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Representations of White Creole Women: The Characterization of Aunt Cora in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Elsa Maxwell¹

This article explores Jean Rhys' characterization of white creole women through a critical reading of Aunt Cora's role in the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. It argues that Aunt Cora plays an important role in Antoinette's identity configuration, both as a point of identification and divergence. By tracing the similarities and differences between Aunt Cora and Antoinette's identity positions, it illustrates how Rhys' characters resist facile categorization as white female creoles. It also examines the importance of Aunt Cora's resistance to English patriarchy in relation to the stereotypical representation of the 'mad' creole, showing that although Aunt Cora is silenced by male dominance, she defies being driven mad by it. In this sense, Aunt Cora's characterization as a sane, although muted, white creole serves to counter colonial representations of the mad West Indian creole woman as portrayed in Charlotte Brontë's depiction of Bertha in *Jane Eyre*.

KEY WORDS: WIDE SARGASSO SEA; CREOLE WOMEN; IDENTITY; JEAN RHYS

In 1966, Jean Rhys (1890-1979) published the acclaimed novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, her prequel to Charlotte Brontë's classic *Jane Eyre*, with the intent of resurrecting the voice of Bertha, Rochester's mad wife from Jamaica who is secretly housed in Thornfield's attic. Undoubtedly, Rhys' interest in recovering Bertha's voice responded to certain elements of her own biography: daughter of a Welsh doctor and a West Indian woman, Rhys was born and raised in Dominica, an English colony in the Caribbean, and like Brontë's character Bertha, was considered a white creole—a person of European descent born in the West Indies— whose personal experience was marked by emigration to England. At the age of 16, Rhys was sent to London, where she studied during the First World War and then spent a decade living in continental Europe, particularly in Vienna and Paris. In this period,

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Rhys wrote and published five novels, all of which focused on female protagonists struggling with financial and emotional (in)dependence in the context of male dominated societies.² Her narratives received critical acclaim, but after the 1940s she and her novels fell into relative obscurity. Rhys did not publish another novel until 1966, when she presented *Wide Sargasso Sea*, today considered her most important work. As with her previous texts, *Wide Sargasso Sea* explores the debilitating effects of patriarchal society on the female psyche by reconstructing the story of Rochester's "mad" Jamaican wife: Bertha (Antoinette) Mason³.

One of the principal themes in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is Antoinette's struggle to define her identity in post-Emancipation Jamaican society. As a female white creole,⁴ Antoinette straddles opposing worlds: born in the West Indies, she is not quite "European" (although many white creoles identified with metropolitan culture) nor is she "native", as her white skin distances her from colonial Jamaica's black majority. Within this social context, Antoinette attempts to position her own subjectivity by identifying with multiple female figures who surround her, particularly her Aunt Cora, also a white creole; Christophine, her black nurse; and Tia, a black playmate from her childhood. The centrality of these three female figures in Antoinette's identity configuration is made particularly evident in the last scene of the novel, when the protagonist is about to jump (or awake from a nightmare) from Thornfield's roof. Consider how Antoinette calls out to each one of them as she takes her last steps:

Suddenly I was in Aunt Cora's room. I saw the sunlight coming through the windows, the tree outside and the shadows of the leaves on the floor, but I saw the wax candles and I hated them...As I ran or perhaps floated or flew I called help me Christophine help me and looking behind me I saw that I had been helped...When I was out on the battlements it was cool and I could hardly hear them [shouting]. I sat there quietly. I don't know how long I sat. Then I turned round and saw the sky. It was red and all my life was in it. I saw the grandfather clock and Aunt Cora's patchwork, all colours, I saw the orchids and the stephanotis and the jasmine and the

² For an overview of Rhys' oeuvre see Francis' Wyndham's "Introduction" published in the Norton edition of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 1982.

³ In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Bertha's original name is Antoinette, until Rochester forcedly renames her Bertha.

⁴ In the English speaking Caribbean, white creole refers to people of European descent born in the West Indies. See the Introduction to Judith Raiskin's *Snow on the Cane Fields: Women's Writing and Creole Subjectivity* (University of Minnesota Press, 1996) for a discussion of the different meanings of creole and *criollo* within British and Spanish colonies in the Americas.

tree of life in flames...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 188-189)

The significance of Christophine and Tia's presence in Antoinette's last dream has been the subject of many scholarly essays. For example, Keith A. Russell argues that Antoinette seeks help from her childhood nurse because she sees her as her savior, concluding that "by embracing the memory of her da, Antoinette is able to escape her prison by leaping to her death" (n. pag.). Similarly, Missy Kubitschek suggests that Antoinette's evocation of Christophine and Tia is a symbolic recognition of her authentic true self whom she failed to recognize in her attempt to assimilate into metropolitan culture. In this sense, Kubitschek argues that although Christophine's marginal perspective (and by extension Tia's) cannot guide the narration, it can "inform it": upon receiving "help" from Christophine and calling out to Tia one last time, "Antoinette awakens with a new certainty about herself and her purpose" (25). Joya Uraizee's interpretation of Antoinette's last dream also foregrounds the return to her mixed Caribbean cultural heritage: Uraizee writes that Tia "becomes her [Antoinette's] mirror image, an image reflected in the looking-glass of fire...[h]er presence also suggests that Antoinette's leap could be read as 'a celebration of or fantasized union with...blackness'" (5). Lastly, Gayatri Spivak, without making direct reference to Christophine, addresses Tia's meaning in Antoinette's last dream: "Here the dream sequence ends, with an invocation of none other than Tia, the Other that could not be served, because the fracture of imperialism" (250).

Critics have not only analyzed Christophine and Tia's significance in Antoinette's reverie, but also within the context of the overall novel. On the one hand, scholars have dedicated numerous articles to the exclusive study of Christophine, and in doing so have placed her not only at the forefront of scholarly inquiry but also of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Whereas some critics consider Christophine a secondary character, others have argued that she is the central protagonist. Keith A. Russell concisely summarizes the scholarly debate surrounding the significance of Christophine within the context of subaltern representation in postcolonial texts:

Christophine's provocative role in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* has generated a tremendous quantity of inquiry: the turn to Christophine arose largely out of debate over Spivak's watershed essay "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism" from 1985. Spivak ignited a firestorm in Rhys criticism with her oft-quoted passage: "Christophine is tangential to this narrative. She cannot be contained by a novel which rewrites a canonical English text within the European novelistic tradition in the interest of the white Creole rather than the native." (n.pag.)

Writing in response to Spivak's contention of the unrecoverable subaltern voice, Benita Parry proposes a very different reading of Antoinette's nurse: instead of tangential, Christophine constitutes a crucial part of the narrative, specifically as a figure who defies colonial cultural dominance. Within this debate, Russell affirms that Carine Mardorossian's article on Rhys' use of narration and focalization represents the halfway point between Spivak and Parry's contesting positions: refuting Spivak's conclusion by showing, in Russell's words, that "the novel does not reinscribe blackness in a subservient role through Antoinette's narration, but rather complicates the reader's identification with the white Creoles", she also calls in to question Parry's portrayal of Christophine as a "free, independent native woman whose voice confronts the repressive system without difficulty" (Russell, n.pag.). Other scholarly articles dedicated to Christophine include Missy Kubitschek's "Charting the Empty Spaces of Jean Rhys's 'Wide Sargasso Sea' ", which argues that Christophine is the "true heroine" (27); Joya Uraizee's text on Christophine and history; and Keith Russell's cited article which analyzes Christophine's use of language.

Tia has proved to be a less controversial figure, but nonetheless her character's relationship to Antoinette has been analyzed in myriad articles. Specifically, her role in the scene in which Coulibri is burned has been the subject of much scholarly inquiry. For example, consider Mardorossian's interpretation of Antoinette's attempted identification with Tia:

Early in the novel, Antoinette turns to her childhood friend Tia to get her approval, thus seeking yet again to obliterate the difference history and culture has set up between them and to identify with black and mulatto female voices. Tia's reaction, however, prevents us from turning her into Antoinette's defining other. It forces, as it were, a recognition of the very difference which Antoinette is trying to ignore. (1083)

In contrast to the numerous specialist studies analyzing the significance of Christophine and Tia, little scholarship has focused on the characterization of the third female character that Antoinette mentions in her last dream: Aunt Cora. A number of works focusing on Christophine and Tia allude to Aunt Cora, but they do not provide an in-depth study of her character. Mardorossian, in an end note addressing Antoinette's invocation of her aunt's patchwork, comments that she, along with Christophine, is one of Antoinette's "two mother substitutes," adding in parenthesis that these two female characters are "also the two most resolute and astute characters in the novel" (1088). Mardorossian continues: "Aunt Cora's patchwork is one of the last things she remembers about 'home' before her suicide", which serves as a metaphor "not only for Antoinette's divided self but as a metaphor for my own act of reading, i.e., of patching together this polyphonic narrative's scattered meanings and voices" (1088). However, this comment is intended more to explain Mardorossian's interpretation of the patchwork than to analyze Aunt Cora's significance in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Similarly, Joya Uraizee's article about Christophine also briefly mentions Aunt Cora's role in her interpretation of the novel's last scene:

her 'dream' begins and in it, she wanders off into a room in Thornfield Hall which has a red carpet and red curtains, and sitting there, she begins to feel miserable and remembers her Aunt Cora's colorful quilt. The pain of the memory of the colors of the Caribbean makes her knock down all the candles in the room and the curtains catch fire. Antoinette at first watches the flames and "laughed when I saw the lovely colour spreading so fast." Again, the red of the fire becomes her signature. (5)

But in the same way in which Mardorossian's analysis is more focused on the metaphor of patchwork than the significance of Aunt Cora, Uraizee's mention of her is used to explain Antoinette's relation to the intensity of the colors in the Caribbean. Aside from these citations, references to Aunt Cora or analysis of her character are scarce, an unfortunate oversight given her role in Part One of the novel and her symbolic appearance in Antoinette's last dream.

The lack of critical commentary regarding Aunt Cora suggests that her character is viewed as insignificant or unimportant. Although this essay does not contend that Aunt Cora is a main character in the novel (despite her prominent position in Part One), a survey of her role shows that her characterization serves to counter stereotypical views of white West Indian creole females as portrayed in *Jane Eyre*. Like Annette and Antoinette, Aunt Cora's identity is profoundly marked by

ambiguity, being neither English nor native. Moreover, as a white creole woman in post-emancipation Jamaica, Aunt Cora continually contends with the rigid structures of the English patriarchal system which excludes her not only because of her ambiguous nationality but also because of her gender. Mr Mason and Richard's successful attempts to silence her are constant reminders that creole women were bequeathed an inferior status in English colonial society. However, unlike Annette and Antoinette, Aunt Cora remarkably resists being driven into madness despite English male society's suppression of her voice. If Rhys' characterization of Antoinette *challenges* the stereotype of the mad creole woman by humanizing Bertha and contextualizing how colonial society could drive women into madness, it is the author's characterization of Aunt Cora that effectively *dispels* it: whereas Antoinette ultimately jumps to her death—following the plot line of *Jane Eyre*—Aunt Cora resists insanity, and in doing so, undoes the stereotype of the West Indian madwoman represented in Brontë's classic novel.

It is unclear if Aunt Cora is Antoinette's blood relative or a family friend who was bestowed the appellation "Aunt," but in any case she is a close relation to the Cosway family who acts as Antoinette's caretaker in her mother's absence.⁵ Aunt Cora is introduced in the narrative after Annette marries Mr Mason: Antoinette states that "[w]hile the repairs were being done [to Coulibri] and they [Annette and Mr Mason] were in Trinidad, Pierre and I stayed with Aunt Cora in Spanish Town. Mr Mason did not approve of Aunt Cora, an ex-slaveowner who had escaped misery, a flier in the face of Providence" (Rhys 30). As Laura Ciolkowski demonstrates in her description of post-emancipation social relations in Jamaica, Mr Mason's disapproval of Aunt Cora is rooted in English society's growing repudiation of pre-emancipation plantation culture:

Part One of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is rocked by the disorienting textual motion between the colonial identification and disidentification with England. Rhys's text repeatedly calls attention to this intense ambivalence, lingering over the confusion of the Creole woman who is caught between the increasingly separate moral and economic logics of England and the West Indian colonies. By 1830, there was virtually a national consensus in England regarding the immorality of slavery. The abolitionist movement in England was steeped in the rhetorics of Christian fellowship, human

⁵ If she is in fact Antoinette's aunt it is most likely that she is Antoinette's father's sister, a Cosway, as there is not indication that she came from Martinique with Annette.

rights, and moral law that not only aided in excluding the slaveholder from the community of respectable English men and woman but also clearly invested him with the moral and sexual indecencies attached to the hateful system he espoused. (341)

In this context Mr Mason's disrespect for Aunt Cora is twofold: not only was she a member of Jamaica's detestable slaveholding class, but also a "flier in the face of Providence" who escaped punishment for her tenancy of slaves, unlike Annette whose post-emancipation poverty somehow redeems her, in Mason's eyes, from her slaveholding past. Cited below is the subsequent conversation between Antoinette and her stepfather, beginning with Mr Mason's question about Aunt Cora's absence during the years when Annette was burdened with financial hardships:

"Why did she do nothing to help you?"

I told him that her husband was English and didn't like us and he said, "Nonsense."

"It isn't nonsense, they lived in England and he was angry if she wrote to us. He hated the West Indies. When he died not long ago she came home, before that what could she do? *She* wasn't rich."

"That's her story. I don't believe it. A frivolous woman. In your mother's place I'd resent her behaviour."

"None of you understand about us," I thought. (Rhys 30)

On the one hand, this conversation is indicative of Aunt Cora's financial situation as a Creole woman: when Mr Mason questions why Aunt Cora did nothing to help Annette and her children, Antoinette points out that her aunt could not because "[s]*he* wasn't rich" (Rhys 30), as to indicate her inferior and dependent relationship to her English husband. This position of inferiority is reaffirmed through Mr Mason's reaction to Antoinette's support of Aunt Cora, showing how white creole women's views were often disregarded as "nonsense". In fact, Mr Mason's response to Antoinette ("That's her story. I don't believe it") foreshadows how he will ignore Annette's repeated plea to leave Coulibri, as she fears the recently liberated black population may retaliate against them. As it is known, Mason's refusal to consider his wife's request results in the burning of Coulibri and the death of Pierre, and Annette's subsequent fragile and unstable mental state.

The aforementioned passage is also indicative of Antoinette's strong identification with Aunt Cora, and by extension the West Indies. When Antoinette tells Mr Mason that Aunt Cora returned "home" to Jamaica after her husband's death, Antoinette is not only expressing Aunt Cora's attachment to the West Indies, but also her own sense of place and belonging. Likewise, it is clear that despite Aunt Cora's residence in England, Jamaica is her home, paralleling Antoinette's connection to the West Indies in her dream during her forced residence in England. Similarly, after Mr Mason re-affirms his dislike of Aunt Cora in spite of her niece's arguments in her favor, Antoinette says to herself, "None of you understand about us, I thought" (Rhys 30). This concluding statement serves to show not only Antoinette's identification with Aunt Cora and the cultural divide between white creoles and the English, but also Antoinette's perception of her subjectivity as a white creole. In effect, she is recognizing her difference in relation to the English.

The marked cultural divide between white creoles and the English is also apparent in Aunt Cora's experience with local Jamaican belief systems, particularly those of the ex-slaves. For instance, Aunt Cora's suggestion to Mason that he not disclose to the colored servants his plan to import East Indian workers demonstrates her familiarity with the blacks' cultural perceptions. Mardorossian's interpretation of this scene illustrates this point:

Indeed, the scene [in which Cora warns Mason] ...helps elucidate the seemingly unjustified violence of the ex-slaves: one of the servants, Myra, overhears Mr. Mason's intention to "import labourers...from the East Indies" and goes, as Aunt Cora implies, to notify the others. It is left up to the reader to infer that what Myra reports is that the 'importation' and commodification of human beings which to the ex-slaves would necessarily conjure up slavery was to be resumed. (1078)

Thus, it is Aunt Cora's familiarity with the black's belief systems that enables the reader to understand why the ex-slaves target Coulibri and its inhabitants. Ironically, it is Mr Mason who claims that Aunt Cora has no understanding of the locals: when Aunt Cora tells Mr Mason that "it would be wiser not to tell that woman [Myra] your plans... I don't trust her", he replies "live here most of your life and know nothing about the people. It's astonishing. They are children – they won't hurt a fly" (35). As Mardorossian observes, Mr Mason's belief that the ex-slaves are childlike and docile reflects contemporary English perceptions of blacks: "Like Rochester, Mason is a haughty and pious abolitionist...whose complacent ideals reveal a stereotypical understanding of the

blacks that has remained unchanged since before Emancipation” (1075). In sum, Mr Mason has little knowledge of, or experience with, race relations in the West Indies, and thus blindly believes that Aunt Cora and Annette’s fears of retaliation are ungrounded.

In a similar way, Aunt Cora’s role during the subsequent scene in which Coulibri is attacked evidences her understanding of local belief patterns, and serves to contrast with Mr Mason’s confused foreign interpretation of the events. As Antoinette and her family are trying to escape the angry mob that set fire to the main house, a group of blacks surrounds them led by a man carrying a machete who has taken the horse’s bridle from the driver of the carriage. While Mr Mason is too surprised by the situation to contend with the ireful man, Aunt Cora adeptly confronts him:

It was Aunt Cora who stepped forward and said, “The little boy [Pierre] is very badly hurt. He will die if we cannot get help for him.”

The man said, “So black and white, they burn the same, eh?”

“They do,” she said. “Here and hereafter, as you will find out. Very shortly.”

He let the bridle go and thrust his face close to hers. He’d throw fire on her face, he said, if she put bad luck on him. Old white jumby, he called her. But she did not move an inch, she looked straight into his eyes and threatened him with eternal fire in a calm voice. ‘And never a drop of sangoree to cool your burning tongue,’ she said. He cursed her again but he backed away. (Rhys 44)

As this episode shows, Aunt Cora proves to be a more effective protector of Annette and her family than Mr Mason, whose English perceptions in a foreign land prevent him from knowing how to react. Unlike Mason, she can employ her familiarity with local beliefs to frighten away the mob leader, thus securing the escape of Annette and her family. At the same time, however, we can only assume that her knowledge of local beliefs is rooted in her “slaveholding past”, which juxtaposes her threat to reproduce the violence of slavery (“They do [burn]. Here and hereafter, you will find out”) with her maternal role as Antoinette’s care-giver and protector.

The complexity of Aunt Cora’s character is illustrated once again in the scene in which she confronts Mr Mason’s son, Richard, about her disapproval of Antoinette’s arranged marriage to an unnamed man from England (Rochester). Aunt Cora’s uncertainty of the union stems not from her

objection of the marriage in itself, but from the unequal conditions under which Richard negotiated it, which essentially require Antoinette to fully relinquish her inheritance to her soon-to-be husband. Antoinette recounts Aunt Cora's attempt to protect her niece from Richard and the unfamiliar foreign suitor to whom she will be wed:

When I passed her room, I heard her [Aunt Cora] quarrelling with Richard and I knew it was about my marriage. "It's disgraceful," she said. "It's shameful. You are handing over everything the child owns to a perfect stranger. Your father would never have allowed it. She should be protected, legally. A settlement can be arranged and it should be arranged. That was his intention."

"You are talking about an honourable gentleman, not a rascal," Richard said. "I am not in a position to make conditions, as you know very well. She is damn lucky to get him, all things considered. Why should I insist on a lawyer's settlement when I trust him? I would trust him with my life," he went on in an affected voice."

"You are trusting him with her life, not yours," she said.

He told her for God's sake shut up you old fool and banged the door when he left. So angry that he did not notice me standing in the passage. (Rhys 114-115)

Aunt Cora's bold remarks are noteworthy not only because she is challenging Richard's authority and England's unjust legal system, but also her place in society as a white female creole. In effect, her decision to verbally confront Richard demonstrates her rejection of English society's routine attempts to quiet the voices of its female colonial subjects. However, Rhys characterization of Aunt Cora does not unrealistically portray her as an independent creole woman unhindered by the restraints of colonial society. Clearly, Richard's violent reaction shows that Aunt Cora's pleas are ignored and silenced by the powerful male voices who dominate her social surroundings. Even though we can assume that Aunt Cora's confrontation with Richard prompts Antoinette to reconsider marrying this unknown Englishman (shortly before the ceremony Mason desperately tells the bridegroom that "[s]he won't go through with it!...She won't marry you."), in the end Aunt Cora's voice cannot prevail over the creole patriarch Richard, and in effect, the English colonizer: unwilling to be the "rejected suitor jilted by this Creole girl", the English suitor spuriously promises Antoinette peace, safety, and happiness, convincing her to marry him according to the original

arrangement Richard refused to amend, in spite of the unfavorable conditions placed on his sister. Unable to change this situation as a Creole woman in an English dominated society, the old and sick Aunt Cora “turn[s] her face to the wall” and concludes that “[t]he Lord has forsaken us” (115).

Not surprisingly, Aunt Cora’s predictions materialize: when Christophine advises Antoinette to leave her husband if she wants him to love her, Antoinette faces the restrictive nuptial position which prevents her from determining her own destiny:

“I am not rich now, I have no money of my own at all, everything I had belongs to him.”

“What you tell me there?” she said sharply.

“That is English law.” (Rhys 110)

Not only has Antoinette lost control of her inheritance, but she has also become shackled to a man who is both her husband and jailor.

The focus of this essay on the importance of Aunt Cora’s character in *Wide Sargasso Sea* might seem to support Spivak’s affirmation that *Wide Sargasso Sea* was written “in the interest of the white Creole” (253), given that it has focused specifically on her experience as a white creole woman. However, Mardorossian’s demonstration that Rhys’ novel was in fact unsympathetic to Antoinette is also applicable to Aunt Cora. First, let us review briefly Mardorossian’s argumentation:

Rhys does to her own protagonist Antoinette what she has been acclaimed for doing to Bronte’s Jane Eyre, i.e., shows her as constituted within and by the processes of colonization and imperialism...Rhys distances herself from her protagonist through formal patterns, ellipses, and repetitions which expose Antoinette’s colonialist assumptions...[t]hus *Wide Sargasso Sea*’s double narrative structure...attests not to Rhys’s imperialism but to her insight into the workings of the ideological system and its categories of representation. (1072)

By drawing on Mardorossian’s conclusions, we can see how Rhys distances herself from Aunt Cora by underscoring the ways in which she mimics imperialist and racist attitudes. Accordingly, Rhys’ characterization of Aunt Cora serves not to sympathize with her but rather to depict an accurate portrayal of the complex, and at times contradictory, positioning of white creole women. On the one hand, Rhys shows how Aunt Cora harbors imperialist views and obstinately clings to English

society's norms and beliefs⁶, in spite of her strong creole identity that at times clashes with English patriarchal values. For instance, even young Antoinette, who frequently finds comfort in her aunt, is aware of how Aunt Cora's superficial closeness to English culture distances them: just before Coulibri is burned Antoinette observes: "Aunt Cora was sitting on the blue sofa now, wearing a black silk dress, her ringlets were carefully arranged. She looked very haughty. I thought" (Rhys 38). By adopting English dress and style, Aunt Cora is displaying her status and wealth, thus assuring that she would not be mistaken for a "white cockroach"⁷. Likewise, Aunt Cora's understanding of the ex-slaves' cultural norms and beliefs does not mean that she is sensitive or compassionate towards them. In fact, she, like Mason, distances herself from blacks: in numerous occasions she expresses her mistrust of the colored servants, and uses her position as a white woman to reinforce racial oppression. In this sense, Aunt Cora's creole cultural identity differs from Antoinette's: whereas Antoinette seeks comfort and acceptance from Christophine and Tia, Aunt Cora never looks to blacks as a source of support or friendship. Ultimately, Aunt Cora sees them as fit to be servants, not equals. The differences between Aunt Cora and Antoinette exhibit the pluralities inherent in their identities, despite their common creole cultural heritage. Consequently, by emphasizing their dissimilarities Rhys refuses to stereotype West Indian creole women by placing them in rigid identity categories imposed by colonialism. This is particularly apparent in Aunt Cora's defiance of the "mad creole" label, for while she is muted, she resists the imposition of insanity that befalls Annette and Antoinette. As H. Adlai Murdoch's observes:

[by] deliberately underlining and problematizing the double, dissonant trope of creole identity, Rhys undermines our writerly and readerly notions of the oppositional relation between self and Other through her characterization of Bertha in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Indeed, cultural 'in-betweenness' is inscribed in the very discursive act that brings this character into being, contextualizing the presumed instability of the 'mad creole,' as Raikin explains by "claiming a subjectivity for a character denied a

⁶ In her analysis of white Creoles' ambivalent cultural identity in post-emancipation British West Indies, Giolkowski observes that "while the dramatic collapse of the Caribbean plantation economy in the 1830s succeeded in transforming the class of affluent Creole planters into economically and culturally disenfranchised 'white niggers' and 'cockroaches,' locating them outside the ranks of the new community of nonslaveholding English colonials, it did not succeed in fully severing the Creoles' stubborn attachment to England. For the Anglophone, white Creole, Jamaica or Barbados was where one *lived* but England was still one's *home*" (341). Rhys' portrayal of the white Creole contrasts with this definition, given that both Antoinette and Aunt Cora identify Jamaica as home, not England. However, for the purposes of this essay it can be argued that Rhys' white Creole characters simultaneously maintain a "stubborn attachment to England" given their adoption of certain English cultural norms.

stable position in any cultural or social space.”... for both Antoinette and her mother, it is the psychological conflict between their desire to belong and their recognition of their exclusion from both the metropolitan and the slave-based axes of colonizer and colonized that highlights the interstitial pluralities of the creole subjectivity.” (Murdoch 257-8)

As we have seen, in a similar fashion Rhys claims, and complicates, a subjectivity for Aunt Cora, whose complex past and present intertwine in a single character; who at once represents the reproduction of, and resistance to, colonial ideology, all the while dispelling the metropolitan conception of the “mad creole”.

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