a very sensitive white creole girl" like Antoinette must be understood in light of Rhys' seeming indifference to the incomparably greater suffering of innumerable black children.

If we understand Brathwaite in this way, we are more likely to make sense of his widely cited remark that "Tia was not and never could have been her [Antoinette's] friend" (*Contradictory* 36). If we remain mindful that Brathwaite's claim is based in ideology rather than on a close reading of the text, we may avoid interpreting it as a problem of realism, as Veronica Marie Gregg does when she immediately follows Brathwaite's quotation on the impossibility of the friendship with an archival letter from Rhys to Francis Wyndham in which Gregg reads Rhys as suggesting that she should have put Tia's aggression into a dream rather than in the straight narrative: "A lot that seems incredible is true, the obeah for example, the black girl's attack. I've [I'm?] stuck because it should have been a dream and I've tried to make it a realistic truth" (Rhys qtd. in Gregg 96). Rhys struggles with the idea that her readers might find some of her representations implausible. She suggests that they might have been more palatable to readers if they had been incorporated into a dream sequence rather than into straight narrative (which she terms "realistic truth"), but in my view the letter simply does not justify reading the text against the grain, if for no other reason than that the novel was then in manuscript form and Rhys could have revised it if she wished. (She writes, indeed, that "[p]art II is typed and *unrevised*" [Rhys qtd. in Gregg 214; emphasis in original]). Gregg, however, uses Rhys' letter to reconcile Brathwaite's discounting of the relationship between the girls with Rhys' authorial choices: "It is possible to argue that Rhys's comments and the textual and structural operations of *Wide Sargasso Sea* are not that far removed from Braithwaite's central assertion. Both writers and Rhys's text show that the relationship between the two functions as a dream truth, a kind of death, because a 'real' relationship would have been impossible" (Gregg 96). In Rhys' narrative, however, obeah was real, the two

girls were friends, and Tia did attack Antoinette—these passages may seem "incredible" to Rhys' readers, but they are integral to the narrative as it was written and fully intended by the author.

In any event, Gregg bases her argument on a fundamentally different mode of analysis than Brathwaite's and assumes his complaint is with the realism of the relationship. For Brathwaite, the problem is not whether a black child and a white child might play together (perhaps especially in Annette's household, which was in a state of disorder and was isolated from its upper class creole neighbors)—that is, whether the friendship was "realistic"—but rather whether the representation itself was permissible when authored by a white creole because it falsified the general conditions that prevailed on plantations in the period, which he reasonably saw as being characterized by the absolute social separation between races that was a consequence of white creoles' practices of racism and cultural domination. While we might sympathize with Gregg's motivation in wishing to show how her reading of the frontiers between straight and dream narrative sequences in the text might explain Brathwaite's discrediting of the premise of the relationship, the thrust of her argument domesticates and diminishes Brathwaite's analysis of acculturation in *Contradictory Omens*. Brathwaite believed the lack of realism in the Tia-Antoinette relationship stemmed from ideological barriers that could not be overcome by converting certain passages of straight narrative to dreams.

V. Cultural Trauma and *Marly, the Planter*

The strikingly categorical nature of Brathwaite's views on race in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is best understood by reading them in their context in *Contradictory Omens*, where they are immediately followed by an extended quotation from *Marly, or, The Life of a Planter in Jamaica Comprehending Characteristic Sketches of the Present State of Society and Manners in the British West Indies and an Impartial Review of the Leading Questions Relative to Colonial Policy*. Published anonymously in 1828, approximately a decade before the period in which *Wide Sargasso Sea* is set, *Marly* is so virulent in its racist treatment of blacks that if Brathwaite held it to be indicative of white creoles' attitudes in that era then his re-

sistance to the depiction of the interracial friendship between Antoinette and Tia is easily explained. Brathwaite writes:

> Tia was not and never could have been her friend. No matter what Jean Rhys might have made Antoinette think, Tia was historically separated from her by this kind of paralogue: [Quoting *Marly*] "There is, I must confess, an involuntary feeling apparently implanted in the breasts of white men by nature herself, that black men are a race distinct and inferior to those whom providence has blessed with a fair complexion. This distinction of colour forms, indeed, such an impassable boundary between these two races of mankind, that it would seem to countenance the general supposition that Providence [has decreed it] in the wise dispensation of earthly affairs." (*Contradictory* 36)

Thus the historical separation that Brathwaite saw as nullifying the pretext of friendship between the girls was a reflection of white, not black, ideology of the period which explicitly posited an "impassable boundary between these two races." In using the term "paralogue" (biologically equivalent), Brathwaite lets his readers know that he considers the virulent racism of that era to be universal and indelible. Brathwaite's curious formulation "[n]o matter what Jean Rhys might have made Antoinette think" (of course authors make their characters think various things) suggests that the racism of white creole society is so deeply ingrained that it trumps any other mode of thought Rhys may have intended for her character. Brathwaite's disinclination to tolerate even a fictional rendering of a friendship that crossed racial lines in the era in which *Wide Sargasso Sea* is set may be an effect of the logic of cultural trauma, in which falsification of the past is a matter of psychological import in the present.

In Brathwaite's reading of *Marly*, race and culture are synonymous on Caribbean plantations. Thus he does not interrogate the validity of *Marly*'s implied claim that all members of the plantocracy subscribe to a white supremacist ideology; nor does he contemplate the possibility that their racism could be, for some at least, a matter of degree. He relies on *Marly* to support his position that white creoles of that era, considered

as a group, were irredeemably and absolutely racist. I do not believe that Brathwaite, even when he was writing *Contradictory Omens*, intended to pass judgment on Rhys' text as an imaginative work; however, he clearly felt that the false optimism implied by Antoinette's admiration for Tia and Annette's reliance on Christophine was deeply and damagingly false.

Wide Sargasso Sea's relationship to history is both fraught and complex. Few critics hold Rhys' text to Brathwaite's highly debatable standards, which ask it to disallow a narratively indispensable friendship on ideological grounds. It is quite unlikely other critics would introduce an extended quotation from *Marly* to illuminate any aspect of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In fact, the relationship between Rhys' personal history and the text is notable for its complexity. Hulme reads *Wide Sargasso Sea* "as a 'compensation' for the ruin of [Rhys'] family at the time of Emancipation, [14] a compensation which occludes the actual relationship between that family history and the larger history of the English colony of Dominica" ("The Locked Heart" 76).[15] Historicizing the text is further complicated by its relationship to passages on colonial life in *Jane Eyre*, which is set in the decades before Emancipation. (A temporal disjuncture of more than a decade exists between the settings of the two novels.) From the standpoint of purely textual interpretation, most critics take for granted that Rhys' text should not be held to any standard of historical accuracy other than that which it claims on its own terms; indeed, Rhys consciously takes artistic license in all her historical representations (Ghosh-Schellhorn 179).

For these reasons, reading Brathwaite empathetically does not entail accepting the logic of his argument. His position as a victim of cultural trauma does not entitle him *ipso facto* to arbitrate which representations by which authors are permissible. However, the passages at issue must be read in the context in which they appear in *Contradictory Omens* so that a crucial distinction can be made: Brathwaite's purpose is not to break new interpretive ground in reading the novel. Rather, it is to illustrate his theory of acculturation. Within the context of the colonial ideology described in *Marly*, which Brathwaite considers absolute, the only conceivable relationship between two individuals on

opposite sides of the black and white divide is one of exploiter and exploited, or racist and victim of racism. In his response to Look Lai in *Contradictory Omens*, Brathwaite refers to "the deep subtle hopeless black/white 'West Indian' relationships" (35). For his purposes in that moment, narratives of friendship across the divide falsify the conditions of the ideology of the era, even if they are credibly portrayed within the context of a given text. As I discuss below, Brathwaite claims that these narratives partake of the same falsity as those of affectionate relationships between plantation mistresses and house slaves. For readers who identify themselves with the victims of slavery and see slave owners, including their families, as a class of perpetrators, falsely optimistic counter-narratives of the past carry the potential to reopen psychological wounds in the present.

VI. Dialogues of Misrecognition

In defending his writing on *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Brathwaite is motivated less by differences of interpretation than by feelings of being misunderstood and disrespected by his scholarly antagonists. In response to Hulme's critique of his use of "derivations," Brathwaite responds:

> This is an utter travesty of what I say in **CO** & what I represent—where I'm 'coming from, as they say, & where I goin. But this 'case' has been repeated so many times against me as if 'true', that I suppose it has now become part of 'post-colonial' folk culture! & I guess that I'll always be attacked on this by those who don't want a blk norm for the Caribb. . . . xcuse my **DUMBness** here but whenever p step into my sunlight I speak out. I regret that what I sayin might well start a whole nother round of RESENTMENTS . . . but p who step on others' countersongs & shadows never seem to NOTICE & don't like being TOLD that despite all the theory & bell-curve (perhaps because of it?) dem still behavin like Christofer Columbus & Prospero. . . . Hulme clearly has not read my work—certainly none of it since the parts on **WSS** he quotes. ("Post-Cautionary" 70)

Both the informality of his prose and the outrageousness of his attack on Hulme are striking. Brathwaite accuses Hulme of being motivated by a desire to deny that black Caribbean culture is normative, and by an assumption that blacks are unintelligent. He then links Hulme and other critics to the arch-perpetrators of the cultural trauma of colonization, Columbus and Prospero. By essentially equating opposition to his writing with a manifestation of racism, Brathwaite closes off dialogue even as he simultaneously voices a plaintive hope that his invective will clear the air and set the stage for discussion. He thus reveals acute sensitivities that may only be understood as the result of longstanding patterns of racism and colonialism. He experiences criticism as an assault that he quickly links to his and his opponents' respective positions: he becomes an exemplary victim and his opponents become exemplary perpetrators.

Hulme declines to engage Brathwaite in dialogue, drily replying that "Brathwaite's descriptions of Look Lai and Ramchand as of Chinese and East Indian 'derivation' clearly touched a raw nerve. There's not much I can say in response to the pyrotechnics that follow, since few of the fireworks relate to anything in my article" ("Response" 49). He adds that these "'derivations' don't make their readings of say, the Antoinette-Tia relationship either more or less convincing: they are irrelevant to such readings" (49). Hulme fails to consider for whom these questions are "irrelevant." They are obviously not irrelevant to Brathwaite, nor should they be to critics who wish to engage with him.

To some degree, the gulf between the two scholars arises from their respective attitudes toward the conventions of academic discourse. Brathwaite's hybrid texts incorporate informal and poetic language in articles that take the form of scholarly writing or, at least, appear in scholarly journals. Hulme derides Brathwaite's impassioned argument as being composed of "pyrotechnics" and "fireworks" that essentially ignore what he regards as the substance of his own article. Brathwaite accuses Hulme of not reading *Contradictory Omens* in its entirety. At the heart of their respective complaints of being misunderstood is each critic's lack of sympathy for the other's reading practice. Brathwaite considers ethnic and racial identities (his own, as well as those of authors

and critics) not only to be fair game, but also essential to situating himself with respect to others' writings; Hulme does not.

Brathwaite's response highlights the problem he faces in entering into a dialogue with a Western academic establishment that insists that any discourse, even on a Caribbean text, may only take place on its own terms. Thus Brathwaite, through his direct address to the reader ("xcuse my **DUMBness**") and his reference to the infamous bell curve, calls attention to attitudes of racial superiority he believes are harbored by white "XPAT" academics. Brathwaite is nothing if not fearless as he engages a topic that most would consider taboo: the attitudes of white scholars toward black Caribbean scholars. He mocks academic conventions, particularly the use of bibliographic references, through his playful use of elaborate citations to support his definition of the term "norm." He engages in consciously ungrammatical word play to mock Hulme's position as an authority on the Caribbean: "normally - normatively - brilliant much admired & enrichening scholar like Peter Hulme" ("Post-Cautionary" 70). He also seeks to reverse Hulme's disapproval of his invocation of racial identity by suggesting that critiques directed against him are motivated by racist attitudes. In his impassioned self-defense, Brathwaite assumes a "blk norm" for Caribbean culture in contrast to his nuanced consideration of race and culture in *Contradictory Omens* that rejects any norm other than one based on the creolization of plural racial groups.

To begin altering the dynamics of this exchange from one of mutual recrimination to one of meaningful dialogue, Western critics should grant Brathwaite the recognition he craves, at this point in his career, as a scholar and a victim. When he writes that it is "dishonest to try to hold that it is possible to be an impartial critic, in cases where one's historical and historically received image of oneself is under discussion," he makes the case that it is not only acceptable for him to invoke his own identity as an Afro-Caribbean in his criticism but also that it is ethically necessary. At the same time, no critic should feel compelled to follow Brathwaite's example. When authors, readers, and critics grant each other latitude to draw explicitly on their own experiences of cultural trauma in their textual investigations—or *not* to do so if they choose—

texts may become privileged loci for dialogic encounters of stakeholders in historical traumas.

VII. The Evolution of Brathwaite's Relationship to *Wide Sargasso Sea*

When later critics cite Brathwaite's challenge to the legitimacy of *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a Caribbean text, they typically fail to note that his views have long since changed. Perhaps ironically, by the time he wrote "A Post-Cautionary Tale of the Helen of Our Wars" in 1995, two decades after *Contradictory Omens*, Brathwaite had developed a considerable affection for Rhys and her novel, referring in the first sentence of his article to "Jean Rhys' great Caribbean novel, **Wide Sargasso Sea**" (69; emphasis in original), surely a graceful retraction of his notorious stance. In the rather obscure title of his article, he goes so far as to identify Rhys with Helen of Troy, an object of desire in whose name men fought one another.

In a remarkable passage in the article, Brathwaite reveals Tia's importance to his thinking in relation to Antoinette and himself, despite his earlier rejection of the creation of any black character by a white creole author. Brathwaite responds to what he believes is Hulme's willful misreading of his commentary on the Antoinette-Tia relationship:

> This is unfair. My point has always been THAT WE DON'T KNOW **WHAT** MIRANDA/Antoinette/Miss Ann IS FEELING AT ANY STAGE OF THE SLAVE/PLANTATION CONTINUUM because Prospero never wrote about her & is only now in the 1990s that she's beginning to write about herself (Kosage, Elaine Savory, Michelle Cliff, Marina Warner) in the tradition of Rhys of course & her cousin Phyllis Shand Allfrey
>
> What I'm saying is that is good to have Rhys' version **BUT THAT THAT VERSION/VISION IN RELATION TO TIA** (who we know something about as STARK - my blk Caliban sister) may be guilt or wishful thinking on JR's part & can be used by certain critics to create a sense of guilt in 'Tia'. But this

> is certainly not consonant w / the historical record . . . from 1834 to the PRESENT both here & say in S Africa where the Tia/Antoinette relationship has not essentially changed despite 'post-colonial' & 'post-apartheid' efforts to assume that things have since the post-colonialists - another Prosperean invention/ interrogation/intervention - want to operate in the Caribbean from the false, liard & hypo (also hyper) critical stance that things now OK & can therefore be written about from the point of view of neo-appropriation masked as (pseudo)-familial cultural equality & understanding - the **Tia = Antoinette** syndrome**.** which is what the whole wash of books on Rhys at least in Hulme's reading appears to thrive on - a false or NO knowledge of Caribb (or 'creole'.) 'reality' ("Post-Cautionary" 73; emphasis in original)

In a manner consonant with the spirit of the Caribbean Arts Movement that he helped found, Brathwaite reaches for a performance of his critical position that captures some of the syntax of informal Jamaican dialect. He thus pathologizes the attitudes of Western critics as grounded in the transfer of guilt from the perpetrators to the victims.

His attention to the underlying ethics of subaltern representations is reminiscent of Spivak's, although he locates the problem in the neocolonialist's "point of view of neo-appropriation masked as (pseudo)-familial cultural equality & understanding." His concern is that Western texts set in the Caribbean normalize a version of their authors' cultures in an environment that the Western authors deem post-racial. For Brathwaite, the central dynamic of colonial appropriation is one of acculturation, the process, as I implied, of cultural domination as an instrument of neocolonial power. In contrast, Spivak is concerned with the way in which cultural domination reinforces the construction of Englishness at home. Brathwaite is less interested in the internal dynamics of Englishness than with simply keeping it out of the Caribbean, except to the extent that it coexists in a relationship of mutual influence with Afro-Caribbean and other cultures, a proposition he views as unrealistic given the history of English involvement in the region.

Thus, Brathwaite more or less condemns the entirety of Western criticism on *Wide Sargasso Sea* as emanating from a postcolonialist mentality. He invokes South Africa under apartheid as an analogue to post-emancipation Jamaica to generalize his proposition that representations of friendship between races are inherently false and hypocritical in environments of pervasive institutionalized racism and discrimination. Rather than clarify historical oppositions between perpetrators and the oppressed, he argues, Western critics undermine them through counter-narratives of mutual recognition, as between Tia and Antoinette. At stake are not simply persistent inequities in the present but histories of slavery and apartheid that represent paradigmatic cultural traumas. Thus, Western critics who fail to historicize the text within the "historical record" are complicit in the injustices of the era in which the text is set. The connection he draws between Antoinette and Miss Ann makes clear his view of the inherent falsity of representations of friendly conduct by members of slaveholders' families toward black subjects. He suggests that critics who take such representations at face value are hopelessly, if not willfully, ignorant of the historical realities of white/black relations in Jamaica.

Brathwaite insists that Antoinette can only be written about from the slave master/victimizer's point of view (Prospero's) and he refigures Antoinette from her position as a victim (in the context of patriarchy as well as of racist ex-slaves) to, on the one hand, that of Miranda, the daughter who sought to domesticate Caliban on the unnamed island on which they are shipwrecked, and, on the other, to that of the false Miss Ann, the figure of the condescending white mistress, who lords over her black servants. Brathwaite provocatively, but not ungenerously, credits Rhys and Phyllis Shand Allfrey with inspiring a tradition of white creole writers who explore their own histories. He proposes that the "feelings" of the figure of Antoinette, as a white creole, will be revealed when these authors write about themselves—but that that action will not disclose anything real about Tia or any hypothetical friendship between the two. He emphatically rejects critics' reading into Tia any sense of guilt when he writes that Rhys' "version/vision in relation to Tia . . . can be used by certain critics to create a sense of guilt in 'Tia'" (73). He appears to refer

to Tia's tears after she has wounded Antoinette, but his use of quotation marks around Tia's name makes the question moot. Clearly, Brathwaite is happiest when white creole writers' works are interpreted only insofar as they illuminate the identities of white creoles; his invocation of the names of prominent Anglophone women writers, however, suggests his genuine respect for their work.

Perhaps most stunning in this article is Brathwaite's revelation of his personal investment in Tia, who, perhaps over the course of a lifetime of thinking about *Wide Sargasso Sea*, he has come to regard as a spiritual sister. When he writes that "we know something about [Tia] as STARK - my blk Caliban sister" (73), he identifies her with Stark, the sister he invented for Caliban in his too-little-studied *Barbajan Poems 1492–1992*. In this extravagant volume, Brathwaite lays out his own relationship to the long history of *The Tempest* in Caribbean literature:

> **Prospero**/the man who possesses us all
> **Miranda/** his motherless daughter
> **Antoinette** (out of Jean Rhys, Sargasso Sea)/his creole wife or daughter
> **Ariel**/the mulatto servant, Prospero's aerial or radar information/communication/media system, the Euro-orientated if nationalist victim-factor in the business (see Rodo, see Lestrade in DW's Monkey Mt)
> **Caliban**/Prospero's slave and symbol of the Caribbean rebel or more accurately wd-be rebel. A whole range of types develop out of this: the SAMBO/QUARSHIE, the ANANCY, the TACKY/SAM SHARP/TOUSSAINT LOUVERTURE/TOUSSAINT LEGBA rebels, the Cudjoe & GrandeeNanny or Palmares type Maroons, the Rastafari or Contemporary Maroons, the Bob Marley artistic & psychological Maroons; with all these personality types wrought or fraught with DICHOTOMOUS sometimes SCHIZOPHRENIC CONFLICTS (Mitt, Rhys, Fanon, DW, ?Michelle Cliff) result of the drama of 'creolization' (culturation, acculturation, deculturation,

> interculturation, reculturation, out & in
> culturation, culturation as ornament sometimes orNAMent
> etc etc etc)
> **Stark** /Sister Stark, Caliban's sister, is my own imagination's
> invention and although I have been thinking of her for some
> time now (History, Society & Ideas classes at the
> UWI/Mona) she did not walk clearly away from me until
> the October evening 1991 at NYU when I spoke of Paule
> Marshall's then new book, **Daughters** and recognized Stark
> in what Marshall was doing - the first time that the Plantation
> has a black woman w/ firm feet, sensitive/aggressive breasts
> and a space & plan if not always a room of her own She
> begins in James Carnegie's Mary (Wages Paid) and now makes
> her way in & through the wonderful efflorescence of STARK
> WRITING since Mary Prince since Mary Seacole since
> Walker since Morrison since Brodber since Kincaid since
> Condé since Walker since Carolivia Heron since Cynthia
> James/ to name only a few w/Stark appear other daughters of
> the dust (indeed, many of them appear symbolically in Julie
> Dash's 1992 Gulla/Geechee film, **Daughters of the Dust**)
> (*Barbajan* 316)

It is quite extraordinary that in this autobiographical *tour d'horizon* of his personal archive, intellectual itinerary, and pantheon of authors from whom he has drawn inspiration, Brathwaite promotes Antoinette, Rhys' creation, to the third place in his personal *Tempest*'s hierarchy. She is fully transformed from her position in Rhys' text as a victim of patriarchal oppression and realigned with the colonial master and perpetrator of cultural trauma, Prospero ("the man who possesses us all"), either as his wife (which would make her Miranda's mother) or daughter (and Miranda's sister). While Brathwaite does not make his thoughts on the significance of gender in women's writing explicit, he clearly celebrates it as a "wonderful efflorescence." Brathwaite names Jamaican James Carnegie, who depicted plantation life in *Wages Paid* (1976), but then adds ten consecutive women writers to a category he names for

his own creation, "STARK WRITING" a category he introduces in the *Barbajan Poems*. His grouping speaks to the flourishing of women's writing in the Caribbean in the 1990s, but he also identifies with women's double oppression. While it is difficult to be certain, I speculate that he finds black women's assertion of their places in Caribbean cultural life, their claim to a "room of [their] own," to be a necessary phase in the "drama of creolization" that resulted in the unwinding of acculturation.

His creation of Stark, whom he identifies with Tia, is a gesture of solidarity with the enslaved and victimized. Although Tia is Rhys' creation, and he might be thought to be appropriating her by adopting her as a sister, Brathwaite positions himself as able to understand her in a way her creator could not because both he and Stark/Tia are identified with Caliban, the dominated and enslaved. While he depends on Rhys to create Tia and credits her with having written "a great Caribbean novel," his underlying claim is that only he and those who have suffered like Caliban/Stark/Tia at the hands of Miranda/Anoinette/Miss Ann may claim spiritual kinship with Tia and represent her creatively.

More is at stake in this debate than the validity of particular representations in *Wide Sargasso Sea* or its inclusion in the Caribbean literary canon, a matter long since settled in the novel's favor. For European or American critics to engage fully with Brathwaite's writings or those of other Afro-Caribbean critics concerning *Wide Sargasso Sea*, they must acknowledge the cultural traumas that inevitably affect the outlook of Afro-Caribbean critics. They must scrutinize whether they are more prone to identify, perhaps unconsciously, with the position of the white creole losing some part of her privilege in that historical period than with the Afro-Caribbean subjects that were sacrificed to achieve it. Thus, although critical readers should not avoid sympathizing with the character on whom the narrative focuses, they should bring a heightened ethical awareness to the historical and cultural positions of all involved, including the author, themselves, and other critics.

Notes

1 By 1996, however, Brathwaite had termed *Wide Sargasso Sea* a "great Caribbean novel" ("Post-Cautionary" 63).

2 See Neal for an early and influential articulation of collective memory as the site on which "collective trauma" is registered (7–8).
3 The most comprehensive and provocative intellectual history of psychological trauma remains Leys' *Trauma: A Genealogy* (2000).
4 Spivak sees Tia as a failed mirroring of Antoinette, "the other that could not be selfed, because the fracture of imperialism rather than the Ovidian pool intervened" (250). Spivak acknowledges the point as "difficult" and returns to it, but in her reading Tia has no more autonomy than Narcissus' reflection in the myth that Spivak invokes.
5 This passage has been the focus of sustained scholarly investigation. Niesen de Abruna sees Bertha's jump as liberatory and her apparent resolve to seek "connectedness with Tia" a successful act of revenge against Rochester, who had locked her in a "baronial cage" (Niesen de Abruna 96).
6 Caruth's paradigm has received its share of critiques, perhaps most notably from Leys, who faults Caruth's reading of the Tancred story in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Leys is concerned that Caruth's understanding of trauma as being "unlocatable" and transmissible destabilizes the position of the victim and opens the door to turning "perpetrators into victims too" (297). More recent critics, including Mandel, have cast doubt on the doctrine of "unspeakability" that arises from Caruth's articulation of traumatic memory as fully interred in the subconscious and therefore unavailable for representation. Still, the central insight of psychological trauma theory—that victims bear unassimilated traumatic experiences in their subconscious that disrupt their experiences of the present—remains secure. In part because *Wide Sargasso Sea* was published before the works of Caruth, Felman, and others, it is a particularly valuable site for the study of psychological trauma since Rhys could not have constructed her characters to fit what has become a widely circulating knowledge of post-traumatic stress disorder symptomology.
7 Brathwaite refers to Look Lai both in his text and his footnotes as "Wally Look Lai" rather than "Walton Look Lai," the name under which Look Lai publishes. It may well be that Brathwaite knows him and uses his accustomed informal form of address in *Contradictory Omens* simply because it is familiar to him. To my knowledge, critics generally refer to Look Lai as Wally when they discuss Brathwaite's reference to his ethnicity, which suggests that they are simply using widely circulated quotations from works whose contents and contexts they have not independently investigated in the original. This small moment of misrecognition may illustrate the problem of using interpretations of the original text rather than the original text itself.
8 Indeed, Niesen de Abruna later reads the passage similarly (see note 5).
9 For a further account of Hulme's argument on this point, see pages 11–12 of O'Callaghan's *Woman Version*.

10 These are, in the first instance, European, Euro-creole, Afro-creole (or folk), and creo-creole or West Indian. He notes two additional orientations: East Indians and Chinese "who came after the first main stage of creolization" (25).

11 Essentializing in a manner that contemporary readers may find rather shocking but which recalls Fanon's *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952), he writes that "[t]he Negro has a deep contempt, as has been said, for all that is not white; his values are the values of white imperialism at its most bigoted. The Indian despises the Negro for not being an Indian; he has, in addition, taken over all the white prejudices against the Negro" ("Contradictory" 49).

12 The summary in this paragraph draws on page 30 of Pollard.

13 Brathwaite's vision of interculturation was influenced by the Caribbean Arts Movement (Walmsley).

14 Rhys' own forebears on her mother's side, the Lockharts, owned the estate on which Coulibri is modeled, which was burned to the ground by arsonists. For Rhys' own description of her family history and her childhood in Dominica, including her own experience of being hated by blacks, see pages 33–35 of her 1981 autobiography.

15 Hulme's title, "The Locked Heart: Wide Sargasso Sea," seems to be a play on the Lockhart family name. This passage is quoted by Walmsley, whose reading also discounts any presumption of historical specificity in the novel and instead prefers "an ideological rather than psychological basis for the post-Emancipation setting of the novel" (115). She writes that "*Wide Sargasso Sea* can be seen to re-conceptualize the West Indian Emancipation of Slavery of the 1830s and, by implication, the West Indian decolonization of the 1960s, through a modified, high modernist lens that looks back to Nietzsche" (115).

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