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When Texts Collide: The Re-Visionist Power of the Margin

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IN CONTEMPORARY THEORY and literary thought, the term *marginal* usually carries with it a strong negative connotation. The marginal is that which is oppressed and dominated by the master discourse of society; it is that which is silenced and limited by the power structure of the (white, male, heterosexual) hegemony. To be marginalized is to be displaced, denied. The margin is a space of powerlessness and restriction.

In her article “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness,” bell hooks suggests an alternate way of thinking about the margin. For hooks, the margin is a “space of radical openness ... a profound edge” (149). It is in this space that “one can say no to the colonizer, no to the downpressor.” It is a “position and place of resistance ... for oppressed, exploited colonized people.” Seen in this way, the margin is not a place one wishes “to give up or surrender as part of moving into the center—but rather ... a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one’s capacity to resist. It offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds” (150). In other words, the margin becomes a position of strategy, not essence. A person in the margins is outside the definitions imposed by the master discourse, just as the margin of a book lies beyond the words; she has the ability both to define herself and to gain a new perspective on society as a whole. A person in the margins is outside the usual categories, definitions, and binaries of society; not “Self” or “Other,” not “Black” or “White,” she develops and articulates instead her own subjectivity and identity, her own highly personal sense of the world (153). For hooks, it is necessary to find such a space in order to lead a life of resistance; it is the margin in “which I come to voice—that space of my theorizing” (146). hooks states that the speech of resistance she voices from her marginal space is aimed at transforming society into a “space where there is unlimited access to the pleasure and power of knowing, where transformation is possible” (145). The marginal space is a personal version of this utopian space; the pleasure and power and transformation are limited there, but they are under individual control.

Key to this concept is the fact that the margin as a place of resistance must be consciously chosen and maintained. To see the margin only as a place of deprivation is to give in to despair. It is not a safe place; the center is always
trying to contain the margin, to bring it under the power of definition and limitation. “Everywhere we go there is pressure to silence our voices, to co-opt and undermine them” (148). In order to maintain marginal status, it is necessary to have a voice, to speak from that place of personal vision. This speech from the margins is the counter-language, which “may resemble the colonizer’s tongue, [but] has undergone a transformation ... been irrevocably changed” (150). This is the counter-language of hooks’s theory and criticism; it is the counter-language which enables the marginalized person to define herself in her own terms and express the radical perspective the margin allows.

For hooks, then, the margin is a chaotic space of creativity and power. It is contrasted with the “center,” a place of hierarchy, of race, sex, and class domination, the source of oppression, definition and limitation. This concept of the margin as a space of radical possibility for re-vision and individual identity is a powerful one for the reading of literature. In this paper I will use hooks’s idea of the margin to explore Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*. I will begin by examining some of the characters and situations of each novel, using this as a key to a discussion of the complex relationship between the two texts.

A close reading of the opening chapter of *Jane Eyre* provides what is in many ways a perfect illustration of the powers and dangers of the margin as hooks thinks of it. As the chapter opens, young Jane is clearly in a subservient position within the Reed household; her heart is “saddened and humbled” by the treatment she receives at their hands (5). She is excluded from their gathering in the drawing-room by the word of Mrs. Reed. Jane is, in this small universe, the most marginalized person, with less power than even the servants. And yet she manages to find some degree of power in that margin. She finds, first of all, a critical voice; her first speech in the text (“What does Bessie say I have done?” [5]) is made to question a judgment issued against her. The immediate move of Mrs. Reed is to silence that voice in the name of the power it threatens: “there is something truly forbidding in a child taking up her elders in that manner. Be seated somewhere; and until you can speak pleasantly, remain silent” (5).

Expelled from the group, Jane immediately seeks to find her own place of solitude, “a small breakfast-room” (5). Gayatri Spivak has pointed out that this space is “triply off-center”; not quite a drawing-room, not quite a dining room, not quite a library. Jane takes her marginalization one step further by climbing into the window seat and drawing the curtain. Thus sealed off into a private space (“I was shrined in double retirement” [Bronte 5]), Jane enters and expresses her “self-marginalized uniqueness” (Spivak 246). In this space, Jane studies a book; but she “still preserves her odd privilege, for she continues never quite doing the proper things in the proper place. She cares little for what is meant to be read: the ‘letter-press.’ She reads the pictures.” Indeed, both the pictures in the book and the scene outside her window are open to Jane’s own reading, able to be “deciphered by the unique creative
imagination of the marginal individualist” (Spivak 246). Like hooks’s marginal resister, Jane has found new possibilities for vision. She is under the power of no other mind: “Of these death-white realms I formed an idea of my own: shadowy ... but strangely impressive” (Bronte 6).

In this marginal space, Jane is happy and fears “nothing but interruption” (7). It comes in the form of John Reed, who though only a few years older than Jane is the sole male of the household and therefore a representative of the patriarchal power which oppresses her. His first move upon entering the room is to impose upon Jane a new name: “‘Boh! Madame Mope!’ cried the voice of John Reed” (7). Here again we see evidence of what bell hooks argues throughout her article, that “[l]anguage is also a place of struggle.” The struggle between John and Jane—the struggle between any oppressor and any marginalized person—is to a large degree the struggle for language, for the right and ability to name and define oneself.

Jane’s marginal status is initially enough to protect her from John; “he was not quick either of vision or conception” (7). He finds her out, however, through the intervention of Eliza. It would perhaps be overreading this text to suggest that Eliza is able to locate Jane because she herself, as a female in a patriarchal world, is somewhat marginalized. Be that as it may, the very fact that Jane can comment on John’s weaknesses hints at the perception possible from the margin. Once found out Jane surrenders her space voluntarily, “for I trembled at the idea of being dragged forth by the said Jack” (7). With this move, Jane continues to insist on her right to determine herself as far as possible; the margin is not only a physical space, but a conceptual one.

Once exposed, Jane once again makes her discontent clear through her voice: “‘What do you want?’ I asked, with awkward diffidence” (7). And once again, the figure of authority immediately moves to correct that voice: “‘Say, “what do you want, Master Reed?”’ was the answer” (7). John finds it necessary that Jane have the “correct” view of him, and works to impose that view. “He bullied and punished me ... continually” (7). In this passage Jane resists passively, with inner speech; as John torments her she thinks of his gluttony and his mother’s hypocritical blindness to it. “I mused on the disgusting and ugly appearance of him” (8). Even this inward resistance, however, is risky: “I wonder if he read that notion in my face; for, all at once, without speaking, he struck suddenly and strongly” (8). Here we see the danger of the margin, for the center is always in a position of more power. John’s stated reasons for the blow all have to do with Jane’s marginal methods of resistance: “‘That’s for your impudence in answering mamma a while since ... and for your sneaking way of getting behind curtains, and for the look you had in your eyes two minutes since, you rat!’” (8).

John’s next speech is telling, for it illustrates the power the center gains by controlling language. “‘You are a dependent, mamma says; you have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg, and not live here with gentlemen’s children like us’” (8). At the same time he sets forth his own power: “‘all the house belongs to me, or will do in a few years’” (8). Jane’s
powerlessness and John’s power are contained and enabled by the words he speaks; his control of the field of language allows him to establish what she is and what he is. Thus we see the importance to the marginal resister of developing a counter-language; it is perhaps the most important field of struggle.

Jane bursts into this struggle of language violently after John’s next attack: “‘Wicked and cruel boy!’ I said. ‘You are like a murderer—you are like a slave-driver—you are like the Roman emperors!’” (8). Note here that Jane turns the very power of language that John has used against him, defining him in her own terms (she “had formed [her] own opinion of Nero, Caligula, &c”; my emphasis). It is a use of language that she has developed and nurtured in her space on the margins, and it enables her to return the aggression directed against her. It is also, however, a very risky move: “I had drawn parallels in silence, which I never thought thus to declare aloud” (8). Indeed, John’s response is to call down instantly a source of Law higher than himself—mamma—and then launch a physical attack. The chapter closes with the voicing of another unfair accusation against Jane (“‘What a fury to fly at Master John!’” [9]), but now she is powerless to resist in any way, for her voice is silenced by the physical power of the oppressor. The margin provides great opportunities for fresh viewpoints and expressions—but that is the only power it has.

It is the power that Jane will employ throughout the book. It is her strong sense of herself, beyond the reach of any authority to destroy it, that sustains her through her trials. Consider, for example, the scene in Thornfield Hall in which Jane is forced to be present at a party of her “betters,” including the woman Rochester is supposedly in love with. Jane arranges herself so that “the window curtain half hides me”; as so often, she wishes to “see without being seen” (152, 145). The position echoes her marginal space from the first chapter. She is “part of the whole but outside the main body” (hooks 149). From this position she is able to see clearly the characters and motives of the people arranged before her; speaking of Blanche Ingram, Jane observes that “she appeared to be on her high-horse tonight; both her words and her air seemed intended to excite not only the admiration, but the amazement of her auditors” (157). Jane can see clearly the hypocrisy and poses of the powerful people in front of her; she can describe them in her language of resistance. She is not dazzled by them, as Adele is. Again, there are dangers in this marginal position. When the ladies present offer a vigorous attack against governesses, Jane is powerless to defend herself. The words do not really touch her, however, she has a language of her own to counter it, and at least now she need not fear the violence John Reed employed.

Despite the potential for resistance Jane finds in the margin, she abandons it in order to marry Rochester and enter the center. It is true that this is not a complete surrender of her own individuality, “because I am my husband’s life as fully as he is mine” (396). Still, she has become, in the language of the patriarch, “bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh” (397; my emphasis). This
is undoubtedly meant as a happy ending, but it is one which “terminates the story by locking away the female protagonist in the paternal house” (Hite 39). The marriage marks the end of the book and thus the end of Jane’s individual, resistant voice; *Jane Eyre* ends when Jane Eyre disappears, to be replaced by Jane Rochester.

Another aspect of the book is still more troubling than Jane’s surrendering of her power, however. This is the treatment of Bertha Mason Rochester, the other woman who gives up her name for Rochester’s. As Hite notes, Jane wins Rochester at Bertha’s expense; “Bertha’s incarceration allows Jane to fall in love with Rochester; Bertha’s escape terminates Jane’s engagement; Bertha’s death enables the marriage that constitutes the happy ending” (39). Bertha is even less empowered than Jane is; she is limited not only by her status as woman, but also by her “insanity” and by the fact that she is “a figure produced by the axiomatics of imperialism” (Spivak 247).

Unlike Jane, Bertha is never allowed to come to voice from her marginal position (and her physical position, confined in the blocked-off attic of a country home, is very nearly the epitome of *marginal*). Instead the text seeks to contain and define Bertha through language, just as John did to Jane, only through language that is even harsher and less permissive. Bertha is silenced not only by Rochester, but also by the text. One of the first descriptions of her comes when Jane tells Rochester of Bertha’s visit to her bedside. Jane draws not a woman, but a fiend: “‘It was a savage face. I wish I could forget the roll of the red eyes and the fearful blackened inflation of the lineaments ... the lips were swelled and dark; the brow furrowed; the black eyebrows raised over the bloodshot eyes’” (249). When Rochester takes Jane to see Bertha after their aborted marriage, the language is even more bestial: “a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it grovelled, seemingly on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal ... a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face” (257-58). Note the persistent use of *it*; the text here denies Bertha even the minimal identity of human. Indeed, Bertha has no identity, no true self; she is simply *other*, defined only and always by the center. Rochester gets to tell his side of the story of their marriage, but Bertha does not even have a voice in which to express hers. Rochester announces the text’s attitude toward her: “‘Let her identity ... be buried in oblivion’” (272). Even Bertha’s final acts, the destruction of Thornfield Hall and her suicide (which are not shown, but only described later), are presented not as deliberate acts of resistance but as the random madness of a lunatic.

More than a century later, Jean Rhys wrote *Wide Sargasso Sea* in an attempt to clear away oblivion and blame and give a voice and identity to the beast-woman in the attic. Her book has much to say about the powers and dangers of the marginal position. It is itself drawn from the margins, in more ways than one. The story of *Wide Sargasso Sea* comes from literal margins, from the gaps and spaces between words in Rochester’s story of Bertha. It
comes also from the marginal space created by oppression, for it is a book written not only about but by a colonized woman. The relationship between *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* is complex, and is tied up with the character of Bertha—who is reborn in Rhys’s text as Antoinette. Rhys’s book, however, has lessons about marginality which stand apart from its relationship with the earlier work; before turning to the intricate question of Bertha/Antoinette, I would like to examine some of the book’s other characters and how they react to being on the margin.

Rhys’s characters are all, to some extent, marginalized. Jane, though a moneyless woman, was at least English; the characters in *Wide Sargasso Sea* are marginalized by their color, by their sex, by their status as colonized persons and commodified persons. Yet some of them manage to find the power and possibilities of the margin despite this. Primary among these is Christophene. The novel opens with a scene of marginalization that involves her: “They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did. But we were not in their ranks. The Jamaican ladies had never approved of my mother, ‘because she pretty like pretty self’ Christophene said” (17).

Here, obviously, “they”—the white people—form the center, the hegemonic power structure of the society. “We”—at the moment uncertain, but later identified as Antoinette and her family—are the marginalized, literally pushed outside of the “ranks.” Out of this margin comes the voice of Christophene, the first speaker of the novel, to comment on and interpret the actions of the center. Like Jane, she sees through deceit and hypocrisy because she stands outside it. In her reading of this passage, Spivak notes that all of the students she has taught the book to “stepped over this paragraph without asking or knowing what Christophene’s patois, so-called incorrect English, might mean” (252). It means, of course, that Christophene has one of the true signs of the resister, a counter-language. But this language is not confined to patois, as we will see.

Christophene, despite her status as servant, black, and woman, has power in this text. Spivak claims that “taxonomically, she belongs to the category of the good servant rather than that of the pure native” (252). I believe, however, that it would be a mistake to assign Christophene to any mere category; she will only transcend it, just as, we will see, she transcends the text itself. The first sign of her power is the respect and even fear she evokes in the other blacks. She has her own marginal place, a house somewhere near Granbois where she is no one’s servant but her own. The very confusion over the location of the place is a sign of its power; it is beyond the power of the authority to locate and incorporate. It is the place where she has power, where she can practice the forbidden obeah. Indeed, the voice of the Law, as expressed in a letter to Rochester, is uncertain of her very name: “Josephine or Christophene Dubois, some such name” (143). It is Christophene that Antoinette turns to in her moments of crisis. From her marginal position Christophene can see clearly the plight Antoinette is in, a plight she herself knows enough to avoid: “All women, all colours, nothing but fools. Three
children I have. One living in this world, each one a different father, but no husband, I thank my God. I keep my money. I don’t give it to no worthless man”” (109-10). Christophene thanks not the God of the patriarchy, the God of the oppressor, but her God. She refuses to be defined as either “mother” or “wife,” the two roles society would most highly approve of for her. By so refusing she maintains her own power, here expressed as money.

It is during her climactic confrontation with Rochester that the full powers and vulnerability of Christophene’s position are demonstrated. Throughout the conversation Christophene insists that she knows—she knows what has happened, what will happen, what Rochester has thought, what he will do: “’You young but already you hard. You fool the girl. You make her think you can’t see the sun for looking at her.’” Her words carry the power of truth: “It was like that. [Rochester] thought. It was like that. But better to say nothing” (152). He cannot escape “her judge’s voice” (153). The power of the margin comes not from physical power, not from threats or money or the Law, but simply from seeing and knowing. For a time, indeed, Rochester’s interior voice can only echo Christophene, confirming her vision and her condemnation. “I should stop this useless conversation, I thought, but could only listen, hypnotized, to her dark voice coming from the darkness” (156). Christophene’s voice comes from the margin, which is dark to Rochester because he has rejected it; he cannot see her because she lies beyond his (the center’s) definitions. He has, after all, been mistaken about Christophene from the beginning: “I looked at her sharply but she seemed insignificant” (72).

The greatest moment of Christophene’s power comes at the end of this conversation, just before she exits the text:

“I said loudly and wildly, “And do you think that I wanted all this? I would give my life to undo it. I would give my eyes never to have seen this abominable place.”

She laughed. “And that’s the first damn word of truth you speak. You choose what you give, eh? Then you choose. You meddle in something and perhaps you don’t know what it is.” She began to mutter to herself. Not in patois. I knew the sound of patois now. (161)

The muttering here represents Christophene’s true language of resistance, beyond the English-based patois. It is evidently a language with power, for this passage hints that Rochester’s blindness in later life can be traced to this moment. Still, though this conversation reveals Christophene’s powers, it also demonstrates that they have limits: faced with the threat of the Law, she has no choice but to retreat. The power of the margin is an individual power; it can hope to effect only gradual change in the hegemony of the center. It is worth noting that Rochester can only enact this threat by reading aloud to her from a printed text; unlike Christophene, he needs a society at his back, the strength of the master discourse, to impress his adversary.

Given the power that Christophene obviously wields, some critics have found it difficult to account for her abrupt departure from the text at the end of this conversation: “’Read and write I don’t know. Other things I know.’
She walked away without looking back” (161). Gayatri Spivak reads this as Christophene being “simply driven out of the story, with neither narrative nor characterological explanation or justice” (253). I read this passage differently, as being related to the very nature of text and margin. I would argue that Christophene’s ability to walk out of the text—to return to the margin—is another mark of her power. Her final statement could serve as a summary of the margin: “Read and write [the master discourse, the language of the oppressor] I don’t know. Other things [the truth and vision of the margin] I know.” She is not driven out of the story; she walks out under her own power and for her own reasons. She has failed to save Antoinette, but she preserves herself—and Antoinette is doomed anyway, by the “read and write” that is Jane Eyre. By walking out, Christophene is denying Rochester the power to contain and define her as he has done to Antoinette.

There is another figure in Wide Sargasso Sea who is intricately tied into questions of the margin, but who is largely overlooked by critics: Sandi. Antoinette’s cousin appears only twice in brief scenes in the course of the novel, but he seems to carry a much greater weight than a page count would indicate. The first time he appears, to save the young Antoinette from a pair of bullies, he seems almost a superhero: “He had long legs, his feet hardly touched the ground. As soon as they saw him, they turned and walked away” (50). In the midst of all the cruelties Antoinette suffers this savior stands out sharply, yet we are told very little about him: “His name was Sandi, Alexander Cosway’s son. Once I would have said ‘my cousin Sandi’ but Mr Mason’s lectures had made me shy about my coloured relatives” (50). Sandi, then, is himself a marginalized figure in this society.

Sandi’s second appearance occurs during a flashback after Antoinette has reached England. She remembers him coming to see her, and asking her to go away with him. He does not want to leave her because she is unhappy. They have evidently seen each other when Rochester was away. “We kissed each other … that was the life and death kiss and you only know a long time afterwards what it is, the life and death kiss” (185-86). What has happened in the intervening years to turn Sandi from a relative Antoinette barely knows into someone very close, someone who represents her last chance for escape? The text does not answer this question; it barely provides enough information to make the question possible. We know what Rochester thinks; when he learns of the visit he calls Antoinette “Infamous daughter of an infamous mother” (186). Daniel Cosway also hints at a sexual relationship between Sandi and Antoinette, but there is ample reason to distrust Daniel (125).

It is precisely the lack of information about Sandi that makes him such an interesting figure. His relationship with Antoinette is uncertain, and therefore undefined; it is made up of possibilities, which are more powerful than certainties. Her relationship with Sandi is one aspect of Antoinette that the text cannot contain or define. This puts it in sharp contrast with Jane Eyre, where Bertha is entirely contained by the power of the text. Sandi is not just marginal in terms of the society he lives in; he is also marginal in terms of the
text that mentions him, but cannot contain him. After each of his appearances he slips again into the space between words. His potential as a figure of resistance comes from this very failure of the text to control him.

The flip side of this coin is Daniel Cosway. Where Sandi refuses to be defined by the standards of society, Daniel is only too happy to play the role assigned to him. In his letter he displays a consciousness of matters of class and position that “Mr Mason’s lectures” are needed to give Antoinette: “But they are white, I am coloured. They are rich, I am poor” (97). He throws these things in Rochester’s face: “‘A tall fine English gentleman like you, you don’t want to touch a little yellow rat like me’” (125). Daniel’s existence is defined by these divisions, by the illegitimacy of his birth. Rather than finding a place to stand for himself, he remains forever embittered by and struggling to overcome something that happened before he was born. Daniel is marginalized by society, but he has not become empowered by his position. This is because he has not used it to discover his individual self; rather, he echoes the sentiments of society, desiring to bring to himself power and money. Unlike Christophene, his words do not carry the power of truth; every other character suspects and distrusts him. His speeches about Antoinette ring the same note that Rochester will sound in Jane Eyre: “‘It’s lies she tell you. Lies. Her mother was so’” (125).

This brings us to one of the two central figures of Wide Sargasso Sea, Rochester. That identification of the character, however, is problematic. As many critics have noted, Rhys’s text denies Rochester the patriarchal name which is the very token of social dominance and generational power; in Wide Sargasso Sea, the character corresponding to Rochester is never referred to by name. This is, I think, a crucial point. By denying the character his name, Rhys denies his identity and his place in the order of the master discourse. It is possible to see a kind of poetic justice here: Antoinette/Bertha is denied an identity in Jane Eyre, instead being defined simply as the animalistic other; Rochester is denied identity in Wide Sargasso Sea and becomes simply “the white man.” In this text, Rochester (it is convenient to refer to him so) represents the center that defines surrounding marginal spaces. However, he himself has been expelled from that center; because of his status as second son he is himself marginalized. All this is symbolized by the loss of his name. In the master discourse, the Name is the Law. Rochester has been wiped clean; Wide Sargasso Sea is, in part, the story of how he reacts.

His initial impulse is toward bitterness and resignation: “so it was all over, the advance and retreat, the doubts and hesitations” (65). During the journey to Granbois and the early part of the second section of the book, he alternates between this kind of negative emotion and a more positive feeling; at moments he seems open to the possibilities his new marginality provides. Perhaps the most significant of these moments comes when the party crosses the river that marks the boundary of Granbois: “She smiled at me. It was the first time I had seen her smile simply and naturally. Or perhaps it was the first time I had felt simple and natural with her” (71). This is the first sign
that Rochester might be willing to live on the margins, to follow Antoinette’s lead. But even here he has a tendency toward center-style thought, categorizing and defining: “Looking up smiling she could have been any pretty English girl” (71).

Telling, too, are some of Rochester’s reactions to the house at Granbois. He is at first pleased to discover “a small writing-desk with paper, pens, and ink” (74). These things indicate for Rochester all the things he has left behind; discourse, the Word, the Law, the center. He is prepared to consider the place “a refuge.” This feeling lasts only until Baptiste, one of the servants, interrupts him to bring a blanket. He “went away. But the feeling of security had left me” (75). Baptiste has reminded Rochester of where he really is. This is immediately followed by a sharp reminder of his marginal status: “on the last shelf, Life and Letters of ... The rest was eaten away” (75). He cannot be comfortable in this marginal place: “I wondered how they got their letters posted” (76).

Despite Rochester’s bitterness over the “lies” Daniel Cosway reveals to him, it is he who has been dishonest with Antoinette from the start. In a flashback he recalls how she threatened to call off the wedding. His reaction places his value system firmly within the concerns of the center, the patriarchy: “this would indeed make a fool out of me. I did not relish going back to England in the role of rejected suitor jilted by this Creole girl” (78; my emphasis). Note the emphasis here on the part one plays, the place one takes; unlike a marginal person who can define himself, Rochester, with his essentially center-based ethics, can only take one of the parts that society decrees is open to him. This account of his feelings contrasts sharply with that he offers Antoinette: “I’ll trust you if you’ll trust me. Is that a bargain? You will make me very unhappy if you send me away” (79). Here Rochester can only express his desires in terms of a bargain, an exchange; once again this emphasizes the fact that Rochester is essentially a person based in the power/commodity value system of the center. He cannot look at the world from a marginal standpoint and see it, and himself, in a fresh way. Like Daniel, he cannot define himself apart from the role society has prepared for him. Antoinette protests that “you don’t know anything about me,” but he thinks he knows enough; he knows her class, her status, her fortune. In his world, that is enough; emotions, feelings, personal viewpoints do not matter. “How old was I when I learned to hide what I felt? A very small boy” (103).

Rochester is thus uncomfortable in the world of Granbois; it is a marginal space that is not under his control. It is defined by Antoinette, not him: “and it kept its secret. I’d find myself thinking, ‘What I see is nothing—I want what it hides—that is not nothing’” (87). What he in fact desires is to establish his power over the place, convert it from margin to center. (“Nothing I told her influenced her at all. Die then” [94].) What finally gives him the leverage to do so is the letter from Daniel. It speaks of betrayal and deceit, of power and money and sex rather than love; it puts him back, in other words, on ground he knows. “It was as if I’d expected it, been waiting for it” (99).
The letter allows him to feel justified in destroying Antoinette, bringing her fully under his sway: “[the flowers] are like you,” I told her. Now I stopped, broke a spray off and trampled it into the mud” (99). It is immediately after this that Christophene leaves Granbois. It is the beginning of a process that will allow Rochester to assume complete control of Granbois, and ultimately return to Europe, taking a broken Antoinette with him.

When Antoinette asks Rochester much later if he has a reason for treating her as cruelly as he has, he has an answer ready: “Yes,” I said, “I have a reason,” and added very softly, “My God.” She asks if he really believes in God. “Of course, of course I believe in the power and wisdom of my creator” (127). Rochester’s God is most definitely not the same as Christophene’s. His is a God, first and foremost, of power. His is the God of the center, the God of the oppressor, the God of hierarchy and logic rather than emotion and intuition. In calling on his God, Rochester returns himself fully to the world of the center; he “decides to break Antoinette, to keep her as his property and not as a companion” (Gardiner 131). The process requires only the deaths of his father and brother to be complete.

Of course, the character of central importance to Wide Sargasso Sea is Antoinette. Again, the name itself is significant. In Jane Eyre, the character’s legal name is given as “Bertha Antoinetta Mason, daughter of Jonas Mason, merchant” (255), and it is as Bertha that Rochester refers to her. Rhys undercuts all of this in her text. Bertha is not this woman’s true name; rather, it is an artificial definition that Rochester imposes upon her in an attempt to limit and control her. Antoinetta is not her name; it is the name Daniel Cosway uses when he lies about her, another artificial construct. Nor is she the daughter of Jonas Mason; she is his step-daughter. She is Antoinette. “Bertha Antoinetta Mason,” the name she is given in Bronte’s text, is a conglomeration of lies imposed upon her by men. The violence of these renamings is highly significant: “Names matter, like when he wouldn’t call me Antoinette, and I saw Antoinette drifting out of the window” (WSS 180).

That said, Antoinette’s identity in Wide Sargasso Sea is by no means a stable one. Several critics have noted the “many images of mirroring in the text” (Spivak 250), the most frequently cited being her identification with Tia on the night of the fire at Coulibri. Antoinette is perpetually unsure of herself: “So between you [Christophene and Rochester, black and white] I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all” (102). She falls into the gaps in many of the binaries that structure society; she is, for instance, a “white nigger,” neither black nor privileged enough to be white (24). Throughout the book she has difficulty distinguishing the me and the not me; her identity “is always being created and always at risk” (Gardiner 130). Antoinette is a marginalized person, but her failure to discover a strong personal identity which she can vocalize from that marginal space weakens her ability to resist. Only at Granbois does she seem truly comfortable; it is there perhaps that she is really herself, confident enough to express love and desire, or even to mock England.
Antoinette’s fatal mistake is allowing Rochester to enter that personal space of Granbois. Had their battle taken place anywhere else, she would at least have had Granbois to retreat to. As it is, her sense of identity, even at Granbois, is not strong enough to resist him once he begins to impose his own center viewpoint. It is only through a strong sense of identity and a strong voice of resistance that the margin can maintain itself. When Rochester begins to replace her view of Granbois (and her) with his own, Antoinette’s only recourse—a fatal one—is to play his own game. When she goes to Christophene for help, she insists on fighting back in a way that comes not from marginal resistance, but from the power and domination tactics of the center. Her insistence on a “love potion” is basically an attempt to force Rochester into loving her again; and force, of course, is not the way of marginal resistance. Her use of the potion perhaps only destroys the slight possibility of real reconciliation: “she need not have done what she did to me. I will always swear that, she need not have done it” (137). When Rochester wakes the next morning, he has a new mastery of Granbois: “I knew how to avoid every creeper, and I never stumbled once” (139). Antoinette’s turn to methods of force and power even alienates her from Christophene: “how can she know the best thing for me to do, this ignorant, obstinate old negro woman?” Like Rochester, she begins to suspect that Christophene is only out for money. When she begins thinking in these terms, Antoinette is doomed; her marginal space has collapsed into Rochester’s center.

The third section of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is crucial to an understanding of both Antoinette’s character and the complex textual link between the book and *Jane Eyre*. Indeed, the two subjects are so interwoven that they must be discussed together. Here Rhys’s text moves fully into the universe of Bronte’s, as is announced by the speech by Grace Poole which opens the section. Here, however, the madwoman in the attic is finally given a voice, if a confused and fractured one. Antoinette has been reduced to her most powerless; she is barely conscious of where or who she is, and she cannot remember recent events. Her quest for identity and purpose is now more urgent than ever: “I wonder why I have been brought here. For what reason? There must be a reason. What is it that I must do?” (179). The answer to this demand lies on a plane which Antoinette can hardly be aware of. She has been brought “here,” to the world of *Jane Eyre*, in the service of the plot of that book; she is to be sacrificed so that Jane may achieve happiness. She speaks of the “cardboard house where I walk at night [which] is not England” (181). It is not England; it is the world of the master text, a book between cardboard covers (Spivak 250-51). The end of the novel thus becomes “an allegory of the general epistemic violence of imperialism, the construction of a self-immolating colonial subject for the glorification of the social mission of the colonizer” (Spivak 251). This, then, is why Antoinette/Bertha finally recognizes herself in the mirror as she sets out to burn down Thornfield Hall; she is fulfilling the purpose she was created for.
This is Spivak’s reading of the text, and undoubtedly this is one level on which the novel works. It would seem, however, to reduce somewhat the power of Rhys’s work as a novel of resistance, of protest. Spivak is essentially saying that Bertha, as a colonized, marginalized person, has no reality beyond that which Bronte has given her. All Rhys accomplishes in her book is to see that she “is not sacrificed as an insane animal for her sister’s consolidation” (251). She must fulfill the role she has been given; there is no possibility, in the master discourse, for the marginalized person to act otherwise. Certainly there would seem to be some truth to this. Antoinette’s end is foretold; there is nothing she can do to escape it. I would suggest, however, that despite the seeming hopelessness of Bertha’s situation, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is not merely a novel of protest; it does work as well as a novel of resistance in ways that can be read through the concept of the margin. Indeed, it does so in three ways.

The first is through the telling of the fire at Thornfield from Bertha’s point of view. Recall that the fire is not even seen in *Jane Eyre*; instead it is reported to Jane some months later by a witness who presents it as the random act of a madwoman. Its only purpose in the text is functional, to enable the unification of Jane and Rochester. By giving Bertha a life of her own in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys gives the act a meaning and a purpose for her. In her feverish dream of the fire, Antoinette sees her entire life spread before her. Looking down, she sees “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! … I called ‘Tia!’ and jumped” (190). The night of the fire is envisioned anew as a choice for Antoinette, a choice between the authority of “the man’s voice” and the ambiguous and fractured identity Tia represents; between Bertha and Antoinette; between the center and the margin. By jumping, Antoinette chooses the margin and rejects her role as Bertha—though at the same time ironically fulfilling it. Still, on this level Rhys has transformed an act that was essentially a convenient vehicle for a plot resolution and rendered it a meaningful act of resistance.

On another level, Rhys has transformed the act by eliminating it. The end of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, after all, does not show the fatal fire; it only describes it as part of a dream Antoinette has, and wakens from. The final act of vengeance/fulfillment/destiny ordained by the master discourse remains a dream, a possibility. When we last see Antoinette, she is (possibly) on her way to fulfill it in fact, but we must turn to *Jane Eyre* to see the act performed and its aftermath. The crucial moment, then, appears in neither text. By not showing the act, Rhys leaves her character in a state of possibility, suspended between the victim Antoinette and the vicious Bertha. She exists not simply in the margins of a book, but in the complex margin between two books, a place of radical openness. Her final fate is left open. In this way both Antoinette and *Wide Sargasso Sea* itself escape “the ultimate imperialism of definitive interpretation” (Howells 105). Even a reading such as Spivak’s, which positions the text as “post-colonial counter-discourse”—that is, a mar-
original expression of resistance—fails completely to capture the work, because in the end (conclusion) it refuses to commit itself to an end (purpose).

Finally, Rhys’s text expresses the power of the margin through its complex relationship with Jane Eyre. The text itself becomes a protest not merely against this particular instance of imperialist thinking, but against the very dominance of the master discourse. Bronte’s text existed long before Rhys’s; there is no logical reason why it should be affected by the later text. Yet it undeniably is. The very existence of Wide Sargasso Sea changes the nature and possible readings of Jane Eyre. Once familiar with Antoinette and her story, it becomes difficult if not impossible for any reader to credit Rochester’s account of the bestial Bertha. Wide Sargasso Sea “insists on its place in English literary tradition and its right to reformulate that tradition … reshaping its entire anatomy” (Gardiner 124). Speaking from the margins of the earlier text—speaking, also, from her own experience as a marginalized person—Rhys succeeds in changing the master discourse; she succeeds in challenging the dominance of the center. Wide Sargasso Sea literally squeezes into the margins of Jane Eyre to pry the earlier text away from the author and her intentions, opening up “a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world” (hooks 153). In this way the novel fulfills perfectly hooks’s expectations of marginal speech as “radical cultural practice.” Rhys’s book is both a revision and a re-vision of Bronte’s; not merely fiction, it is a true speech of resistance, fulfilling some of the functions of criticism and theory by finding new ways to speak of old texts. It violently breaks apart the accepted structure of the discourse and builds it anew. Wide Sargasso Sea speaks of resistance through new alternatives, new possibilities, new visions; it speaks from the margin, and in so doing changes the center.

Works Cited


